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RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

A Focus on Practice

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Publication Information

Acknowledgements

Foreword

The *Education in Employment* project funded through the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) has made a significant contribution to date in promoting work-based and blended learning, progression opportunities for craftspersons, and a greater understanding of the challenges in meeting the learning needs of migrant workers in Ireland. The work detailed in this report, however, on the practical implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) will, I believe, be its most fundamental and long-lasting contribution to elaborating and enabling learner-centred lifelong learning throughout the third-level educational institutions in Ireland.

Led by the Cork Institute of Technology, the working group established under the *Education in Employment* project to address the RPL issue comprised members from Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, NUI Galway, and University College Cork. In addition, there was a considerable and welcome input from outside the original project working group from the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI).

This document meets the stated outcomes of the *Education in Employment* project, in the development of policy and the publication of guidelines for learners and assessors, but it goes further in bringing together, for the first time in a single publication, a useful framework for the implementation or development of the RPL process and practice within educational establishments. This document provides a unique starting point for the further development of RPL through an exploration of the details of the practices as they currently exist within the partner institutions and through a frank review of the issues and questions that are raised.

I know that this publication will be welcomed by those developing policy, those in third-level education, and those who want to engage with third-level providers in a meaningful and accessible way. I would like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of the working group in bringing this work to fruition.

Michael Delaney

Michael Delaney

Vice President for Development
Cork Institute of Technology

Executive Summary

The nature of work and employment is changing rapidly and pervasively. A reliance on traditional manufacturing and low-skilled services will not be sufficient for developed countries like Ireland to remain at the forefront of economic and technological advancement. The world is becoming flatter and basic tasks are now outsourced as low-tech businesses and contract manufacturing migrate to low-cost economies such as China, India, South America and the newer EU Member States of Central and Eastern Europe, while developed countries become more expensive. Developed countries can no longer secure their future on continuing to perform tasks that can easily be moved to low-cost environments. Instead, these countries must provide services higher up the value chain, in areas that are less cost sensitive but require ingenuity and creativity (Ireland, 2008: 36). Reflecting this need, there is a widespread and increasing emphasis on lifelong formal and informal education and training, which are seen as critical components to ensure a highly skilled workforce that maintains and manifests currency of knowledge and skills. In this context, recognising *prior* learning can make a significant contribution to providing responsive, relevant, and integrated learning, which are all necessary for the ongoing maintenance of a quality workforce in Ireland. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is critical to the development of an open, accessible, inclusive, integrated and relevant education and training system, and is a key foundation for lifelong learning policies that encourage individuals to participate in learning pathways that include formal, non-formal, and informal learning. RPL has a potential role to play in meeting individual, societal, and national needs; as an instrument for providing people with access to education, training, and formal qualifications; and to help meet the ongoing and fast-changing requirements of the workplace.

Widening access to higher education through RPL is not about introducing less qualified graduates, but rather about supporting learners with the potential to benefit both themselves and society through participating in higher education. This means reaching out to an increasingly broad range of learners with different motivations and interests.

In 2006, the Government introduced a Strategic Innovation Fund through which €510m is allocated for spending, between 2006 and 2013, in higher education institutions for projects to enhance collaboration in this sector; to improve teaching and learning; to support institutional reform; to promote access to lifelong learning; and to support the development of fourth-level education. Through the Strategic Innovation Fund, the development of new strategic alliances creates new synergies and potentials for higher education systems. Through the range of initiatives that it supports, the Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) is providing new impetus to the development of system-wide quality. SIF is driving reform of structures and systems within and across institutions to cater for growing student numbers at all levels; for greater teaching and learning quality; to ensuring graduates are equipped for a lifetime of innovation and change in the workplace; and to enhance research and innovation capacity.

The *Education in Employment* project is one of the initiatives funded under the first cycle of the Strategic Innovation Fund. The *Education in Employment* consortium is led by Cork Institute of Technology, which coordinates the work contributed by the other members of the consortium: Athlone Institute of Technology; Dublin Institute of Technology; Dundalk Institute of Technology; Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology; Institute of Technology, Sligo; Letterkenny Institute of Technology; National University of Ireland Galway; and University College, Cork. *Education in Employment* focuses on the learning needs of non-traditional learners and includes lifelong learning and the recognition of prior learning as core aims by placing significant emphasis on continual professional development and up-skilling, for learners in employment and for jobseekers.

This report is based on the collective activities of the RPL strand, one of four linked sub-strands in the *Education in Employment* project. The main focus of the report is to provide a practical guide for recognising *all* prior learning in third-level institutions.

In order to contextualise prior learning for this report, a review of the relevant existing literature on prior learning was conducted. These literature findings are summarised and presented in Chapters 1 and 2. One of the key messages arising from the literature search was that there is no clearly agreed definition on what constitutes prior learning. Defining prior learning is recognised as problematic. There is no clear agreement among writers, researchers, and major policy-influencing agencies on standards or even guidelines for the recognition of prior learning, or what precisely RPL involves or what it encompasses. Views vary from simply defined notions of RPL as providing an alternative access to a programme or to a qualification, through to conceptions of RPL being a reflective process that can directly influence the nature of learning and the process of training. For the purpose of this report, the recognition of prior learning is considered to be the generic term for a variety of approaches such as Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning (RNFIL), the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) and the Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL). The term 'prior' concerns learning that *has* taken place but may not have been formally assessed or accredited prior to entering a programme of study or prior to seeking an award. The core philosophy underlying the recognition of prior learning is the enabling and supporting of people entering or re-entering formal education, leading to a qualification, by awarding or recognising credit for what they already know in the course curriculum.

Acknowledging the importance of recognising prior learning for individuals, third-level institutions, employers, and employer organisations, an investigation of the recognition of prior learning practices was carried out in the *Education in Employment* partner institutions. The findings from this research illustrate that the recognition of prior learning is already challenging the current structures of third-level academic institutions, requiring them to be flexible in terms of mode of delivery and accrediting prior experiential learning. The findings also emphasise the importance of inter-institutional co-operation and highlight the need for sharing information and expertise to further progress the recognition of prior learning nationally.

Finally, in the current economic climate, the recognition of prior learning is becoming increasingly important for jobseekers and for those in employment who wish to up-skill and re-skill. Third-level institutions need to address their respective levels of RPL provision, which is greater in some areas of education than in others. 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.

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1 Introduction

1.0 Background

> *The new lifelong learning for all approach is a true 'cradle to grave' view. It encompasses all purposeful learning activity undertaken with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence. It gives weight to building foundations for lifelong learning as well as to remedial second chances for adults. And it recognises that not only the settings of formal education but also the less formal settings of the home, the workplace, the community and society at large contribute to learning . . . No learning setting is an island* (OECD, 1998: 8-9).

The concept of lifelong learning, referred to by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) above, indicates that learning should encompass the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Lifelong learning is defined as all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competencies (National Competitiveness Council, 2009). Learning occurs in many contexts including work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience. In order to enable an individual to learn throughout life, equal value should be given to all these forms of learning regardless of source, how it is achieved, or when in life it is achieved. Lifelong learning, therefore, is about making use of personal competencies. Duvekot *et al.* (2007: 9) suggest that:

> *Everyone should be aware that people are always learning everywhere and, above all, not always in a conscious or self-chosen learning situation. The degree in which individuals and the knowledge society consciously build on this is still strongly underexposed and under-utilised. In the knowledge society, the focus should be on the individual learning process.*

Competencies acquired, therefore, in non-formal and informal situations rather than solely in formal situations are essential parts of individual learning. Learning that takes place outside the formal systems for education and training, however, is much more difficult to identify and value. As a result of taking all types of learning situations into account, the focus on lifelong learning policy has slowly shifted from the traditional approach of 'learning in the classroom' to incorporate 'other learning environments'. This actually means giving value to non-formal and informal learning.

One of the distinguishing features of non-formal and informal learning is that the experience of the learner occupies central place in all considerations of teaching and learning. This experience may comprise earlier events in the life of the learner, current life events, or those arising from the learner's participation in activities implemented by teachers and facilitators. It supports a more participative, learner-centred approach, which places an emphasis on direct engagement, rich learning events and the construction of meaning by learners.

According to a Eurostat survey (2007) Ireland performs poorly in terms of the percentage of persons engaging in lifelong learning, with 7.6% of respondents aged 25 to 64 receiving formal education in the four weeks prior to their survey. This remains below the Lisbon target of 12.5%, the EU-15 average of 12%, and considerably behind the leading countries (National Competitiveness Council, 2009). The *National Skills Strategy* sets an ambitious target of up-skilling an additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce by at least one level in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) by 2020. A National Competitiveness Council (2009) report suggests that this target presents a challenge for Government, employers, and employees in terms of how to create a culture and sense of shared responsibility for lifelong learning and decisions on appropriate investment levels and sharing of costs.

The current economic downturn underscores the need for everyone, particularly those with low skill levels and those in vulnerable firms, to upgrade their skills. The aim is to significantly improve access for unemployed persons to job search, training and education, community and employment programmes, and to maximise opportunities for up-skilling and re-skilling so that people will be better placed to avail of new job opportunities where they become available, including in new sectors such as energy efficiency (Government of Ireland, 2008: 54). In order to facilitate the required up-skilling and re-skilling, a particular focus needs to be placed on efforts to increase participation in lifelong learning by providing opportunities for education and training. The Irish Government recognises the importance of lifelong learning, and its publication of *Building Ireland's Smart Economy* document (Ireland, 2008: 13) indicates that a number of initiatives to support lifelong learning will be implemented, for example:

■ Restructuring the higher education system will be a priority with a new Higher Education Strategy to enhance system-wide performance;

■ Higher Education institutions will be supported in pursuing new organisational mergers and alliances that can advance performance through more effective concentration of expertise and investment;

■ Under the Strategic Innovation Fund, priority will be given to flexible learning initiatives that can be targeted at up-skilling people in the workforce.

1.1 What is the Recognition of Prior Learning?

Recognition of Prior Learning is a process by which learning that has already taken place prior to enrolment on a programme of study is given a value. This learning process may have taken place formally through a further or higher education provider or informally or non-formally through work/life experiences. The Commission of the European Communities (2000) suggest that for the purposes of developing a national approach to the recognition of prior learning, prior learning encompasses:

1.   **Formal learning** which takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards

2.   **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 include learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, in the voluntary sector, or in communities

3.   **Informal learning** that takes place through life and work experience (experiential learning). It is learning that is quite unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to his or her knowledge, skills and competences.

A broad aim of RPL is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what is already known of the course curriculum. The purpose of RPL may be formative (supporting an ongoing learning process) as well as summative (aiming at certification). In higher education institutions, two main categories of prior learning for the purpose of RPL are
(i) Certified learning
(ii) Experiential learning

Certified (accredited) learning is learning that has previously been accredited, formally recognised or certified. This is the recognition of formal learning for which certification has been awarded through a recognised educational institution or other higher education/training provider. The process of identification, assessment and formal acknowledgement of prior learning and achievement is commonly known across the higher education sector as 'accreditation'. The term 'accreditation of prior learning' is used to encapsulate the range of activity and approaches used formally to acknowledge and establish publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place. The recognition of this category of learning will normally result in:

■   The admission to a programme or course of study;

■   The award of advanced academic standing (entry to a programme beyond year one); or

■   The award of exemption from module(s) of a programme.

Experiential (unaccredited learning) is learning which has not been previously accredited or recognised and is typically uncertified. This is learning which has been gained through life experiences in work, community, or other settings. It is often unintentional learning. The learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it contributed to the development of their skills and knowledge. This recognition may happen only retrospectively through the RPL process. The process of giving formal recognition to non-formal or informal learning can be described as the accreditation of prior experiential learning. The recognition of this type of learning will normally result in the awarding of credit attached to the learning outcomes for the learning achieved by the learner.

While it is useful to understand the differences between these different types of learning, it is likely that an individual's learning experience will have a combination of formal, non-formal and informal aspects. Engaging in RPL allows people to systematically look at their own experiences, to reflect on them, and perhaps look at them in a different or new way. Through informal or experiential learning people are regularly acquiring and renewing their skills and knowledge, and RPL enables people to consider and reflect on how these have developed and changed.

1.2 Defining RPL

RPL has been defined in a number of ways, some more expansive than others. All definitions, however, include the key notion that RPL involves the assessment of previously unrecognised skills and of knowledge an individual has acquired outside the formal education and training system. The process of RPL assesses hitherto unrecognised learning against the requirements for a qualification or for a course leading to a qualification, in respect of both entry requirements and outcomes to be achieved.

By removing the need for duplication of learning, RPL encourages an individual to continue upgrading their skills and knowledge through structured education and training towards formal qualifications and improved employment potentials. UNESCO defines RPL as:

The formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experience (Vlāsceanu, *et al*., 2004: 55).

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA, 2001: 9) defines recognition of prior learning as 'recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred'. Evidence may include 'any combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience, or general life experience', and may take a variety of forms, including 'certification, references from past employers, testimonials from clients and work samples'. The assessor must ensure that 'the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current, and sufficient'. ANTA places significant emphasis on the nature and processes of assessment, and is heavily focused on system and institutional administrative needs. Interestingly, ANTA does not specifically identify a functional link between RPL and workplace learning or workplace competencies. ANTA provides an administratively focused view of RPL, emphasising notions of rigour, standards and quality control. The Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (1997: 13) suggests that RPL 'involves a case-by-case assessment of the individual's knowledge and skills, which may be derived from a whole range of learning experiences, including workplace learning and general life experience'. The Australian focus of assessment, however, is primarily technical knowledge and skills rather than generic employment attributes.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) in Britain also places an emphasis on assessment and has defined the recognition of prior learning as:

A method of assessment that considers whether a learner can demonstrate that they can meet the assessment requirements for a unit through knowledge, understanding or skills that they already possess and do not need to develop through a course of learning (QCDA, 2009).

The QCDA underlines one of its main aims to respond to the needs of individual learners. In support of this, it contends that learners should not be required to 're-learn' something that they already know, understand, or can do.

Wheelahan *et al.* (2002: 4) suggest that RPL involves a process that 'assesses the individual's learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification'. Furthermore, they suggest RPL involves an access mechanism when the normal education or qualification prerequisites are not present. They clearly separate the notion of RPL from that of credit transfer, which they define as a mechanism

that: 'assesses the initial course or subject that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in, the destination course to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification.'

Overall, in line with the definitional frameworks discussed above, Wheelahan *et al.* (2002) and Wheelahan (2004) summarise that RPL literature focuses mainly on supporting learners through the assessment process. They comment that while the intention of including RPL as part of a broader assessment process was to incorporate it holistically into learning and assessment, the result, however, has been that the overwhelming focus of RPL has been on assessment. Wheelahan *et al.* further argue that the greater focus of RPL on assessment may well limit the extent to which it is used because people may 'be unaware of what they know and the extent to which they know it' or 'not have the language to describe what they know' or 'not be able to move from the discourse of their everyday practice to the discourse required to substantiate their claims' (2002: 13). Another problem identified by Wheelahan *et al.* is that RPL primarily requires learners to translate their industry-based practice into academic discourse which requires learners to understand and articulate notions such as 'competency standards, elements of competency, performance criteria, evidence and range of variables, codes, and institutional processes' when their education and work backgrounds have not provided significant development of this specialised skill (2002: 13–14). They conclude that insufficient attention has been paid to the individual learners and their ability to claim recognition for their prior learning.

In summary, there is no clear agreement among writers, researchers, and major policy-influencing agencies regarding what RPL is, what it does, or what it encompasses. Views vary from quite tightly defined notions of RPL as a means of access to a training programme or a qualification, through to conceptions of RPL as a reflective process that can directly impact on understandings and applications of the learning process, both for learners and educators.
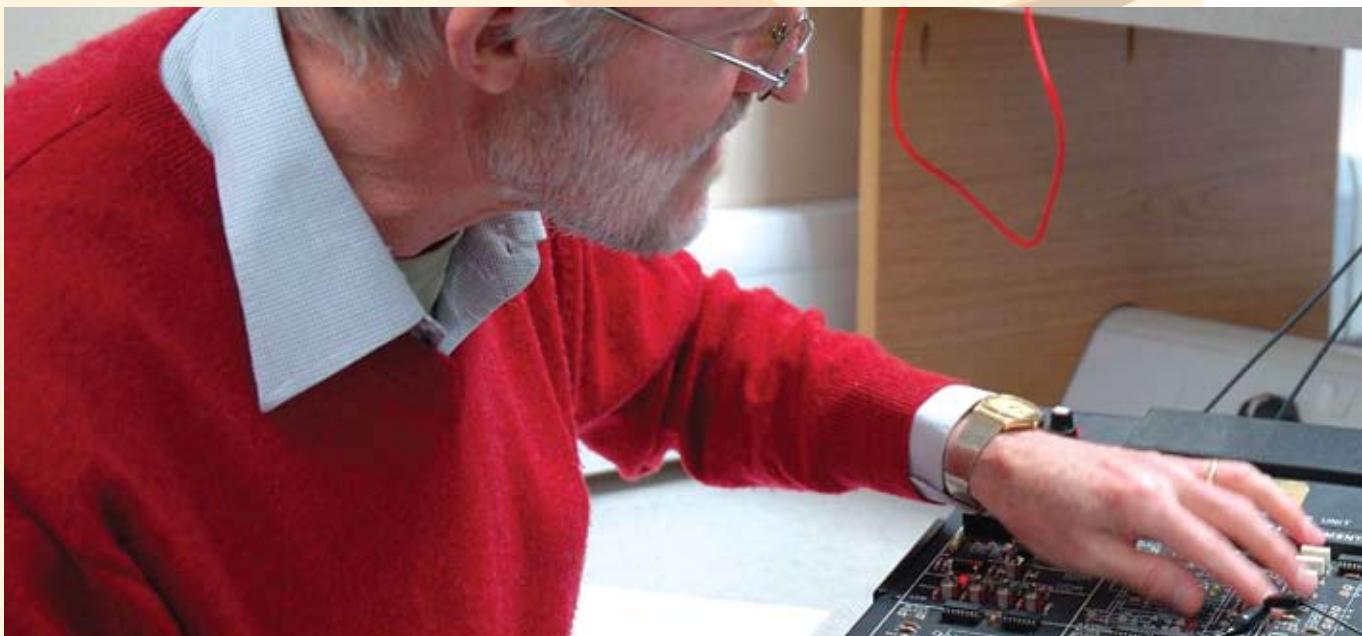
1.3 Who Can Use RPL?

RPL should be an accessible and inclusive process, applicable to all learners at all levels. RPL can be used by a wide range of learners to help them either re-enter learning or as a contribution towards a programme including:

- Adults returning to higher education;

- Employed and unemployed people seeking recognition for skills gained through informal learning;

- People wishing to improve their existing qualifications;

- People wanting to re-train or change careers;

- People who have undertaken non-formal learning or training in the workplace or through community-based learning;

- People who have gained a range of skills and knowledge through volunteering or through activities or projects in their community;

- People in occupations requiring formal qualifications.

A variety of different approaches to RPL can be developed and used by higher education institutions to meet the needs and goals of learner groups across the different sectors. All RPL provision, however, whether for personal/career development or for credit should be an effective, quality-assured practice that will enable all users to have confidence in the outcome of the process. RPL should be a gateway, and not a barrier to learning. RPL should promote the positive aspects of an individual's learning experience (as opposed to its deficiency). The learner's needs and reasons for recognition should be paramount.

1.4 Strategic Innovation Fund Aims and Objectives

The Strategic Innovation Fund is awarded by the Department of Education and Science and is administered by the Higher Education Authority (HEA). SIF is a competitively driven resource stream to implement organisational transformation. The fund is multi-annual, amounting to €510 million over the period 2006-2013. SIF aims to support innovation, and to foster collaboration between institutions competing for funding to:

- Incentivise and reward internal restructuring and reform efforts;

- Promote teaching and learning reforms, including enhanced teaching methods, programme restructuring at third and fourth level, modularisation and e-learning;

- Support quality improvement initiatives aimed at excellence;

- Promote access, transfer, and progression, and incentivise stronger inter-institutional collaboration in the development and delivery of programmes;

■ Provide for improved performance management systems and meet staff-training and support requirements associated with the reform of structures and the implementation of new processes;

■ Implement improved management information systems.

Through the collaborative nature of the projects, new strategic alliances have been developed and supported, providing new impetus for enhanced quality and effectiveness. The OECD *Review of Higher Education in Ireland* made a compelling case for reform of third- and fourth-level education in Ireland (OECD, 2004). While the sector is acknowledged as an engine for economic development, higher education institutions need to rise to the challenges of increasing their relevance, for example, through promoting access and participation by those already in the workforce. The Strategic Innovation Fund is an important element in the investment and reform of higher education institutions to enable them to meet challenges presented by changing social and economic realities while building on their existing strengths. In this way, the projects funded through the SIF will help the partner institutions towards realising their potential while also improving the learning experience for a diverse range of learners at all levels.

In developing a project proposal for SIF Cycle 1, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) endeavoured to ensure that the submission should build clearly on existing leadership and strengths and align with CIT's strategic plan and those of partner institutions. The resulting *Education in Employment* project focuses on the learning needs of those already in the workforce, through four distinct but linked strands. The four strands are:

(i) Recognition of Prior Learning
(ii) Work-based and Blended Learning
(iii) Progression Routes and Diversification Opportunities for Craftspersons
(iv) Migrants and Higher Education in Ireland.

The project is a Cork Institute of Technology-led consortium comprising Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology, Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, National University of Ireland Galway, and University College Cork.

1.5 *Education in Employment* Project

The *Education in Employment* consortium is promoting a model of education development, delivery, support and assessment which is based on a number of underlying principles:

- Learning (as a process rather than an event) is at the centre of the provision;
- Learning (formal, non-formal, and informal) must be assessed and accredited;
- The workplace itself can constitute a rich learning environment and work-based learning should be integrated into learning programmes;
- A sustainable partnership between education and the workplace is necessary for the development, delivery, support and assessment of '*Education in Employment*'.

Recent growth in 'non-traditional' student numbers and demands for up-skilling and upgrading qualifications is increasing the pressure on third-level institutions to provide efficient user-friendly routes to these qualifications. This must be achieved in a manner which retains the confidence of individual learners, employers and awarding institutions. There is also a requirement for a process which offers a complete route to a qualification as opposed to a partial solution for learners.

The main aims and objectives of the recognition of prior learning working group of the *Education in Employment* project include:

- Standardisation of RPL policies and procedures in line with international best-practice;
- Development of a scaleable approach to RPL where the cost per credit awarded decreases as the participation level increases;
- Embedding of RPL as a mainstream activity in all the schools/departments of the institutions;
- Recognition of RPL by all stakeholders as an important input for the identification of existing skills levels in the workplace;
- Delivery and support of a technology facilitated RPL provision;
- Development of a research capability in RPL;
- Development of on-line tools for RPL administration, portfolio preparation (e-portfolio) and assessment and integration with existing Learning Management Systems.

These objectives led to a number of key outcomes:
- Training and development in RPL for 205 academic and administrative staff in participating institutions;
- Consolidating links with external stakeholders and organisations;
- Training mentor networks in key employer organisations;
- Developing a specification for on-line resources, e-assessment, e-portfolios and RPL administration;
- Marketing of RPL to approximately 2,000 potential applicants;
- Production of agreed guidelines and documentation (including on-line) for students, mentors and RPL assessors distinguishing the Advisory, Mentoring, and Assessment roles;
- Publishing agreed procedures and systems required to bring about the integration of RPL into admissions, accreditation and examinations procedures;

- Development of a series of accredited modules on Portfolio Development and Mentor Training;
- Pilot "RPL Procedures" as part of a modular taught Master's programme.

Additionally, through institutional collaboration, members of the *Education in Employment* project have developed principles and operational guidelines to provide information and advice at a national level in relation to RPL. These principles aim to provide:

- Opportunities for learners to have their non-formal and informal learning recognised and counted towards a qualification;
- Greater awareness and understanding of RPL and how it can be used;
- Diverse and inclusive pathways to lifelong learning;
- Consistency in the principles used in implementing RPL within higher education institutions;
- Guidance to education providers on managing the process of recognising informal learning within the context of the NFQ;
- Greater transparency of the principles and processes used by third-level institutions to implement RPL;
- Support for the practice of recognising prior learning as part of the lifelong learning agenda in Ireland;
- Quality and integrity of previous qualifications.

From the outcomes above, it is evident that the focus of the project is on practical issues relating to RPL. Through a collaborative approach, members of the *Education in Employment* project aimed to produce useable generic RPL guidelines. These guidelines are based on the many years of 'on the ground' practical experiences members of the working group shared in conjunction with a review of best practice of RPL internationally. The project funding allowed the allocation of dedicated personnel in many of the partner institutions and this made a significant contribution to the development of policy and practice. The determining factor in developing the above principles was that the recognition of prior learning should meet the needs of learners. In particular, the learning needs of part-time students, mature students, disadvantaged groups, learners in the workforce, and those unemployed should be supported by recognising their prior learning.

From the empirical research conducted with third-level partner institutions in the *Education in Employment* project it is clear that there is not a uniform approach to recognising prior learning. It is also evident that there is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations. In particular, different sectors give rise to different models. It can be suggested, however, that the RPL model which is implemented must be aligned with the outcomes, goals and objectives of the qualification.

1.6 Structure of Report

This report is divided into four chapters. The first chapter serves as a general introduction and provides a background to the report. The chapter introduces the concept of RPL and explores some definitions of RPL from the relevant literature reviewed. Chapter 1 also illustrates some groups who may benefit from RPL. The chapter briefly highlights the aims and objectives of the SIF, and particularly focuses on the *Education in Employment* project.

Chapter 2 presents some of the key driving forces for RPL internationally and nationally. The chapter also highlights the impact of RPL on lifelong learning and briefly presents data on the European and Irish frameworks under which the recognition of prior learning systems are developing.

Chapter 3 presents the collective findings of working-group members on the practices of RPL among the partner institutions represented in the *Education in Employment* project. One of the main aims of this chapter is to provide some *practical* guidelines for promoting RPL policies and practices in third-level education institutions. The empirical work conducted for this report included both primary and secondary research. Chapter 3 begins by exploring the RPL practices which were in existence in partner institutions prior to the commencement of the project. Through the collaborative nature of the project, partners with existing policy and practice documentation made these available to the working group and these documents were subsequently compared to international best practice RPL procedures. Due to the tight three-year project deadline, it was decided to subdivide the working group in order to achieve the project outcomes more efficiently and effectively. Consequently, three sub-groups were formed. These sub-groups were required to focus on the practical advancement of RPL in relation to:

(i) policy;
(ii) learner guidelines;
(iii) assessment guidelines.

The primary research consisted of two sets of questionnaires, which were completed by working group members in each of their respective institutions. On analysis of the questionnaire findings, a subsequent focus-group workshop generated more in-depth findings, which are also represented in Chapter 3.

Chapter 4 summarises some of the challenges that exist for RPL and also presents some RPL recommendations for third-level education institutions. This chapter also presents a conclusion to the report.

The report also contains a number of appendices devised by members of the *Education in Employment* RPL working group. These appendices provide a useful toolkit for the implementation of RPL. Each appendix is intended as a stand-alone document which can contribute to the development of RPL policy and practice or as a basis for the development of appropriate learner information.

Appendix A simplifies some general terms and definitions associated with RPL. Appendix B provides some policy guidelines which could be used by higher educational institutions for best practice in RPL. Appendix C presents some assessment guidelines which could be used in assessing prior certified learning, prior experiential learning, and learning portfolios. Appendix D provides some practical learner guidelines intended to assist the learner in the preparation of their RPL claim. Appendix E consists of a set of RPL frequently asked questions which are

directed towards the learner. Appendix F presents brief information on the NFQ. Finally, Appendix G lists the membership of the RPL *Education in Employment* working group.

This work should be of interest to policy makers, higher education providers, and all who want to engage with RPL. In particular, and in keeping with the *Education in Employment* project remit, the main aim of this report is to provide an impetus to upscale existing RPL activity and to initiate activity where it has not yet begun. Through exploring existing practice and articulating many difficulties and inconsistencies where they exist, this work should contribute in a meaningful way to the development of RPL practice.

2.0 Recognition of Prior Learning in the Context of Lifelong Learning

The nature of work and employment is changing rapidly and pervasively in a global economy where the fundamental sources of wealth have moved from the ownership and exploitation of natural resources to the created resources of knowledge and communication (Smith and Riley 2003; Stewart 1997). Competitive advantage now lies in the ability of businesses to respond rapidly and flexibly to change. As a result, there is an increasing emphasis on lifelong formal and informal learning and training as a critical component in ensuring a highly skilled workforce that maintains and demonstrates currency of knowledge and skills. The traditional notion of obtaining one set of skills or qualification(s) that would suffice for a lifetime of permanent employment, generally with the one employer, is no longer the dominant model (Nicolescu, 2002; Howkins, 2001). Contemporary employees, therefore, require the capacity to work across a range of contexts in an integrated manner which acknowledges that "life, content, ideas, and knowledge are not divided into separate, segregated clusters" (Spady, 2003: 18). More recently, Coughlan (2007) cautioned that learning in the workplace is seen as separate to that attained in higher education institutions. Coughlan emphasises that the workplace should be seen as an integral contribution to the learner in third-level education institutions. Education and training providers, policy-makers and curriculum developers need to acknowledge that the present, past and even future 'real life experiences' of those undertaking education and training are an inseparable and essential ingredient of quality programmes. Goggin (2008) also emphasises the importance of workplace learning and upskilling workers and, in particular, the removal of barriers discouraging people from partaking in third-level education and continuing professional development.

The complexity of individual learning and the opportunities it offers for the knowledge society were recognised in Europe in 1995 in the White Paper of the European Commission: *Towards the Learning Society*. While learning within the formal system for education and training is a distinguishing factor of a modern society, learning that takes place outside this sphere is much more difficult to identify and value. The proposals of the White Paper have slowly shifted from the traditional approach of 'learning in the classroom' to utilise 'other learning environments' such as work environment, independent learning, remote learning, implicit learning and leisure activities. The European Commission published Common European Principles on the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning (2004) in order to value competencies developed in all possible learning environments and also to make use of non-formal and informal learning. Developing a set of common principles for RPL is a way to bring added value to ongoing work at local, regional and national level. According to the Bologna Process the main motivation for developing such principles is to strengthen the comparability (and thus compatibility) of approaches at different levels and in different contexts. Methods and systems of RPL had largely been designed and set up in isolation from each other and could not easily be linked and combined. Lack of comparability, therefore, makes it difficult for individuals to realise lifelong learning by combining qualifications and competences acquired in different settings, at different levels, and in different countries. Since 2004, common European principles have been used by many countries as a reference for national developments, underlining their usefulness as a checklist for developing high quality, credible validation approaches.

The common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning are based on the following agreements:

■ Validation must be voluntary;
■ The privacy of individuals should be respected;
■ Equal access and fair treatment should be guaranteed;
■ Stakeholders should establish systems for validation;
■ Systems should contain mechanisms for guidance and counselling of individuals;
■ Systems should be underpinned by quality assurance;
■ The process, procedures, and criteria for validation must be fair, transparent, and underpinned by quality assurance;
■ Systems should respect the legitimate interests of stakeholders and seek a balanced participation;
■ The process of validation must be impartial and avoid conflicts of interest;
■ The professional competences of those who carry out assessments must be assured.

According to the European Commission, the European principles will provide a reference point and checklist for developing validation methods and systems, making it possible to systematically take into account and build on experiences across Europe. Each country and stakeholder will decide if they want to use the guidelines. Their value and status will be entirely based on their ability to capture existing experience and communicate sound practice.

The OECD's review of the role of various national qualifications frameworks in promoting lifelong learning places a major focus on the link between recognising the prior learning of students and qualification outcomes, arguing for the need to improve opportunities for people to use their informal learning to gain recognised qualifications. Furthermore, the OECD review adds the concept of 'articulation to the concepts of RPL and credit transfer, defining articulation as 'opportunities for mobility and progression between different types of qualifications and between qualifications for different occupational sectors' (Young 2001: 4). Additionally, the OECD sees RPL (and the associated credit transfer and articulation) as being 'intrinsic to lifelong learning', the creation of opportunities, and the provision of access (Wheelahan *et al.,* 2002: 3). The OECD also asserts that RPL is itself a 'learning concept' that must be 'personally meaningful' and have 'social recognition and status'. The OECD framework positions RPL as both an assessment and a learning process. This framework provides a holistic view that incorporates system and institutional demands and personal goals and benefits for individual learners.

The OECD moves away from a 'definitional' approach addressing what RPL *is* to an approach which seeks to convey what RPL *does*. Smith and Keating (1997), focusing their discussion on the use of RPL, also adopt this approach. They broadly designate RPL as determining current competency in the workplace and as a learning process in its own right. Smith and Keating believe that the focus of the learning process should be on how the learner can best meet the prescribed learning outcomes of the particular subject, course, or training programme. The articulation of clear learning outcomes is considered to be a central feature of any type of learning. Learning outcomes have the potential to provide learners with an understanding of what is trying to be accomplished. Raggatt *et al.* (1996) suggest that by focusing on learning and learning outcomes, in contrast to education or training, attention is directed to the individual. It is the individual who has to take responsibility for learning and for selecting what, where, and how to learn.

Bjornavold (2007) observes that the shift to learning outcomes promoted by the European Qualifications Framework, and rapidly followed by the setting up of NQFs all over Europe, may prove to be very important for the promotion of validation of non-formal learning. Bjornavold believes this is due to the general shift in emphasis through the learning outcomes approach, whereby the focus is firmly on the results and outcomes of a learning process and less on the particularities of the process itself. Bjornavold concludes that many important external pressures have contributed to triggering the development of the European Qualifications Framework and of the corresponding National Qualifications Frameworks together with the development of methods and systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning. Migration rates are increasing, technological change is rapid, globalisation has become a reality, lifetime jobs are no longer part of career plans, and lifelong learning is a challenge for most individuals. Combined, all these factors require more flexible, inclusive and open qualifications systems.

2.1 RPL and the National Framework of Qualifications

In the European Union, a set of common principles regarding recognition of non-formal and informal learning with the aim of ensuring greater comparability between different countries and at different levels has been developed. One of the key functions, therefore, of the National Qualifications of Ireland (NQAI) is to facilitate access, transfer and progression to learners through the spectrum of educational provision. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, defines access, transfer, and progression as follows:

- ■ *Access:* the process by which learners may commence a programme of education and training having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence required;

- ■ *Transfer:* the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme having received recognition for knowledge, skill and competence acquired;

- ■ *Progression:* the process by which learners may transfer from one programme of education and training to another programme, where each programme is of a higher level than the preceding programme.

The role of the NQAI in this area is to lead the development of the NFQ; facilitate the necessary changes in education and training systems to support access, transfer and progression; develop supplementary policies on credit, to support the recognition of prior learning and transfer and progression routes.

The NQAI, therefore, after consultation with relevant stakeholders set out principles and operational guidelines for a national approach to RPL (NQAI, 2005). These were developed as a first step in co-ordinating the work of awarding bodies and providers of RPL. They address quality, assessment, documentation, communication and guidance. These issues are critical to building confidence in recognition processes and to meeting learner needs. They draw upon national and international practice including the common European principles on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (2004) which were adopted during the Irish Presidency of the EU. The principles and guidelines address issues of quality, assessment, documentation and procedures for the review of policy and practice.

The principles are intended to encourage the development and expansion of processes for the recognition of prior learning by education and training providers and awarding bodies so that they may:

■ Communicate their commitment to the recognition of prior learning;

■ Bring coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning;

■ Remove difficulties that may confront an applicant wishing to transfer within and between the different education and training sectors.

This can be for the purposes of

■ Entry to a programme leading to an award;

■ Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements;

■ Eligibility for a full award.

The development and introduction of the NFQ since 2003 is also facilitating and encouraging RPL. The NFQ is an integrated and inclusive one and is defined as:

The single, nationally and internationally accepted entity, through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards (NQAI, 2009: 4).

The rationale for the NFQ is that it will contribute to lifelong learning – in personal, social, economic and civic contexts. The recognition of prior learning in relation to achieving qualifications is part of this vision. A major objective of the NFQ is to recognise *all* learning achievements including prior learning. The NFQ provides a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and be formally rewarded for it. It aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications (or awards) and by promoting the recognition of prior learning. The NFQ does this by:

■ Establishing a national point of reference or basis for RPL – learning outcomes;

■ Promoting alternative pathways to qualifications;

■ Promoting a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications.

The NFQ, therefore, forms the basis of a new, more flexible and integrated system of qualifications (Appendix F provides an outline of the NFQ). The need for such a system arises mainly from the national objective of moving towards a 'lifelong learning society', in which learners will be enabled to take up learning opportunities at chosen stages throughout their lives. Coughlan (2006) stated that the issue of accreditation of prior learning has long been "the subject of major debate across all sectors of the Irish educational system". Coughlan concluded that he believed the accreditation of prior experiential learning would become a central element of the development of lifelong learning in Ireland. One of the main reasons for the sense of hope was based in the work of the NQAI and its commitment to ensure that all types of learning within the educational system are recognised.

The NQAI recommends that in developing policies and operational guidelines for the promotion of RPL that co-operation and co-ordination between awarding bodies would be helpful and appropriate. The following operational guidelines build upon the principles above and are in line with the approach set out in the Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners published by the NQAI (2003):

- Prior learning should refer to learning which has occurred before admission to a course or to the relevant stage of a course;
- Policies and procedures should clearly differentiate between the recognition of prior certified learning and the recognition of prior experiential learning;
- Prior learning should encompass all forms of learning – formal, non-formal and informal;
- The modules, programmes and awards that can be achieved on the basis of recognition of prior learning should be identified;
- The process should ensure that, where possible, the applicant can complete the recognition process in a shorter time than it would take to achieve the relevant module, programme or award;
- All programmes open to the recognition of prior learning must be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The same learning outcomes should be used to assess all learners for a module or programme;
- Recognition of prior learning should provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression to education and training and for the achievement of an award;
- The process of recognising prior learning should maintain the standards of the NFQ and its awards;
- Recognition of prior learning should be embedded within the quality assurance procedures of the institution;
- The policies, processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be clearly stated and documented and be available to all potential applicants academic and administrative staff and assessors;
- Assessment criteria for the recognition of prior learning should be published, made explicit to applicants, and applied consistently and fairly;
- Assessment criteria should be based on learning outcomes of awards or standards of knowledge, skills and competencies set out in the NFQ and by the relevant awarding bodies;
- The grading and classification of awards should be available to all applicants;
- Guidance and support should be made available for applicants and all involved in the processes of recognition of prior learning;
- An appropriate appeals mechanism should be in place, and applicants should have the right of appeal;
- Policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning should be monitored and reviewed periodically as part of the general review of quality assurance procedures in place to determine effectiveness;
- Appropriate resources to support the processes for the recognition of prior learning should be in place;
- Collaboration across sectors and between awarding bodies, providers and stakeholders should be encouraged.

As stated previously, the NFQ was introduced in 2003. The NQAI, therefore, considered it timely to investigate the extent to which the Framework and its related policies on access, transfer and progression have been implemented during its first five years in existence. The NQAI commissioned an international study team to undertake such research on its behalf. The findings of the *Framework Implementation and Impact Study* (2009) underscore a demand for greater availability of RPL from many stakeholders, for example, Skillnets; Irish Small and Medium Enterprises (ISME), and the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA). Other issues in relation to RPL include:

- *Inconsistency in how RPL is used for the entry of mature students to higher education.* There is no transparent system in place to gauge how prior non-formal or informal learning is valued in entry processes.

- *Different weightings associated with RPL.* Different weightings are being given to RPL in relation to nurses, in particular to qualifications achieved by nurses prior to those currently required for registration (e.g. for entry and exemptions to postgraduate programmes). Similar differences appear to apply to craft awards and to the recognition of qualifications in the workplace.

- *Lack of recognition of awards through RPL.* Learners who have accessed and successfully completed postgraduate programmes (e.g. conversion type diplomas at Level 8) on the basis of RPL may find that they are disenfranchised from entry to higher education programmes or to employment where they have not achieved the requisite Honours Bachelor Degree.

- *Resource requirements for RPL.* These are significant at both further and higher education training levels (NQAI, 2009: 28-29).

The study team observed that the adoption of RPL policies is dependent on an acceptance amongst providers and professional accreditation bodies of Framework learning outcomes and a deeper embedding of the Framework. Overall, the report concluded that there continues to be considerable scope for the acceptance and use of RPL across the education and training system. The overall position in Ireland is typical of the situation in relation to RPL in other OECD countries (OECD, 2008).

3 | The Contribution of *Education in Employment* Project to RPL Practice

3.0 Introduction

This chapter summarises the varying RPL practices within the project partner institutions and uses them to develop proposed generic process maps for RPL and to explore various roles and other related issues typically encountered in developing RPL. During the course of the project, the working group members presented a set of questions and a workshop discussion on the existing RPL practices within each partner institution. In this way, the varieties and similarities in practice were explored and the different actors in the processes and their varying roles and responsibilities were discussed. The underlying RPL enablers were sought in order to determine factors that might facilitate development, and an attempt was made to identify the barriers to further development or scaling up of RPL activity.

The chapter also highlights some of the policy and practice issues within third-level *Education in Employment* partner institutions. While the autonomy of any individual institution must be paramount, the research findings point to a set of issues or questions which may arise and, where feasible, suggests approaches for addressing some of these issues.

3.1 Pre-existing RPL Practices

The national report on RPL compiled for the OECD (2007) was the first attempt to report comprehensively on RPL policy and practice in Ireland. The report revealed a lack of comparative data on practice, participation rates, and outcomes for learners. A wide range of RPL practice, policy, and procedures was evident. The report also illustrated that much RPL practice is localised: specific to particular groups of learners, programmes, or sectors. The report concluded that awareness and understanding of RPL was limited and the numbers of learners involved were relatively few (www.nqai.ie).

Despite the findings of the 2007 report, it is now widely acknowledged that the Recognition of Prior Learning is not new within the Irish third-level system. In particular, there has been considerable development since the 1990s, facilitated and supported by the National Council of Educational Awards (NCEA) and the NCEA Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning process and by its successor organisations, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC). The increasing importance attached to lifelong learning provision and the introduction of higher standards/qualifications as a requirement for professional practice have acted as a catalyst for RPL developments in some areas, for example the changed qualification requirement in the nursing profession in recent years. In some cases the need for certification in a particular sector has been the driving force. Over the last decade, within the Institutes of Technology, RPL policies and practices have been development and, in some cases, resources applied to RPL at varying degrees. Within the University sector, generally, there is less formal development of RPL practices, but there are instances of RPL, in particular for entry to programmes where the entry requirement may not have been met formally. In some cases, for example, learners can access Level 9 Master's programmes without having achieved the usually required Level 8 qualification for entry.

The Líonra Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) project 2006-2007 received funding from FÁS, the National Training Authority, under the 'Training for People in Employment Initiative'. Líonra, the higher education network for the Border, Midland and Western (BMW) region of Ireland was established in 2001. Membership of the network

comprised five Institutes of Technology: Athlone (AIT), Dundalk (DKIT), Galway–Mayo (GMIT), Letterkenny (LYIT), Sligo (IT Sligo), the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), St Angela's College, Sligo, and the BMW Regional Assembly. The Líonra APL project aimed to provide a collaborative response to the education and development challenges facing the BMW Region. The project sought the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in Information Technology for companies operating in the BMW region. While considerable work had been undertaken by academic institutions and policy makers, the Líonra project's collaborative approach, similar to that later adopted by the *Education in Employment* project, presented an opportunity to explore RPL issues and opportunities in a shared and co-operative way and made a practical contribution to future developments.

At the initial stages of the *Education in Employment* project, it was recognised that the academic partners, some of whom had been participants in the Líonra APL project, as well as other European-funded initiatives were at very different stages of RPL readiness and engagement. The focus of the *Education in Employment* project, therefore, was to facilitate continued RPL engagement and ensure the development of RPL opportunities through sharing experiences and identifying good practice within the consortium.

It is evident that formal and official policy and support, including adequate resource allocation, is required to make RPL processes effective and sustainable over the longer term. It is clearly recognised at the level of an individual applicant and at a political level, that enabling people to build on, rather than repeat, their learning is cost effective and readily facilitates individuals, organisations, and society when responding to challenges in a flexible and dynamic manner.

While the focus of RPL within Europe is underpinned by the European Union principles (2002), practice varies significantly from country to country, and within Ireland the practice varies from institution to institution. The *Education in Employment* project recognised that, for meaningful change to be implemented, open dialogue between organisations, employers, education providers, and employment agencies must take place in a positive and supportive climate. The *Education in Employment* project aimed to stimulate such discussion and, through sharing knowledge and experience, to identify good practice. In working together, it was not expected that a uniform approach should necessarily be adopted but rather that appropriate and informed practices should be developed in organisations, resulting in clear guidelines and expectations for learners. Within the Irish education system the general principles for RPL have been set out by the NQAI (2005). These include the following tenets:

■ The recognition of prior learning will give value to all learning, no matter how that learning is achieved;

■ Participation in recognition is a voluntary matter for the individual;

■ Recognition of prior learning will be part of an inclusive approach to learning by the education and training providers and awarding bodies;

■ Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for access transfer and progression to education and training providers and for the achievement of an award;

■ Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for learners to participate on an active basis in society in general and within a workplace context.

In third-level institutions in Ireland, the RPL process generally functions as a mechanism by which prior learning is measured and assessed against an existing programme or award standard. In the case of a claim for access or entry, the learner seeks to have their learning recognised as generally meeting the award standard required for access to the destination programme. In the case of a claim for exemption, the learner seeks to have their learning recognised and measured against a module or modules of the destination programme to allow them to gain exemptions from those module(s). In the case of a claim for an award, the learner seeks to present their learning against an entire award standard and to be granted that award based on their learning as presented and evidenced. The systems in other jurisdictions vary: in some cases RPL is a process that recognises experiential learning in its own right in the context of personal development and labour-market priorities and not referenced against a programme or award. In yet other jurisdictions RPL is a process that sees the awarding of 'open' credits that can be used against a number of programmes or in their own right.

The *Education in Employment* project recognised that RPL practice, capacity, and capability varied significantly between the academic partners. The project, therefore, did not seek uniformity; rather it sought to ensure that RPL policies and practices in individual institutions were appropriate to their overall educational strategy and state of readiness for RPL. The practice between organisations varies, not only in scale but also in respective levels of requirements for advanced entry or exemptions awarded. Organisations who have focused only on accreditation of prior *certified* learning tend to view the process as merely administrative whereas those who have developed expertise in evaluating and assessing prior informal and non-formal learning tend to see the process as one involving academic staff across all disciplines and at all levels. These different approaches reflect the current status of practice within organisations, including that some institutions are neither ready nor even willing to embrace RPL.

In general, it was evident that the *Education in Employment* partner institutions do not process claims for full awards. The focus of this work, therefore, is on the recognition of either certified or experiential prior learning, or a combination of both, for the purpose of gaining entry to a course of study or for the purpose of gaining exemption from a module or modules.

3.2 Scale of RPL Activity within *Education in Employment* Partner Institutions

When assessing the level of RPL activity in partner institutions some fundamental difficulties arose when setting up a series of metrics for comparable measures. As the processing of applications for entry, based on prior certified learning, can be treated as an administrative task which can occur at the admissions, departmental, or other functions, application processing was not included in the first measure of activity. For the purposes of comparison and to ensure that progress could be mapped under the project, we asked all partners to enumerate the number of RPL applications that were based, in part or solely, on the presentation of a 'portfolio' of evidence of experiential learning by the learner. The level of activity was markedly different between the project partners: varying within an academic year from less than 10 such applications to more than 500. Rather than making a comparison, as such, between partners, the purpose of this discussion was to quantify the existing level of activity and to monitor the relative increase in activity over the lifetime of the project. It also became evident that the national and regional imperatives for developments in RPL increased over the lifetime of the project to date. The number of RPL applications increased, either due to a better understood RPL capability and increased capacity within the partner institutions or due to economic imperatives encouraging more learners with experience back into education.

3.3 Agreement on and Implementation of Institutional Policies on RPL

At the commencement of the project, five of the project partners had policy documents on RPL agreed within their academic system. One of the most useful exercises conducted was the sharing of those existing policy documents and the exploration of the content in the context of national and international publications. Following considerable discussions it was agreed that a single RPL policy within institutions was not achievable. The aim, therefore, was to have a single 'top-level' outline policy agreed by all partners and to ensure that the various institutional policies as implemented within the individual institutions would be in broad agreement with the single top-level document. During the course of the project the majority of partners' policies were reviewed, revised, and adopted by their respective institutions. By August 2009 a high level policy document was agreed, and all *Education in Employment* project partners had an RPL policy/practice document in their institutions. The partners also had the advantage of familiarity with the other partners' RPL policies. It was agreed that project outcomes would be disseminated as generic documents, rather than the product of an individual partner. The guideline document on RPL policy and policy issues, included in Appendix B, is one of these documents.

3.4 RPL: Learner Information and Quality Assurance

The working group agreed that all third-level institutions should develop and maintain quality assured procedures for RPL, including the promotion of RPL to the learner and to the employer where appropriate. RPL policies, procedures, and processes should be explicitly included in quality assurance procedures within institutions to ensure that qualifications achieved in part or in full through RPL are of the same quality and have the same standing as qualifications achieved as a consequence of formal education and training.

Information for learners and prospective employers might include:

- Information and advice on subjects, modules, competencies, courses, and qualifications for which RPL can be used to establish access and exemptions;
- Information on how to apply for RPL, contact details for further information and for support in preparing applications, and information about timelines, appeals processes, and fees;
- An outline of the learning or competency outcomes against which learners will be assessed;
- Information about appeal mechanisms, which should be provided at the commencement of RPL procedures and made available throughout a learner's enrolment in a programme;
- Advice to learners on the RPL assessment process, the kind of evidence they can use, the forms in which it can be presented, and, where appropriate, a guide as to what is considered sufficient and valid evidence;
- Information on administrative processes for receiving RPL applications, administering assessment, recording results, advising students of the outcome, and administering appeals processes;
- Designation of responsibilities and accountabilities for undertaking RPL assessments;
- An outline of different assessment processes that may be used;

■ An outline of the manner in which RPL policies, processes, and assessments are quality assured. Clear and transparent quality assurance mechanisms are essential for ensuring confidence in RPL decisions. These quality assurance arrangements should be included in negotiations with all stakeholders. The findings from the Líonra project also underscore the need for clear information and transparency. An example of a learner guideline document, including guidance on the process of developing the required portfolio of evidence, is provided in Appendix D.

3.5 RPL Process Map

Exploration of policy and practice on RPL throughout the consortium through questionnaires and in-depth discussion fora allowed a generic process map for different elements of RPL to emerge. This process map does not represent any particular process within a specific institution but is broadly representative of good practice emerging from a discourse on existing RPL arrangements and from an amalgamation of inputs from the contributing academic institutions. This illustration of the Recognition of Prior Learning process is intended to be a sample guide and is in no way meant to be prescriptive. In this case the map allows an exploration of roles often encountered in the systems and of the issues that arise in practice which were explored through the *Education in Employment* project deliberations.

Figure 1 illustrates a process whereby RPL is sought for exemption from an element of a programme. In this case, the learner is generally required to demonstrate that they have met all of the learning outcomes of the module(s) for which exemption is being sought. The partner institutions reported that these cases are most often encountered for part-time programmes where non-standard learners bring significant learning to a particular programme. Non-standard learning can be certified or experiential, or in some cases a combination of these. The process map attempts to identify various roles and stages and to show the relationships between these. While these roles are shown separately, single individuals can be responsible for a number of these roles in any institution. For instance the administrative and academic guidance roles may be carried out by a single individual in some cases. Separating the roles is meant to draw attention to the different stages of the process and to contribute to the discussions on appropriate resourcing levels.

Figure 1: RPL for Exemption – Experiential and/or Certified Learning

RPL for Exemption - Experimental and/or Certified Learning

Learner	Administrator	Mentor	Assessor	Exam Board Data Record
	Log application on RPL DBase	Consider programme / module learning outcomes		
Initial enquiry	Explain RPL process	Consider overall learning plan		
Develop portfolio or evidence of certified learning		Advise on steps for portfolio development or certified learning evidence		
	Accept portfolio and pass for assessment		Determine if learning outcomes are met	
	Enter decision on RPL DBase		Advise on decision	Present outcome to exam board

Figure 2: RPL for Entry

RPL for Entry

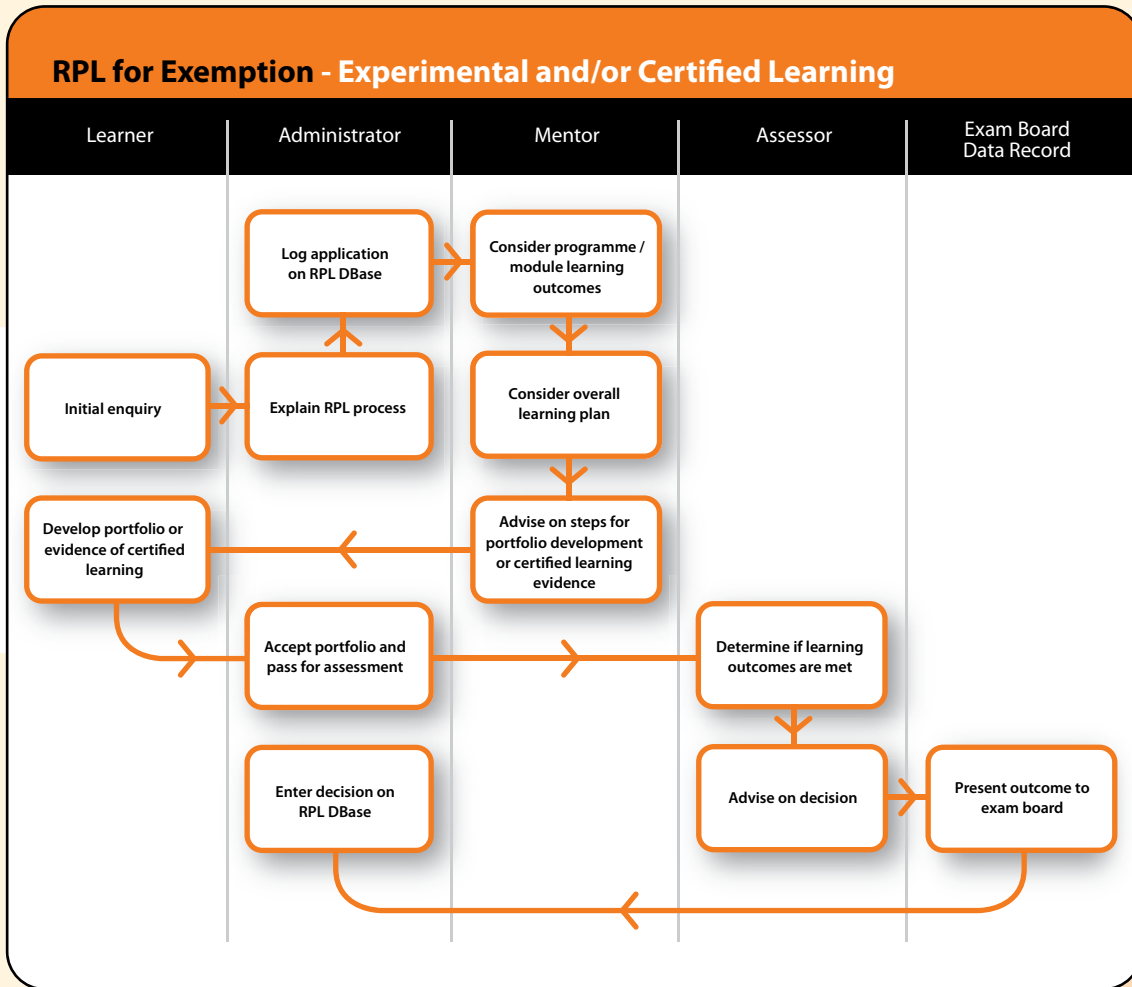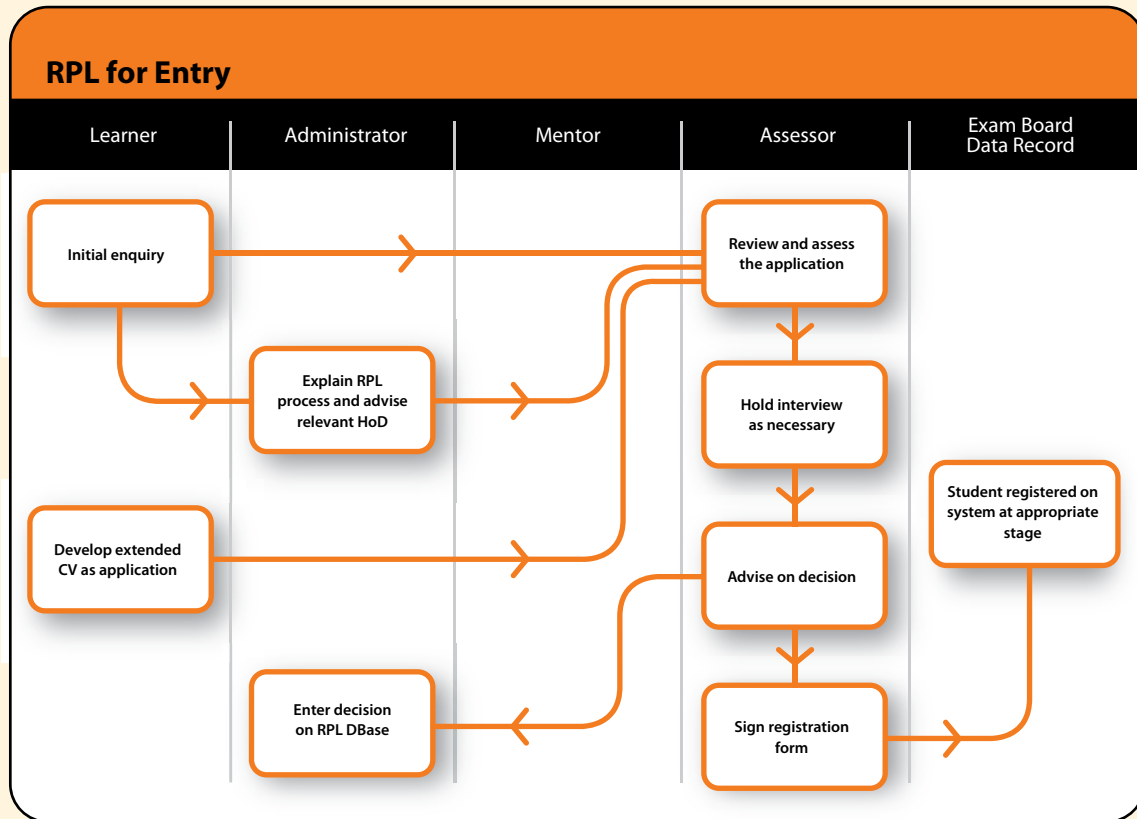| Learner	Administrator	Mentor	Assessor	Exam Board Data Record
Initial enquiry			Review and assess the application	
	Explain RPL process and advise relevant HoD		Hold interview as necessary	
Develop extended CV as application			Advise on decision	Student registered on system at appropriate stage
	Enter decision on RPL DBase		Sign registration form	

Figure 2 shows a RPL process for entry to a programme. In this case, the learner is seeking to enter a programme for which they do not have the required formal prerequisite, for instance, a learner who enters a Master's programme without the cognate Level 8 honours degree. In these cases, a more holistic approach is generally taken where the responsible academic, with sanction from their Head of Department, makes a general decision about the eligibility of the learner to enter a programme. Typically, this requires the learner to present an extended curriculum vitae (CV) and to undergo a semi-formal interview. In this case, a learner's prior learning can be formally 'recognised' for entry but is not usually considered to be 'credited'. The learner, for example, applying for entry to a Level 9 course would not be granted the Level 8 award in such cases. It is generally understood that this use of RPL for entry is under-reported as in many cases the learner engages directly with the appropriate academic department and may not go through a central RPL advisory body or office, even where such a service exists.

In the case of the processes represented above, the major considerations focus on roles and responsibilities, the timing of various processes, and the thresholds and limits placed on the use of RPL, and these are explored in more detail.

3.6 Roles in the RPL Process

Where RPL is to be marketed and scaled up as an entry mechanism and as a service to employers, sufficient resources must be provided to ensure that the learner and, where appropriate, the employer receive an appropriate level of service. Identifying a number of different RPL roles, the process maps can be used as reference points for informing institutional decisions on RPL resources. Most institutions have not decided whether RPL roles should be administered centrally or if these functions should be distributed throughout the administrative and academic resources of the various Faculties/Schools and Departments. There are arguments supporting both approaches. One benefit of having at least some dedicated RPL resource or function centralised would be to facilitate the collation of overall RPL data. Where there is a central RPL administrative resource, the central admissions, registration, and examinations processes of the institution must also play a role. Distributing the RPL functions has the advantage of ensuring a greater spread of RPL awareness, capability, and credibility throughout the staff cohort. From the perspective of academic quality and of quality assurance the academic assessment role must, however, be independent of the advisory role.

The working group agreed that RPL processes should include and clearly indicate academic and administrative responsibilities and accountabilities, and these should be widely publicised both within institutions and to potential learners. The potential for RPL should be offered prior to or when enrolling, and RPL follow-up processes should continue to be available while the learner is enrolled in a programme. Support should be available to learners in either a formal group or an informal setting to learn the skills needed to gain RPL. Processes should be timely and, where possible, decisions should be made as close as possible to the commencement of a programme. The main roles in the RPL process typically include: the learner; the RPL mentor; and the RPL assessor

The Learner

The learner is the person who applies to have their prior learning assessed. All RPL processes require the applicant to provide evidence of appropriate past learning, whether certified and/or experiential learning. Guidance, support, and mentoring should be provided for applicants wishing to submit evidence for assessment. Contact points for advice, support, and mentoring should be clearly signposted. The learner should be:

- Fully informed of the application process, including its different stages, and of the nature and range of evidence that is considered appropriate to support an RPL claim;
- Supported in developing their understanding of the intended learning outcomes, against which prior learning will be assessed;
- Supported to develop reflective capacity skills in the identification of learning outcomes;
- Informed in relation to fees that are payable for the consideration of claims for the accreditation of prior learning;
- Given clear guidance on when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim, and the outcome;
- Required to provide an original transcript of previous results and relevant syllabus information, if possible, where prior certificated learning is the basis of RPL.

The RPL Mentor

Mentoring helps people to realise their potential and can combine elements of giving advice, counselling, and coaching. The RPL mentor should discuss the role of both the learner and mentor at the beginning of the process to ensure a mutual understanding of the relationship. Morton (2003) advises, "there must be clarity as to the purpose of mentoring and what it is intended to achieve. All parties involved in the process must be clear about the intended outcomes." The role of the RPL mentor is to advise the applicant on RPL planning, evidence gathering, and portfolio building. The mentor should provide the applicant with relevant information and guidelines on RPL policy and procedures and should provide information on the assessment process. The RPL mentor may include meeting with learner(s) on an individual basis and/or group basis to discuss progress. Meetings with learners should be timetabled to take place at appropriate points during the RPL process. The content of those discussions should be kept confidential.

The RPL mentor should:

- Provide initial guidance on the RPL process;
- Provide guidance on the gathering and presenting of evidence of learning;
- Facilitate opportunities for the applicant's further learning and development;
- Support applicants in the reflective process, for identifying learning through experience (skills, knowledge, and competence);
- Support applicants in selecting and producing evidence of that learning, and identify areas for further learning;
- Provide unbiased constructive criticism, guidance and feedback;
- Avoid or be prepared to explain academic jargon;
- Encourage applicants to make links between learning and their work practice;
- Help applicants with any practical or conceptual difficulties with the RPL process;
- Encourage applicants to take responsibility for their own learning and help to build their confidence.

Garavan *et al*. (2003) assert that the focus of mentoring must be on helping the learner. They further suggest that, while direct advice and instruction from the mentor can be helpful, it is important to ensure that learners think for themselves and that the mentoring process does not, either intentionally or unintentionally, create a dependence where they just blindly follow the mentor's instructions and cannot take action without advice. Both the Líonra APL project and the *Education in Employment* project have explicit aims relating to the development of workplace mentors. The two projects acknowledge that in many cases the recognition of prior learning can be initiated, supported, and facilitated through employers and employer organisations. The development of well-informed workplace mentors can play an important role in reducing demand for more resources from the third-level provider.

The RPL Assessor

The assessor is responsible for the assessment of the individual RPL case. The assessor should be a subject specialist with experience of using a range of assessment techniques. Assessors should be requested to assess only learning outcomes which they are competent to assess. Each case is assessed against the learning outcomes of the destination module or programme. Training is required for the assessment of prior experiential learning as this type of learning normally takes place in an unstructured way and in many different and untypical learning contexts.

When assessing **prior certified learning** the assessor will consider the following:

■ **Level of prior award in the NFQs:** The prior learning must be at the same level or higher in the NFQ in comparison to the programme the learner is currently undertaking or proposing to undertake. An applicant, for example, seeking an exemption from a Level 7 module must have completed an equivalent Level 7 module or higher. In the case of international awards clarification can be sought from the NQAI as to the comparable level in the Irish system;

■ **Learning outcomes:** The learning outcomes of the module(s) previously certified must be similar to the learning outcome of the module(s) the learner seeks exemption in;

■ **Timeframe of Learning Outcomes:** The prior certified learning must have been achieved within a relatively recent timescale, but the currency of the learning can depend on the particular discipline.

When assessing prior experiential learning, the assessor will consider the following:

■ The likely ability of the applicant to meet the learning outcomes;

■ The ability of the applicant to meet the standard of learning on the NFQ;

■ The ability of the applicant to demonstrate that they are capable of applying the learning in a new context;

The assessment process is essential for quality assurance and for building confidence in the RPL process. The Líonra project recognised this issue of assessment as difficult and highlighted the need for fairness between traditional and RPL assessment processes. In order to contribute to the debate on and development of appropriate assessment methodology and practice, a summary of the assessment guidelines developed through the *Education in Employment* project is provided in Appendix C.

3.7 Timelines in the RPL Process

One of the major points of discussion in any RPL process is the timing of the various trigger events and the impact that timing has for both the learner and the institution. Generally, most RPL applicants begin the process of making their application at approximately the same time, or at best a few weeks before, the module delivery begins.

Most of the *Education in Employment* third-level partners agreed that, while there should be a lenient policy in terms of the opportunity for learners to apply for RPL and to prepare their portfolios, from the assessment and administration perspective, there should be a date beyond which an application cannot be considered within a given semester. From a learner perspective, learners usually require an outcome of the RPL process as soon as possible so they will be able, for example, to make a decision to enrol for a particular module if their RPL application is unsuccessful.
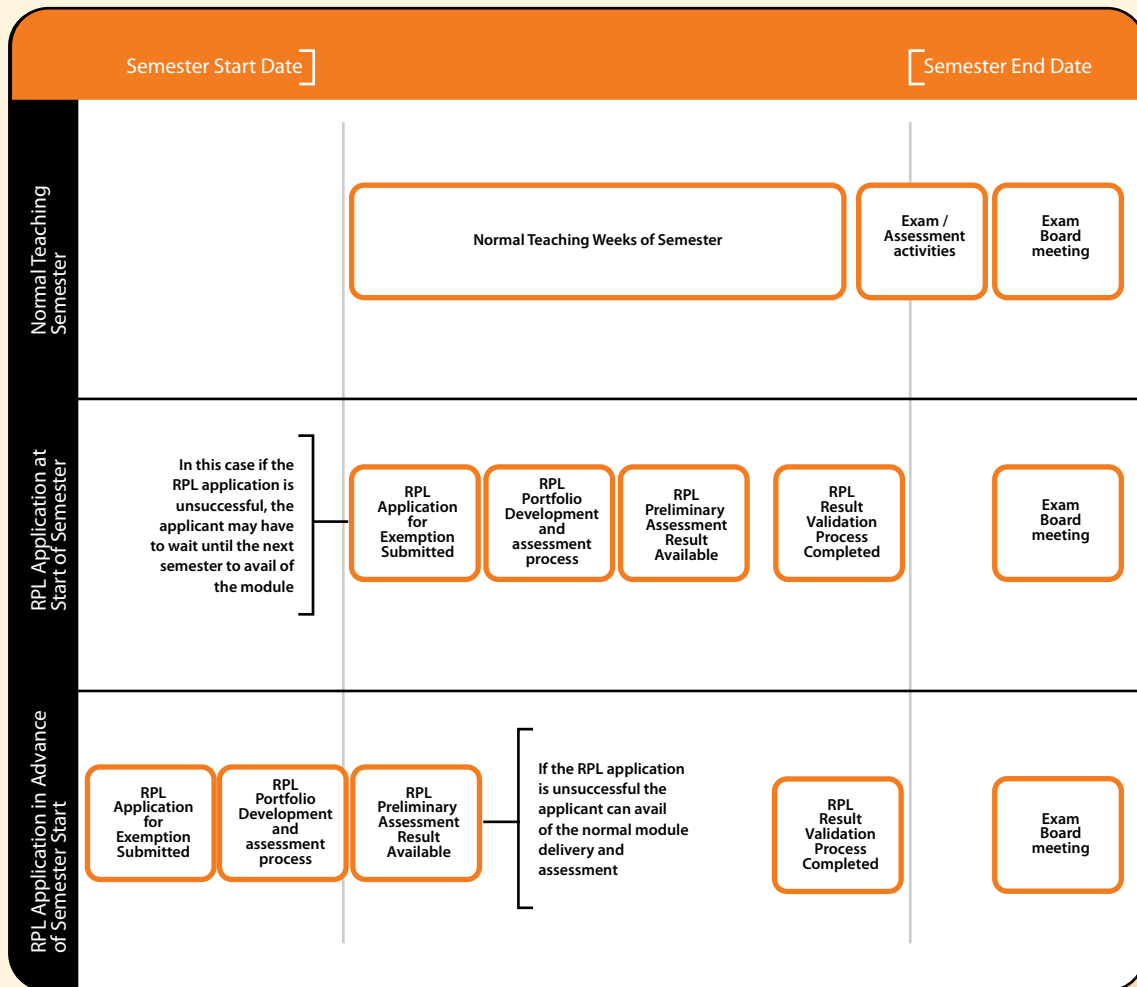
In a modularised and semesterised system, semester duration is usually 12 to 14 weeks. In the case of prior certified learning, the preparation and assessment of the evidence can be reasonably straightforward. In some cases, however, complications can occur when supporting documentation is in a foreign language. In the case where claims are based on prior experiential learning, the timeline is very demanding when providing guidance on the preparation and assessment of a portfolio of learning mapped to the learning outcomes of the module in question.

The RPL process should be marketed, supported, and assessed in advance of the semester in which the module is delivered, to allow learners whose application is unsuccessful the option of conventional enrolment and assessment. Allowing the learner to register for a particular module in advance of the delivery schedule has implications for the institution. A question that arises here is if one can register a learner on the institutional records system and charge them the appropriate fee for a particular module before that module is delivered or available. There is an issue, therefore, about the timeline when an 'official' admission/registration form for RPL applicants is completed and entered in official records. This can be especially fraught where the RPL route is separated from the standard application route.

Another issue that arises is the point in time when the result of the RPL application is entered into the official examination records. Following the assessment of the portfolio or consideration of the certified evidence, the result in most cases is subject to ratification by a modular exam board or a specially convened RPL validation board, in line with the QA processes within the particular RPL system. If this board is not convened until the end of a given semester, the learner cannot get an 'official' answer to their application until that time. Ideally, the learner should be advised of the outcome of the assessment process at the earliest possible opportunity.

Where an institution is working with a group of learners in partnership with an employer, the timing issue is often dealt with by a customisation of the destination programme so that it would incorporate an RPL process, in some cases, including a credit-earning module around the development of a portfolio. Figure 3 depicts the normal teaching semester and an indication of the timing involved if the RPL application is made the start of Semester or in advance of the Semester beginning.

Figure 3: Examples of RPL Timelines

	Semester Start Date					Semester End Date	
Normal Teaching Semester			**Normal Teaching Weeks of Semester**			**Exam / Assessment activities**	**Exam Board meeting**
RPL Application at Start of Semester	In this case if the RPL application is unsuccessful, the applicant may have to wait until the next semester to avail of the module	**RPL Application for Exemption Submitted**	**RPL Portfolio Development and assessment process**	**RPL Preliminary Assessment Result Available**	**RPL Result Validation Process Completed**		**Exam Board meeting**
RPL Application in Advance of Semester Start	**RPL Application for Exemption Submitted** / **RPL Portfolio Development and assessment process**	**RPL Preliminary Assessment Result Available**	If the RPL application is unsuccessful the applicant can avail of the normal module delivery and assessment		**RPL Result Validation Process Completed**		**Exam Board meeting**

3.8 Awarding Grades for RPL, and Limits on Attainable Credits for RPL

In the case of any application for RPL exemptions from programme modules, much concern and discussion centres on the outcome of each particular assessment process. Across all project partner institutions, when prior certified learning is presented for an exemption an 'X' is entered on the examination transcript to indicate that the learner has been exempted from that element but , generally, no grade is awarded. In non-award stages this usually has no implication for the learner but in award stages this may lead to an 'unclassified' award. A core issue arises where prior experiential learning is presented against the learning outcomes of a particular module. In this case, some of the *Education in Employment* project partners award a grade based on an assessment of the portfolio regardless of the stage. With some of the project partners a grade was awarded only if it was at an award stage, while in yet other cases only an exemption, 'X', is offered, regardless of stage.

In the case of experiential learning, the learner usually presents material which has not been previously assessed or granted credits, and also provides evidence of meeting the learning outcomes of the relevant module for the first time. The capability of the academic institution to validly assess and award grades to evidence of learning outcomes achieved, regardless of where the learning was gained is what is challenged here.

A further issue relevant to the RPL process is the limit or threshold on the number of RPL credits that can be attained at any particular stage in a programme. Where a limit is applied, it is generally 50% of the available credits in a non-award stage, and less in an award stage. Limits on the presentation of prior certified learning are usually more restrictive than those on the presentation of prior experiential learning. As it is at least theoretically possible under the NQAI guidelines for a learner to claim a full award through the RPL route, there is some disagreement about the appropriateness of limits in this context.

3.9 Costs of RPL Provision

An analysis of RPL processes and roles would not be complete without discussing the issue of costs associated with RPL. 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. 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 RPL fee. The fee for certified learning is of the order of the examination fee for the module from which exemption is sought, and the fee for exemption 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. The full-time student, however, is liable for the full registration fee.

In the case of some of the partner institutions, a fee is paid to assessors for appraising portfolios. This practice would reflect practices developed by institutions previously involved in the Líonra project. In other institutions there is no separate fee for assessment. In discussions on payment for portfolio assessment, the 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 generally be aligned between the various institutions. Any future reintroduction of fees for full-time students might also have implications for the costing of RPL processes within institutions.

3.10 Capacity and Capability for RPL

Through the *Education in Employment* project, significant training activities on RPL at various levels have taken place both within individual institutions and inter-institutionally. Regional symposia on RPL which have taken place have been open to institutions outside the *Education in Employment* partnership. Training has included sessions on awareness-raising, sessions on promoting better practice, and the presentations of case studies. In addition, a Level 9 module on RPL was piloted by Dublin Institute of Technology in the second semester of 2008/09 and offered again in the first semester of 2009/10. These training activities are aimed at enhancing RPL provision through better informed dialogue and by facilitating the mainstreaming of RPL activity. If RPL activity is to be sustained and scaled up within a given institution then academic staff need to be involved as assessors, mentors, and supporters of the process. It is also recognised within the partner institutions that training and development in the areas of non-examination assessment has implications for all forms of flexible and work-based learning and will act as an enabler for more open and responsive assessment methods throughout the sector.

3.11 Engagement with Employers and Employer Organisations

The progress within the *Education in Employment* partner institutions in engaging with the workplaces has varied, largely because of regional and institutional priorities. In the case of some of the higher education institutions, there is a clear strategy to develop RPL in line with employer or other sectoral needs and to market RPL through workplaces rather than to individuals. Other institutions have developed both approaches, putting resources in place to facilitate individual RPL claims and also marketing RPL through workplace partnerships. A number of partners have been involved in offering RPL training and/or mentoring to employers and employer organisations, for example, the Irish Naval Service, Skillnets, ICTU, etc. The function of RPL engagement with employers has a number of facets. It acts as a marketing device for RPL and an incentive for workplaces to engage with third-level education generally. The employer can also take on a supporting role in the process and, by taking part in the mentoring and guidance process, can alleviate the resource load within the third-level provider. This building of the mentoring role within employer organisations has led to formal training being offered by some of the participating institutions to their workplace mentors, and in many cases these mentors also acted as facilitators for work-based learning. Another advantage of a partnership approach to RPL is the resulting growth in RPL awareness and understanding within the employer organisation, which in turn builds trust in the process and value in the outcomes.

3.12 RPL Barriers and Enablers

The *Education in Employment* project did not focus solely on enabling the development of relevant learning opportunities for the workplace learner. One of the main objectives of the project was to contribute to the reform of systems and structures within the higher education institutions in relation to workplace learning and to bring improved practices into the mainstream activity of the institutions.

In attempting to identify potential areas for reform or for restructuring the *Education in Employment* project, partners were asked to identify the main barriers to and enablers of the enhancement of the RPL process in their individual institutions. The responses received are summarised below.

3.12.1 Barriers to RPL

Student Record Systems
When asked to identify the main barriers to development and scaling up of RPL activity in individual institutions, working party representatives from a number of institutions — notably institutions with the most significant RPL practice built up — identified problems relating to student records and management information systems as barriers to successful RPL. Difficulties or deterrents included: rigidity of the institutional record system, difficulty in clearly and consistently recording students who are granted exemptions, implications for the students' full-time status and delays in the portfolio development and assessment process. It was agreed that these are not insurmountable difficulties but would need to be addressed for the development of robust RPL systems. These system issues were also reported in the Líonra project. The recording of the outcome of the process and how this is translated to the Diploma Supplement was also considered. The working group recommended that, where experiential learning is awarded a grade and included in a final award, these grades should not be differentiated on the Diploma Supplement.

Time Involved in the Preparation and Assessment of Portfolios
The length of time required to prepare and assess a portfolio of experiential learning was identified as a concern and, often, an RPL barrier at some of the institutions. Where the preparation of the portfolio is contemporaneous with the delivery of the module in question there can be serious concerns over any delay in portfolio preparation. The major concern is that the learner may fail in their bid for RPL and may have opted not to take the lectures or tuition in that subject, thereby missing their chance to undertake the conventional assessment methods on offer. It was noted that learners initially often underestimate the time and effort required to complete a portfolio and, following mentoring and advice sessions, some of the potential RPL applicants opt to undertake the modules through the conventional route. Particular circumstances, however, can vary significantly and the timing issue is often not a difficulty where a cohort of learners is progressing through the RPL process in a planned and managed way in collaboration with an employer partner.

RPL Costs
RPL costs can be a barrier for the learner and for the provider. One of the issues explored by the RPL working group is the lack of clarity and transparency around RPL costing. As referred to above, the process to recognise prior certified learning has a very different resource requirement than that required to advise and guide a learner on the preparation and assessment of a portfolio. The working party agreed that the RPL process could be

important for incentivising learners towards third-level education, therefore neither the costs nor the process should act as a barrier to the learner.

Academic Language and Jargon

In some cases, the language in which the learning outcomes are couched, even terms such as 'learning outcomes', can deter potential applicants who have not previously engaged in third-level education. Some of the *Education in Employment* partners have already engaged with the process of re-phrasing terminology concerning the learning outcomes of modules which are often the subject of RPL claims. The working group is also providing examples of prior learning evidence at the appropriate level that can be used to meet specific requirements. In cases where an institution is working with numbers of learners, the provision of readily understandable exemplars can be very effective in encouraging RPL applicants.

3.12.2 Enablers of RPL

Policy and Process

An approved policy on RPL is one of the main building blocks for successful development of RPL. Currently, the build-up of practice and experience based on an approved RPL policy within any institution acts as an incentive for developments. In the case of many of the partners the ongoing development of RPL policy and the clear upholding of academic standards are facilitated through a sub-group of Academic Council or equivalent.

Institutional Capacity and Capability

An institution's RPL capability requires adequate staff capability in RPL-related administrative, mentoring, and assessment functions. Building this capability and, as far as possible, ensuring that the required capacity is quantified and available, will result in enhanced opportunities through RPL. Building assessment capability as it relates to problem- and project-based learning, and work-based and flexible learning will translate well into RPL and vice versa.

Point of Contact

Some partners believed that a clearly identifiable point of contact and a dedicated resource and/or office for RPL was a significant factor in growing and developing RPL activity and ensuring that the learner believed that this resource was readily accessible to them. Under the SIF *Education in Employment* project funding many partners put a dedicated RPL resource in place or supplemented resources that already existed. One of the significant questions at the close of the project will be the sustainability of this dedicated RPL resource.

Robust Quality Assurance (QA) Systems and Well Designed Programmes

A perception can be held by some people in the academic community and in other areas that the recognition of prior learning allows an easy or easier route to an award for a learner, or that the learner does not hold the same level of knowledge, skills, and competence as a learner who went through the traditional learning route. The experience of learners and academics involved in the RPL process, however, is that the route to exemption, based on prior experiential learning is difficult and rigorous. The application of transparent and robust QA systems should help to build more widespread confidence in RPL systems.

Experience and practice would indicate that there are modules which are commonly the focus of RPL claims — modules where the learning outcomes focus on particular skillsets and application of those skillsets, for example, computer programming or project management. On the other hand, there are some modules which may never be the subject of an RPL claim, for example, advanced mathematics, or other highly analytical elements. The onus is on the academic institution to ensure that programmes leading to awards consist of an appropriate mix of knowledge, skills, and competence at the appropriate level. This should enable the guidance and mentoring function to clearly identify and distinguish modules and learning outcomes as either inside or outside the normal range of experiential learning.

Compilation of RPL Data
It was clear that information on the RPL process and RPL applications was not collected in a uniform and comparable manner among the institutions represented by the project partners. It was agreed that the availability of information on RPL practice within institutions would serve a number of purposes. From an internal organisational perspective, the availability of a precedence database would allow an assessor to view the outcome of previous cases and assist in the consistency of assessment processes. The compilation of information on certified cases could, for instance, allow the granting of exemptions on a cohort basis to holders of particular certified learning pathways. The collection and sharing of information could, as a matter of course, allow recognition of learning from professional bodies and private providers. For example, an in-depth consideration of a set of Irish Management Institute (IMI) examinations against the learning outcomes of a stage 1 module in Business Studies might be accepted as a precedent and allow other learners to have such lear ning recognised without the need for further in-depth consideration. Equally, success in the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) could be accepted against an introductory level computer skills module once the institution had completed one comprehensive mapping exercise. As well as ensuring greater internal consistency this can be seen as a marketing opportunity which could be advertised to potential learners.

Compilation of information on experiential learning cases could assist in developing exemplars for potential learners to illustrate how evidence can be successfully presented against particular learning outcomes. The compiled information should also assist the higher education provider in identifying the discipline and modules which are most commonly the subject of RPL claims and should therefore assist in the identification of resources and capability required.

Collection of data on earlier RPL queries and unsuccessful bids should assist in the development of advisory information which can be made available to learners in advance and to avoid similar unsuccessful applications in the future.

3.13 Concluding Remarks

This chapter draws on the work completed under the RPL strand of the SIF *Education in Employment* project and uses the findings as a basis for contributing to the development of a roadmap for RPL. The chapter summarises the work undertaken for the project and, where appropriate, contributes suggestions and outlines for further development. The focus of the *Education in Employment* project was on practice rather than theory, therefore, these research findings should contribute to the practical development of RPL in institutions where RPL is still very tentative. Through the collaborative nature of the project, the information presented here represents a unique multifaceted contribution on RPL practice in Ireland. During the course of this project, a significant project on Flexible Learning, led by the Institutes of Technology Ireland (IOTI), brought a greater focus on the learning needs of the part-time and workplace learner. It is expected that the Flexible Learning project and the learning portal (www.BlueBrick.ie), developed to make flexible learning opportunities more accessible, will become a significant driver of RPL activity. The *Education in Employment* project has agreed to supply the IOTI-led flexible learning project with all relevant information on RPL, including a set of data from which a precedence database can be developed. This engagement with the IOTI-led project will help to ensure sustainability and the broader dissemination of the contributions and outputs from the *Education in Employment* project.

4 Recommendations and Conclusions

4.0 Challenges of RPL

There are many challenges that higher education institutions are confronting in RPL provision, not least the widespread confusion over what constitutes RPL, which is also referred to by a variety of terms, such as: **APL** (accreditation of prior learning), **APCL** (accreditation of prior certified learning), **APEL** (accreditation of prior experiential learning), **RNFIL** (recognition of non-formal and informal learning), **PLAR** (prior learning assessment and recognition), and **RAL** (recognition and accreditation of learning. For the purpose of this report, members of the SIF *Education in Employment* project decided to adopt an all-inclusive approach to RPL, accepting the variety of terms outlined above. A focus on terminology and definitions could, however, get in the way of exploring and dealing with what really matters, in particular, deliberately and strategically influencing the overall RPL policy environment, dealing with structural issues and challenges, and sharing, promoting, and encouraging effective RPL practices.

According to Adam (2007), there have been significant developments in the area of international recognition since the inception of the Bologna educational revolution in 1998-99. A formidable array of recognition tools, techniques and processes now exist. Adam suggests that the main challenge is not to create more RPL devices but to ensure the existing ones are properly and extensively employed.

The findings of the research conducted for this report suggest that academic standards continue to be a key challenge for third-level education providers involved in RPL. Concerns regarding academic standards are fuelled by an unfounded fear that RPL is contributing to a more general lowering of standards by making RPL available to all learners. A challenge for RPL providers, therefore, is to ensure that RPL activity is recognised as part of the quality assurance mechanisms within their institutions. A robust quality assurance system also enhances the comparability of validation processes across institutional, regional, and national borders.

Another challenge for academics championing RPL is to ensure that *all* staff in their institutions recognise that learning also occurs outside the higher education institution. This requires well-defined standards, accessible information on learning outcomes, clear information on how assessments are conducted and jargon-free policies. It is important, however, to ensure that RPL systems are not made unnecessarily complicated, too time-consuming, too bureaucratic, or too expensive to administer.

4.1 Recommendations for Implementing RPL

The empirical research conducted during this project confirms that many third-level educational institutions now have policies and procedures for formally recognising prior learning. Many RPL developments have taken place in the past five years, contrasting with the previous years, when Murphy (2004: 8-9) concluded that, "in Ireland the application of the accreditation of prior experiential learning related in the main to existing course provision across a relatively small range of fields of learning". Murphy further noted that only four institutions had organisation-wide policies in place and these were mainly driven by external forces rather than an active desire from the institutions to promote RPL. The new *Education in Employment* project now fosters RPL developments and has achieved the main SIF objectives by:

- Enhancing collaboration between higher education institutions;
- Improving teaching and learning;
- Supporting institutional reform;
- Promoting access and lifelong learning;
- Supporting the development of fourth-level education.

As argued throughout this report, RPL is already a vital and legitimate mode of learning, offering significant value for the teaching and learning agendas of higher education institutions. Based on a review of the relevant literature and drawing on the experiences of the RPL working group members, a number of recommendations for higher education institutions should enable further progress on RPL agendas in the near future. It can be recommended, therefore, that higher education institutions should:

- Recognise that a learner already has certain insights, experiences, and knowledge;
- 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;
- Recognise that RPL has to be underpinned by quality assurance mechanisms;
- Clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the learner, the RPL mentor, and the RPL assessor;
- 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;
- Gather appropriate information on the RPL process within their organisation;
- Provide effective, timely, and appropriate feedback to learners;
- Work in partnership with employers, where appropriate, to develop negotiated pathways to learning for cohorts of workers while taking account of their prior learning.

There are many considerations for the implementation of RPL for both third-level institutions and for learners. RPL is a very attractive option for learners as its relevance is clear and it provides an opportunity to gain qualifications by drawing on recent or current everyday practices. It is important that boundaries are constructed in an educational framework maintaining academic standards while at the same time providing policies, guidelines, and practices that make explicit the educational parameters within which RPL is to be negotiated and assessed.

4.2 Conclusions

The economic and employment climate in Ireland deteriorated significantly in the two years since April 2007. Ireland thus faces a harsh new fiscal environment. Economists recognise that enhancing people's skills gives future competitive advantage to a workforce. The current economic downturn makes a strong case for reforming aspects of third-level education in an effort to strengthen economic growth. The formal recognition of prior learning is now accepted as an essential element in educational reform. This change should encourage the building of a culture of up-skilling for jobseekers and for the continuous development of skills among those already in employment. The development of RPL processes should play a more significant part in the development of pathways to learning for those whose job functions are under threat or those who are unemployed. The recognition of prior experiential learning can also be used to foster a culture of lifelong learning and to provide opportunities to meet the newer needs of individuals and employers. As Pouget and Osborne (2004: 46) note, "One of the outcomes of the consultation launched by the *Memorandum on Lifelong Learning across Europe* has been to highlight the importance of 'valuing after learning' be it informal, non-formal or informal settings."

The developments associated with the concept of the learning society, lifelong learning, and the learning organisation are promoting change in higher education in a number of ways. There is increasing pressure on higher education institutions to work more closely with employers and thus contribute to the processes of economic change and development. Education and industry partnerships are increasingly regarded as essential to the development of lifelong learning, resulting in the blurring of boundaries between these sectors. This reflects a growing emphasis on the importance for higher education institutions to develop partnerships with employers and other organisations. Partnership is an important catalyst for the recognition of prior learning at all levels. RPL can also provide significant assistance to employers because of the added value contribution employees can make to the organisation. Partners in the *Education in Employment* project have welcomed the opportunity to work with employers in their local regions in order to encourage further recognition of *all* prior learning, which in turn promotes the lifelong learning agenda. Recognising prior learning, however, must not only satisfy academic scrutiny by the third-level institutions but it must demonstrate a 'fitness for purpose' at the level of the individual, the employer, and, in many instances, the wider professional community.

Higher education institutions are expected to be increasingly flexible in their modes of delivery when meeting lifelong learning agendas. Recognising all prior learning complies with criteria for flexible learning by being adaptable in terms of time, place, and mode of learning. This newer flexibility transforms the role of higher education from merely delivering pre-specified programmes of study into one of proactively facilitating and supporting learning in response to new societal demands. The recognition of prior learning across all disciplines provides many opportunities for such flexibility. Many Irish third-level institutions are now delivering courses in modules, that is, organising academic courses in smaller rather than larger units, thus making it easier to formally accredit prior learning. As well as enabling learners to gain credit in Irish third-level institutions for their learning, modularisation helps individuals to transfer more easily to third-level institutions across Europe.

Further flexibility is offered to learners through the partnership developed between the *Education in Employment* consortium and BlueBrick.ie, a student-focused information portal developed by the IOTI-led flexible learning project. Through a modular approach, BlueBrick.ie will enable learners to register for modules in their area of interest, from modules on offer by third-level institutions, and to accumulate credit towards a graduate or postgraduate award. Bluebrick.ie aims to allow individuals to continue their learning through taking subsequent modules at their own pace, in their choice of institution, and still be able to group those modules to create

a national award. This approach allows maximum flexibility to the individual while steadfastly protecting the autonomy of the institution and rigorously upholding academic standards.

The SIF *Education in Employment* project members, reflecting the report of the National Competitiveness Council (2009), agree that inter-institutional cooperation is critical to the continuing success of Ireland's higher education system. The National Competitiveness Council further suggest that higher education institutions can provide value for money and can enhance efficiency by reducing duplication through rationalising courses and developing critical mass through greater sustained cooperation. The National Competitiveness Council views the establishment of the SIF as a positive step in this direction. Inter-institutional cooperation further underlines the need for clear, unambiguous, transparent, comparable, and accessible policies and procedures. Unnecessary complexity in procedures, even if only in jargon-laden guidelines, acts as a disincentive for learners seeking RPL.

This report, resulting from inter-institutional cooperation during the past three years, should illustrate some of the outcomes which can result through such inter-institutional cooperation and, as a result, should encourage further collaboration in future. In addition to inter-institutional cooperation within higher education institutions, an inter-disciplinary approach should, ideally, be established to progress the RPL agenda. At the same time, RPL in each discipline within each third-level institute must meet national and international requirements for quality assurance. By placing RPL high on the quality assurance agenda of each institution, such prioritising should help to dispel a common myth — that RPL is an 'easy option' or a 'back door' to a qualification.

Overall, the findings of the SIF *Education in Employment* consortium underscore that higher education institutions are in a transition period as they move to place more emphasis on recognising *all* prior learning. As indicated above, the current provision of RPL activity varies from institution to institution. If higher education institutions aim to adopt a more proactive approach to developing RPL practices, fundamental decisions will need to be taken in relation to costs and human resources. The costs associated with RPL, both in time and budgets, appear to be a significant disincentive both for learners and higher education providers and may help to explain why the service is underexposed and underutilised. Working group members, however, argue that the benefits to both the learner and the higher education institution outweigh arguments focused on cost savings. Additionally, working group members agree that a dedicated resource in each third-level institute should actively promote the provision of the service. A dedicated RPL resource should play a strong role in the process, not only for providing support, advice, and guidance to the learner, but also for promoting RPL to employers.

There are significant RPL advantages for learners and employers from the information gained through engaging with the process and systems, and not just in the advanced standing RPL can provide towards a qualification or programme of study. Recognising prior learning will ensure better access to high quality education and should raise both economic competitiveness and the wellbeing of society. It is critical that Ireland continues to provide and maintain a highly skilled and well-educated workforce to successfully compete in global markets, and to combat the recent sharp rise in unemployment, as higher skill levels boost labour participation rates, productivity, and economic growth. Prior learning must be more proactively recognised for its solid and valuable contribution to third-level education, and thus ultimately enhancing the economic and general well being of individuals and society generally.

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The report focuses on the practicalities of implementing RPL. The appendices are intended to form part of a practical toolkit for higher level institutions for developing and standardising RPL policies and practices. These appendices are drawn from the practical experiences of the working group in their respective institutions and from the primary and secondary research conducted as part of the SIF *Education in Employment* project.

RPL Terms and Definitions

Accreditation
Accreditation is a term frequently used as a synonym for the recognition of learning. It is, however, more properly used to signify the most formalised and widely practised forms of recognition of learning.

Accredited Programmes
Learning that is validated and recognised by an official state-recognised educational institution.

Accreditation and Recognition of Prior learning
This is a process for assessing and, as the standard is reached, recognising prior experiential learning or prior certified learning. The process for presenting prior learning for recognition typically involves describing experiences, reflecting on those experiences, identifying the learning associated with the experiences and defining this learning in terms of knowledge, skills, and competence. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be formally rewarded for it within the NFQ. Recognition occurs when the learner has demonstrated that learning has taken place. The learning experience is not recognised simply because it has occurred. The role of the provider is to provide effective support to the learner in this process and to manage the process of recognition in a clear, fair, consistent, and timely manner. The learner must provide verifiable evidence to demonstrate that the learning achievement has taken place.

Advanced Academic Standing
Advanced academic standing refers to exemption from a year, or stage, or group of modules on the same level so that a learner can progress to a more advanced part of the programme. This does not involve the awarding of credit. This is generally the same as RPL for entry.

Assessment
The credibility of higher education and training qualifications relies on the validity and reliability of the procedures for the assessment of learners: "The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education. The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment is carried out professionally at all times and that it takes into account the extensive knowledge which exists about testing and examination processes. Assessment also provides valuable information for institutions about the effectiveness of teaching and learners' support" (ENQA, 2005: 17).

Learner assessment means inference (e.g. judgment or estimation or evaluation) of a learner's knowledge, skill, or competence by comparing it with a standard based on appropriate evidence. The intended learning outcomes for a programme define the minimum learning outcomes for a particular programme. A learner who completes a programme is eligible for the relevant award if he or she has demonstrated, through assessment, attainment of the intended programme learning outcomes.

Adequate assessment mechanisms are required even where the intended programme learning outcomes are not known, for example, in the case of general credit and the recognition of (uncertified) prior learning. The learner's learning attainment may not be fully known to the subject assessor(s), in which case a staged assessment process may be required which brings the learning attainment into focus in a step-by-step manner until the required level of detail is reached.

Awarding Credit

This describes the outcome of the recognition process when a learner with prior experiential learning (uncertified learning) demonstrates that the prior learning satisfies the learning outcomes or standard for the module, subject, or other unit of learning. The learner then gains the credit value attaching to the relevant learning outcome(s).

Credit

Credit is an award made to a learner in recognition of the verified achievement of designated learning outcomes at a specified level. Credit refers to the European Credit Transfer Scheme (ECTS) as part of a national approach to credit. A unit of credit is equal to approximately 25 to 30 hours of learner effort.

Formal learning

Learning which takes place through study/training programmes that are delivered by education or training providers, and which attract awards.

Gaining an Exemption

This describes the outcome when a learner with prior certified learning demonstrates that the prior learning satisfies the learning outcomes or standard for the relevant module, subject, or other unit of learning. The exemption releases the learner from having to enrol for the module, subject, or unit of learning.

General Credit

This refers to credit which is linked to a programme, either without predetermined module learning outcomes or with learning outcomes, which promotes reflection which is generic to a number of prior learning experiences.

Informal learning

Learning that takes place through life and work experience, sometimes referred to as experiential learning. Such learning is usually unintentional and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it was contributing to his or her knowledge, skills, and competencies.

Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are educational goals which are represented under the headings: Knowledge, Know-how and Skill and Competence. The NFQ is a standards-based framework with learning outcomes as a central underpinning concept.

Non-formal Learning

Learning that takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification.

Prior Learning

This refers to learning, knowledge, skill, or competence that has already been acquired, but which has not necessarily been assessed or measured through formal processes. It is learning which has taken place prior to entering a programme (or the relevant stage of a programme) or prior to seeking an award. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal routes and should encompass all forms of learning. In all cases the onus is on the learner to demonstrate the prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate and verifiable evidence, under the guidance and advice of the institution. The two main categories of prior learning for the purpose of these guidelines are:

1. **Accreditation of Prior Certified Learning (APCL):** learning which has been previously accredited, formally recognised, or certified. The recognition of formal learning for which certification has been awarded through a recognised educational institution or other higher education/training provider.

2. **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL):** Learning which has not been previously accredited or recognised, and therefore usually uncertified. The process of giving formal recognition to non-formal or informal learning can be described as the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning or the accreditation of prior experiential learning. Credit can be awarded only for achievement of learning outcomes as a result of a learning experience and not for the experience itself.

Recognition of Learning
Recognition of learning is any process that acknowledges and establishes publicly that some reasonably substantial and significant element of learning has taken place and can be assessed to have done so.

Specific Credit
This is credit attached to specific, programme, module or subject learning outcomes.
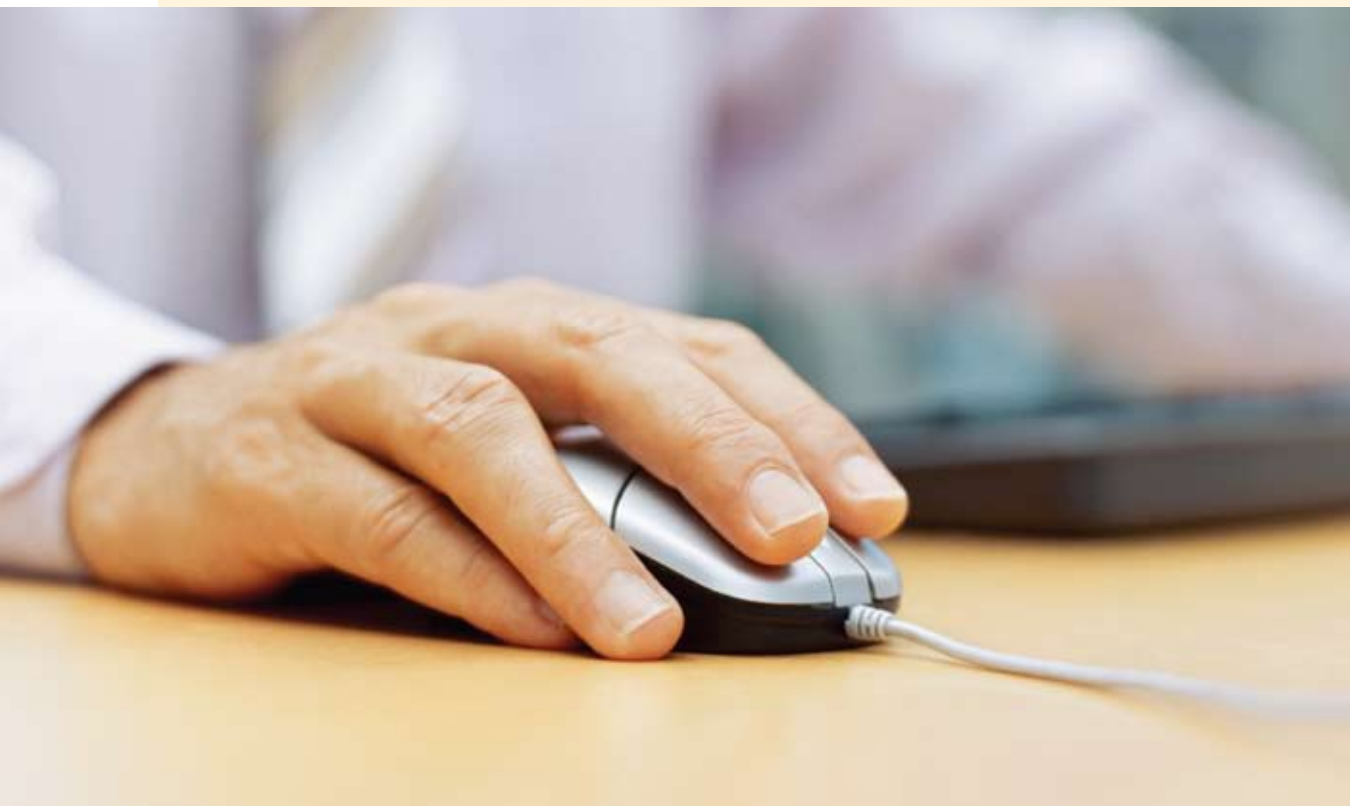
RPL Policy Guidelines

This section addresses the basic policy parameters recommended for inclusion in institutional policy and procedures for the recognition of prior learning. These guidelines are intended to assist higher education institutions when developing policy within their systems:

Summary Policy Considerations:
a.   The recognition of prior learning should be embedded in the institution's quality assurance programme;
b.   The range and scope of RPL availability should be stated clearly;
c.   Policies and procedures should clearly differentiate between the recognition of prior certified learning and the recognition of prior experiential learning;
d.   Where possible, limitations should not be placed on the extent to which prior experiential learning is recognised;
e.   Limitations on the recognition of prior certified learning should apply;
f.   All programmes open to the recognition of prior learning must be expressed in terms of learning outcomes. The same learning outcomes should be used to assess all learners on a particular programme or module;
g.   The assessment of prior learning should be considered and devised as part of the overall assessment strategy to ensure fairness and consistency for all learners and for each individual programme and module;
h.   The grading and classification of awards should be available for learners involved in an RPL assessment process;
i.   The basic minimum support in place for learners engaging in the recognition of prior learning should be clearly stated at policy level;
j.   The role and responsibility of all stakeholders involved in the recognition and accreditation of prior learning should be explicitly stated, including that of the learner;
k.   A learner who has benefited from the RPL process should not be subsequently disadvantaged in terms of access, transfer, or further advancement;
l.   Institutions should monitor and evaluate RPL procedures and record statistical information on the number of learners undertaking RPL processes;
m.   The processes and assessment mechanisms supporting RPL learners should rely on supportive and verifiable evidence to demonstrate attainment of the learning outcome;
n.   Policies, procedures, and guidelines established for the recognition of prior learning should be monitored and revised periodically.

The Recognition of Prior Learning and Quality Assurance
The policy and procedures for the recognition of prior learning should be embedded in the institutional quality assurance procedures and should form part of the typical arrangements in place for higher education and training provision, such as the external examining process. Quality assurance procedures underpinning RPL assessment processes should promote RPL to the learner.

Scope and Range of RPL Policy
The range and level of programmes, modules, and awards available under the policy of the recognition of prior learning should be clarified at policy and programme level. Higher education and training awards range from Level 6 to Level 10 of the National Framework of Qualifications. Research degree awards include the Master's Degree, Doctorate of Philosophy, and Higher Doctorate. Other categories of awards include the Minor, Supplemental, and Special Purpose awards at Levels 6 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

The scope of the NFQ policy on RPL also refers to a broad variety of issues, including:

- Entry to programmes or exemption from parts of programmes or full programmes through RPL assessment;
- Status of the learner when RPL assessment process is initiated;
- Implications, if any, for the RPL learner for a typical learning pathway in terms of access, transfer, and progression;
- Defining 'recognition of prior certified learning' in the context of what will be deemed recognisable;
- Limitations refer to the volume of recognition that can be achieved through RPL and limits or barriers on modules/subjects that cannot avail of RPL processes;
- Policy for dealing with grades awarded by another higher education provider when a learner has successfully achieved recognition of prior certified learning;
- Classification of awards assessed under the recognition of prior learning.

Limitations on the Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning

The concept of placing a limitation on the amount of demonstrated experiential learning achievement which will be recognised by an institution against the standards of a programme is not supported by the objectives of the NFQ. Where limits are in place on the proportion of learning that can be recognised as prior learning, however, these should be explicitly stated at policy level and derogations should be explicitly stated at programme level in all the information published for the programme.

Limitations on the Recognition of Prior Certified Learning

Policy limitations should apply to the recognition of prior certified learning for the purpose of gaining a recognised award of the NFQ. In particular, limitations should apply where the prior certified learning achievement is being used by a learner or graduate to gain a new award at the same level which represents the learning previously achieved.

Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes are essential to the successful recognition of prior learning. They represent the standards of the national framework of the individual awards and of the field of learning. Intended programme and module learning outcomes should be established by the institution and periodically reviewed to ensure these keep pace with evolving needs. The learning outcomes of any programme or module should be readily understood by all learners and by all involved in the assessment of the learning achievement. Assessment of the submitted prior learning achievements should be conducted against the learning outcomes of the relevant programme module or other units of learning. The same learning outcomes for a programme and/or module should be used to assess all learners.

Assessment Strategy for Programmes and Modules

Assessment (including tasks, criteria, procedures, and inferences) should be unbiased so that no particular person or group (traditional or non-traditional learner) is unfairly advantaged or disadvantaged. Great care must be taken with the construction and conduct of assessment tasks and criteria, and any prejudice or conflicts of interests must be avoided. Fairness requires transparency of assessment processes and of criteria — at module, programme and provider levels. It is essential that learners are informed about and understand the precise criteria that will be used to assess them.

Support for Learners

Policy parameters should clearly indicate the basic minimum support in place for learners engaging in the recognition of prior learning process, including the procedures that automatically apply as part of the quality assurance systems in place, such as recheck, or appeals mechanisms. Each stage of the RPL process should be defined in terms of:

■ Information;

■ Timeframe and related implications;

■ Implications for exemptions, assessment, or reassessment grades;

■ Mentoring and other key points of contact to enable reflective skills development;

■ Key points of contact.

Electronic and other types of model-based support for RPL learners are known to reduce the resource implications for supporting RPL applicants.

Learners should be supported in developing their understanding/internalisation of the intended learning outcomes. For RPL learners this involves a reflective capacity and skill in the identification of learning experiences.

Assessors

Assessors should be requested to assess only learning outcomes which they are competent to assess. Training is required for the assessment of prior experiential learning as this type of learning usually takes place in an unstructured way and in many different and untypical learning contexts. This type of learning usually contrasts to that of the mainstream and structured higher education teaching and learning environment.

Evidence Verifying the Learning Achievement

Assessment of submitted learning should be conducted against the learning outcomes of the relevant programme modules or subjects. Policy and procedures should clarify the role and responsibility of learners in demonstrating their learning achievement against required learning outcomes. The responsibility of the learner extends to providing evidence demonstrating the learning achievement. This evidence must be verified by a third party as the true work or achievement of the learner. Evidence can take many different forms and should be appropriate to the learning achievement.

Review of Policy and Procedures

Policies and procedures for the recognition of prior learning should be monitored and reviewed periodically as part of the general review of quality assurance procedures to determine effectiveness.

Grading and Classification of RPL

Providers are encouraged to grade prior experiential learning for modules, subjects, or units of learning that form part of the award stage and classification calculation in order to avoid disadvantaging the learner. In the interests of fairness and consistency, if the module is one which contributes to the award classification, it must be graded in order to classify the award, otherwise, an unclassified award should be made. Modules that do not contribute to the award classification do not need to be graded.

RPL Assessment Guidelines

Assessment methods should accommodate the literacy levels, cultural background, and educational background and experiences of learners. Assessment methods should provide for a range of ways for learners to demonstrate that they have met the required outcomes. RPL assessment processes should be comparable to other assessment processes for assessing learning or competency outcomes in a subject, module, unit, course or qualification. All RPL assessment methods should be explicitly subject to the quality assurance processes used to ensure the standard and integrity of mainstream assessment processes within institutions, and be validated and monitored in the same way that other assessment processes are validated and monitored. RPL assessment should also be structured to minimise costs to the individual and all decisions on assessments should be accountable, transparent, and subject to appeal and review.

An effective assessment strategy engenders confidence in the academic rigour applied to the assessment process and its outcomes. Assessment strategies should be plainly but clearly written and communicated to learners and to all those involved with teaching and assessing at the start of programme. A clear assessment strategy can complement a statement of intended learning outcomes, as well as aiding its interpretation by learners.

Learners should be provided with advice about the institution's assessment processes and about the sort of evidence the institution will consider when assessing any RPL application. Learners should also be provided with sufficient information to enable them to prepare their evidence to the standard required for the RPL assessment process. The processes used to assess RPL applications may take several (not mutually exclusive) forms, for example:

- Learner participation in the same or similar assessment which the learner would be required to complete as part of the full programme;
- Assessment based on a portfolio of evidence;
- Direct observation of demonstration of skill or competence;
- Reflective papers, journals, or portfolios that relate past learning to the learning or competency outcomes of the current module;
- Provision of examples of the learner's work drawn from the workplace, social, community or other setting in which the learner applies their learning, skill, or competence;
- Testimonials of learning, skill, or competence; and
- Combinations of any of the above.

RPL assessment processes and procedures may consist of the following stages:

- Establishing the purpose of the assessment;
- Identifying the evidence required;
- Using appropriate evidence-gathering methods;
- Interpreting the evidence and making a judgement;
- Recording the outcome;
- Reporting the assessment to stakeholders.

When assessing prior certified learning the assessor will consider the following:

- **Level of prior award in the NFQ:** The prior learning must be at the same level or higher in the NFQ in comparison to the programme the learner is currently undertaking or proposing to undertake. An applicant, for example, seeking an exemption on a Level 7 module must have completed an equivalent Level 7 module or higher;
- **Learning outcomes:** The learning outcomes of the module(s) previously certified must be similar to the learning outcome of the module(s) the learner seeks exemption in;
- **Timeframe of Learning Outcomes:** Depending on the discipline, the currency of the learning outcomes may be relevant in the assessment process. Learning outcomes related to, for example, a language may remain current but those related to a specific technology skill set may not;
- **Avoiding Double Credit for Awards at the same level:** If, a graduate holding a higher education or training award presents for a further major award at the same level within the same generic area of study the institution should ensure that a minimum threshold of new learning is presented.

When assessing prior experiential learning, the assessor will consider the following:

- The likely ability of the applicant to meet the learning outcomes;
- The ability of the applicant to meet the standard of learning on the NFQ;
- The ability of the applicant to demonstrate that they are capable of applying the learning in a new context.

Assessment of Learning Portfolios
The learning portfolio is a document which can be used to represent learning that has taken place. It is a collection or 'a file of evidence' which demonstrates how the learner has met the learning outcomes of a module or entry requirements for a programme through their prior learning. When it is presented for assessment it is examination material. Portfolios can be based on formal, informal, non-formal, experiential, or work-based learning. When assessing learning portfolios, the assessor should:

- Grade each learning outcome;
- Ensure the applicant's evidence of learning reflects each learning outcome;
- Identify any specific areas or gaps in the information provided, and request additional information;
- Communicate the outcome of the assessment through the appropriate channels within the institution.

If the assessor believes that additional information, other than what is contained in the learning portfolio, regarding the learning of the applicant could be ascertained by interview then a suitable time and date should be arranged for the applicant and the assessor.

Dealing with Exemptions

In general, it is recommended that recognition should be given on the basis of complete modules as defined within approved course schedules and not for elements of a module. Exemption procedures must be consistent with the necessity for learners to demonstrate the learning outcomes required to qualify for an award. Exemption allows those learning outcomes to be achieved and/or demonstrated in alternative ways and recognises that they may have been achieved prior to enrolment in the programme.

In principle, exemptions are permitted at any stage of a programme, subject to the relevant programme and constituent module assessment strategies. Where the result of a module is required for calculation of an award classification, the provider should, where feasible, establish a fair, consistent, and transparent process for grading the learner's achievements in respect of the learning outcomes of the exempted module. Where this is not possible, the award can be recommended only without classification. The learner should be fully informed of the consequences of accepting exemptions on this basis.

RPL: Learner Guidelines

This section refers to learner guidelines for the preparation of a learning portfolio which may be used for the recognition of prior experiential learning to gain exemption from a module. The guidelines and the template for the presentation of evidence of achievement of learning outcomes provided here are indicative and arise from a sharing of systems in place among the project partner institutions. Rather than being prescriptive, these guidelines are intended to be a useful starting point for institutions when developing their own systems.

Section One: RPL Application Form
An application form must be completed by all RPL candidates. The form contains details of the RPL application, including the relevant module title and code of the module or modules for which an exemption is sought. This application should be fully completed prior to submitting a learning portfolio.

Section Two: The Learning Portfolio
The learning portfolio should include the following three components:
1. An extended Curriculum Vitae (CV);
2. Matching of learning against learning outcomes;
3. Documentary evidence of prior learning

1. The Curriculum Vitae (CV)

A CV will usually include the following sections:

■ Employment Details: Details of candidate's existing employment (if applicable) and previous employments considered relevant to the application for RPL should be provided.

■ Training/Education and Professional Membership: Accredited and non-accredited courses and programmes that are relevant to the application should be included. Details of professional memberships should also be included. Voluntary activities together with any other relevant information should also be supplied.

This information is being sought to provide the Assessor with an overview of the range of experiences being drawn from when compiling the learning portfolio. The CV, therefore, provides a useful backdrop of evidence and learning experiences.

2. Learning Outcomes

The learning portfolio requires a description and evidence of how each of the learning outcomes of the module in question is met through the candidate's prior learning.

What are Learning Outcomes?
Every module has a number of learning outcomes that describe the key learning that a learner is expected to achieve having successfully completed a module or programme of study.

A learning outcome is a statement of what a learner should know or be able to do as a result of a learning experience. Learning outcomes describe the key learning expected to be achieved on completion of a module. Learning outcomes are usually expressed in terms of knowledge, skill, and competence.

An RPL applicant, seeking recognition of prior experiential learning, must be able to demonstrate how each of the learning outcomes has been achieved through prior experiential learning. One must also be able to provide evidence of the learning that has been achieved. Experiential learning refers to learning that has taken place through paid employment, in a voluntary role, or through life experience. It can also include training courses that may have been undertaken as part of employment or voluntary activities but have not been accredited formally.

3. General Guidelines for Meeting the Learning Outcomes

In this section, it is necessary to demonstrate how each learning outcome has been met through experiential learning.

■ A sample format or template for presenting non-formal and informal learning experiences should be provided;

■ It is necessary for the learner to give an account of prior learning against specific learning outcomes;

■ The learner must provide evidence of the learning achieved in support of the application. (See criteria for evidence documents below);

■ In addressing each of the learning outcomes, it is necessary to focus on the learning that has been achieved from a particular experience or experiences. It is important to be specific about the learning that has been achieved, showing the knowledge, skill, and competence that have been gained from experience. Recognition can be given only for evidence of learning and not for the experience itself;

■ A separate description must be completed for each learning outcome; therefore, a copy of the template for each learning outcome is required;

■ The template has a space for the Module Title and Learning Outcome, both of which must be entered in the application form. The remainder of the template is for compiling responses and outlining the learning relevant to the learning outcome being addressed;

■ Responses should be set out in a clear and logical manner, identifying relevant evidence in the responses being submitted in support of the claims.

How Should the Learning Outcomes be Addressed?

■ Full details of the relevant module including the learning outcomes must be made available;

■ Each learning outcome should be addressed separately, thereby helping to match individual learning to the requirements of the learning outcome;

■ Each learning outcome should be carefully read to identify what is being asked. Some learning outcomes may have several parts so it is important that all parts should be addressed adequately;

■ Each response is personal and, therefore, will vary from applicant to applicant, in terms of content and length. As every candidate will have different circumstances and experience to draw from, there is no single right answer, style, or degree of application;

■ To give a structure to the learning experience, however, the following suggested format may be useful when organising responses to the learning outcomes:

Module Title: [Enter the title of the module from which an exemption is being sought]

Learning Outcome: [Address each learning outcome separately]

Introduction and Context
It is useful to start with an introduction that puts the prior learning into context. If, for example, the learning experience is based on activity carried out at work then the context in which the activity takes place and the individual role played in the process should be described. At this stage, it is necessary to briefly outline how the learning outcome has been met, before describing the activity or work related experience.

The Learning Experience
The context above will have given the Assessor a brief overview of how the learning outcome has been met. In this section, it is necessary to describe the learning experience in terms of what was involved, who was involved, where, when and how. This is now detailing the specific learning that is evident in the experience which has just been outlined.

The account of prior learning should include concrete examples of how prior learning was achieved. It is important to be specific about the type of learning that was achieved in terms of knowledge, skill and competence, and in what manner these have been applied in a working/voluntary environment. An account of the knowledge gained from and applied to a working environment should be provided. Skills that have been developed and applied in the workplace, together with competencies that have been developed and applied in a range of work-based functions should also be included.

Some of the learning outcomes to be addressed are specifically knowledge related. It is necessary, therefore, to demonstrate evidence of knowledge in the relevant subject or discipline, and how this knowledge was acquired. It is also necessary to illustrate how this knowledge was applied and in which circumstances, for example, in a work environment, and with what results.

Reflection/Analysis
The candidate must conclude with a reflection on the learning achieved from the above activity or experience in the context of the learning outcome in question. This section should be used to make a clear link between one's 'own learning' and the learning outcome which the learning is being assessed against.

The Assessor will base his or her decision on the evidence of the learner having achieved the learning outcomes and not for the experience itself. In this section it is important for the candidate to articulate how the experience described above has met the learning outcomes of the module from which an exemption is being sought.

- In all cases, it is necessary for the candidate to support what he or she claims to have learned, by providing evidence of the learning that has been achieved. (Examples of evidence and evidence criteria are outlined below).
- It is possible that some learning experiences may address more than one learning outcome. It this case cross referral of learning experiences is acceptable, but the learning experience should relate to the specific learning outcome being addressed.

4. Evidence of Learning

Each claim of learning submitted in support of an RPL application should be accompanied by appropriate evidence documents providing proof of learning achieved or verifying the learning experience.

Evidence of learning is one of the basic principles of RPL and, therefore, it is important that claims of learning should be verified by producing evidence to support the application for recognition.

Examples of Evidence
The following are examples of evidence that may be used to support a learner's RPL claim:

- Testimonials from employers regarding specific tasks undertaken in the workplace;
- A job analysis of role(s) verified by an employer;
- Projects, reports, publications undertaken by the learner;
- Log book or diaries of in-house training activities undertaken;
- Emails, memos, documents verifying tasks, activities undertaken;
- CV outlining career, voluntary work, and learning activities;
- Photographs and audio/video tapes of work, projects, presentations or assignments;
- Copies of certificates;
- References;
- Any additional material that verifies claims of relevant learning gained.

Evidence Criteria
In all cases, the evidence documents submitted in support of the application for RPL must be:

- *Authentic*: Evidence presented must be truly the work of the applicant;
- *Sufficient*: Evidence presented must show necessary breadth and depth of knowledge, skill and competence required for the learning outcome(s) or entry to a stage of a programme;
- *Current*: Evidence and examples presented should be up to date and relevant to the current best practice in the discipline;
- *Relevant*: Evidence submitted must be appropriate and relevant to the learning outcomes;
- *Consistent*: Candidates must demonstrate that they have performed the tasks, used the knowledge and skills (associated with the learning outcomes) at the level required in a variety of situations over a period of time.

Organising and Submitting a Learning Portfolio
A learning portfolio should provide the basis of an RPL claim and must be subject to assessment by course specialists who will in turn make a recommendation and decision. The learner must ensure that the learning portfolio contains all the necessary information and evidence to support the application. The candidate should organise the portfolio to help the assessor to easily identify relevant information and documentation submitted with the application. The text of the submission should clearly advertise when evidence documents are used to support the application.

RPL: Frequently Asked Questions

The more information a learner can have in advance of making an RPL application the higher the probability of a successful application. There are many sources of information for learners and potential learners and the *Education in Employment* project has determined that the provision of information through employers and employer networks should be very useful. The following general information on RPL is provided as an indicative set that could provide a useful starting point for institutions when providing information in either hard or soft copy.

What is RPL?
Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the generic term used to describe the system for recognising and awarding or transferring credit to learners on the basis of learning that has occurred prior to admission to a particular programme. In order to have their learning recognised, the applicant will be required to provide evidence of that learning.

The term RPL includes:
(i) **Recognition of Prior Certified Learning:** This refers to formal learning for which certification has been awarded, through an educational institution or other recognised education/training provider. The learner will be able to provide a transcript of results, details of the syllabus studied, and information on the examination and assessment processes as evidence of this type of learning.
(ii) **Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning:** This refers to informal or non-formal uncertified learning gained through work, voluntary activities, or other life experiences. In this case, the learner will be required to provide a portfolio or collection of evidence to indicate this learning. An interview or other assessment technique may also be required.

What can RPL be used for?
RPL can have a number of purposes:

- To gain entry to a programme at undergraduate or postgraduate level where a learner does not meet the standard entry requirements;
- For advanced entry to a programme at a stage beyond the first stage;
- To gain exemption from some modules or element of a programme;
- In certain circumstances to present an accumulation of evidence of prior learning in order to gain a full award on the framework.

The RPL process enables learners who have already achieved learning outcomes for a subject/module to apply for an exemption from having to take that subject/module again. In this way RPL allows learners to build on previous learning regardless of where it was attained and not to have to repeat that learning.

Who is RPL aimed at?
Generally, the RPL process is aimed at mature learners who will have significant experiential learning in addition to their formal education. Learners who have completed all or part of a formal third-level programme in the past may use the RPL process to apply for exemptions from another third-level programme.

How does the RPL process work?

In advance of making the application, the learner generally should be clear about the programme that they wish to enter or gain exemptions in. Regardless of the outcome sought, the RPL process will require the learner to make a formal application to have their prior learning recognised, to provide evidence of appropriate past learning, and to submit that evidence to an assessment process. The learning that they present for recognition should be relevant to the education/training programme. To apply for an exemption from a particular module, the learner usually has to be able to demonstrate, either through certified or experiential learning, that they have already achieved the learning outcomes of that module.

What is a learning outcome?

A learning outcome is a statement of the knowledge skill and competence that a learner will have achieve following satisfactory completion of a specific module. Most third-level education institutions describe the modules in terms of the learning outcomes at the appropriate standard or level.

What is the 'level' of an award?

In the context of the NFQ the level of an award or qualification refers to its place on the framework. Third level encompasses awards at Level 6 (Higher Certificate) to Level 8 (Honours Degree). Postgraduate or fourth level covers Postgraduate Certificates and Masters Degrees at Level 9 and Doctoral awards at Level 10.

What are ECTS credits?

The European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) refers to a system of describing student achievement in higher education programmes across Europe. The system represents one credit as being roughly equivalent to twenty learning hours, or hours of student effort. If, for example, a module that is worth five credits, that should demand at least one hundred hours learning effort on the part of the learner.

When does prior certificated learning go out of date?

It depends, some learning such as algebra or Greek stay in date for a long time. Other learning such as software design goes out of date very quickly. Applications for RPL are usually judged for their 'recency' or 'currency' of learning as well as other qualities.

Can certificates obtained in another country be used for RPL?

Yes, certificates obtained in other countries may be used for RPL. Certificates obtained in other countries are generally measured against databases of known awards. Other countries may not use similar descriptions of awards as the NQAI; therefore, certificates obtained in other countries may seem more valuable or less valuable than a similar Irish award.

Will all Institutes of Technology and Universities Process an RPL Claim?

At present, not all third-level institutions in Ireland have defined policies or practice in relation to RPL. This is now changing. The Cork Institute of Technology-led *Education in Employment* SIF project, funded by the HEA, has enabled the sharing of practice and policy among the project partners. The Project partners comprise Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway–Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, NUI Galway, and University College Cork.

What are the stages involved in making an RPL claim?
This will differ between individual institutions but generally the stages are:

- Submitting an RPL application form;
- Consulting with relevant academic staff/mentor. (In some institutions there is a dedicated support mentor to assist in the process);
- Where appropriate consulting with one's employer and availing of in-house support and mentoring;
- Developing a detailed portfolio of evidence in support of the RPL claim;
- Where appropriate, undergoing an interview.

What is a Portfolio?
The learning portfolio submitted in support of an RPL claim may take a variety of formats but it must contain all of the relevant evidence confirming that appropriate learning has taken place. If the claim is based on formal or certified learning this may be a syllabus, sample examination papers, and a transcript of results. If the claim is based on experiential learning the portfolio will contain descriptive and reflective elements explaining how the evidence presented meets the learning outcomes of the module from which exemption is sought. The portfolio should be prepared with guidance from the relevant institution to ensure that it meets the assessment needs. A portfolio of evidence may include: an extended version of a curriculum vitae, a detailed analysis of one's job and responsibilities in the workplace, projects, reports, publications, diaries of training activities undertaken, photographs, audio files, video files or objects that demonstrate achievements in the specific learning fields of interest, testimonials, and other documents verifying achievements.

Who will assess the portfolio of evidence?
Institutions will have differing processes but in general the portfolio will be assessed by academic staff of the institution and will be subject to the academic quality system that applies including external examination and examination board consideration.

Is an exemption gained through RPL different from taking the module and doing the exam?
In each case, it is necessary to demonstrate that the learning outcomes of the module have been achieved. The outcomes may be recorded differently on the transcript of results, depending on the route to recognition.

Can credits be gained through the RPL process without reference to a particular programme or module?
In Ireland, most Higher Education providers who offer an RPL service do so only in the context of a specific programme or award offered. In other words, the learning is recognised in respect of a particular programme or module at a particular level and not as general credit.

Is there any limit to the amount of RPL that can be awarded?
The specifics will differ between third-level institutions. In many cases there is a limit to the amount of prior certified learning that can be used in the award stage of a programme.

What does RPL cost?
This will vary from institution to institution and sometimes from module to module. It will also depend on whether the RPL claim is based on prior certified learning, which will usually be less expensive to process, or on prior experiential learning. In some cases employers may have entered into a partnership arrangement with the third-level provider and may support the RPL claim financially.

What are the benefits of RPL?

RPL can facilitate entry to a course, allowing learners, who would not meet the standard entry requirements, to gain access to learning.

The benefits of gaining an exemption from elements of a programme:

■ Learners have more time to devote to other elements of the programme;
■ There may be a financial benefit if the RPL route is less expensive than the conventional route;
■ Learners are not required to repeat learning that has already been demonstrated.

Are there risks associated with the RPL route?

Depending on the length of time involved in RPL application, and the preparation and submission of a learning portfolio, learners may find that if their submission is unsuccessful significant class time may have been missed. If an application for an exemption at an award stage is granted, this may have implications for the overall classification of the award.

Where can more Information be obtained?

Learners should contact their local third-level education provider and ask to speak to an RPL advisor who should be able to advise and assist each applicant at an individual level. Employers, human resource managers, or training and development managers may also be able to provide more information.

National Framework of Qualifications

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) was established in 2001 with the principal aims of establishing and maintaining a National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) and promoting and facilitating access, transfer and progression. The outline framework of qualifications is usually seen in the form of the 'fan' diagram shown below in Figure 1.
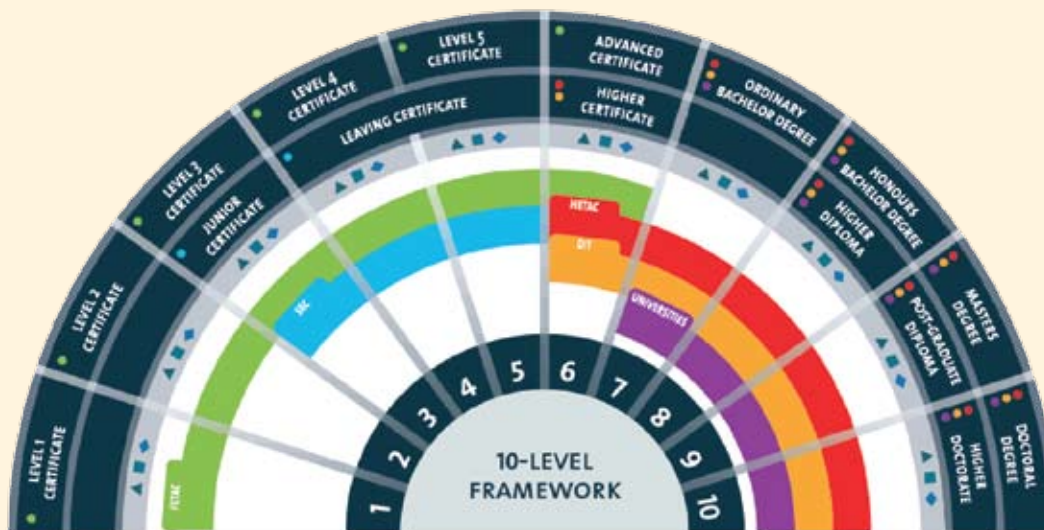

Figure 1 National Framework of Qualifications

www.nqai.ie

RPL Working Group Membership

Representative	Organisation
Kieran Doyle	Athlone Institute of Technology
Dr Pat Mulhern	Athlone Institute of Technology
Ray Coughlan	Cork Institute of Technology
Dr Catherine Frehill	Cork Institute of Technology
Deirdre Goggin	Cork Institute of Technology
Dr Margaret Linehan	Cork Institute of Technology
Dr Anne Murphy	Dublin Institute of Technology
Dr Cornelia Connolly	Dundalk Institute of Technology
Des O'Reilly	Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology
Majella Mulkeen	Institute of Technology, Sligo
Louise O'Gorman	Institute of Technology, Sligo
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