A Pilot Framework for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education

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Contents

1. Glossary of Terms

Definitions in this Framework will be revised in line with national and international guidelines and good practice. The definitions here provided are derived from the NQAI *Principles and Operational Guidelines*, which have gained widespread acceptance in Ireland.[1]

1.1 Definitions

Recognition is a process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed, and acknowledged. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be rewarded for it (e.g. in the form of acknowledgement or accreditation).

Prior learning is learning that has taken place but has not necessarily been assessed, measured, or assigned credits.[2] Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, and/or informal routes.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process by which prior learning is formally valued. It is a means by which prior learning is identified, assessed, and recognised by an educational institution as part of its programmes, courses, and/or modules on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be rewarded for it.

The concept of **lifelong learning** indicates that learning encompasses the whole spectrum of formal, non-formal, and informal learning. With the aim of developing a national approach to RPL, these may be defined as follows:

- **Formal learning** takes place through programmes or courses of study that are delivered in an organised, formal way by education providers and that attract awards or credits. Formal learning is sometimes referred to as certified or accredited learning.

- **Non-formal learning** takes place alongside or outside the mainstream systems of education and training. It may be assessed but does not normally lead to formal certification. Examples of non-formal learning are planned learning and training activities undertaken in the workplace, voluntary sector, or in community-based settings.

- **Informal learning** takes place through life and work experience. Typically, it does not lead to certification.[3]

Non-formal and informal learning are sometimes referred to as **experiential learning**.

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[1] NQAI (2005), *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training,* www.qqi.ie/sites/default/files/2021-09/principles-and-operational-guidelines-for-rpl-2005.pdf.

[2] 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.

[3] Informal learning is sometimes considered to be learning that is *unintentional* from the learner's point of view, and the learner may not recognise at the time of the experience that it has contributed to their knowledge, skills, and competences. However, this has been debated, and it has been observed that *intentional* informal learning frequently takes place across all dimensions of adult life. For example, see D.W. Livingstone, 'Probing the Icebergs of Adult Learning: Comparative Findings and Implications of the 1998, 2004, and 2010 Canadian Surveys of Formal and Informal Learning Practices', *The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, 25:1, November 2012, 47–71.

The terms Recognition of Prior Certified Learning (RPCL) and Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) are sometimes used to reflect how the RPL process may differ in accordance with the type of prior learning involved. Many applications will include evidence of a combination of prior certified *and* prior experiential learning.

The table below may help to illustrate these points:

Formal learning	Certified
Non-formal learning	Experiential
Informal learning	

Table 1: Terminology used to describe types of learning

1.2 Enterprise

RPL is relevant to a wide range of external partners and, in particular, **enterprise**. Reflecting this, 'enterprise' is broadly defined in this document as a business or company (including, but not limited to, multinational companies, small or medium-sized enterprises, start-ups, family businesses); a registered charity; a social, cultural, or not-for-profit civic or community organisation; a state-owned enterprise; a public body; an entrepreneur; or a sole trader.

2. Preamble

The importance of RPL is widely acknowledged in international, European, and national reports and policy documents, with several of these highlighting the need for a national framework for RPL in Ireland.[4] Reflecting the value that is placed on RPL nationally, all higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland have implemented relevant policies and procedures.

The significance of RPL has been evidenced by the funding of the National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project by the Irish government's Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 (Innovation and Agility). This five-year project, with a total budget of €6.9 million, is co-sponsored by the Technological Higher Education Association and the Irish Universities Association, with 18 Project Leads ('Project Network') based in 14 partner HEIs. (The project's partner HEIs are listed in the **Appendix**.) The pilot Framework (hereafter referred to as the 'Framework') is an output of this collaborative project and is intended as a resource to assist with the development of institutional policy and procedures. The Framework has been developed through an extensive, highly consultative process, which culminated in its approval or acceptance in principle by senior leaders at the project's partner HEIs. In the following sections, current and future elements of the Framework are introduced. RPL is then explored, particularly its values and components.

It is noted that elements of this Framework are ambitious, and that progress will be incremental and dependent on the 'starting point' for each HEI. Senior-management support and appropriate resourcing has been, and will continue to be, critical factors in further embedding and enhancing RPL activity in higher education. Consequently, some of the measures included in this Framework may not be achievable within current resources or the lifespan of this project. As this is a pilot, it is expected that the Framework will evolve as it is implemented on the ground in HEIs. A feedback mechanism and intervals will be agreed between the partner institutions and the National Project Team. Ultimately, institutional and system leadership will play a key role in the Framework's success.

Finally, in line with the scope of the National RPL in Higher Education Project, this Framework focuses primarily on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (i.e. experiential learning) – that is, recognition (acknowledgment or accreditation) sought by a learner in relation to an entry requirement and/or module, stage, course, or programme learning outcomes. This Framework is not intended to address broader issues relating to the recognition of awards or credentials, for example 'stackability' or international qualifications.

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[4] See UNESCO (2012), *Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*; Council of the European Union (2012), *Council Recommendation of 20th December 2012 on the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (2012/c 398/01)*; Department of Education and Skills (2011), *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025*; European University Association (2008), *European Universities' Charter on Lifelong Learning*; Ilona Murphy (2019), *European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning 2018 Update: Ireland*, p. 5; Department of Education and Skills (2011), *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, p. 17.

3. Introduction to the Framework

In this section, the purpose of the Framework for RPL in higher education is outlined. A series of tools will follow at planned intervals, serving as practical accompaniments to the Framework. These are described, together with the proposed sequence of activity.

3.1 Purpose of the Framework

The purpose of the Framework is to:

- Support HEIs in developing a shared understanding of RPL and in achieving coherence and consistency in policy and practice within and across HEIs.
- Influence the direction, enhancement, and further mainstreaming of HEIs' policies and processes for RPL.
- Provide tools to support growth in the number of learners benefiting from RPL in higher education.
- Expand RPL across the higher-education sector and enhance learners' experience of RPL.
- Assist HEIs in communicating their institutional commitment to RPL.
- Raise awareness and increase transparency of RPL processes for staff, current and potential learners, and external partners (ranging from companies to civic and community organisations).
- Assist HEIs in responding in an agile manner to economic/labour-market and societal needs, allowing learners to move in and out of higher education more effectively and efficiently.
- Support HEIs in fulfilling their statutory obligation, under section 56 of the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 as amended, to establish procedures for access, transfer, and progression. These procedures should provide for the 'identification and formal assessment of the knowledge, skills or competence previously acquired by learners'.[5]

While each institution has a unique mission, context, and communities, the values, principles, and guidelines outlined in this Framework are designed to have significance for all.

3.2 Timeline and Tools of the Framework

As of **June 2022**, the Framework has been approved or accepted in principle by senior leaders of the project's partner HEIs. A principle that underlies this document is that the Framework will be enhanced through use and adaptation. Consequently, it is proposed that the implementation of the Framework will be a phased, iterative process for HEIs. The following timeline is suggested:

- In light of the Framework, HEIs will undertake to review and to revise their institutional policies and procedures, seeking internal approval for same. This will occur during the **2022/23** academic year.

- It is anticipated that, as HEIs review and revise their policies, ideas for additions and amendments to the pilot Framework will arise. Feedback will be sought from HEIs at intervals (to be agreed) on any adjustments that should be made to the pilot Framework. HEIs will report on progress through their RPL Action Plans.

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[5] See Sections 56(1)–(3).

- The goal is that learners seeking RPL will benefit from revised institutional policies and procedures in the **2023/24** academic year. It is acknowledged that the revision of policies and procedures may take longer than an academic year and that inclusion of information in the prospectus and other promotional materials may also have a significant lead-in time. It may be that some elements are in place in HEIs for the 2023/24 academic year and that others may take slightly longer. However, given the availability of additional resources to HEIs for the duration of the project (which ends on 1 April 2025), HEIs are encouraged to adhere to the timeframes outlined here as far as possible.

As noted above, the Framework will be supplemented by a series of practical, accessible tools and resources, available in multiple user-friendly formats (digital and hard-copy). These will be co-created by the Project Management Team and the network of Project Leads, as well as by a range of national and international experts in relevant fields. These tools and resources will include:

- Guides for applicants and staff;
- Staff training and professional development;
- Materials for enterprise: case studies, brochures, etc;
- Policy guidance and adaptable templates;
- Technical definition for data collection, analytics, and reporting.

4. Introduction to RPL

In the following sections, RPL is defined, and its benefits are outlined. This leads to consideration of the values and principles that underpin RPL. A step-by-step approach to RPL is described, and initial operational guidelines are provided.

4.1   Definition of RPL

RPL is a process by which prior learning is formally valued. It is a means by which prior learning is identified, assessed, and recognised by an educational institution. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be rewarded for it (e.g. in the form of acknowledgement or accreditation).

RPL acknowledges the varied means by which learning happens and provides additional pathways to and through higher education. In so doing, it is a key component of lifelong learning and makes higher education more accessible and flexible.[6] Also, it renders visible and gives formal value to the knowledge, skills, and competences that individuals have obtained. This matters because learning happens everywhere – and all the time.[7] It occurs in many contexts, including (but not limited to) on-the-job learning, involvement in social and community activities, through caring responsibilities, via sport and other leisure activity, or by means of life experiences more generally.

'Prior learning' is defined as learning that has taken place but has not necessarily been assessed, measured, or assigned credits. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, and/or informal routes. These and other key terms are defined in the **Glossary of Terms**.

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[6] The importance of flexibility in higher education is often highlighted. Flexibility not only means allowing students to access education in locations and modes and at times of their own choosing, but also refers to the processes that challenge prevailing constructions as regards what constitutes knowledge and the means by which knowledge can be acquired and demonstrated. Indecon (2021), *Study of Mature Student Participation in Higher Education: What are the Challenges? Recommendations for the Future*, p. 63.

[7] Patrick Werquin (2010), *Recognising Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Outcomes, Policies and Practices*, p. 14.

4.2 Benefits of RPL

RPL can have a range of positive impacts. Some benefits are outlined here.

- RPL is a key component of lifelong learning, both in Ireland and internationally. Promoting a culture of lifelong learning across society and within the workforce is an ongoing national and international priority.[8] On setting a new EU target in relation to lifelong learning, the *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan* noted that increasing adult participation in lifelong learning is paramount to improve employability, to boost innovation, to ensure social fairness, and to close the digital skills gap.[9]

- RPL is a driver for workforce development. As well as supporting individuals' career development, it can be a useful tool to address national economic and societal challenges relating to the green transition, digitalisation, automation, and the skills mismatch. It can facilitate accelerated learning and upskilling/reskilling opportunities to meet workforce needs at local, regional, and national levels.

- Along with work-based learning, RPL is a key part of HEIs' relationship with employers and external stakeholders and supports all forms of innovative course development as well as cohort and individual Continuing Professional Development (CPD) pathways.

- RPL makes visible the valuable skills and knowledge that people have acquired through work or other life experience (e.g. transversal skills, such as critical thinking and teamwork or technical skills).[10] Valuing and recognising prior learning may significantly improve individuals' self-esteem and wellbeing.[11]

- RPL acts as an enabling factor in supporting individuals to access and to participate in the higher education system and was identified as an objective in the *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019*.[12] It also contributes towards a number of Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 4 'Quality Education'.[13]

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[8] For example, the most recent *Bologna Process Implementation Report* noted that: 'work is still needed to develop Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and other alternative pathways to higher education across [the] EHEA [European Higher Education Area]'. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2020), *The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report*, p. 91. See also Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2021), *Statement of Strategy 2021–2023*, p. 9; Department of the Taoiseach (2020), *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future*, p. 21.

[9] The current EU target is that, by 2030, at least 60% of all adults should participate in training every year. European Commission (2021), *European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan*, p. 2.

[10] The VISKA project adopted UNESCO's view of transversal skills. These skills are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline, or area of knowledge but as skills that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings. See the VISKA project's 'Briefing Paper on Transversal Skills', November 2017.

[11] See UNESCO guidelines (2012).

[12] Higher Education Authority (2015), *National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015–2019*, p. 30.

[13] See the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals at https://sdgs.un.org/.

- RPL has long been identified as a useful resource for supporting newcomers, including refugees, to access and to participate in the higher education system.[14] In so doing, it may serve to enhance the cultural diversity of higher education institutions.

- RPL is a mechanism that facilitates the participation of learners of all ages in higher education, including older adults who may wish to pursue personal development and/or 'second careers'.

- RPL candidates possess skills and experience that drive classroom discussion and class performance forward and are often acknowledged as exemplar students.[15]

- RPL may help to reduce the amount of time and cost associated with acquiring a qualification.

- RPL supports staff development within organisations by increasing staff motivation to undertake appropriate education or training. Employers will benefit from engaging with RPL to identify opportunities as part of their learning and development strategies for employees.

4.3 Values and Principles of the Framework

The Framework proposes two core values of **learner centredness** and **quality assurance**, which are supported by a series of guiding principles. These values and principles are informed by national and international good practice.[16] The Framework builds on and takes account of developments already taking place both nationally and internationally.

4.3.1 Learner Centredness

A wide range of learners may wish to apply for RPL. As a concept, RPL is for everyone.[17] HEIs will wish to reflect on who their potential RPL applicants may be and how they may be best supported.

In this Framework, the following principles are based on the value of **learner centredness**:

- The learner is central to the RPL process.
- The RPL process respects and values the uniqueness of the individual's learning.
- Participation in RPL is voluntary for the individual learner concerned.
- The RPL process is conducted in a manner that is transparent, consistent, fair, and non-discriminatory.
- Information on RPL is clearly visible and accessible to learners.

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[14] The VINCE (Validation for Inclusion of New Citizens in Europe) project identifies the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as being particularly important for the integration of newcomers in higher education systems across Europe. See https://vince.eucen.eu/about-vince/.

[15] Maynooth University Innovation Lab (2022), *Book of Discovery: RPL Service Mapping and Solution Co-creation*, p. 3.

[16] These principles build on several national and international resources. A key European resource is: Cedefop (2015), *European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning* (Luxembourg: Publications Office). Cedefop reference series; No. 104. As regards Ireland, the Framework draws on the NQAI *Principles and Operational Guidelines*. As for other countries, an especially informative resource is Siret Rutiku, Inga Vau, Raul Ranne (2011), *Manual for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* (Tartu: Archimedes Foundation).

[17] For illustrative purposes, applicants may include (but are not limited to) those who wish to enhance their careers through upskilling or reskilling, as well as mature learners, refugees, newcomers, and others from underrepresented groups.

- Information, advice, and an identified contact point are available at each stage of the process to assist the learner in making an informed decision.
- Clear and evidence-based processes will be available to all learners (and, by extension, to all who participate in the RPL process).
- Use of a range of assessment mechanisms is encouraged. These should be informed by Universal Design for Learning principles, allowing applicants to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways.
- Institutions will implement an appeals procedure for RPL applications.[18]

4.3.2 Quality Assurance

RPL is underpinned by quality assurance. Quality assurance delivers public trust and confidence in the learning environment and in any resulting credits or awards obtained by learners.

In this Framework, the following principles are based on the value of **quality assurance**:

- The RPL process is fully embedded in the quality assurance procedures of a HEI and is aligned with the NFQ, of which HEIs and Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) are joint custodians.
- A HEI's policies and procedures relating to RPL will be easily accessible and will be re-evaluated as required.
- Learners will have the option to apply for RPL in relation to all modules, on all programmes or courses, at all NFQ levels, in all modes of study, and in all disciplines of study.[19] However, exceptions may arise for a number of reasons: e.g. where a HEI does not allow full awards through RPL or due to professional or regulatory requirements. Where exceptions arise, these will be clearly identified to learners.
- Processes and practices for RPL are clearly documented, including timeframe, deadlines, support systems, and fees where relevant.
- Appropriate user-friendly information and advice are readily available to all involved in the RPL process.
- The assessment of prior learning is an academic activity that is performed primarily by academic staff.[20]
- The documentation submitted by learners as evidence should be authentic,[21] valid, and sufficient.
- Credit may not be earned twice for the same learning achievement; however, such prior learning may be acknowledged (e.g. through an ungraded exemption).[22]

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[18] In the appeals procedure, it should be clear whether RPL applicants may lodge an appeal on the basis of the application outcome, the process followed, or both.

[19] This includes undergraduate, postgraduate taught, and postgraduate research programmes. Full-time and part-time modes of study are 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.

[20] Where cohort-based RPL is involved, there may be a role for enterprise or employers in the assessment process.

[21] The authenticity of documentation submitted for RPL should conform to guidelines for academic integrity. Academic integrity 'assumes that all interactions with the HEI are approached with the value system of honesty, trust, fairness, respect, responsibility, and courage. This includes all documentation and artefacts submitted to the institution for academic purposes. Responsibility for demonstrating academic integrity lies with the enrolled learner'. QQI (2021), *Academic Integrity Guidelines*, p.10.

[22] NQAI (2005), *Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of a National Approach to Credit in Irish Higher Education and Training*, p. 18.

4.4 An Approach to the RPL Process

The process of RPL typically includes five stages.[23] These are:

A. **Information:** During this stage, the learner obtains accessible, user-friendly information about what is possible and how the RPL process works.

B. **Identification:** During this stage, the learner explores their prior learning (e.g. in relation to a programme's entry requirements or the learning outcomes of a module) with a view to making an application for formal recognition.

C. **Documentation:** This stage makes visible the individual's learning in the context of their application. For the learner, this involves a reflective process and gathering relevant materials to substantiate their application.

D. **Assessment:** The learner's application is assessed. A range of assessment mechanisms may be used (e.g. portfolios, interviews, essays, examinations, etc.). This stage must be appropriate to the application and fit for purpose. Depending on the outcome of the assessment process, the learner proceeds to receive either certification or further information.

E. **Certification:** If the application is **successful**, the learner will receive formal recognition (i.e. acknowledgement) or certification, which will lead to one or more of the following outcomes:

- Credit towards an award or exemption from some programme modules
- Advanced entry to a programme
- Entry to a programme.[24]

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 by applicants.

Information: If the application is **unsuccessful** (e.g. if the applicant is not granted an exemption or accepted onto a programme or course of study through RPL), any available options or supports will be outlined to the applicant. As noted above, the applicant may avail of the appeals procedure that is in place, which will be communicated to them.

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[23] This process is adapted from the Council of the European Union (2012) and the EU-funded 'RPL in Practice' and VINCE (Validation for Inclusion of New Citizens in Europe) projects.

[24] 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. As well as for entry to major awards, RPL may be used to gain entry to minor awards, micro-credentials, special purpose awards, and supplemental awards. Where appropriate, RPL may be used by learners to achieve other outcomes in the latter contexts also.

4.5   Operational Guidelines for RPL in Higher Education

Operational and policy guidelines that can assist HEIs to enhance structures and processes to recognise the outcomes of all forms of prior learning will be provided to complement this Framework. Some initial guidelines, stemming from the Framework's values and principles, are outlined here. These relate to assessing prior learning and communicating RPL to all involved.

4.5.1   Assessing Prior Learning
- The RPL process will have sufficient flexibility to allow for adaptation to particular disciplines and types of prior learning. The development and use of a range of assessment mechanisms (e.g. portfolios, interviews, essays, examinations, etc.) is encouraged.
- Assessment of prior learning will follow consistent, precise, and unambiguous assessment principles, and independence and impartiality will be key factors.
- Assessors and other staff involved in the RPL process will be given training and support as appropriate.
- Every effort will be made to conduct assessments in a reasonable timeframe. The applicant should be enabled to complete the recognition process in a shorter time than it would take to achieve the relevant module, programme, or award.

4.5.2   Communicating RPL
- RPL processes will be organised in such a way that barriers for the applicant will be anticipated and removed as far as possible. Clear information and relevant contact points for further advice will be provided to applicants at every stage of the process.
- General information about RPL will be readily available to prospective applicants. In providing such information, HEIs will signal that RPL applicants are welcome and valued.
- The roles and the responsibilities of personnel involved in the RPL process should be specified. It will be made clear that the roles of assessors and any contact points, advisers, or mentors are defined and distinct.
- HEIs will communicate the institution's policy and process for RPL to internal staff.
- To promote and raise awareness of RPL, HEIs are encouraged to seek the consent of learners to share their journeys as case studies or testimonials.

Appendix: Partners of the National RPL in Higher Education Project

The following HEIs are partners on the project and have approved or accepted the pilot Framework for RPL in Higher Education in principle:

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. National University of Ireland, Galway
8. South East Technological University
9. Technological University Dublin
10. Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest
11. Trinity College Dublin
12. University College Cork
13. University College Dublin
14. University of Limerick

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