



Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET)

This report was prepared by Deirdre Goggin,
Phil O'Leary and Prof. Irene Sheridan of Cork Institute
of Technology



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Foreword

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a phrase as redolent with promise and expectation as it is with anxiety and frustration. This deceptively simple research report does not disappoint in naming pragmatic questions and more complex issues in the context of RPL practices in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector as evidenced within education and training boards (ETBs) in Ireland.

Policy expectations both nationally and internationally arising from the provision of RPL services are high. The assumption is undeniably attractive: if we make our skills and learning however attained, visible as qualifications, ultimately there will be better skills matching, less unemployment and underemployment. It may also lead to greater personal confidence and social and professional engagement, and more efficient and cost-effective participation in education and training programmes. Scale and impact of RPL practice remain unknown, and the hypothesis hangs before us, like a logical truth, neither costed nor proven. While employees, employers and economic development broadly may be a key beneficiary, education and training institutions, because of their relationship with awards and qualifications, are effectively perceived to be at the frontline of RPL service provision and expectation. Consequently practitioners, learners, institutions and policy makers alike have many questions about the implementation of RPL services nationally.


The establishment of the RPL Practitioner Network Ireland in 2014 provides an opportunity for the ongoing sharing of national practices, including, in 2015, the Focused Research Report of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (the Forum), 'A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education.'¹ This report acknowledged the diversity of institutions, complexity of issues and the organic nature of practice, and identified a range of recommendations to inform next steps. The recommendations included the extension of the research remit across the continuum of practice in further, higher and workplace learning boundaries.

The Network responded positively to the Forum report and recommendations. Quality and Qualifications Ireland agreed to fund a research project to describe approaches and practices in publicly funded FET within the ETB sector in co-operation with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), using as similar a methodology as appropriate to that of the Forum report, and to make recommendations for next steps.

This resulting report is sympathetic to the diversity of ETBs institutions, to the range of learners, programmes and services offered and the ongoing practical challenges of institutional change, arising from amalgamation and environmental change. The sense of practices and traditions being at a crossroads emerges frequently, including where traditional characteristics of the sector are presented for new scrutiny by those within the sector including under the lens of RPL. Participant commentaries are nuanced by these broader critical reflections and uncertainties, reflective of broad sectoral change.

RPL for access, informally administered, is an intrinsic part of the FET sector disposition, and is acknowledged by the authors as innovative. FET practitioners do not necessarily name this open access practice as RPL, and the research resulted in some introspective, and potentially radical questioning of both RPL and access practice. A core concern remained the purpose for which the learner engaged, and the NFQ level of engagement, including ultimately the purpose of the award to be obtained. Should RPL for certification be different from RPL for access to FET? There is also

1 <http://www.teachingandlearning.ie/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Project-2.pdf>



a continuous thread of concern regarding personal authority and national consistency in decision making in assessment and in quality assurance.

It can be difficult for individual practitioners to step outside their current frame and formally implement RPL beyond where clear procedures exist, as for example, in the implementation of exemptions for certain prior certified learning. This can be attributed to a pervasive approach to assessment that is currently very programme-specific, as well as the absence of the following: agreed RPL policy across the different legacy traditions within an ETB; agreed guidelines at ETB level; and systematic data collection to surface practices.

Bearing in mind the timing of the research in the ETB sectoral context, while both legacy policies and procedures are being assimilated and evaluated and new policies are being established, the challenges that are identified through the research unsurprisingly will require co-ordination among different stakeholders at ETB and national level to resolve.

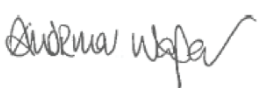
At sectoral level, the inclusion of RPL in national projects looking at programme design, assessment and data is helpful in raising awareness and integration, and both names and builds on existing good practices.

Common definitions to inform approaches to RPL practice, good practice guidelines and procedures, data collection systems and indicators, national and institutional level governance, clarity around drivers and priorities, and staff development and training echo and resonate with recommendations of other reports on our way forward nationally.

The report is, of its nature, inward looking – it sets out as a helpful baseline the strengths and challenges of the ETB sector in its current RPL practice, and identifies from the sector itself, ways forward. It is hoped that the report is timely, given the ongoing development of a range of specific projects which will build capacity and support the development of sectoral policies, including for the quality assurance of RPL activities. Situating RPL as part of broader development work is a significant opportunity for the sector, and a helpful piece in the overall national RPL jigsaw.

Thanks are due to the Project Team – Deirdre Goggin, Professor Irene Sheridan and Phil O’Leary – not only for the expertise and wisdom which shaped this report, drawing out similarities and differences with other sectors and in the identification of key recommendations to inform next steps, but for their capacity to create a collaborative platform for learning among contributing partners. The report is based on the reflective and insightful contributions of individuals within a wide range of ETBs – Adult Education Officers, Quality Assurance Officers and FET Directors, who embraced this work amongst a myriad of competing tasks, and to whom our sincere thanks is due. Finally, to Marie Gould, ETBI, a key support and advisor to the project at every stage, our thanks.

QQI looks forward to its ongoing partnership with the project team in the Extended Campus of the Cork Institute of Technology, with ETBI and the ETBs, along with other essential stakeholders, to share the outcomes of the report and to build firm foundations for confident RPL practice within the sector over the coming years.



Andrina Wafer,
*Head of Access and Lifelong Learning
Quality and Qualifications Ireland*





Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process which seeks to acknowledge all forms of learning, and to give them a value in the context of a destination award (European Commission, 2008; National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005; OECD, 2004). The definition of RPL used for this research is taken from the European Inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning, country report Ireland 2014:

'RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the National Framework of Qualifications'
(European Commission, CEDEFOP, ICF International; 2014 p. 3)

RPL allows for all forms of learning to contribute to an award (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005). RPL provides access to the education system for individuals who through formal acknowledgement of their prior knowledge, skills and competences may complete their studies in a shorter timeframe without having to revisit learning. RPL is also used for the award of credit, or exemptions, for individual modules on programmes. RPL is beneficial in that it allows an individual to demonstrate what they know already. In 2010, the OECD presented the benefits of RPL as they related to the key stakeholders involved (see Table 1).

Table 1: Benefits of RPL	
Benefits for employers	Economic, Improving links between employers and training, Education and QA, Recruitment and work organisation
Benefits for governments	More competitive economy, Democracy and citizenship, More effective systems
Benefits for the individual	Economic, Educational, Social, Personal
Benefits for providers and awarding bodies	Meeting policy and regulatory needs

(Source, Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011, p. 22; Werquin, 2010)

RPL is known by a variety of terms around the world and reflects the many settings and diverse approaches practised (Werquin, 2010). However, despite the various approaches and methods, RPL has common stages, as outlined in Table 2.

Tabel 2: Common stages in RPL processes

Identify/document	Identify and record what someone knows and can do. This may be achieved with support.
Assess	Establish what someone knows or can do. This is a measurement stage
Validate	Establish what someone knows or can do to satisfy certain requirements (points of reference, standards). A level of performance is set and requires the involvement of a third party.
Certify	Stating that what someone knows or can do satisfies certain requirements, and the award of a document to testify this. (Necessitates the involvement of an accredited authority to certify performance and level.)

(Adapted from Expert Group on Future Skill Needs, 2011, p. 18; Werquin, 2010)

RPL initially involves the identification of learning and the recording of this learning in a form suitable for assessment. Most individuals benefit from support with this stage of the process (Leiste and Jensen, 2011; Conrad and Wardrop, 2010). The second stage is the assessment of the candidate's prior learning. A number of approaches are used including review of documentary evidence, interview, or demonstration. Validation is the third stage and involves the use of particular references points or standards. Validation is followed by certification which is the award of a formal qualification following the identification/documentation and assessment of the learning. Certification normally involves a recognised awarding body (CEDEFOP, 2016a).

RPL is important in the context of accessing education and in support of lifelong learning. It provides a mechanism for human capital development and the reskilling and/or upskilling of individuals for the knowledge economy. RPL also provides a mechanism to recognise the skills of immigrants and other sectors of society such as the voluntary sector, and older workers. RPL can be used to support the employability and mobility of older people, women and early school leavers. The standards in vocational qualifications are framed around competency-based assessments. RPL is particularly important for the FET sector, with RPL arrangements reported in vocational education and training (CEDEFOP, 2016a). The European landscape and the emergence of RPL as a key element in lifelong learning policy will be explored in the following section.

RPL: an international perspective

Further education policies are closely linked to the broader socio-economic climate of a region and reflect the requirement for a society to adapt and respond to a highly mobile employment climate. In Europe there has been significant policy development and restructuring of education and lifelong learning over the past twenty years, within which RPL is a key element. As early as 1995 the lifelong learning agenda was put centre stage with the publication of the White paper *Towards the Learning Society* (Commission of the European Union, 1995). Globally, there has been similar development with significant organisations publishing guidelines, inventories and reports on the practice of RPL (Harris, 2011; Werquin, 2010).

RPL operates mainly in the VET sector in Europe (CEDEFOP, 2016a). In 2016 it was reported that 27 countries had RPL arrangements in place for initial vocational education and training while 25 countries had RPL activity in continuing vocational education and training (CEDEFOP, 2016a). A further 15 countries reported the use of RPL in adult education (CEDEFOP, 2016a). In 2016 CEDEFOP

noted that member states included RPL on their policy agendas and also that “low qualified and low skilled job-seekers” (CEDEFOP, 2016a, p. 19) were reported as users of RPL; disadvantaged groups, however, were still not availing of it. Figure 1, outlines the key policy influences for RPL in education and training.

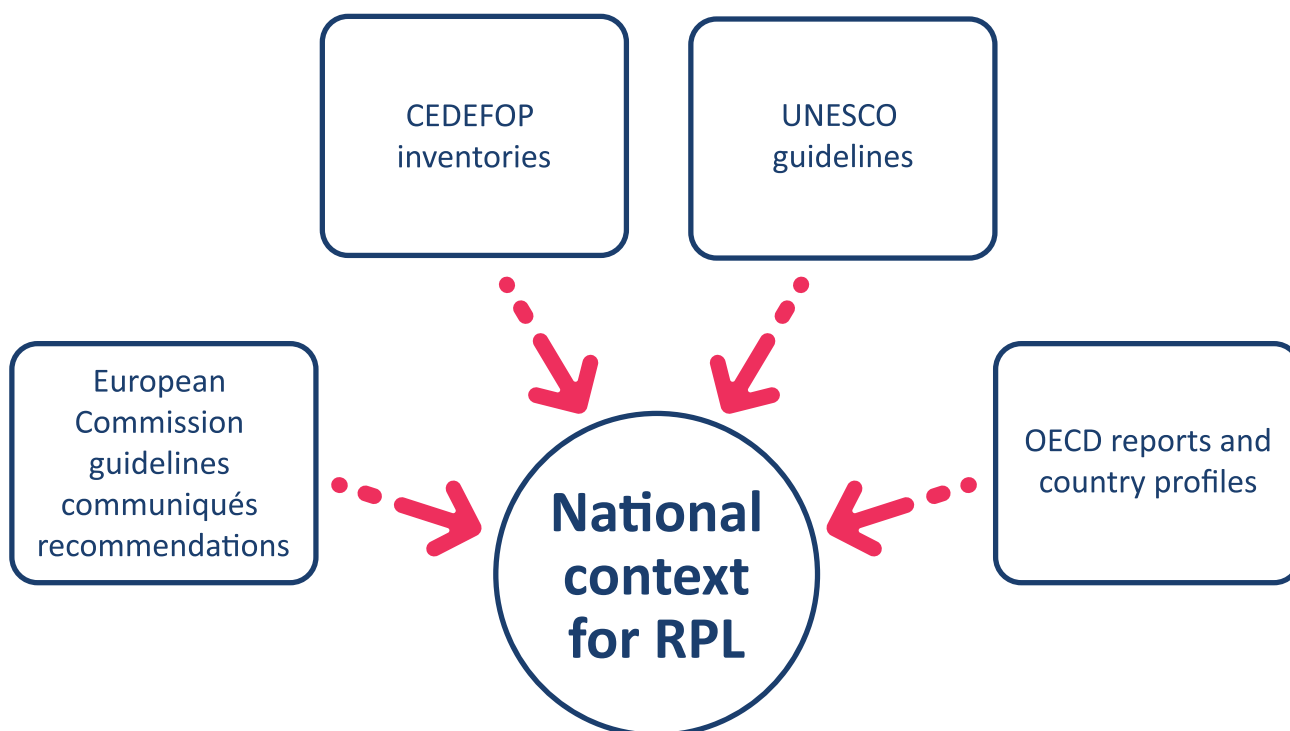


Figure 1: International policy framework for RPL informing the national context

The European Commission and the Council of Europe have provided a macro influence in directing policies and legislation which have supported the restructuring and updating of the learning system. (Bologna, 1999; European Commission, 2004, 2006; Bologna, 2005, 2007). The establishment of the two European frameworks – the *European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning* (EQF-LLL) and the *Bologna Framework for the European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) – along with the Bologna process provided the mechanisms whereby learning attained in a variety of contexts can be formally validated (Bologna, 1999; Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission 2010; 2015a, 2015b).

Currently, Europe 2020 and the Education and Training 2020 are the key policy initiatives driving national policy developments (Council of the European Union, 2009). Europe 2020 is the ten-year growth strategy for Europe and Education and Training 2020 is the current framework for co-operation (Council of the European Union, 2009). This framework has four priority areas, each of which directly relates to RPL and its operation:

1. Making lifelong learning and learner mobility a reality
2. Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training
3. Promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship
4. Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training (Council of the European Union, 2009).

Education and Training 2020 was enacted in 2009; however, in the years prior to and following this, a significant number of reports and communiqués were delivered to bring about an environment where mobility and transparency could be realised in the context of lifelong learning across the FET sector. These are summarised in Table 3:

Table 3: Timeline of relevant reports and communiqués

International / European	Year	Ireland
<i>Towards a Learning Society – White Paper</i>	1995	<i>Towards a Learning Society – White Paper (EU Commission)</i>
<i>LLL a monitoring framework and trends in participation (OECD)</i>	1998	
<i>Bologna EHEA joint declaration</i>	1999	<i>Qualifications Act</i>
<i>EU Inventory A memorandum of LLL (EC)</i>	2000	<i>White paper on adult education (DES)</i>
<i>EHEA Prague Communiqué Making a European area of LLL a reality (EC)</i>	2001	
<i>Copenhagen Declaration</i>	2002	
<i>European principles for RPL (EC) The role of national qualification systems in promoting LLL (OECD)</i>	2004	
<i>Bergen Communiqué</i>	2005	<i>Principles and Operational Guidelines (NQAI) FETAC RPL policy</i>
<i>Helsinki Communiqué</i>	2006	
<i>London Communiqué CEDEFOP RVNFIL for VET teachers & trainers</i>	2007	<i>EGFSN Tomorrow’s skills, towards a national skills strategy FETAC QA Assessment Guidelines</i>
<i>The EQF for LLL (EC) Country note on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning in Ireland (OECD)</i>	2008	
<i>European Guidelines for VNFIL ET2020</i>	2009	<i>RPL – A focus on Practice (EIE) Further Education Support Service RPL booklet</i>
<i>Country Practices Report (OECD) Guidelines for RNFIL (OECD) Recommendation on the promotion and VNFIL (EC) Final European Journal of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)</i>	2010	

	2011	<i>RPL in University Sector (FIN)</i> <i>National Strategy for Higher Education (DES)</i> <i>Role of RPL (EGFSN)</i> <i>National plan for Equity of Access to HE (HEA)</i>
<i>Guidelines on the RVA of outcomes of NFIL (UNESCO)</i> <i>EU Council Recommendation on VNFIL</i>	2012	<i>Part time and flexible HE in Ireland (HEA)</i> <i>Qualification and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012</i>
<i>A country profile for Ireland (OECD)</i>	2013	<i>Consultation on RPL (QQI)</i> <i>Education at a glance (DES)</i> <i>Strategic Review FET and the Unemployed (NESC)</i>
<i>European Inventory Country report Ireland (CEDEFOP)</i> <i>Education and Training monitor (EC)</i> <i>Employment outlook; how does Ireland compare (OECD)</i>	2014	<i>FET Strategy 2014-2019 (DES)</i> <i>ESRI report on FET in Ireland; past present and future</i> <i>HEA consultation paper towards new NP for equity of access in HE</i>
<i>European Guidelines for VNFIL (CEDEFOP)</i> <i>RVANFIL in UNESCO member states (UNESCO)</i> <i>CEDEFOP provide European Database on VNFIL</i>	2015	<i>RPL Research (NFT&L)</i> <i>Qualifications recognition; mutual recognition of professional qualifications in Ireland (DES)</i> <i>QQI Policy restatement guidelines for ATP</i> <i>Pathways to work; policy statement (DSP)</i> <i>Springboard; building our future</i>
<i>CEDEFOP reports:</i> <i>1. Validation and open educational resources (OER)</i> <i>2. Funding validation</i> <i>3. Validation in the care and youth work sectors</i> <i>4. Monitoring the use of validation of non-formal and informal learning</i>	2016	<i>RPL Practitioner Network focus on FET</i> <i>RPL research in FET (QQI)</i> <i>National Skills Strategy 2025 (DES)</i>
	2017	<i>Action Plan for Education 2017 (DES)</i> <i>Action Plan for Jobs (DJEI)</i>

In addition to the contribution of the European Commission, CEDEFOP has provided valuable information on RPL, and has acted to promote and monitor its practice across Europe. In 2007, CEDEFOP published *Recognition and Validation of non-formal and informal learning for VET teachers and trainers in the EU Member States* to support the validation of the skills and learning of professionals involved in adult education provision (CEDEFOP, 2007). CEDEFOP published the *European journal of vocational training* in 2010 and reported on the complexity of issues and the underlying tensions which can arise in skills recognition (CEDEFOP, 2010). In the same year, CEDEFOP also published the *European Inventory of Validation on Non-Formal and Informal Learning* which provided a snapshot of how RPL was being used to overcome social exclusion and support access to employment opportunities (Hawley *et al.*, 2010).



In 2014, CEDEFOP published a comprehensive European inventory on validation (update), documenting 33 European countries, eight thematic reports and two case studies. This inventory focused on the challenges for RPL delivery in 2014 and highlighted access, awareness and social recognition. The issues of fragmentation, financial sustainability, coherence and professionalisation of staff along with data collection were also noted (European Commission; CEDEFOP; ICF International; 2014). Significantly, on fragmentation, CEDEFOP found that relatively few countries had comprehensive national systems in place and commonly RPL operated as a special initiative or project at a local level. Coherence was seen as a challenge (European Commission; CEDEFOP; ICF International; 2014).


The 2014 Country Report Ireland recommended that individuals accessing labour market activation programmes should have the chance to build on their prior learning to realise employment opportunities. The report cited the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs report on *Developing Recognition of Prior Learning* (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011), which called for the assessment of the core skills of job seekers to allow for access to FET opportunities (European Commission; CEDEFOP; ICF International; 2014). The 2014 Country Report Ireland noted that RPL usually had a work-related or human resource function as a driver and detailed how the National Employment and Entitlements Service (NEES) provided advice on training options including information on RPL. The 2014 Country Report Ireland noted the significance of the requirement for new graduate teachers in the FET sector to have the capacity to deliver student needs and skills analysis, including the recognition of prior learning. This requirement follows the 2009 Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations (Teaching Council, 2011) that require graduate teachers to have a further education teacher qualification stating:

'As part of the requirements for teaching, learning and assessment, the requirements stipulate that the graduate teacher must recognise the individual potential of learners, have the capacity to undertake student needs and skills analysis, including the recognition of prior learning.'
(European Commission; CEDEFOP; ICF International; 2014, p. 25)

In 2015, CEDEFOP created a European database on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (VNFIL) or RPL, for both further and higher education. This database is searchable by country and provides a comprehensive reference point on the operation of RPL in Europe (CEDEFOP, 2015a). The CEDEFOP European database serves to support good practice in RPL by linking the European guidelines for validation with the inventory on practice and provides practical information for individuals and organisations involved in implementing and operating validation arrangements.

In 2015 CEDEFOP also updated the original *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning* when they published the 2nd edition (CEDEFOP, 2009, 2015b). These guidelines provide information for individuals and institutions responsible for the delivery of validation arrangements (CEDEFOP, 2015b). Four phases of validation were outlined: the identification, documentation, assessment and certification of learning (Council of EU 2012), followed by an exploration of the conditions and contexts for validation (CEDEFOP, 2015b).

More recently, CEDEFOP (2016b,c,d,e) published four reports on RPL practice: *monitoring RPL, RPL in the care and youth work sectors, funding and open-education resources and validation* (CEDEFOPb, CEDEFOPc, CEDEFOPd, CEDEFOPe, 2016). These reports underline the significance of RPL activity in Europe at the present time and show the diverse ways RPL is being used and implemented.



Beyond the European dimension, at an international level, UNESCO has also published material on RPL. In 2012, UNESCO published the *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (UNESCO, 2012). This report outlined the vision, principles and purposes of RPL and key areas of action at national level:

1. Making RPL a key component of a lifelong learning strategy
2. Developing an RPL system that is accessible to all
3. Ensuring RPL is integral to education and training systems
4. Delivering RPL through a co-ordinated national approach that involves all
5. Supporting the capacity of personnel within RPL
6. Designing sustainable funding mechanisms for RPL (UNESCO, 2012)

In 2015 UNESCO noted the emerging opportunities arising from the translation of non-formal and informal learning into credits and/or qualifications within both further and higher education (Yang, 2015). The publication details a range of legislation and public policies which endorse the recognition of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning around the world for both further and higher education.

The OECD also focused on RPL when it published *'Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning, Outcomes, Policies and Practices'* in 2010 (Werquin, 2010). The OECD provided policy recommendations based on a review of 22 countries and advised on approaches to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Finally, one of the most significant policy enactments in recent years is the *Council of the European Union recommendation of 20th December 2012 on the validation of non-formal and informal learning* which calls on all European countries to have arrangements for RPL in place by 2018. This recommendation has resulted in an increased impetus across the FET sector to implement arrangements for RPL in a visible and meaningful way (Council of the European Union, 2012). This recommendation will directly impact the implementation of policy and practice at a national level.

RPL: Further Education and Training policy context

A broad range of reports and government papers were published over the past number of years aimed specifically at the FET sector, within which RPL is both a recurring and significant theme (Table 3).

As early as the year 2000, when the government published the white paper on adult education, RPL was on the policy agenda (Department of Education and Science, 2000). The white paper on adult education called for greater use of RPL and the mechanisms supporting it, with the intention of providing a streamlined national approach which would be available to all (Department of Education and Science, 2000).

In 2011, RPL was reported as a means of enhancing the upskilling and reskilling of the workforce, when the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs reported on RPL specifically (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011). As stated, demand for RPL arises from the following sectors:

1. Unemployment and the need to enhance employability
2. Demands for upskilling
3. Continuing professional development, and increasingly, regulatory requirements for minimum qualifications within the workforce

4. Demand for improved linkages between education and training providers
5. Demand for skills assessments from employers and individuals
6. Targets for increased participation in lifelong learning
7. Demand for flexible approaches to learning

(Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011, p. 46)

In the report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs the potential of RPL in FET provision was emphasised (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011). The first recommendation of the report was aimed at NFQ levels 1-3 and those with no formal qualifications. The report called on the Department of Education and Skills to provide for an assessment of core skills for all adults. This would target the most vulnerable in terms of accessing and retaining employment and would position RPL as a critical tool within FET. Such an assessment would bring visibility to prior learning and would enhance employability and encourage more participation in FET. The suggestion that “The Department of Social Protection could refer individuals for assessment, or consider integrating RPL assessment tools into its referrals work” (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011, p.8), also emphasised the key role envisaged for RPL in terms of supporting individuals and enhancing mobility.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs report commended the approaches taken by NALA as an example of good practice with applicability to the FET sector for other core skills (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011). NALA delivers distance learning which leads to certification at NFQ Level 2. The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011) suggested an integrated RPL service for levels 1-3 and envisaged that such approaches could be combined with adult guidance and employment services.

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011) took a broad view of RPL and its operation and suggested FET providers engage at local level with employers and trade unions to meet specific demands for RPL. The report made reference to the poor experiences that individuals might have had previously in education and emphasised the critical role of guidance in the RPL process (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011). RPL literature notes the key role that advice and guidance plays for the applicant in supporting the identification and sourcing of evidence and the preparation of the prior learning case for assessment (Conrad and Wardrop, 2010; Leiste and Jensen, 2011).

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011) provided a review of the RPL infrastructure and the bodies involved in RPL, noting the use of credit systems, modularisation, learning outcomes approaches, new forms of assessment and flexible delivery as approaches which enable RPL in practice. However the report noted the limited evaluation and reporting on RPL activities across Ireland, and the resulting difficulties in estimating the scale of demand for RPL (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011).

In 2012 the Department of Education and Skills requested guidelines to assist the FET sector to align their provision to better meet the broader skills needs of the economy (National Economic and Social Council, 2013). The Forfás guidelines on ‘*Aligning further education provision with the skills needs of enterprise*’ were written in 2012 and updated in 2013 (p. 35 National Economic and Social Council, 2013). In 2013, the *Strategic Review of Further Education and Training and the Unemployed* called on FET to ‘develop and enhance the availability of RPL’ (National Economic and Social Council, 2013, p. 35). This review noted the capacity for RPL within the Irish retail and wholesale sector to ‘establish employees’ existing competencies and their position on the National Framework of Qualifications, enhance employee mobility and encourage workers to pursue further education and more specialised qualifications within the sector’ (National Economic and Social Council, 2013, p. 48). The report acknowledged the potential of RPL to support employees with significant experience

to access FET opportunities and to increase their mobility on the job market, and called for its rapid development in this context. However, the cost and time-consuming nature of RPL implementation for providers was noted. The report documented the role of the ETBs in supporting lifelong learning and creating new pathways to education in the absence of a strong tradition of lifelong learning in Ireland. In July 2016, a rate of 7% was reported for adults participating in lifelong learning in Ireland which is well below the European Average of almost 11%. Females are more likely than males to participate with an 8% participation rate reported for females as opposed to 6.3% for males (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2016).

In 2013 the Department of Education and Skills reported on FET and the Skills Needs of Enterprise (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b). In the report, the potential for the use of RPL was noted in the wholesale and retail sectors, in terms of supporting the mobility of workers and supporting the validation of their experiential and work-based learning at a point on the national framework, thereby providing access points to FET. Interestingly, the report illustrated the key drivers of change within the skills and labour market, which will in turn, impact on demand for RPL within FET (see Figure 2):

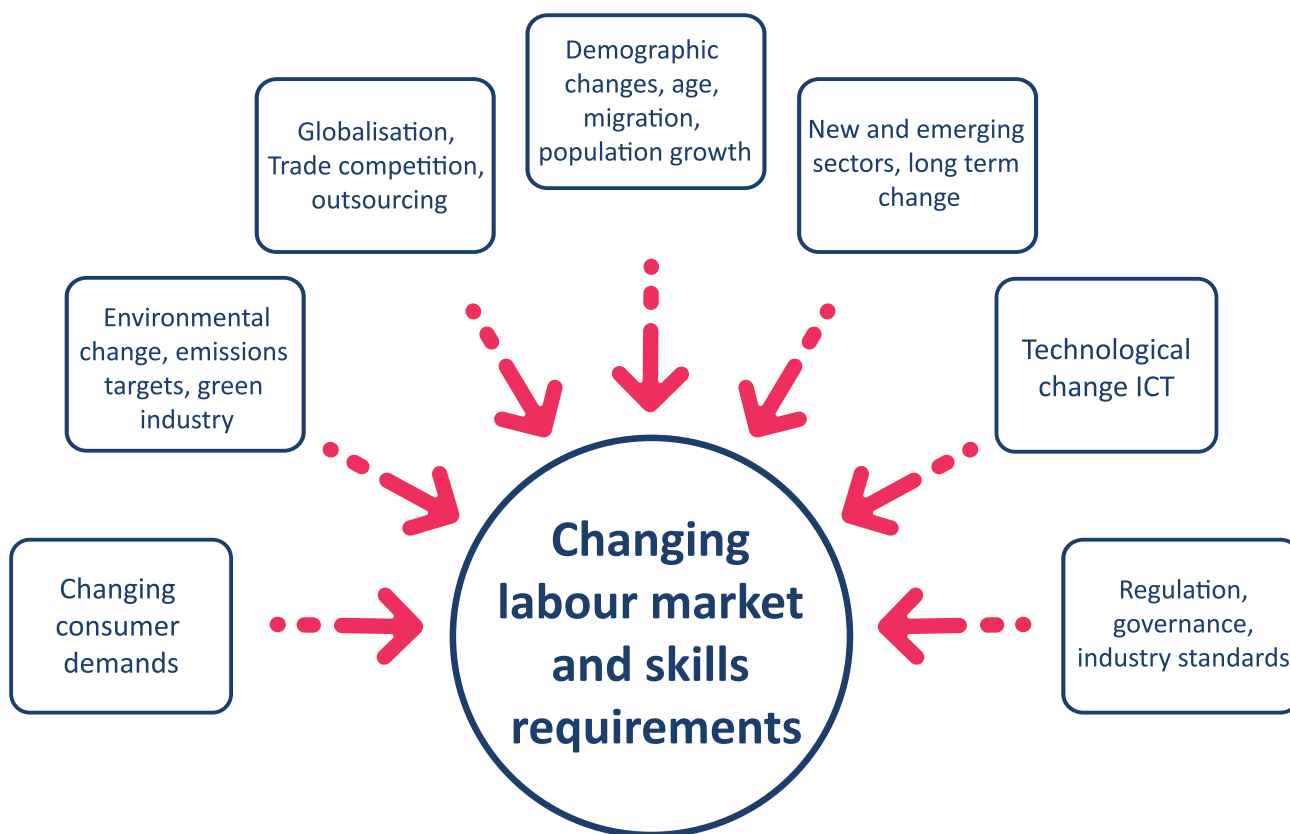



Figure 2: Drivers of change in skills and labour market needs (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b, p.3)

Each of the drivers of change in Figure 2 (above) reflects the diversity of influences on the labour market which must respond to macro and micro forces in order to serve the economy (*Department of Education and Skills, 2013b*). Changing consumer demands and new product and services development will directly impact on FET in terms of reskilling and upskilling as will the maturation of the green economy which will yield opportunity for new and emerging job profiles in the future. RPL will play a key role in supporting mobile populations who wish to access new labour markets and will allow for a broader demographic profile to access work or new learning opportunities across the lifespan. Similarly, highly mobile sectors such as ICT and emerging technologies will benefit from



the responsive, adaptable approaches taken by FET providers who are in a position to recognise previously acquired learning. Lastly, the demands for increasing regulation and industry standards will directly impact the FET sector who can respond in a timely way to deliver new programmes with the support of the Regional Skills Fora. Again RPL will complement such endeavours, ensuring a sector that can deliver FET in a responsive timely way (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b).

In 2014, McGuinness *et al.* noted the importance of lifelong learning and the social inclusion agenda in education in Ireland (McGuinness *et al.*, 2014). Similarly the *Integrated Reform Delivery Plan; Education and Training Sector 2015* outlined the importance of reforms in FET and higher education in the context of learning for life (Department of Education and Skills, 2015a).

The present legislative framework for access, transfer and progression, is provided by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 which provided the statutory basis for the establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Within the Act, QQI has direct responsibility for policy for access, transfer and progression of learners, where access, transfer and progression refer to:

- a. *access by learners to programmes of education and training, including recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired,*
- b. *transfer of learners from one programme to another having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired, and*
- c. *progression of learners from a programme to another programme of a higher level.*

(Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, p11)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland engages with and monitors providers who themselves provide the policies and criteria for access, transfer and progression. QQI is the state agency accountable for quality assurance and for maintaining the ten-level NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications). Learners can apply directly to QQI for awards where they meet the standards established and in such cases QQI can look to providers for assistance to assess the knowledge, skills and competencies involved.

Recent policy development by QQI included the publication of the consultation paper on Access, Transfer and Progression and on the Recognition of Prior Learning (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013). In 2015, Quality and Qualifications Ireland published a policy restatement of *Policy and Criteria for Access, Transfer and Progression for Providers of Further and Higher Education and Training* (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2015), and the *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training*, which were first published in 2005 (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005). In June 2017 the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Amendment) Bill proposes several amendments to the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012. This Bill specifies the involvement of providers more centrally in application processes for the Recognition of Prior Learning.

The *Further Education and Training Strategy* (Department of Education and Skills, 2014), referenced how RPL can be useful to validate non-formal and informal learning of job seekers and older workers with little or no qualifications. The report stated that, ‘the validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competence acquired through non-formal and informal learning (RPL) can play an important role in enhancing employability and mobility’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, p. 92) and noted the broad range of stakeholders involved. The *Further Education and Training Strategy* noted ‘a market gap for providing RPL services’ (p. 92), and called for a coherent and co-



ordinated national strategy to support providers in delivering what is a complex and time-consuming brief.

Noteworthy, within the literacy and numeracy strategy of the *Further Education and Training Strategy* document, was the recommendation to ‘develop and enhance availability of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and establish a working group to examine the Report of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs on RPL and to make recommendations for action.’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, p.101). The *Further Education and Training Strategy* document was strongly supportive of RPL, and provided an example of how it can be used to mobilise workers across sectors (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, p.124). The report calls for the Department of Education and Skills to develop and implement an approved approach for RPL for FET and all stakeholders (Department of Education and Skills, 2014).

At the broadest level, the mission and visions outlined in *Ireland’s Education and Training Sector, Overview of Service Delivery and Reform* (Department of Education and Skills, 2015b), underpin the conditions necessary for RPL to thrive: where an individual can achieve their full potential and the learning system can respond in a flexible way to the changing needs of society. This report stated that lifelong learning is to be nurtured through valuing the voice of the learner to allow for increased participation and equity of access.

In 2016 *Ireland’s National Skills Strategy 2025* was published and outlined its objectives as follows:

1. Education and training providers will place a stronger focus on providing skills development opportunities that are relevant to the needs of learners, society and the economy.
2. Employers will participate actively in the development of skills and make effective use of skills in their organisations to improve productivity and competitiveness.
3. The quality of teaching and learning at all stages of education will be continually enhanced and evaluated.
4. People across Ireland will engage more in lifelong learning.
5. There will be a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market.
6. Support an increase in the supply of skills to the labour market.

(Department of Education and Skills, 2016a, p. 11).

Ireland’s National Skill Strategy 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a) commented on the significance of Ireland’s skilled labour force which has drawn multinational companies to Ireland. The strategy document noted the importance of the operation of the National Framework of Qualifications and the work of Quality and Qualifications Ireland to provide “coherence and quality” (p. 57) in skills development in a timely, effective way. The strategy document noted the recent strong performance of FET while adapting to the challenges of significant reform and increasing demand for places despite decreasing budgets during the economic crisis.

Recognition of Prior Learning is particularly relevant under objective 4, and 5 of the strategy document which relates to lifelong learning and inclusion (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a), specifically:

Objective 4: People across Ireland will engage more in lifelong learning

1. The benefits of lifelong learning will be promoted and communicated to the full population of Ireland.
2. There will be more and easier opportunities for those in employment to engage in education and training.
3. There will be greater recognition of workplace learning and capacity for recognition of prior learning will be developed.
4. Career guidance will be strengthened significantly, with the aid of employer engagement (p.72)

Objective 5: There will be a specific focus on active inclusion to support participation in education and training and the labour market

1. Disadvantaged and under-represented groups will be supported to participate in education and training.
2. Jobseekers will be supported to find the best possible job.
3. Older workers will be encouraged to remain active in the labour market.
4. Economically inactive and under-represented groups will be helped to increase their labour market participation. (p.72)

The report emphasised the key role of the Regional Skills Fora to support “employer-educator dialogue” (p. 12) to effectively match the emerging skills needs of employers with provision across Ireland. The emphasis was on the commitment to valuing the knowledge, skills and competencies of individuals across the workforce to develop and use their skills to the best potential which in turn will reflect on Ireland’s reputation abroad as a country that prioritises education and training. The Regional Skills Fora act to channel the dialogue between stakeholders and have a role in making explicit the opportunities available to employers for skills development. It is envisaged that the Regional Skills Fora can provide “Improved translation and mediation of skills ‘intelligence’” (p. 70), for future provision and act to provide a framework where employers can more proactively promote the range of careers possible in a given region.

Ireland’s National Skill Strategy to 2025 called for greater recognition of workplace learning and for capacity for RPL to be supported and developed (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a). The strategy document outlined the relevance of workplace learning, however it also noted the lack of a common understanding of what RPL is and how it can be used. The report called for the further development of RPL processes at provider level and the availability of a national policy to frame practices. The strategy document also commented on established good practice in higher education and noted its significance in terms of building capacity across the FET sector. The strategy document also noted the work on access transfer and progression within Quality and Qualifications Ireland. Finally the strategy document delivered actions and measures to achieve key objectives, amongst which ‘Action 4.3: Workplace Learning and RPL’ proposed the following measures:

1. Provide for the recognition of awards
2. Promote the development of a common understanding of RPL
3. Support the dissemination of good practice in RPL across the FET sectors and higher education sectors.

(Department of Education and Skills, 2016a, p. 100).



The report emphasised the importance of increasing access to lifelong learning opportunities across Ireland and the role of RPL in this context (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a).

The *Action Plan for Education 2016-2019* states that the Department of Education and Skills must develop a national policy on RPL by 2018 in order to support the learning experience and learning outcomes for disadvantaged learners (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b). The report is committed to building stronger bridges between the formal learning system and the community and to creating more opportunity for lifelong learning (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b). It is envisaged that the publication of a national policy for RPL (Department of Education and Skills, 2016b, p. 32) would complement the timelines in place in Europe for RPL arising from the Council of Europe recommendation (Council of Europe, 2012).

In 2017 the *Action Plan for Jobs* focused on ‘Delivering Skills for a Growing Economy’ (p. 61) and called for an FET policy framework to support employee development and to guide and inform ETB activity around such provision (Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, 2017). The report also signposted the 2017 FET Services Plan to provide the detail of all SOLAS-funded FET provision in line with the National Skills Strategy and the Regional Skills Fora. Focusing on the digital economy the *Action Plan for Jobs 2017* noted the significance of the *Strategy for Technology Enhanced Learning in Further Education and Training, 2016-2019*, to both inform and innovate for future FET provision (Department of Jobs, Enterprise and Innovation, 2017, Solas, 2016). A commitment to publish a national policy on RPL by quarter 4 was outlined by the Department of Education and Skills in Goal 2, objective 2.1, action 44 of the *Action Plan for Education 2017* (Department of Education and Skills, 2017a). To better understand how RPL operates in FET it is necessary to explore FET in the first instance. The following section of the report examines FET in Ireland.

The Further Education and Training sector in Ireland

Education underpins Ireland’s economic, social and cultural ambitions, and operates on three levels to support the development of the individual, provide social cohesion and to support economic development. The education system in Ireland is comprised of a number of distinct areas:

- Early childhood
- Primary
- Post-primary
- Further Education and Training
- Higher Education

The Department of Education and Skills (DES) is responsible for education in Ireland. Currently DES is implementing significant system-wide reform through a series of integrated strategies across the education and training sector. The reform programme has placed learners at the centre and is designed to provide them with both the knowledge required to participate in society and clear pathways to support lifelong learning. The broad ranging reform plan has four key goals: learning for life: improving quality and accountability; supporting inclusion and diversity and building systems and infrastructure (Department of Education and Skills, 2016c, p. 14). Along with these key strategic goals the department has delivered significant legislative reform including:

- The Further Education and Training Act, 2013
- The Education and Training Boards Act, 2013
- The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012

Such broad sweeping legislative changes have acted to provide a complete overhaul of the education and training system over the past five years. This reform has also impacted on the FET sector. The Education and Training Boards Act 2013 abolished the VECs and statutorily established 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The Further Education and Training Act 2013 abolished FÁS and established SOLAS as the further education and training authority. The establishment of SOLAS, with responsibility for strategic oversight, planning and funding functions, together with the devolvement of responsibility for all state-funded training to the local education and training boards, provided the opportunity to bring a more coordinated and coherent approach across the sector.

FET as a sector is both complex and wide-ranging with an ethos to support all learners regardless of circumstance. FET awards range from levels 1 to 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. FET provides for individuals who have not completed post-primary education and is intended to provide educational opportunities for the broadest sectors of society, to encourage inclusion and mobility, to provide pathways to employment and to update the skills of employees.

McGuinness *et al.* (2014) provide a useful synopsis of the role of FET in Ireland as:

- I. Providing initial vocational education and training, including high quality apprenticeships;
- II. A re-entry route for individuals to education and training including literacy and basic education;
- III. Professional or vocational development of individuals in the workforce or re-entering the workforce;
- IV. Community education and training, and
- V. Other systematic and deliberate learning undertaken by adults in a wide variety of settings and contexts both formal and informal.

(McGuinness *et al.*, 2014, p. viii)

This underlines FET's different roles in terms of anticipating and meeting skills needs within the labour market and contributing to equity in education and countering social exclusion. The SOLAS website provided a snapshot of the scale of provision as:

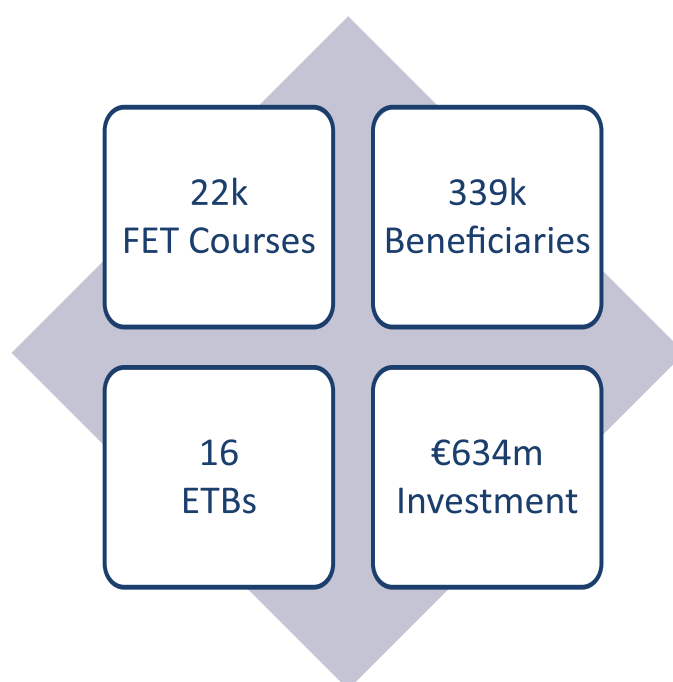


Figure 3: The scale of FET in Ireland

The FET sector provides opportunities for learners, and for job seekers, along with supporting the needs of enterprise and the broader economy. The remit of the FET sector is to align provision with the ongoing needs of enterprise to ensure that all learners have opportunities to reskill and upskill on an ongoing basis.

Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) represents Ireland's sixteen education and training boards (ETBs) and was established 1 July 2013. ETBs manage the provision of education and training programmes which are validated by Quality and Qualifications Ireland. These awards are linked to NFQ levels through the Common Award System (CAS) which is the national qualification system for FET in Ireland (Qualifax, 2017). The CAS system, developed by Quality and Qualifications Ireland, is a system of linked FET awards at levels 1 through 6 on the national framework (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2014). The database of awards available on the QQI website is indicative of the range of modules and programmes available in the FET sector. Providers select and develop their own programmes in line with these standards (Qualifax, 2017).

Education and training boards provide a diverse range of training services and are umbrella organisations for the regional development of FET. They are an amalgamation of the services as outlined in Figure 4 with the exception of the craft apprenticeships, which are managed centrally through SOLAS, and will in future be managed by ETBs as co-ordinating providers. As with any new amalgamation with diverse missions and purpose there is a significant cultural transformation and change management process underway, which is taking time to realise. A new management structure is also emerging which includes responsibility for quality assurance. However the challenge of creating a singular QA process to span the entirety of the organisation is significant. The sector is engaged in strategic national projects including programme development and assessment of which RPL is a key part. The main types of publicly-funded FET provision are outlined in Figure 4.

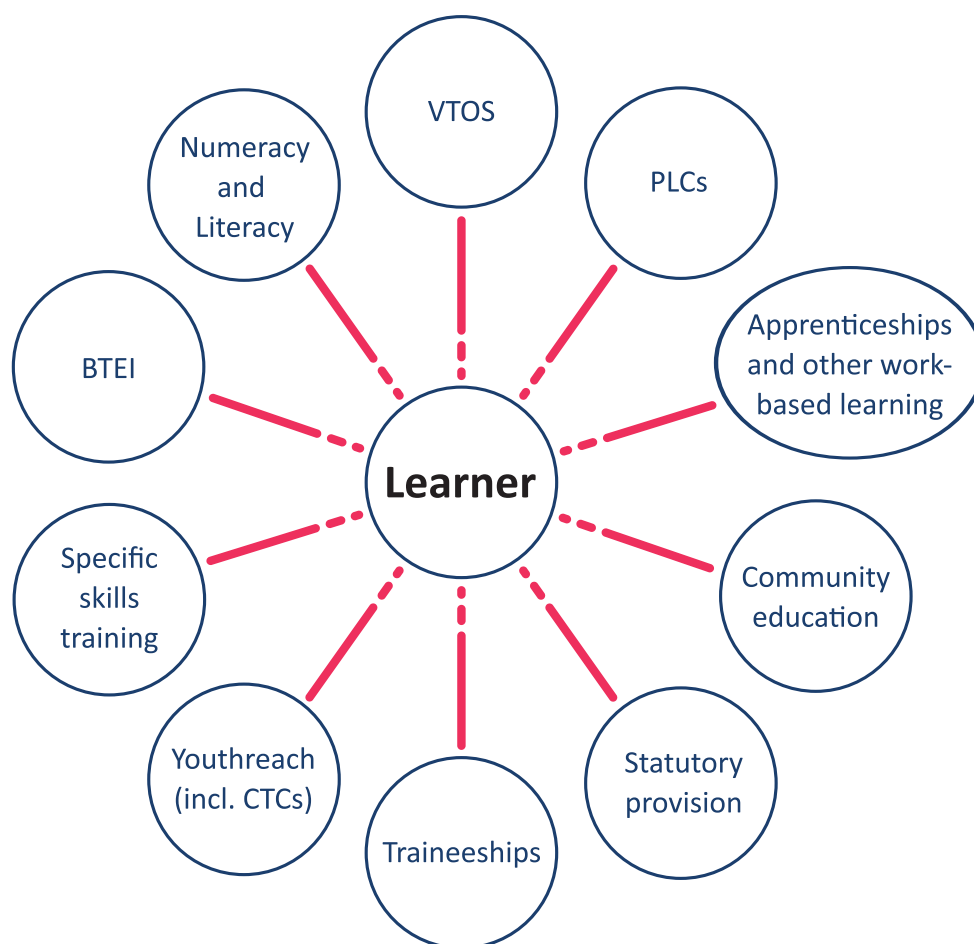
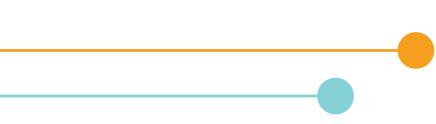


Figure 4: Main types of FET provision (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, p. 53)



The FET sector is comprised of the apprenticeships scheme, traineeships, Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses, Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), Youthreach, Specific Skills, Momentum, bridging/foundation courses and the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) amongst others. The sector is accessible to everyone, including non-traditional students, and makes a significant contribution to Ireland's economic and social progress. Reporting on the destinations of FET award holders in 2010, QQI stated that 18% entered higher education while 56% gained employment (Department of Education and Skills, 2013b).

The broad variety of provision within FET is apparent when considering each of the aspects of Figure 4. For instance, VTOS provides a range of courses for job seekers who require certification or skills development. VTOS courses are available nationally for job seekers who are over 21 and in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance or Benefit. VTOS courses are delivered by the 16 education and training boards at a variety of levels on the Framework.

PLC programmes are available through the education and training boards and delivered in vocational schools for young people and adults who have completed the Leaving Certificate. They are normally at level 5 or 6 on the Framework. The Higher Education Links Scheme provides access to selected programmes in third-level institutions on the basis of attainment in PLC courses.

Within the spectrum of FET, apprenticeships form a particular subset. SOLAS currently has responsibility for the management of apprenticeships. The traditional apprentice routes provide substantial training and education in a given domain for no less than two years in duration. Apprenticeship programmes are structured and comprise more than 50% workplace learning. Successful apprenticeships are awarded a National Craft Certificate at Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. The economic downturn resulted in a sharp drop-off in the recruitment of new apprenticeships, however current numbers have recovered from the low levels experienced in 2008/2009.

In July 2015, twenty-five new apprenticeship programmes were announced following a review of the apprenticeship system (Department of Education and Skills, 2013a). New apprenticeships were provided with a dedicated website www.apprenticeshipcouncil.ie and a range of criteria to guide proposers:

- Industry-led
- Substantial in depth and duration, prepare apprentices to work autonomously
- Lead to an award from level 5 to 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications and be at least two years in duration
- To include a minimum of 50% on-the-job training and include a Contract of Apprenticeship.

These reforms were intended to enable a world-class apprenticeship system to complement the diverse FET sector.

Community education provides adults who wish to return to education with an opportunity to avail of education programmes in their own locality. Community education courses offer a learner-centred approach and are generally delivered in community centres and projects. There are currently 38 Community Training Centres operating nationally and providing for the education and training needs of learners aged between 16 and 21. Courses tend to be of one-year's duration and lead to major awards at levels 3 and 4.



Traineeships are specifically focused on a particular aspect of work or on-the-job training. They include occupation-specific education and work-based learning and form part of the responsive mechanism of the FET sector to meet the skills needs of SMEs with limited resources. Traineeships typically take between four to nine months to complete.

Youthreach was launched in 1988 to provide education, training and skills development for individuals with less than upper secondary education. At present, 110 Youthreach centres located throughout Ireland target individuals aged 15-20 and support them to identify options and provide information which can lead to certification. Youthreach has a continuous intake approach and provides a dual focus to consider the personal as well as the academic needs of the learner. Youthreach centres deliver a variety of programmes, some lead to certification on the framework, others lead to Junior and Leaving Certificate exams.

Specific Skills Training courses focus on particular work-related aspects and are delivered from levels 4-6 on the framework, normally taking six months to a year to complete. Specific Skills Training courses are designed for individuals looking to re-skill to another sector or for those entering the workforce for the first time. These courses run throughout the year and are offered across a range of domains such as computing, administration, retail or payroll.

The Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) provides part-time FET programmes for mature learners who have previously not had the opportunity to access education. BTEI allows adults to combine work and other responsibilities with further learning and re-skilling opportunities.

Numeracy and literacy is another key area of provision for FET. Numeracy goes beyond the ability to use numbers, and includes the ability to communicate quantitatively to solve problems in complex everyday settings, whereas literacy means the ability to comprehend and construct meaning. Recently an OECD survey reported that 1 in 6 of Irish adults has difficulty reading (OECD PIAAC, 2013). The *National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy among Children and Young People 2011- 2020* was published in 2011, following extensive consultation (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). The strategy set targets for numeracy and literacy in young people for 2020. The interim review (Department of Education and Skills, 2017b), found both achievements and challenges. Ireland is currently ranked 3rd of OECD countries for reading, however amongst the challenges reported was the gap in numeracy and literacy achievement in disadvantaged schools in comparison to other areas.

To summarise, there has been significant policy implementation at European and national level over the past twenty years which has set the operational context for RPL in the FET sector. It is expected that the drivers of change in skills and labour market needs (Figure 4) will continue to impact on demand for RPL which will be met by the FET sector.



Research Methodology

Introduction

The empirical research was undertaken with Adult Education Officers (AEOs) within each education and training board (ETB), who were identified in consultation with Education and Training Board Ireland (ETBI) as being the best placed to respond on RPL activity within each of the sixteen regions. These formed the initial point of contact for the research, however as the study evolved contributions were also furnished by quality assurance personnel and directors within the various ETBs to ensure that the research was as complete as possible within the time and resource constraints.

The study aimed to ascertain the perspectives of personnel within the education and training boards with regard to RPL in order to inform the future development of RPL within the FET sector in Ireland.

The research question and the scope of the research

This research, funded by QQI, was undertaken in response to the 2015 report entitled *A Current Overview of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Irish Higher Education* which was conducted under the auspices of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, 2014). The report sought to respond to the following questions:

What are the current policies, frameworks and processes that are used to support the recognition of learning -- formal, informal, accredited and experiential?

How can these current policies and practices become more coherent and consistent across the higher education sector in Ireland?

In addition to these questions the scope of the research was further expanded to include an exploration of the current practices relating to RPL in the continuing professional development of staff in higher education institutions in Ireland.

These questions aligned with the 2013 Quality and Qualifications Ireland RPL consultation document and the findings of the CEDEFOP Ireland report of the European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2014 (European Commission, CEDEFOP, ICF International, 2014; Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2013).

The aim of this research is to provide a comparable study into the current practice of RPL within the FET sector in Ireland. The scope of this research sought to address the following questions:

What are the current policies, frameworks and processes that are used to support the recognition of learning – formal, informal, accredited and experiential?

How can these current policies and practices become more coherent and consistent across the further education and training sector in Ireland?

What training and development is currently available to staff in the further education and training sector relating to the area of recognition of prior learning?



Methodology

To answer the research questions, the research design has taken a mixed methods approach. Building from the research question as posed, the researchers sought to explore the current policies, frameworks and processes within the FET sector in Ireland through the ETBs, as the largest publicly funded group. The sector as a whole is much larger than just this cohort and includes the voluntary secondary, community and comprehensive schools (VSCCS), SOLAS and the education and training boards (ETBs). When considering the actors in FET in Ireland, a significant number function in a direct or support role to learners, and are outside the focus of this study. For the purposes of this study, the ETB sector is comprised of the sixteen education and training boards (ETBs), which were established in 2013. The participant pool of education and training boards for the study was drawn from the ETBI, and the AEO with each ETB board was invited to propose a participant for interview in the study.

Research methods – Desk review

A desk review of the literature supporting the FET sector was undertaken to identify the general themes emerging from position papers and published materials.

Research methods – Empirical research

The empirical research phase comprised of a study undertaken with adult education officers within individual ETBs, who were identified by ETBI as best placed to have organisational knowledge of activity in the first instance with the opportunity for input from other staff as necessary.

Data Gathering

Considering the actuality of RPL as it is practiced within the education and training boards and seeking to build as valid a picture as possible of the lived experience of practitioners, an in-depth interview approach was selected as the most appropriate research method. An outline of the anticipated interview structure was provided in advance to ensure that the organisation could make an informed decision in selecting a representative. In total, 10 of the possible 16 education and training boards participated in the research.

Four case studies outlining varying practice within the ETB sector with regard to RPL are also included in the report as an indication of the diversity of application within the FET sector in Ireland. Data processing and analysis

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

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the work was sought and granted by the Cork Institute of Technology Research Ethics Committee.

Research Results

Following Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) thematic analysis of the data resulted in the generation of a number of key themes which are developed below.

Theme 1 Understanding of RPL

Initially, each research respondent was asked to comment on their understanding of RPL. It is evident from the responses that there is not one universally agreed understanding of RPL within the FET sector in Ireland. The interviewees' responses varied depending on their professional path, their interactions with mature learners with experience and whether they had completed training on RPL. A general awareness is evident across the sector that RPL refers to the recognition of informal, non-formal and formal learning. As is evident in the following comments the research findings suggest that there is more comfort with prior formal learning than informal and non-formal learning for access to education and training.

There are interpretations depending on where you come from within the ETB.

From my perspective from an RPL point of view there is a difference between the RPL for access and the RPL for certification.

From the APL access point of view they would be recognised all the way down the individual programme levels, recruitment, interview, initial investment of learners to recognised equivalent qualification and to recognise entry capabilities of learners to allow them to enter programmes.

From a certification point of view of informal/formal learning, we haven't any structure or system in place. We have no mechanism to do that.

As FET in Ireland spans levels 1- 6 on the national framework there is huge variation in ability of the learner and purpose of engagement in education at the opposite ends of this spectrum. As stated by one of the participants 'different learners, different needs'. It was very clear from the responses received that the reasons why one would engage at level 1 vary hugely with the reasons why one would engage at level 6. This has an influence on perspectives when considering RPL, as it was evident from the interviewees responses that there is more perceived 'risk' associated with qualifications which would enable one to enter employment. It would be fair to conclude that there is caution surrounding the recognition and validation of informal and non-formal learning at levels 4-6 of the framework due to the possibility of accessing the workforce as a result of the qualification.

While RPL involves the recognition of prior formal, non-formal and informal learning it is generally only the formal learning that is identified by most centres as RPL. While there is an awareness of the existence of the NARIC recognition service under the auspices of Quality and Qualifications Ireland, participants voiced concerns regarding the evaluation of informal/ non-formal learning and establishing equivalence. One respondent commented that they do not feel qualified to finalise an RPL assessment. Respondents noted a preference for a central role for Quality and Qualifications Ireland in assessing applications for recognition for a variety of reasons, including it being easier to justify if the application was rejected. As outlined by one respondent: it would be better if a group could be established within the ETBs to review applications so that it would not become the responsibility of one individual.



We would love to do it and everyone else feels the same, if somebody comes to us and they have done something exactly the same and they have to do the work again.

We would really welcome something formal, at the same time there is a feeling to be a bit more objective.

It's not the adult literacy organiser determining whether or not their particular student should be exempt from that learning that it would be a bit more objective than that.

The only way that can happen is if there was a formal group set up within the ETB.

Other comments surrounding RPL within the ETBs was that there is no defined structure and no guidelines available for RPL for the applicants nor for the relevant staff within the providers. One respondent highlighted that RPL for access is very different to RPL for certification or exemption. It was acknowledged by the majority of ETBs that they do make informal judgements about individuals seeking to enter FET in Ireland. The basis of the judgements made are not formally recorded in any of the ETBs who took part in the study.

There is, in fact, extensive recognition of non-formal and informal prior learning for access on to courses, but it is not really recognised as such, and documented, nor do we have a formal policy or guidelines on it.

Theme 2 RPL and where it can be used

As already mentioned the empirical research uncovered practice of RPL for entry in the majority of ETBs participating in the research although it was not possible to quantify this activity. There was an awareness that RPL would also facilitate exemptions from certain elements within a programme but this was certainly not formalised or utilised as a norm. The Quality and Qualifications Ireland 'five-year rule' with regard to the recognition of prior certified learning was mentioned as problematic for those who completed Quality and Qualifications Ireland minor awards, and now sought to return to complete a major education and training award outside of the five-year threshold. In this instance an examination resit or RPL is the only solution available. However this solution was not presented by those who responded. One of the participants in the study stated that they are aware that learning acquired through programmes in the FET sector enables advanced entry to programmes in higher education institutions. It was acknowledged that RPL may be useful in making the right decisions as to where people should go and the level at which they should enter.

It can be used to allow learners to gain access to programmes appropriate to the level and the ability of the learner

RPL offers a unique opportunity to 'demonstrate' the worth of the learning which individuals at the early stages of the National Framework of Qualifications already possess. This immediately situates the learner within a 'Wealth' model in which they are possessors of knowledge/skills and competencies that are acknowledged and valued. This fits well with the dominant ethos in Adult Basic Education in Ireland, which seeks to build upon what the learner already knows; a complete antithesis to the learner as blank slate paradigm. This has the multifold effect of valuing (and crediting) existing skills, creating a jumping off point for further engagement with more formal learning situations while motivating, encouraging and assisting with self-esteem and confidence building for the learner.

Theme 3 RPL and who might benefit

As stated by one of the respondents, in general those who benefit from RPL are:

...mature learners who are returning to education and training after years in the workforce for upskilling or reskilling purposes.

There are people working in a lot of different sectors that have low levels of skills and due to changes in the sector or because of new national standards required to work in the sector they now need a different level of qualification.

They do the work every day but they don't have the qualification.

There are also the people who have been out of education for a long time.

In analysing the responses received from participants in the study there are a variety of perspectives on who could benefit from RPL. In general the perspective of the respondent aligns with their own experience and the learner cohort with which they are familiar. At the lower levels of the framework literacy is a primary focus of those engaged with learners. As one participant commented:

RPL is more related to the higher level I think and maybe somebody has done a course and got certified for it.

In the case of one participant, they noted the opposite, that 'RPL can be used as a tool at the majority of levels.' It was stated that in order for it to be used at the lower levels that:

we must ensure the information is given to the learner in a way they understand whether that's giving an audio/video description of the process involved, having supported workshops and providing support after the process ends whether the applicant is successful or not.

Theme 4 Participant views on RPL policy

When asked if there was any existing RPL policy, the majority of respondents in the ETBs stated that there was no policy with regard to RPL available nor is it explicitly mentioned in any policy or procedural document. In the case of two of the ETBs, RPL is incorporated into the QA agreement or as a statement in its own right. In the case of only one of the ETBs who took part in the study, RPL is a formal process being implemented within the ETB. In that instance the policy is a standalone one which is not aligned with the appeals process. Almost half of the interviewees reported arrangements were well underway to develop policy and implementation of RPL in the near future as it is seen as a priority. Illustrating the ongoing commitment to RPL and the changing nature of the macro-policy framework one respondent commented:

We were doing one in 2013 because of dissolution of FETAC that was put on hold and we were advised to wait longer.



Another commented that

Review and evaluation are intrinsic to current practice as part of QA, whether formative or through more formal means (questionnaires and written reflections) at the end of QQI programmes or at end of year and inform future practice. Views on RPL could easily be integrated into this existing process.

It is important to acknowledge that this study comes at a time when the FET sector has gone through a significant re-organisation process within and across geographic regions. A respondent from one ETB stated that prior to the recent amalgamation, RPL would have previously been included in the QA documentation of the various providers. Another respondent prioritised other aspects of quality assurance over RPL.

When respondents were asked if RPL was more appropriate at levels 1 to 3 or 4 to 6 of the framework of qualifications, responses were divided. At the higher levels (4 to 6), qualifications are often seen as directly linked to entry into the workplace so there appears to be more caution about having RPL at these levels than at the lower levels of the framework. The reasons for engaging at levels 1 to 3 is generally from a motivational participatory perspective in education. Adult literacy issues are also addressed at these introductory levels of the framework where the foundations of education and training skills are developed. As stated by one of the participants, 'It is unclear how RPL aligns with the introductory levels if there is a literacy skills gap.'

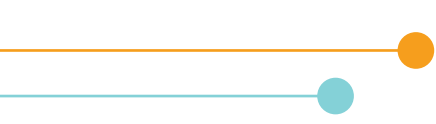
Where RPL is applied in an informal way within the education and training boards it is generally for entry to a course but it is not documented or addressed in policy or procedures. In very rare instances RPL is used to enable advanced entry to a programme beyond year one. Exemptions from an element or elements of a course based on prior learning are not commonly facilitated. One exception is prior formal learning acquired less than 5 years ago under the older award system and mapping to a QQI Common Award System (CAS) award. It was mentioned that in the past FETAC/ QQI made the judgement of the equivalence of this learning to the current module or award. One respondent in particular mentioned that they would not feel that they had the capability to make a judgement of the relevance of the prior learning to the current module/ programme.

As there is no policy available in the majority of ETBs, there is no upper limit to the percentage of RPL which an applicant can gain in a programme. There is a variation in how RPL is implemented in terms of being available, supposedly, across all programmes while in some instances it is more limited in its implementation. RPL is seen as valuable, however, as stated:

Something we haven't been implementing but we could see huge value from it from the learner in particular.

There was a divide in opinion as to where RPL should be implemented across the lower and upper thresholds of 1-3 and 4-6. As recognition is essentially given in an informal way there was a sense from the respondents that what they are doing, regardless of the level, should be formally categorised as RPL. Resources were identified as an issue in considering the more formal implementation and integration of RPL into the FET sector.

In support of an argument for additional resources there is an absence of reliable data across the sector. The QQI Business System (QBS), in which each provider records learner results, is centrally managed in Quality and Qualifications Ireland and provides a certain amount of evidence of the numbers of exemptions based on prior formal learning granted annually. Some centres have a



limited awareness of the volume of applications they would encounter on an annual basis, which can range from 5 to 119. It is not possible to compare data reliably across the ETB sector.

Theme 5 Assessment

The findings of the research showed that no single method was consistently across the ETB sector when assessing those presenting with prior learning within programmes. Many of the ETBs take an informal approach to determine if an individual is suitable for a course. It was apparent from the responses received that entry at levels 1 to 3 requires different considerations to entry at levels 4 to 6.

We must ensure that the method of assessment and preparation of evidence matches each learner's level, regardless of the learner's literacy level there must be several different methods of delivery of evidence.

The approaches adopted by some ETBs included an ad-hoc mapping of learning and programme outcomes and a shortening of contact hours in the achievement of the formal programme. There was an awareness that practice existed elsewhere which could be integrated and a sense that RPL processes would be more amenable to a cohort approach as it can be very time-consuming to process claims from individuals:

What's not discussed is the amount of time that goes into accrediting someone in that way. By the time you finish working with a group, you have nearly put them through a programme.

In terms of training being available to staff some respondents indicated that they had received some formal training related to RPL in the past and a number were committed to undertaking training in the future. This training was provided by third parties outside the sector with some peer to peer learning also taking place within the ETBs. It was observed by one of the participants in the study that the training they received had not been used. Training was seen by the majority of the participants as beneficial and the staff identified as requiring it included those offering guidance services, tutors in the literacy services, resource workers and tutors delivering modules.

Respondents indicated that the potential presentation of evidence of prior learning is generally not considered when new modules and programmes are being written. A comment made by one of the participants of the study was that

Assessment should be fair and equitable. By using a rubric, simplifying the language and/or changing assessment techniques assessment can be more universal and applicable to all learners.

Instead of the learner being assessed against the outcomes of the module or minor award they are assessed, in the case of one of the ETBs, against the skills for work skills checker for levels 1 to 3 giving a general indication of education level attained. In other instances staff involved in providing guidance assess individuals for entry to modules at levels 4 to 6. Therefore it could be said that the assessment is more holistic rather than matching evidence of learning or skills attained to a specific module or award.



Theme 6 Data collection

The majority of those interviewed stated that data on the number of applications received for RPL, which relates to RPL for access, is not retained or noted by individual providers, centres or ETBs. In one exceptional case, a respondent was able to provide data from one of the PLC colleges and generally across their particular ETB on all forms of exemptions. These numbered 119 applications for entry, 86 direct QQI exemptions and 33 non-QQI exemptions which tended to be learning at higher levels on the framework.

The QQI QBS system facilitates some of the data collection with regard to exemptions² for modules based on prior formal learning acquired within the five-year threshold rule but it does not capture RPL for entry which is where it is predominantly used in an informal way in the FET sector in Ireland. The reason cited as to why no data was maintained related to the lack of structure, however some respondents reported that quality assurance personnel are being put in place in response to the broader changes happening at ETB level. It is anticipated that these staff will take responsibility for reporting RPL more centrally, as stated:

Going forward QA will be doing more in terms of RPL, reporting centrally etc.

It was felt by one of the respondents that a QQI policy which also provided the requirements for reporting on RPL activity would be beneficial and most readily accepted by providers. The comments also suggested that any internal policy on data collection which might be developed within each ETB might not be viewed as objective and might not contribute to the collation of meaningful data on a national basis.

Theme 7 Management of RPL

As the whole FET sector in Ireland is currently going through a significant transformation, a study on RPL is timely. It was mentioned by the respondents that some systems are, at this time, steadily improving. Another respondent called for a national rather than a local approach noting that the whole country should be doing the same thing and that there was 'no point in doing things on your own' as there is strength in developing a common approach. The capacity to respond to demands for RPL was another concern expressed by one of the participants in the study. As noted by one of the participants of the study:

There are many ways to combat the cost implications such as having a panel of tutors and assessors from various organisations working together to provide a quality assured, unbiased and honest system of preparation and assessment. The cost and resources are shared out amongst the organisations.

In focusing on future development it is envisaged that the quality assurance (QA) team will have responsibility for maintaining quality standards as will the resource workers on the ground. As the management within the ETB sector is localised there is also a view that programme co-ordinators and teachers would have a role in the management of RPL. In the case of one of the ETBs, it is anticipated that responsibility for RPL, including responsibility for collation of information and maintenance of an audit trail, will be devolved to one individual within each centre or school. In order to develop and manage RPL, one participant of the study commented on the need for continuous professional development within the sector:

² Since 2012, 740 exemptions have been granted within major awards arising from non-CAS minor awards. Further information pertaining to these are published on the QQI site



Continuous Professional Development is a critical issue to progress the development of RPL in Ireland. High-quality CPD in the area not only facilitates the delivery of robust, high-quality RPL, but it commences the cultural and attitudinal sea change necessary in our institutions and Irish society generally which currently esteems the learning acquired in higher education above any other.

Theme 8 Supports for RPL

Staff who currently provide guidance within the ETBs were identified as the cohort who could potentially identify the knowledge, skill and competence of learners seeking recognition. It was widely acknowledged by respondents that the FET sector suffers from a significant lack of resources to support learners and RPL processes alike; one respondent noted that there is a reluctance ‘to publicise something without being adequately able to respond to requests for support’. This highlights to some extent why RPL is not promoted within the ETBs. It was commented by some of the respondents that in order to make RPL a reality within the ETB sector adequate capacity and capability needs to be in place to meet the demand.

If you make it known that we do RPL, you would have everyone and anyone coming in looking for RPL and how do you meet that demand?

I wouldn't be in favour of advertising something unless you can meet the demand.

One proposal put forward was for a formal group to be established within each ETB with representatives including but not restricted to representatives of the PLC colleges, training function and adult education who would all support the development of RPL within the geographic region covered by the ETB.

(Within the broader FET system supports available for apprentices seeking recognition are under the remit of SOLAS. This system is explored later in the report for completeness.)


Theme 9 Quality Assurance

In considering QA within the ETBs, interviewees were asked if existing processes give consideration to RPL. In the case of two ETBs, RPL is already implemented and included in a policy statement which ties in with their QA procedures. However, the vast majority of ETBs are still operating in a state of transition and are in the process of developing their broader policies and procedures which will include consideration of RPL.

Up until this, each college had its own QA agreement.

It's a big piece of work to move all that into one QA which allows flexibility, RPL will have to be part of that.

Generally it was felt by respondents that a more proactive response is needed to using RPL evidence for exemptions and accreditation within the FET sector in Ireland. Coupled with this response, it is felt that a more defined QA guide in relation to certification of non-formal and informal learning is needed. This work needs to take into account the recent transformation of the system.



Quality assurance policies should be put in place prior to offering RPL and be displayed and provided in different formats (audio, video, written formats) to cater for all levels of learners.

When asked who should have a responsibility for RPL within FET in Ireland, respondents said a shared responsibility between QQI, ETBI and the individual ETBs would be suitable. It is envisaged that the staff of each ETB would have a role to play. A general consensus among all participants in the study was that the starting point would be to look at what is currently happening with regard to access into programmes. It was also proposed that this group would look at ‘what to stop, start and keep going’ within the FET sector. Clarity on who is responsible for costs arising from implementing RPL and who signs off on RPL decisions were mentioned as the practical decisions which could be made by this group.

I think it comes down to training people in it that they know what they’re doing and that we don’t get caught in handing out certifications without good evidence being there to back it up.

In supporting the development of effective quality assurance procedures and systems a need for a standard policy and learner handbooks were also identified.

Some method that people can buy in to which is reasonable, measured and sustainable.

Theme 10 Barriers

When asked what barriers (if any) to RPL exist within the FET sector, the majority of participants mentioned time and resources as the two most prominent obstacles.

We are majorly understaffed for the last number of years.

In addition, staff training and development on mentoring and assessment for RPL is identified as required to build capacity and progress RPL in the sector.

The biggest thing is the resource requirement and secondly it would be the training around that.

Tutors and others within the organisation not agreeing with the RPL process and in order to help them see the benefits hold in-service and offer individuals the chance to apply for RPL themselves.

There is a need for direct support for learners in putting their application together to meet the requirements of a module or programme. Personnel resources are regarded as paramount if the system is to operate properly and be impartial. The barrier relates equally to the initial establishment of a system and to the resources to maintain it.

Seconding individuals into roles without proper consultation, education and support could be a barrier to implementation.

As part of the empirical research phase insight was also sought from other staff across the ETB sector on the key challenges which they feel affect the implementation of RPL within the FET sector in Ireland (figure 5). The greatest challenge identified was resources to support the implementation of RPL within the sector. The resources identified included time and money. The next challenges for implementation are information/understanding and evaluation/assessment. These challenges stem perhaps from the lack of agreed definitions or discourse in the area of RPL, lack of training and confidence. The diversity of learners and being able to adequately meet their needs was also identified as a challenge.

Top challenges as identified by ETB staff

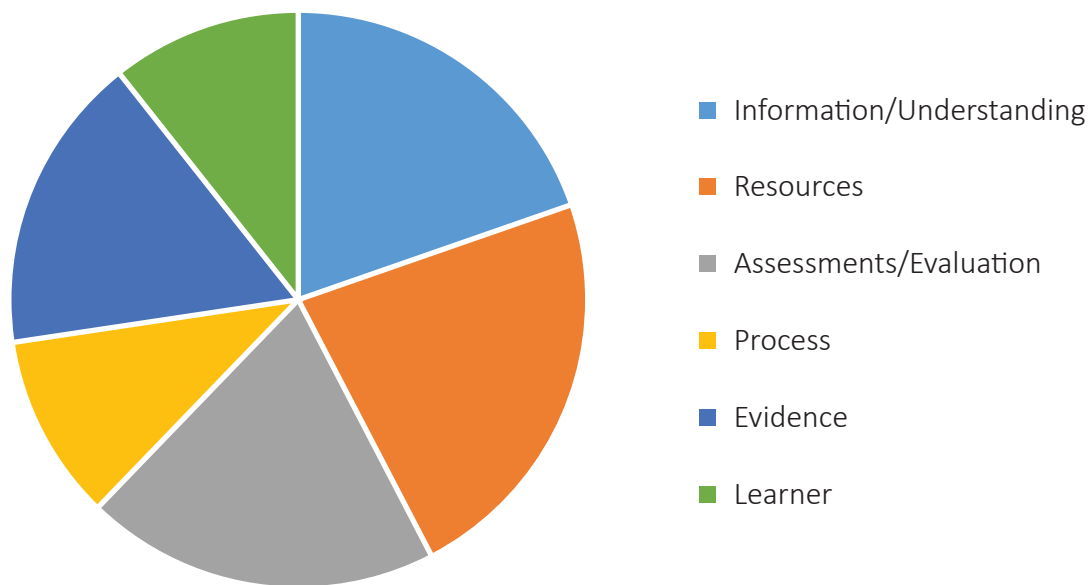


Figure 5: Challenges in providing RPL, according to ETB staff



Conclusions and Recommendations

The FET sector in Ireland has gone through a considerable reorganisation recently through the inception of the ETBs. This change has required work in policy, practice and procedural development across all facets of the ETBs. The debate surrounding RPL is timely as a more general reorganisation and realignment is taking place.

The following are some conclusions arising from this study and are similar in part to those identified in the study on RPL in Higher Education conducted under the auspices of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (Goggin et al., 2015). RPL for the FET sector in Ireland has been included in the FET strategy to 2019 and in other related national strategies and position papers (Department of Education and Skills, 2016a, 2016b, 2015, 2014). Similar to the findings of the report on higher education the translation of the proposals and aspirations into actions is as yet unclear and unspecified.

Organic Development

Innovative RPL activity is taking place at present within ETBs with regard to access, however it is not named or formally recognised in practice. The present level of activity is seen as the starting point for many of the ETBs who took part in the empirical research phase. However, the diversity and scope of the present levels of RPL activity in FET would be enhanced by improved levels of data capture. Improved reporting on RPL activity is one of the key challenges identified by Cedefop to be addressed in the immediate future and will provide enhanced visibility and support the building capacity across a sector calling for adequate resourcing for RPL delivery. The establishment of the Irish RPL Practitioner Network www.rpl-ireland.ie has enabled further collaboration and sharing of practice across education and training in Ireland since its establishment in 2014. In particular the participation of FET personnel in the network continues to inform the conversations of the network at national level.

Absence of clarity and lack of commonly agreed definition

In parallel to the findings of the report on RPL in higher education in Ireland, it was found that there is no common definition or understanding of RPL at present. It was evident from participants that the sector was most comfortable with the recognition of prior formal learning than with the assessment and potential validation of informal and non-formal learning. This was particularly relevant for exemptions from modules within awards. This research concludes that provision of a national policy and strategy would support institutions and individuals and provide the reassurance needed across the FET sector who may formulate a common agreed approach to implementing RPL.

Complexity of sector and diversity of learner

The diversity of the learners and learning within the FET sector in Ireland provides both context and challenge for RPL delivery. Such diversity provides significant opportunities for FET providers to harness existing RPL practice, with appropriate supports and to build capacity for the future. RPL has been particularly successful in providing access to education to date within FET and is very much in keeping with the 'one step up' concept for access to a particular level on the framework. The challenge now is to build on current levels of RPL practice and to value the strength provided by such diversity.



Organisational challenges for RPL at the present time within FET

The FET sector in Ireland is undergoing significant transformation as the multitude of providers are reorganised under 16 education and training boards (ETBs). The cultural, structural and operational changes occurring at local level are notable with the implementation of new policies, processes and operations in the individual ETBs. Against this backdrop, RPL is not a current priority for the majority of the ETBs although they do recognise the importance of its inclusion and participants stated that they would welcome the development of a strategy to inform and support practice.

National and ETB level governing structures

Respondents to the study had a perception that QQI exerts a strong influence on the activities and future planning of ETBs, whose autonomy to make decisions is relatively restricted. This is not an entirely true reflection of the position of QQI, who would welcome increased autonomy and sense of ownership of decisions and operations of ETBs by ETBs. The importance of the role of the external authenticator in supporting RPL applications for exemptions within programmes and for the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning was highlighted as a potential challenge to implementation. The external authenticator is a key stakeholder within FET assessment. The influence of these stakeholders in future development of RPL within the sector was seen as a challenge and could be the focus of further research.

Organisational knowledge and awareness

There is an overall lack of awareness of the range and scope of RPL activities across FET. The existing knowledge surrounding RPL activity at an individual ETB level was limited by the experience and professional pathway of those interviewed. The limited awareness of broader ETB activity could also be argued as indicative of the continuation of the pre-ETB era of working in silos. As previously mentioned the FET sector in Ireland consists of a myriad of programmes with a particular learner focus and the knowledge and awareness across these sections of activities is limited. This conclusion in part relates to data collection and reporting as there is a lack of visible activity within sections and also across the ETBs. The ETB sector is currently engaged in two key strategic projects of programme development and assessment into which RPL should be included in the discussions in the future.

Recommendations

Through the empirical research phase, staff of ETBs were asked what, in their opinion, is required to overcome the challenges facing RPL in terms of consistent implementation across the sector. In reviewing the findings there were five top suggestions as to how the challenges could be overcome, as outlined in figure 6. These include resources and policy with the leading recommendation leaning towards consistent procedures and processes.

Top challenges as identified by ETB staff

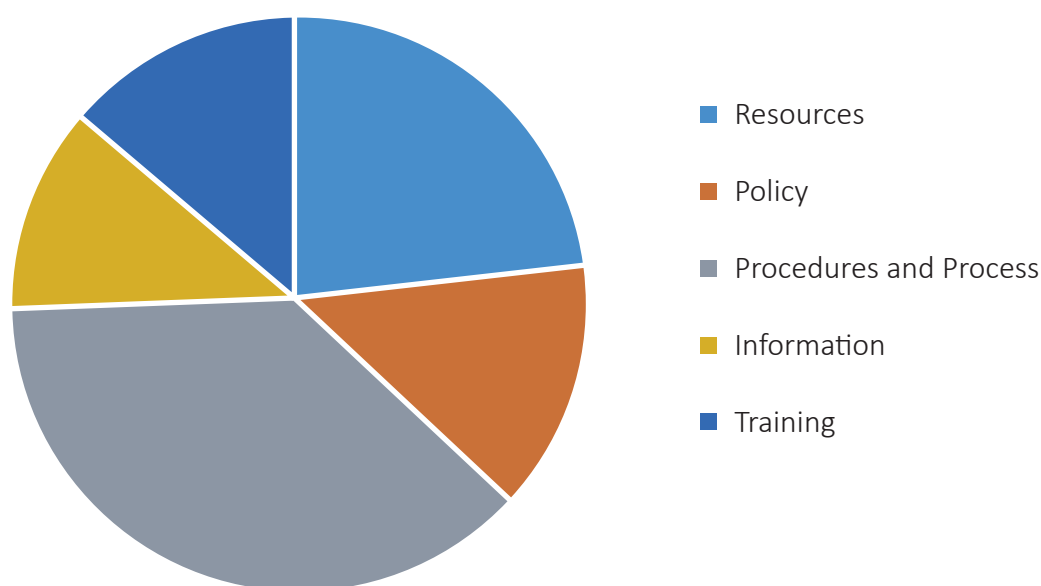


Figure 6: Suggested inputs to meet the challenges in RPL

In addition to those identified by the staff of the ETBs a number of recommendations have emerged from the research, which are generally aligned to those included in the report on RPL in Higher Education in Ireland (Goggin et al, 2015). The suggestions as outlined above are more likely to be successful if taken in parallel with a series of other actions including a communication strategy supporting the sharing of practice, a consultation process to underline the implementation of an integrated strategy across an ETB, informed by the overarching strategy for the FET sector in Ireland.

Common definition and national policy

A common definition for RPL within FET in Ireland in the first instance, and in consultation with all education and training sectors, needs to be developed and agreed. A national policy and strategy is required for RPL which spans the entire national framework of qualifications from levels one to ten. A separate policy for RPL in FET could be devised but should be in keeping with a general national policy.

Data collection

As concluded from the empirical research phase there is some organic development of RPL within some ETBs and others have historically used it for access. This data is in addition to prior formal applications which are captured through the QBS for QQI. In order to ascertain the true extent of RPL practice, systems will need to be developed to capture and record the basis and outcome of the application to ensure consistency of practice in line with quality assurance practices. This development will need to take place at local level informed by a national approach within the FET sector in Ireland. The ongoing development and implementation of PLSS across the FET sector as a single national unifying data system is a unique advantage that could serve this purpose well.



Good practice guidelines

In response to the conclusion of supporting autonomy of ETBs, training and development within ETBs and the sector as a whole needs to occur in consultation with QQI in the broader areas of curriculum development and assessment and the inclusion of RPL in these. How RPL is captured and the basis of the application documented will facilitate organisational and sectoral knowledge development in line with quality assurance procedures.

RPL staff training and development

To support the recommendations listed above, training and development should be implemented for all staff who interact with learners within FET so that an organisational approach to RPL is adopted. It will also provide a space for staff to consider their role and responsibility for RPL.



Examples of Practice

Limerick Clare ETB – Edge Project

E-portfolio and open badge system to capture and recognise informal and non-formal learning.

LCETB Edge project is an Erasmus+ project funded under the Strategic Partnership Action with partners from five countries and LCETB as the coordinating partner. Overall there are four outcomes associated with the project: two with relevance to the area of RPL. These outcomes relate to the development of an e-portfolio system and the research and development of the use of open badges to recognise informal and non-formal learning.

The E-Portfolio was designed through Moodle as a guidance and employability tool for learners. Skills, accreditation and achievements, including open badges, can be incorporated into the e-portfolio using the Mahara platform. The system acts as a plug-in to the Moodle Learning Management System allowing the learner to create a unique page, similar to the creation of a personalised website for the learner. It is designed so that it is accessible, with a built-in template, and allows the learner to interact with relative ease.

As learners progress they build and populate their own learning portfolio with all their supporting documents including multi-media clips, blogs and other evidence which they can tailor and share with different employers and educators as appropriate.

The student target audience is varied. In the VTOS section of the LCETB learners are long-term unemployed with some literacy issues, they also include international students, some of whom are refugees or migrant workers. Across the LCETB there is a diversity of potential beneficiaries from level two to six, part-time and full-time, and the intention is to roll out this tool to the entire LCETB.

The e-portfolio system was developed in the two-year window of the EU-funded project. The aim of the project had been to explore and develop a system which met the targets and had potential for greater exploitation. There is considerable opportunity and challenge associated with mainstreaming the system to a greater diversity and number of users in a meaningful and relevant way. Another aim of the project was to develop a system of open badges. There are about 40 soft skill open badges available, which aim to recognise soft skills which are not normally recognised in certification.

The motivation for developing such a system is to support learners in recognising and evidencing some essential workplace skills such as time-keeping, interpersonal skills, team work and leadership. The project seeks to develop a transferable structure to support such a mechanism. Through project work LCETB has identified key questions relating to quality assurance, value and verification of badge systems which will help to underpin any future developments in this area.

RPL in the Craft Apprentice area (SOLAS)

In SOLAS RPL is linked with the area of apprenticeship. SOLAS is responsible for 27 trade qualifications, all of which can avail of RPL. The overall approach adopted by SOLAS is to maintain an open, inclusive policy which allows access rather than preventing or blocking access. Maintaining the integrity of the programmes for all learners is paramount for management, staff and assessment committees of SOLAS. SOLAS have been very proactive in responding to the needs of apprentices with relevant prior learning in keeping with the quality assurance mechanisms and in developing processes and collating data.

Traditional craft certificate apprentice pathways are made up of on-the-job and off-the-job elements. As outlined by Bryan Redmond of SOLAS:


Generally with apprentice programmes the Phase 2, the first phase they do off the job is very broad and also the programmes are not like in academia where it is broken into different subjects so it's very hard to break them up into practical and academic learning. It's all or nothing. It's either give them a full exemption or no exemption. That can be contentious for us because I believe people are coming in saying I have X but there might be very important elements of the programme they haven't covered.

Other applications for RPL will come from applicants who had not fully completed the previous time-served apprentice model and who seek to have their experience and expertise recognised and mapped to the more recent standards-based model, and applicants from other countries seeking to have their learning mapped to the Irish apprentice system with appropriate consideration for exemptions. In these international cases SOLAS have worked to develop a table of equivalencies for other European countries. There can also be applications associated with the regulated crafts.

In Ireland only two of the crafts are regulated – the electrical and the plumbing. If someone is coming in from abroad, to regulate the free movement of labour, we have to be able to assess their qualifications and assist them to upskill. It's not us directly, it is the Commissioner of Energy Regulations (CER). That comes in under the whole realm of RPL, because the CER would often ask our assistance in assessing someone's qualifications. We wouldn't be directly involved in the actions of that – either awarding or not awarding a license.
Bryan Redmond SOLAS

In developing a new Craft Certificate in the area of Electronic Security in 2007, pathways were considered for those already working in the area. Processes were established to allow those with significant experience to apply for exemptions through the submission of a portfolio, assuming they met certain qualifying criteria. In this area it is estimated that approximately 60 applications have been dealt with while the SOLAS Apprenticeship Section has information on approximately 125 applications in total and estimates that approximately the same number of applications have arisen from those seeking recognition for learning under the previous time-served model.

The economic downturn had a significant impact on apprentice numbers and also resulted in numbers of apprentices being unable to complete their on-the-job training. In response to this, a system of RPL was introduced and a committee established to handle applications from learners



seeking to have their experience and learning assessed against the required on-the-job learning to finalise their craft certificate. So far 400-500 applications have been reviewed over the last number of years.

The lack of a licensing system in Ireland for tradespeople can make it difficult for those who qualify outside the Irish system as there is no opportunity for them to align their qualification within the Irish system. This facility is available in other countries such as Australia where Irish apprenticeship graduates can undertake an exam and obtain a licence to work in their field for a fee. A similar structure in the Irish system would facilitate those who have immigrated to Ireland and support international transferability of learning.

CORK ETB – a snapshot

RPL in St John's College - Cork

Three strands of recognition of prior learning are available in St John's, namely:

- College Module Exemption
- Accredited Prior Learning APL
- Recognition of Prior Learning RPL

Students are encouraged to use RPL to gain credit for evidence of competencies attained prior to attending St John's.

The Module Exemption and Accredited Prior Learning strands are co-ordinated by a Special Duties teacher, and over 100 students avail of this option each year.

RPL was piloted in 2016 / 17 as an advantageous option to "fast track" mature students. However, having outlined the process to students there has been minimal uptake to date.

RPL in Donegal ETB and Defence Forces

This pilot project had the overall objective of validating the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by Privates in the Defence Forces outside of the formal learning environment. The project progressed through the four stages of validation and complimented the Donegal ETB approach 'to recognise and acknowledge both the formal and experiential learning of learners at point of access to courses'.


The Defence Forces as a lifelong learning organisation 'strive to achieve external accreditation on the National Framework of Qualifications for its personnel'. Currently there is no external evaluation for personnel who do not progress beyond the rank of Private. Through the Skills for Work programme it was acknowledged that knowledge, skill and competencies were acquired outside of the formal accredited system and there was an opportunity for this learning to be formally accredited.

Initial identification of the learners was through the Skills for Work programme who ranged in age from 34-59 years. As outlined by Martina Needham the project and course coordinator 'the learners were also not aware of or valued their own level of knowledge, skill and competence'. The approach was novel for both ETB tutors and participants, and involved a questionnaire to ascertain the current skills. Two major awards at level 3 on the National Framework of Qualifications in Information and Communications Technology and Employability Skills were identified as relevant.

Issues relating to security and access to records provided a unique challenge for the participants who had to request certification in writing for key training aspects of their careers. The certified response provided by the Defence Forces overcame the challenge of access to sensitive information for the learners and the staff in Donegal ETB. The advantage of the learner requesting certification of the training also resulted in the career of the learner being expressed in terms which were easily understood by non-military personnel. As awards in the ETBs are validated by an external authenticator, it was important that this authenticator had an understanding of RPL.

As a result of the pilot the learners reported increased confidence and improved awareness in their learning. According to Martina Needham, the project 'inverted the lens by changing the focus from the module curriculum to the objectives of the programme mapped against the award outcomes/standards.'

The pilot project allowed space to carefully consider systems and processes which were in keeping with existing quality assurance and procedures. Consideration of quality assurance measures to enable access on the basis of award standards is still required. This would enable greater flexibility in the recognition of knowledge, skill and competence and would contribute to consistency at a national level. Data collection and monitoring system implementation are two other areas which require a duty of care.



An area which needs careful consideration is the wording of learning and programme outcomes to ensure that these are accessible to the learners involved. The need to explore RPL at the major award standard rather than at the minor award level has also been identified as an area in need of future development. A review of the pilot also identified the need for staff to move beyond the familiar curriculum but to do so, they would need to be supported by relevant quality assurance procedures.

In order to broaden the activities of RPL within Donegal ETB it is envisaged that continuous professional development will need to take place with experienced tutors and Adult Literacy Organisers and Adult Education Officers.

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