

PART 2

RPL: NATIONAL PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE and THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

National Policy and Practice

This section of the Handbook outlines the key national and international policy documents and reports on RPL. There is no separate or dedicated infrastructure for RPL in Ireland. Instead, it is practiced and largely understood in the context of education and training. Practice in higher education and training is long-standing in some areas, for example, in some institutes of technology, and more recent in others as documented in the 2007 Country Background Report on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning²⁰.

Awarding bodies and institutions use RPL in relation to accessing programmes and qualifications. They evaluate prior certified, as well as prior experiential learning. Given the different understandings and uses of RPL, both in Ireland and internationally, Table 1 below defines RPL and what it is used for in the Irish context.

TABLE 1: A definition of RPL

In the principles and operational guidelines for the recognition of prior learning in further and higher education in Ireland (NQAI, 2005), RPL is defined as: “the process by which prior learning is given a value. It is a means by which prior learning is formally identified, assessed and acknowledged”. (p. 2)

The key terms associated with RPL are a) ‘prior’, i.e., learning already achieved; and b) ‘process’ i.e., the distinct stages of identification, assessment and certification. RPL encompasses all forms of prior learning, including learning acquired by following a course of study (i.e., formal learning), learning acquired outside of the formal education system which may not lead to certification (i.e., non-formal learning) and learning acquired through experience.

RPL is used to gain:

- admission to courses where a person may not have obtained the standard entry requirements;
- exemptions from course components which duplicate the learning an individual has already acquired;
- credit towards a qualification; and
- a qualification solely on the basis of prior learning.

There are different means of assessment in place for RPL depending on the type of RPL an individual wishes to gain, i.e., it can be dealt with by an admission officer who reviews previous certification and experience, or (in the case of experiential learning) it can involve an assessment of the individual against the learning outcomes associated with the relevant unit, module, programme or qualification.

To date, policy attention in Ireland has focused on RPL in relation to qualifications. It is clear from national and international practice that it can be used for broader purposes, including social inclusion and equality of opportunity. In recent years, key national education and training reports and strategies have emphasised the importance of RPL in contributing to upskilling, meeting national skills targets

²⁰ OECD (2007) *Country Background Report on the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning, Ireland*: www.nqai.ie/publication_aug2007.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

and sectoral skills needs²¹, and supporting wider participation in education and in lifelong learning. The RPL strand of the Strategic Innovation Fund project on Education in Employment (2007-09) highlighted the uses of RPL in *inter alia* accessing and designing programmes for the workplace.

A number of actions for RPL recommended in the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) have been, or are being, implemented. These include the development of infrastructure to enable the operation of RPL: credit systems, modularisation, flexible delivery and new forms of assessment. The development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) facilitates RPL, as outlined in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2: The National Framework of Qualifications and RPL

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

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

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

The following bodies play a role in developing and operating RPL - the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (the Authority); awarding bodies including the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology; and providers of education and training. Their roles are set out in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 and in the Authority's policies in access, transfer and progression (2003).²²

In 2005, a set of principles and operational guidelines for RPL in further and higher education were developed to encourage RPL practice and broad acceptance of the outcomes of recognition²³. These principles and guidelines identified key areas to be addressed in designing RPL systems - quality, communication/documentation, assessment and process. They also noted that the roles of assessor, mentor, applicant and any other persons engaged in the RPL process should be clearly identified and defined.

²¹ See the workforce plan for the early Childcare and Education (ECCE) sector, consultation paper and report available from: <http://www.omc.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=1232&ad=1&mn=eary&nID=3> (Accessed 24 August 2011), and Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2010) *Future skills needs for the wholesale and retail sector*, Dublin: EGFSN: <http://www.egfsn.ie/publications/2010/title,6230,en.php> (Accessed 24 August 2011).

²² NQAI (2003) *Policies, actions and procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression for Learners*, Dublin: http://www.nqai.ie/publication_oct2003a.html (Accessed 24 August 2011).

²³ *Ibid.*

TABLE 3: Focus of Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (2005)

<i>Issue</i>	<i>Actions</i>
Quality	– embed RPL in quality systems
Assessment	– learning outcomes-based, transparent, fair, consistent
Communication	– statements of arrangements, documentation, awareness
Process	– clarity of roles, support for applicant, appeals mechanism
Applicant	– information, guidance, support

RPL practice has been driven by workplace needs (upskilling, professionalisation, new regulatory requirements, continuing professional development), funding opportunities (EU and national), and, in the context of higher education and training, access policies. What emerges from the various reports in RPL practice in higher education and training in Ireland is that institutions take different approaches to RPL in terms of institutional policy, support structures, staff training and scope of practice.

A number of collaborative projects and reports provide evidence of practice and steps that need to be taken to further develop and improve RPL in higher education and training. The Strategic Innovation Fund (SIF) supported Education in Employment Project Strand on RPL²⁴ shows that the focus, scale and organisation of RPL vary across higher education institutions.²⁵ In addition to setting out the main outcomes of the project, and barriers and enablers for RPL, the project report includes process maps for exemptions and for entry, elaborates on the roles of the learner, mentor and assessor, and addresses quality, grading, resourcing and external engagement. The report underlines the value of inter-institutional exchange and collaboration to develop and embed RPL in institutional arrangements, including in quality assurance, and recommends specific actions to enhance the organisation and practice of RPL. The work of the RPL project now feeds into the Roadmap for Academic Partnerships (REAP) project, also supported by the SIF.²⁶

The Framework Implementation and Impact Study (FIIS), (2009), found that action was needed in further and higher education and training to advance RPL.

Specifically, it recommended that:

- The Qualifications Authority, awarding bodies and providers should work to improve transparency and consistency in the interpretation and application of prior learning and in the communication of pathways other than the Leaving Certificate into higher education and training.
- Inconsistencies in the operation and application of RPL that present barriers to progression should be addressed. Action should be taken by the Qualifications Authority and awarding bodies to:
 - encourage institutions and providers in further and higher education and training to clarify the contexts and circumstances in which RPL is available;

²⁴ See <http://eine.ie/> (Accessed 24 August 2011)

²⁵ This project built on a collaboration between higher education institutions in the Lionra project (2007) Country Background Report, (p.68).

²⁶ See <http://reap.ie> (Accessed 24 August 2011)

- promote awareness and knowledge of institutional and sectoral arrangements for RPL amongst users;
- explore the potential to develop cross-sectoral and cross-institutional brokerage services for RPL for learners; and
- develop and implement transparent sector-wide approaches to RPL (p. 53).

The OECD team which reviewed RPL in Ireland in 2008 recommended that key strategic policy decisions needed to be taken to set out the role of RPL in relation to national socio-economic objectives and in education and training policy. It raised the question of whether RPL should be a discrete activity or be mainstreamed (and the implications that would follow for resourcing).²⁷

In follow-up to the OECD and the FISS reports, and informed by national and international developments, the NQAI explored strategic options for RPL. This led to collaboration with the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2010) to explore the potential of RPL to contribute to the National Skills Strategy. In January 2011, the Expert Group submitted a policy paper and recommendations for action to the Department of Education and Skills.²⁸ This paper, drawing on international evidence, outlined current practice and issues, the potential of RPL to address unemployment and the objectives of the national skills strategy; and costs and funding. It identified actions to make RPL available to specific target groups, in particular those most vulnerable to long-term unemployment. In relation to higher education and training, i.e. NFQ Levels 6-10, the paper found that there was no requirement or desire (from within higher education) for additional national structures to support RPL. Instead, action should be focused on the level of individual institutions, departments and units. The paper recommends that higher education institutions share practice, network and increase the visibility and availability of RPL. Specifically, it recommends:

- (a) that the Irish Universities Association, Institute of Technologies Ireland and the Dublin Institute of Technology support and coordinate RPL activity, and
- (b) that the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education and Skills should facilitate RPL through their funding activities. (p.9)

In relation to the National Skills Strategy and labour market activation, the Higher Education Authority, (January 2011) issued a call for proposals in relation to Springboard,²⁹ a multi-annual fund of €20m for higher education and training institutions to provide education opportunities to unemployed people. This also provides funding for RPL activities.

The National Strategy for Higher Education (Hunt Report)³⁰, launched by the Minister for Education and Skills in January 2011, recommends that “a national framework for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) must be developed and recognised by all higher education institutions” (p.61).

It also recommends that higher education institutions formally acknowledge undergraduate work/service experience through accreditation or inclusion in the student’s Diploma Supplement (p.61). Other aspects of the strategy which could support or impact on RPL include recommendations (to higher education institutions) for greater flexibility and responsiveness in meeting continuing professional development needs and wider community engagement in programme design and revision (p.79), and accreditation of students’ civic engagement (p.79). It is also possible that the recommended shift to parity in the funding model for higher education (i.e. full-time, part-time students, on- and off-campus) (p.122) could also support RPL.

²⁷ The report is available in full at: www.nqai.ie/documents/finalcountrynote1.pdf. (Accessed 24 August 2011)

²⁸ Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011), *Developing recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the national Skills Strategy Upskilling Objectives*, Dublin: EGFSN: www.egfsn.ie/media/egfsn110411-developing_recognition_of_prior_learning.pdf (Accessed 24 August 2011).

²⁹ For information on Springboard, please see: www.heai.ie/springboard (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁰ Department of Education and Skills (2011) *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*. Government Publications Sales Office: Dublin: www.heai.ie/en/node/1303 (Accessed 24 August 2011)

The European and International Context

A wide variety of RPL models and practice exist across Europe and internationally. As in the case of Ireland, in general, it is difficult to obtain a fully comprehensive picture of RPL activity. Detailed country reports were produced in the OECD activity on RPL (2006-2008).³¹ Overviews of non-formal and informal learning in 32 countries are contained in the European Inventory (2007).³² A Bologna Seminar on RPL in higher education, December 2008, Amsterdam, also presented cases of practice in higher education.

There are significant differences in understandings of RPL and in national priorities and approaches (centralised, bottom-up etc.) to supporting it. Within Europe, these range from little engagement (e.g., Germany) to significant engagement (e.g., France, where individual entitlement to RPL is based in legislation). In some countries, the *formative* dimension is emphasised whilst in others, such as Ireland, the *summative* dimension is emphasised.

RPL activity is also promoted within the context of the Bologna process in which it is seen as a way to enhance lifelong learning and widen participation in higher education. The European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning (2008)³³ states that “it is essential for universities to develop systems to access and recognise all forms of prior learning” (p.6) and that “governments have the responsibility to support and motivate institutions in the recognition of prior learning. This can be facilitated through the provision of appropriate incentives to institutions and by ensuring the full integration of prior learning in qualification frameworks” (p.9). The Leuven Communiqué, April 2009³⁴, states that successful policies for lifelong learning will include basic principles and procedures for the recognition of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes, regardless of pathways (p.3).

The 2009 Stocktaking report on the implementation of the Bologna process³⁵ concluded that “while a small number of countries have put in place quite advanced systems for recognition of prior learning, in most countries there is little or no recognition of learning undertaken outside the formal education system” (p.10). It also found that non-university higher education institutions are more engaged in RPL than universities. The report of the Scottish government/Quality Assurance Agency Scotland seminar on RPL, February 2010, suggested that the RPL could be articulated in ways which bring together the skills, employability, lifelong learning and equality agenda.³⁶ In follow-up to that seminar, a European network of RPL practitioners was set up, led by QAA Scotland.³⁷

In 2011, the activity on RPL at EU level is focused on updating the European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning³⁸ and the preparation of a Council Recommendation to further develop and promote RPL.

³¹ OECD (2010) *Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning: Country Practices*, Paris: OECD: www.oecd.org/document/25/0,3343,en_2649_39263238_37136921_1_1_1_1,00.html (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³² European Inventory – Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning: www.ecotec.com/europeaninventory/ (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³³ European Universities Association (2008), *European Universities Charter on Lifelong Learning*, Brussels: EUA: www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/eua-policy-position-and-declarations.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁴ Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve, 28-29 April 2009: http://ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communique_April_2009.pdf (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁵ European Commission (2009) *Bologna Process Stocktaking Report*. Brussels: www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁶ The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) for Scotland (2010), *Recognition of Prior Learning – sharing European Principles and Practices – Final Report*, Scotland: QAA: www.qaa.ac.uk/Newsroom/Events/Pages/Recognition-of-prior-learning-sharing-European-principles-and-guidance.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁷ For information on the European RPL network please see: www.qaa.ac.uk/Scotland/DevelopmentAndEnhancement/Pages/Recognition-of-prior-learning.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011)

³⁸ CEDEFOP (2009) *European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning*, Luxembourg: CEDEFOP: www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5059.aspx (Accessed 24 August 2011).