

Technical Definition of RPL in Higher Education

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1. Introduction

This document outlines the following:

- ✓ The **evolution** of the technical definition of RPL;
- ✓ The **purpose** of the technical definition;
- ✓ The **scope** of RPL activity;
- ✓ The **rationale** that underpins decision-making within the technical definition;
- ✓ The aforementioned **rationale** in practice;
- ✓ Some **advice** on how to implement the technical definition.

2. Evolution of the technical definition of RPL

The technical definition of RPL has been developed by means of an extensive consultation and engagement process with partner higher education institutions (HEIs). The project's partner HEIs are listed in **Appendix 1**.

Key milestones were as follows:

- In **June 2022**, a pilot technical definition was approved or accepted in principle by senior leaders of the project's partner HEIs.
- From **September – December 2022**, the pilot technical definition was tested by a subset of the project's partner HEIs in order to refine and to finalise the definition.

Testing took place on an opt-in, self-selection basis in HEIs. Volunteers tested the technical definition within one or more academic units of their choice (e.g. a department, school, programme, or other). By sharing their observations and any findings arising, institutional representatives worked with the Project Management Team to bring added clarity to the technical definition. The input of these volunteers has been invaluable in progressing this work, and a debt of gratitude is owed to them. Those who participated in this process are listed in **Appendix 2**.

3. Purpose of the technical definition

The purpose of the technical definition is to **assist HEIs in developing their capacity to collect RPL data** for their own internal use. As a resource, the technical definition will **support HEIs in achieving consistency in RPL data collection**, both internally and sectorally.

There are myriad reasons to collect RPL data. Most obviously, the collection of data is essential so that HEIs may **gauge the extent of RPL activity underway**. Over time, such information is useful for the identification of **trends and for the tracking of progress** against a baseline.¹ More broadly, collecting RPL data is useful in demonstrating HEIs' commitment to **increasing flexibility**, seeking to support students' participation in higher education in ways that align with their individual needs and circumstances; this is a matter of strategic importance in the higher-education sector.² Furthermore, the collection and monitoring of data supports **quality assurance** in HEIs. Data is also a key

¹ While growing the visibility of RPL across the higher-education sector is likely to result in increased applications for RPL, external factors (such as unemployment levels) may also have a bearing on annual applicant numbers.

² For example, this emphasis on flexibility and following an evidence-drive approach is illustrated by the recently published *National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation, and Success in Higher Education, 2022-2028*.

component in advancing the **resourcing, further mainstreaming, and longer-term sustainability of RPL and related activity.**

The funding proposal for the National RPL in Higher Education project noted that one of the current challenges associated with RPL in Ireland is the lack of reliable data, noting that this project will help to resolve this issue, both for HEIs and at a national level. A survey of all project HEIs carried out in January 2022 identified the absence of coherent and consistent data collection and reporting mechanisms at local and sectoral levels, echoing the earlier findings of a National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning report in 2015.³ Proactive consideration of this topic is particularly timely and topical, given interest expressed by the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in RPL.⁴ Against this backdrop, the technical definition will act as a **tool to assist HEIs in collecting data on RPL activity, enabling HEIs in achieve consistency in this regard** both internally and across the higher-education sector.

In developing this technical definition, it was important to reflect on the fact that **many things can be considered to be RPL.** Philosophically, all entry to higher education recognises prior learning – for example, CAO entry, in the main, recognises prior performance in Leaving Certificate examinations. Features of the RPL approach may be found in a variety of pathways to, and through, higher education. Very many things could legitimately be counted as RPL. However, **any data that is gathered must be meaningful and useful to the HEI, informing its decision makers in new ways.**

It is the job of the project and its partners to define the most relevant and useful things to count here. In essence, the technical definition sets out to define that which we propose should be recorded as RPL activity. A common technical definition is a key component of consistent data collection institutionally and sectorally.

4. Scope of RPL activity

This technical definition complements the **pilot Framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education.** The Framework provides definitions of RPL and related concepts that are relevant to this document.

Before discussing the decision-making that underlies data collection, it may be useful to consider the scope or breadth of RPL activity. It is essential that RPL data collection captures information on the full range of relevant activity that is taking place within HEIs.

Prior learning is learning that has taken place but has not necessarily been assessed or measured.⁵ It may have been acquired through **formal or certified learning** (e.g. learning through programmes of study that are delivered by education providers), **non-formal learning** (e.g. unaccredited training

activities undertaken for skills development in work, leisure, community engagement, and care responsibilities), and/or **informal learning** routes (e.g. learning through life experience). Non-formal and informal learning are often referred to as **experiential learning**. RPL gives value to **all relevant learning**, in the context of specific courses or programmes of study, regardless of where it is achieved or how it is achieved. Learning occurs in many contexts, including on-the-job learning, involvement in

³ NFETL (2015), *A Current Overview of RPL in Higher Education*.

⁴ For example, see the recent policy platform paper published by the Department in relation to the development of a more unified tertiary education system.

⁵ For inclusion in a HEI's RPL dataset, the prior learning does not necessarily have to have taken place before *entry* to a programme; it may have been completed *after* the student has been admitted to a programme, but, for example, *before* the relevant semester or stage of a course. (In some HEIs, the latter is described as 'concurrent' learning.)

social and community activities, through caring responsibilities, via sport and other leisure activity, or by means of life experiences more generally. Learning may have occurred in Ireland or abroad.

In theory, RPL may apply to **all modules, on all programmes or courses, at all National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels, in all modes of study, and in all disciplines of study**. RPL takes place in **undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research programme contexts**. **Full-time and part-time** modes of study are also included. It can apply to programmes that take place on campus, those that are blended or flexible, and those that involve online or remote learning. RPL is common in **Springboard+** courses, though it is far from being limited to these. As well as major awards, RPL may also occur in the contexts of **minor awards, micro-credentials, special-purpose awards, and supplemental awards**.⁶ As noted in the Framework, exceptions may arise for a number of reasons, e.g. due to professional or regulatory requirements.

The purposes or outcomes of RPL may include:

- Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme modules
- Advanced entry to a programme⁷
- Entry to a programme.⁸

In some HEIs, RPL may also be used to gain a **full academic award**. The availability of these outcomes of RPL is at the discretion of each HEI. HEIs will indicate which of these options may be sought in their engagement with potential applicants. HEIs' policies, procedures, and information for applicants will outline their approach to RPL and any relevant rules or regulations.

5. Rationale to support decision-making in relation to RPL data collection

The various purposes for which learners may avail of RPL have been outlined in the preceding section. For example, RPL may be used by learners to gain entry or advanced entry to a programme.⁹ Of course, a wide variety of pathways or entry routes to higher education are available to learners, many of which do not involve RPL. A challenge is to formulate **an approach that enables identification of RPL learners in a straightforward and consistent manner**. To do this, it is useful to reflect on the key steps involved in the RPL process, which invariably involves a mapping of prior learning being undertaken, and an academic judgement being made as to the appropriateness of the learning.

Thus, the following reflective questions are recommended in order to identify learners for inclusion in HEIs' RPL datasets:

1. Has a mapping of the learner's prior learning taken place?
2. Has an academic judgement been made as regards the appropriateness of the learning?

It may be beneficial to add a third question to the decision-making process:

⁶ An explanation of these terms may be found here: <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/qqi-awards/qqi-awards-standards/types-of-qqi-awards>. 'Micro-credential' means the record of the learning outcomes that a learner has acquired following a small volume of learning. See *Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Approach to Micro-credentials for Lifelong Learning and Employability*, Adopted by Council of the European Union, 25/05/2022: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-9237-2022-INIT/en/pdf>.

⁷ Advanced entry is where a learner applies – using RPL or another mechanism – for entry to year two, three, or four of a relevant course (where applicable).

⁸ Entry to a programme was not the originally intended purpose of RPL, but RPL can be (and is) used in this way; for this reason, it is not listed first here.

⁹ The terms 'learner', 'applicant', and 'student' are used interchangeably in this document. The term 'RPL learner' is used in this document as shorthand to describe learners who have benefited from RPL.

3. Is the inclusion of this data in the HEI's RPL dataset meaningful and useful to the HEI?

Some frequently occurring examples are included in the next section to aid HEIs' application of the technical definition. The above-listed questions are the foundations of the advice here included. Where it is recommended *not* to include particular data as part of an RPL dataset, it is not intended to devalue such routes, or the students who avail of these, in any way. Rather, **it simply indicates that the information should be, or perhaps already is, recorded in another way or that there is little added value to be gained from the inclusion of that data.** The aim here is to enhance data-collection activity, rather than impeding or impinging on related data activities that are already working well or creating unnecessary work.

6. Rationale in practice

In this section, some examples are provided to demonstrate how the above-described rationale applies in practice.

i. Learners who are granted credit or exemption, advanced entry, or award based on RPL

As outlined above, purposes of RPL include: credit towards an award or exemption from some programme modules; advanced entry to a programme; or, in a small number of cases, a full award. Where learners seek and obtain any of these, it is recommended that they should be recorded as having availed of RPL in the HEI's dataset. **In all instances, the RPL process will have included a mapping of the prior learning, and an academic judgement being made as to the appropriateness of the learning.**

ii. Entry requirements assessed via RPL, including cohorts or groups of learners

RPL may also be used for the purpose of programme entry, either on an individual basis or on a cohort or group basis. **Where a mapping of the prior learning has been undertaken, and an academic judgement has been made as to the appropriateness of the learning, such learners should be recorded as having entered through RPL.**

Learners may seek to avail of RPL to enter courses or programmes on an individual basis under a variety of personal and professional circumstances. For example, RPL may be a solution for newcomers who reach their destination without official documentation that would prove their education level in their countries of origin.¹⁰

RPL that takes place on a cohort basis is a growth area in the higher-education sector. This typically involves a formal arrangement being put in place between an enterprise partner and a HEI; following a customised RPL assessment process, several learners take part in a work-relevant course of study.¹¹

The RPL process is distinct from the HEI's standard entry requirements. While RPL is sometimes described as a 'non-standard' method of entry, it might be more positively framed as consisting of an alternative, equivalent, or even a 'lifelong learning' entry route. The latter might capture the increasing importance of creating flexible pathways that suit learners' real-life situations and the higher-education sector's recognition of this. RPL is, by virtue, personal to the learner, and the learning presented will vary in duration, depth, and breadth in line with the course or programme involved. Thus, this might be characterised as a diverse, rather than a homogenous, entry route.

¹⁰ The RPL process may be supported by a variety of tools: for example, the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR).

¹¹ Examples include partnerships between Munster Technological University and the Atlantic Flight Training Academy, South East Technological University and the Defence Forces, and University College Cork and the Carbery Group, respectively.

*iii. Learners who gain programme entry **and** credits/exemptions through RPL*

Many HEIs in Ireland will have examples of learners who benefit from RPL twice: for example, by gaining entry to a programme and also obtaining credits or exemptions through RPL. To facilitate this, an RPL process will have taken place. In order to capture the extent of this engagement with RPL, **it is recommended that such instances should be recorded or identified twice in HEIs' datasets as two separate examples of RPL activity** – e.g. as RPL for entry, *and* as RPL exemptions.

For HEIs that are new to RPL data collection, additional examples provided in **Appendix 3** may be useful in assisting the consistent application of the technical definition. Examples provided are not exhaustive.

7. Advice on how to implement the technical definition

It is recommended that, when RPL data is collected, it should be possible to identify and to disaggregate information on **types of prior learning** as follows:

- RPL on the basis of **formal learning**
- RPL on the basis of **experiential learning** (i.e. non-formal and/or informal learning)
- RPL on the basis of a **combination of formal and experiential learning**.

Gathering data on experiential learning (i.e. non-formal and/or informal learning) is important in order to facilitate international comparison and benchmarking. Such types of prior learning are a particular focal point in Europe and internationally.

It should also be possible to identify and to disaggregate data in accordance with the various **purposes or outcomes of RPL** that are available within the HEI. As noted previously, these may include some or all of the following:

- Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme modules
- Advanced entry to a programme
- Entry to a programme
- Full academic award.

Headcount, or number of learners, is the proposed data-collection unit.¹² No unit is without its drawbacks, of course. Notably, where a HEI's learners have benefited from RPL twice (entry/advanced entry plus exemptions), the headcount metric will not match the actual number of learners availing of RPL. It is recommended that HEIs should be able to identify those learners who are included in an RPL dataset in order to be in a position to reconcile these figures. When the recording of headcount is linked to a unique student identifier (for example, where data collection takes place within a HEI's Student Records Management System), this will facilitate the reconciliation of such figures.

The weakness of a headcount-based approach is in relation to capturing data on RPL **credits or exemptions**. For example, an RPL applicant may benefit from an exemption from one or from several modules; counting this as one learner (i.e. one unit) fails to recognise differences in the 'extent' of the RPL that has taken place. However, headcount is arguably the only unit that captures activity

¹² In relation to advanced entry, entry, and full awards through RPL, the 'number of learners' and the 'number of applications' should match (i.e. 1 learner = 1 application), meaning that such metrics could be used interchangeably in these contexts.

across all four RPL outcome areas in a somewhat meaningful manner.¹³ It is recommended that institutions should **supplement this data with more nuanced information in relation to credits and exemptions**. A suite of metrics would be optimal in this regard, including the **number of modules, sum of ECTS,¹⁴ and number of applications,¹⁵** to give insight into the breadth and/or depth of prior learning that is being presented and assessed. Where each headcount is linked to a unique student identifier, it should be possible, in principle, to generate reports on the aforementioned additional data. A sample data-collection template is provided as **Appendix 4** to assist HEIs in practice.

Notably, in this document, the focus is on data in relation to **successful applications for RPL**: that is, learners who have benefited from RPL. It is worth considering whether an analogous approach could be taken in relation to other useful RPL data. The following points may warrant consideration:

- For example, some HEIs may wish to track **expressions of interest in RPL**. Given that multiple contact persons and other touchpoints are involved in the RPL process, it is likely to be challenging to gather robust data in this regard. Notably, there will be a wide range of reasons for expressions of interest not translating into RPL applications, including personal reasons; the meaning of such data may not necessarily be readily inferred.
- However, it will be useful to track **applications received (i.e. successful and unsuccessful applications)¹⁶** in order to ascertain the success rate and reasons for a negative outcome. When RPL mentoring is done effectively in HEIs, applicants will be discouraged from submitting applications that stand little chance of success; therefore, a high success rate is to be expected. Identifying unsuccessful applications and understanding the reasons for these may assist in shaping the procedures, resource allocation, and supports that are assigned to the process.
- Where HEIs are monitoring **student success** (for example, progression rates, completion rates, and other metrics), it is important to include RPL learners in institutional tracking of this kind. This may serve to identify any issues that hamper the performance of these and/or other students.

¹³ For example, if credits or exemptions gained were the chosen unit, this could not be used to quantify programme entry through RPL.

¹⁴ 'Sum of ECTS' may be a useful metric to complement 'number of modules', given the variation in the number of credits that modules may entail. For example, exemptions that sum to 60 ECTS could mean: 2 x 30-credit modules, 4 x 15-credit modules, 6 x 10-credit modules, etc. If used in combination, ECTS and module-related metrics may be useful in revealing the extent of the activity that is underway; in turn, this may be useful in determining the resource allocation that is required to support such activity.

¹⁵ It is worth noting that, depending on institutional practice, a learner's application might relate to multiple individual modules: e.g. a learner who applies for 5 RPL exemptions could be deemed to have submitted 1 application (with sections relating to each relevant module) or 5 individual applications. For consistency across the sector, it is recommended that '1 application' will relate to '1 module': i.e. 'number of applications' and 'number of modules' will match.

¹⁶ In the context of RPL, an 'unsuccessful application' is one that is assessed but is unsuccessful in obtaining the learner's desired outcome (credits/exemption, advanced entry, entry, and/or a full award through RPL).

Appendix 1: Partners of the RPL in Higher Education Project

The following HEIs are partners of the project:

1. Atlantic Technological University
2. Dublin City University
3. Dún Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design and Technology
4. Dundalk Institute of Technology
5. Maynooth University
6. Munster Technological University
7. South East Technological University
8. Technological University Dublin
9. Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest
10. Trinity College Dublin
11. University College Cork
12. University College Dublin
13. University of Galway
14. University of Limerick

The project is co-sponsored by the Technological Higher Education Association and the Irish Universities Association.

Appendix 2: HEI representatives who tested the pilot technical definition

The following HEI representatives kindly participated in testing the pilot technical definition of RPL, enabling its finalisation:

1. Atlantic Technological University (all campuses)
 - Myra Feely, Olive Kelly, Christine McCabe, Dr Simon Stephens.
2. Dublin City University
 - Karina Curley.
3. Maynooth University
 - Carol Lynch.
4. Munster Technological University (Cork campus)
 - Deirdre Goggin, Dr Phil O'Leary.
5. South East Technological University (Waterford campus)
 - Ann-Marie Cullen, Aishling O'Toole.
6. Technological University Dublin
 - Janet Cairns, Louise Kinsella.
7. Technological University of the Shannon
 - Nicola Berry.
8. University College Dublin
 - Marian O'Connor.
9. University of Galway.
 - Suzanne Golden.

Appendix 3: Some examples to support application of the technical definition in practice

A series of examples are here provided to support the application of the technical definition in practice. These are summarised in tabulated format at the end of this Appendix. These examples, if tracked and monitored by HEIs, may form the basis of a precedents' database to aid RPL decision-making.

a. Learners who enter via the Mature Applicant entry route

In relation to **full-time undergraduate courses of study** in Ireland, learners may apply as a Mature Applicant through the CAO if they are 23 years old on or before 1st January in the year of entry.¹⁷ Mature applicants via CAO usually need to apply before 1st February. However, some HEIs may have a different age requirement, different definitions of mature applicants, etc, and some will consider applications received after the 1st February closing date.

The Mature Student Application Form incorporates elements of RPL; applicants are effectively asked to provide details of their informal and non-formal prior learning when outlining their 'life/educational experience' and any 'hobbies or interests relevant to a specific subject area/field of study'. A number of HEIs have requested that Mature Applicants be counted as RPL. However, the focus of the National Project is on the role which RPL can play to make higher education more responsive and dynamic in the context of the changing needs of learners, the economy, and society. Full-time undergraduate programmes will not necessarily be the programmes of choice for this cohort of learners, who will require multiple participations and accelerated learning opportunities over the course of their lives. These individuals will need to participate in higher education while they continue to carry out their responsibilities in work and/or at home and will be more likely to choose part-time and flexible offerings. The default inclusion of *all* full-time, undergraduate Mature Applicants would skew overall RPL numbers and would provide little added value for institutions with regard to informing RPL policymaking, practice, or broader lifelong learning strategies. **Thus, in response to the question as regards whether the inclusion of this data in the HEI's RPL dataset is meaningful and useful to the HEI, it is recommended that Mature Applicants who enter through the CAO should *not* be recorded as having an entry basis of RPL in a HEI's RPL dataset.**

b. Learners who enter via the Mature Applicant entry route and gain credits or exemptions, advanced entry, or award via RPL

It is essential to note that Mature Applicants may go on to seek and to obtain credits or exemptions, advanced entry, or award via RPL.¹⁸ **If successful in seeking RPL for any of these purposes, it is recommended that Mature Applicants should be recorded as RPL (for credits/exemptions, advanced entry, or award), similar to any other type of learner.**

c. Learners who enter from Further Education and Training (FET)

A variety of FET-HE progression links exist in Ireland. For example, the Higher Education Links Scheme (HELS) gives learners the opportunity to use their QQI Level 5 or 6 major award to apply, through the CAO, for a place in the first year of a higher education programme. Depending on the chosen programme or HEI, entry is determined on the basis of a common scoring system and, in some cases, on the achievement of a specific major award, certain grades (pass, merit, or distinction), particular components, or other requirements. Many HEIs have traditionally had links with individual

¹⁷ Mature Students Ireland (2019), *Admission Requirements Summary*. Some HEIs consider applications that are made directly by mature learners: see <http://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=mature>. Direct applications may also arise, in some HEIs, where learners have completed specific access/foundation courses.

¹⁸ For example, a mature learner could be granted advanced entry via RPL, particularly in practice-based disciplines (e.g. Creative and Performing Arts).

further-education colleges and have enrolled graduates from these institutions into certain higher education courses.¹⁹

The approach taken in relation to FET-HE progression may incorporate aspects of RPL. **However, in response to the question as regards whether the inclusion of this data in the HEI's RPL dataset is meaningful and useful to the HEI, it is recommended that learners who enter through the CAO using the Higher Education Links Scheme should *not* be recorded as having an entry basis of RPL in an institution's RPL dataset.**

*d. Learners who enter from Further Education and Training (FET) **and** gain credits or exemptions, advanced entry, or award via RPL*

It is essential to note that students who gain entry via their FET award may go on to seek credits or exemptions, advanced entry, or award via RPL. **If successful in seeking RPL for any of these purposes, it is recommended that such learners should be recorded as RPL (for credits/exemptions, advanced entry, or award), similar to any other type of learner.**

e. Learners who transfer internally between programmes via RPL

Many HEIs in Ireland offer a process whereby current students may apply to transfer internally from one course to another. **Where an RPL process has taken place (i.e. a mapping of the prior learning has been undertaken, and an academic judgement has been made as to the appropriateness of the learning), and the learner enters a programme and/or obtains exemptions or advanced entry as a result of prior learning, it is recommended that such learners should be recorded within the HEI's RPL dataset.** This is the case regardless of whether the student transfers internally between full-time programmes, between part-time programmes, or from a full-time programme of study to a part-time programme of study or vice versa. Depending on the discipline, the currency, validity, and sufficiency of the learning may be particularly relevant in determining whether a mapping process should take place. For example, learning outcomes relating to a language may remain current but those that relate to a technical skillset may not. Where the learning is not considered to be current, an RPL process is likely to ensue. In light of the above, it is anticipated that **many learners who transfer internally between programmes will be recorded within the HEI's RPL dataset, particularly those who transfer post-Year 1.**

An exception to this would be, for example, where a student transfers at an early stage of a programme (e.g. within Year 1) and their request to transfer is based only on Leaving Certificate results and subject-entry requirements. Such a situation would not entail a mapping of prior learning (i.e. an RPL process) but, rather, would simply mirror the usual entry process; therefore, such learners would not be recorded within a HEI's RPL dataset.

f. Learners who transfer between institutions (nationally or internationally) via RPL

Many HEIs in Ireland offer a process whereby current students may apply to transfer from one HEI to another. Similarly, students may seek transfers from international HEIs to an Irish HEI.²⁰ **Where an RPL process is considered necessary and has taken place (i.e. a mapping of the prior learning has been undertaken, and an academic judgement has been made as to the appropriateness of the learning), and the learner enters a programme and/or obtains exemptions or advanced entry as a result of prior learning, it is recommended that such learners should be recorded within the HEI's**

¹⁹ Department of Education and Skills (2020), *Further Education and Training (FET) Progression to Higher Education (HE): Transitions Reform Working Paper – June 2020*.

²⁰ See Council of Europe (1997), *Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications Concerning Higher Education in the European Region* (European Treaty Series - No. 165), Article IV.1.

RPL dataset.²¹ This is the case regardless of whether the student transfers between full-time programmes, between part-time programmes, or from a full-time programme of study to a part-time programme of study or vice versa. As noted in the previous example, an RPL process is likely to ensue where the learning is not considered to be current, sufficient, or valid.

g. Learners who undertake a module on a standalone basis and later undertake a full award within the same HEI

The situation may arise where learners undertake a module on a standalone basis and later wish to progress to a course that contains an identical module and that leads to a full award within the same HEI. In such circumstances, the learner may be permitted to carry the mark from the standalone module into the full award course. The award result may then incorporate the mark from the standalone module. **As this does not typically entail an RPL process (i.e. a mapping of the prior learning being undertaken, and an academic judgement being made as to the appropriateness of the learning), but merely the carry-over of marks, such learners should not be recorded within the HEI's dataset.** Considerations of currency, validity, and sufficiency will ultimately determine whether an RPL process should take place.

Some HEIs may have designed certain programmes with 'stackability' of credit in mind, such that learners may follow a preconceived pathway towards accumulating sufficient credit as to amount to a full award. An RPL process is unlikely to occur in such circumstances unless considerations of currency, validity, and sufficiency apply.

Should learners wish to accumulate learning from multiple HEIs into an award in a final-destination HEI (i.e. stacking credit where inter-institutional, sectoral, or international agreements are not already in place to facilitate this), an RPL process may ensue.

h. Learners who gain an exemption from undertaking planned placements or work-based learning via RPL

Many HEIs include elements of work-based learning or work placements within their courses and programmes. Notably, these do not represent prior learning in themselves, but, rather, active, or concurrent learning in the present that occurs in the workplace. For this reason, work-based learning or work placements are not considered to be RPL unless an individual has acquired the relevant learning prior to registering on the module and can demonstrate the learning outcomes with appropriate evidence.

So, similar to any other module, a learner may seek and obtain an exemption on the basis of RPL (for example, on the basis of learning evidenced from work experience previously gained). **Where a mapping of the prior learning has been undertaken, and an academic judgement has been made as to the appropriateness of the learning, such learners should be recorded as having been granted an exemption through RPL.** It is worth noting that work-based learning modules will entail learners achieving a range of valuable learning outcomes. This will be reflected in applications for credit or exemptions from such modules through RPL.

i. Learners who re-register after availing of an exit award & go through an RPL process

Exit awards enable learners who are unable to complete the programme for which they have registered to obtain an academic qualification for learning achieved at an NFQ level and/or credit volume lower than that of the target award. In order to assist learners in adverse circumstances, many HEIs facilitate exit awards. Typically, institutions have policies and procedures that specifically

²¹ As noted previously, one such circumstance where an RPL process would arise is when newcomers reach their destination without official documentation that would prove their education level in their countries of origin.

relate to exit awards and that outline regulations regarding re-registration on the original or other programme. **Where an RPL process has taken place (i.e. a mapping of the prior learning has been undertaken, and an academic judgement has been made as to the appropriateness of the learning), and the learner enters a programme and/or obtains exemptions or advanced entry as a result of prior learning, it is recommended that such learners should be recorded within the HEI's RPL dataset.** An RPL process is likely to ensue if the relevant programme has significantly changed since the learner took the exit award (noting that the learning must be relevant and current in the context of the award standard) and/or if the applicant has gained considerable experiential learning in the meantime.

j. Learners who achieve re-admission through an RPL process

In exceptional circumstances, some HEIs may allow former students who have exhausted all permitted attempts at the completion of modules on a programme and who have been officially withdrawn from registration on the programme to be considered for re-admission through RPL. Depending on the institutional policies that are in place, the learner may be expected to demonstrate significant relevant and additional learning during the intervening period to support a decision that they would now be likely to be successful in their studies. **Where an RPL process ensues (i.e. a mapping of the prior learning being undertaken, and an academic judgement being made as to the appropriateness of the learning), it is recommended that such learners should be recorded within the HEI's RPL dataset.**

k. Learners who achieve credit achieved via Erasmus or Junior Year Abroad (JYA) & go through an RPL process

Through International Credit Mobility, HEIs can set up mobility agreements with partners around the world to send and receive students and staff. Such initiatives aim to help participants acquire key skills, support their professional development, and deepen their understanding of other cultures. Gaining international credit does not automatically entail or trigger an RPL process. Nonetheless, an RPL process may take place. **Similar to other examples, where an RPL process ensues (i.e. a mapping of the prior learning being undertaken, and an academic judgement being made as to the appropriateness of the learning), it is recommended that such learners should be recorded within the HEI's RPL dataset.**

l. Learners who undertake joint, dual, or collaborative programmes & go through an RPL process

Where it is appropriate and in line with HEIs' strategic goals, they sometimes enter into agreements with partner HEIs for the purpose of accrediting and awarding joint or dual awards. Such programmes may be found at any level. Similar arrangements are found in research degrees: for example, collaborative research degree programmes,²² HEIs that have formed specific sectoral agreements,²³ etc. Participating in programmes of this type does not automatically entail or trigger an RPL process. Nonetheless, an RPL process may take place. **Similar to other examples, where a learner on this type of programme undertakes an RPL process (i.e. a mapping of the prior learning being undertaken, and an academic judgement being made as to the appropriateness of the learning), it is recommended that such learners should be recorded within the HEI's RPL dataset.**

²² A collaborative research degree programme is a collaboration between two or more HEIs in which the cooperating institutions are responsible, as a group, for admission, academic supervision, the conferral of the degree, and other elements. Some of these institutions may be internationally based. The collaboration is normally organised in the form of a consortium and is regulated by an agreement between the consortium members. Such collaborative research degree programmes may lead to a joint degree or a dual degree. Irish Universities Association (2022), *Guidelines for Establishing Collaborative Research Degree Programmes*.

²³ Sectoral agreements may enable research degree students registered at one participating institution to complete modules available at another participating institution or institutions, and to have the outcomes recognised towards the completion of the structured components of their research degrees.

<i>Summary description of example</i>	<i>Data to be included in HEIs' RPL reporting?</i>	<i>Where to enter data in the data-collection template?</i>
Rationale in practice		
i. Learners who are granted credit or exemption, advanced entry, or award based on RPL	Yes	Rows B, C, D*
ii. Entry requirements assessed via RPL, including cohorts or groups of learners	Yes	Row A
iii. Learners who gain programme entry <i>and</i> credits/exemptions through RPL	Yes – activity is recorded <u>twice</u>	Row A AND Row B
Some examples to support application of the technical definition in practice		
a. Learners who enter via the mature-student entry route	No	Not applicable
b. Learners who enter via the Mature Applicant entry route <i>and</i> gain credits or exemptions, advanced entry, or award via RPL	Yes	Rows B, C
c. Learners who enter from Further Education and Training (FET)	No	Not applicable
d. Learners who enter from Further Education and Training (FET) <i>and</i> gain credits or exemptions, advanced entry, or award via RPL	Yes	Rows B, C
e. Learners who transfer internally between programmes via RPL	Yes (in most cases)	Rows B, C
f. Learners who transfer between institutions (nationally or internationally) via RPL	Yes	Rows B, C
g. Learners who undertake a module on a standalone basis and later undertake a full award within the same HEI	No	Not applicable
h. Learners who gain an exemption from undertaking planned placements or work-based learning via RPL	Yes	Row B
i. Learners who re-register after availing of an exit award & go through an RPL process	Yes	Row B, C
j. Learners who achieve re-admission through an RPL process	Yes	Row A, B, C
k. Learners who achieve credit achieved via Erasmus or Junior Year Abroad (JYA) & go through an RPL process	Yes	Row B
l. Learners who undertake joint, dual, or collaborative programmes & go through an RPL process	Yes	Row B

*Given the infrequency with which full awards are granted through RPL, Row D is not listed beyond this point. However, it may be possible theoretically for most scenarios to involve full awards through RPL. Where such situations arise, data should be captured insofar as possible.

Appendix 4: Data-collection template

Higher Education Institution (HEI):

<i>[Insert HEI name]</i>

Institutional RPL activity: Headcount	Prior Learning Type			Total	Row identifier
	<i>Formal</i>	<i>Experiential</i>	<i>Combination</i>		
Entry	0	0	0	0	Row A
Credit/Exemptions	0	0	0	0	Row B
Advanced entry	0	0	0	0	Row C
Full Awards*	0	0	0	0	Row D
Total	0	0	0	0	

** Complete Row D only if full awards are available through RPL in the relevant HEI.*

Supplementary Information: Credit/Exemptions		Row identifier
Number of modules	0	Supplements Row B
Sum of ECTS	0	
Number of applications	0	