

This article provides an overview and summary analysis of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in higher education (HE) in Ireland to date. It introduces the new National RPL in HE Project, whose vision is to make RPL an integral part of HE. It looks at why RPL is important for Irish higher education, and what actions are being planned to embed it systemically. RPL is a powerful resource that supports HE to progress a range of strategic objectives and makes access to lifelong learning a reality for many.

Introduction

The National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project is a four-year collaboration between the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA) and the Irish Universities Association (IUA), encompassing 19 publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) and funded through the Human Capital Initiative pillar 3. The project seeks to extend what has already been achieved in HEIs and with Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), as well as in the further education and training (FET) sector and through existing fora such as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Practitioner Network.

Our vision is to make RPL an integral and vibrant part of a more flexible and inclusive higher education sector, one that presents lifelong learning opportunities of discernible value to learners, enterprise, and society in general. The project has two core beliefs: that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it, and that we should not require learners to relearn things they already know.

Reframing RPL as a powerful resource for higher education, rather than a burden, will be critical to our success. This article provides an overview and summary analysis of RPL in HE in Ireland to date and seeks to address two key questions: Why is RPL important for HE, and what actions are being planned in the new national project to embed RPL systemically in the policies, practices, and systems of participating HEIs?

RPL in higher education in Ireland – good, in parts

The expansion of arrangements for RPL has been included as an objective in national and European education policy for several years, most explicitly in the context of an overall vision of a

Enhancing the Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education – Why and How?

Making the case for RPL as a powerful resource for Irish higher education



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society where lifelong learning is the norm (e.g., NQAI, 2005; European Commission, 2008). RPL makes invisible learning visible and thus ‘makes the stock of human capital more visible and more valuable to society at large ... [and enables people] to navigate better both the system of lifelong learning and the labour market’ (OECD, 2004).

“ In Ireland, RPL is understood as a process whereby evidence of learning that has taken place before enrolment on a programme of study is recognised and given value in the context of a destination award.

In Ireland, since the adoption of outcomes-based definitions of qualifications in the development of the National Framework of Qualifications (NQAI, 2003), RPL is understood as a process whereby evidence of learning (formal, non-formal, or informal) that has taken place before enrolment on a programme of study is recognised and given value in the context of a destination award.

Formal learning is learning that has already been certified in an education system; non-formal learning is learning acquired through planned activities that does not result in formal certification (e.g., in-house work training or MOOCs), while informal learning is learning acquired through everyday activities, often unplanned and unintentional (e.g., on-the-job learning or learning through volunteer activities).

In higher education, RPL may be used for:

- access to a programme
- advanced academic standing for entry to a programme beyond year 1
- exemptions or credit for a module or a number of modules
- a full academic award.

Irish HEIs have been engaged in RPL activities for many years. The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETL) report on RPL in HE reveals progressive development and excellent examples of innovative practice (Goggin et al., 2015). It also reveals, however, that the availability of RPL to learners is geographically uneven, fragmented, and difficult to navigate for both learners and staff.

At a sectoral level, the approach to RPL may be described as piecemeal, inconsistent, cumbersome, and sometimes unwelcoming for learners. As a key measure to improve this situation, the NFETL report identifies the need to develop a coherent and consistent sector-wide approach.

Why is RPL important? Is it a burden, or a resource to be optimised?

The range of learners seeking access to HE through routes other than direct school-to-college is varied and is changing rapidly. More work is required to better understand this diverse group, but a preliminary analysis of the categories currently identified (which of course overlap and intersect) suggests they include the following:

Mature students with lower levels of formal educational attainment

Recent research on mature-student participation identifies the flexibility provided by RPL as critical for underrepresented groups (HEA, 2021). In this context, RPL can be understood as a mechanism that can expedite progress towards mainstreaming equity-of-access goals and the target participation rates set out in the National Access Plan.

Holders of level 5 or 6 FET awards

Many of these learners seek courses cognate with their prior awards and may progress via HEI links with FET providers. Enhanced RPL services and opportunities would provide greater levels of access and choice for these learners and would support progress towards targets for FET award holders in HE.

Career changers or enhancers

These learners may present for RPL as individuals, as members of cohorts supported by companies, or through programmes such as Springboard. Some may seek entry to level 9 courses, perhaps not (exactly) cognate with level 7 or 8 awards already held. There are examples of standardised RPL channels designed for career-enhancing cohorts and of some customised HE programmes leading to new qualifications.

Portfolio builders

This category of learners has emerged in recent years with the development of career models based on multiple employments and 'portfolios' of work opportunities: people working this way assemble skill sets and qualifications that are varied and that require constant extension and updating. There is potential demand for HE courses and qualifications that are oriented to meet the needs of these 'new professionals'.

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These learners tend to be highly market-oriented, expecting to find clear information and transparent entry procedures for courses they might undertake. They are willing to use online learning opportunities; therefore, they have worldwide access to HEIs. They typically seek value for time invested – they are unwilling to waste time relearning what they already know.

Older students

This category includes people who have retired, but also many others who are not in the full-time labour force. It is a growing sector of potential participation in HE. Some of these learners already hold HE awards; they now wish to return to learning but are not necessarily contented with informal extramural programmes.

Already, many HEIs have identified demand for new or adapted programmes, as well as novel arrangements for access or progression, arising out of labour market developments and emerging new skills needs. Some of

these initiatives arise out of labour market activation measures, such as Springboard (an upskilling initiative in HE) and projects under the Strategic Innovation Fund (supporting innovation, collaboration, and reform in HE). Others are driven by industry or professional bodies' requirements in upskilling.

But perhaps the most significant development is the realisation that the HE students of today will not be 'one-shot' participants in a pre-career learning experience, as has been the case for most students until recently: rather, they will engage in multiple participations in HE as their careers evolve, building portfolios of qualifications reflecting their accumulating knowledge and experience. Several Irish HEIs are already engaged in meeting this demand and are offering micro-credentials in addition to the traditional ranges of HE degrees and diplomas.

“ The key message is that HEIs need to prioritise the redevelopment of RPL policies and practice informed by the principle that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it.

All these emerging activities involve RPL at some stage; some are essentially RPL-driven. There is clearly a lot of RPL going on in HE in Ireland, and there is every indication that much more will take place in the years to come. It is imperative that we organise it properly and work towards an efficient, user-friendly, and quality-assured system to maximise the potential of these existing and emerging learner groups for the benefit of individuals, higher education, society, and the economy.

What actions are required to embed RPL in HE?

The key message from this analysis is that HEIs need to prioritise the redevelopment of RPL policies and practice focused on attracting diverse groups of learners and informed by the principle that the learning that happens outside HE is as rich and valuable as the learning within it. (This, for example, should lead to the elimination of words like 'non-standard' in relation to RPL application processes.) Policies should include plans to:

- establish the necessary structures and procedures to ensure that prospective students, employers, professional bodies, and others can easily access information and contacts
- build expertise in areas such as:
 - assessment and evaluation of informal and non-formal learning
 - the design of new qualifications of varying 'shapes' and 'sizes'
 - tailoring of programmes
 - to address required learning outcomes
 - for flexible delivery (e.g., not necessarily in traditional academic timetables, perhaps in compressed or intensive study blocks).

But can a HEI afford RPL? Apart from any direct additional costs, establishing RPL processes may often require reallocating resources and reorganising responsibilities. Recognising these challenges, initiatives such as Springboard allocate funding on the basis that use of RPL in recruitment for courses will require support. But the most realistic response to the issue of RPL costs is for the HEI to reframe the question: Can we afford not to do this?

HEIs that are already active in RPL development identify the cost and commitment as an investment in capacity, processes, and organisational structures that will reap a significant return:

- in the attraction of new, diverse cohorts of students
- in the development of career-long relationships with learners who will return repeatedly for upskilling, refresher programmes, career-enhancement qualifications, etc.
- in the ability of the HEI to participate in funded programme provision (both employer-led and via State schemes to address skills needs)
- in the ability of the HEI to build on its role as provider of ongoing upgrading and updating for programmes to occupational or professional sectors. There is particular potential in the development of strategic relationships with new or emerging professional areas – e.g., which HEIs will provide programmes to support the developing field of green energy?

Much of the investment involved in RPL is in the initial reorganisation and the establishment of a system to operate it within the HEI. Ongoing operating costs should be considered in the broader context of the returns from the new business generated, though a question remains as to the broader funding model and how this might support more RPL into the future.

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As for the wider sectoral dimension of the task of embedding RPL in HE, the HEIs and their representative bodies are already working collectively towards this goal. The key action undertaken has been the establishment of the National Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Project. This joint THEA/IUA initiative is already under way. Several significant outcomes are anticipated:

- A new National Policy Framework in 2022 will provide the underpinning for action on RPL throughout HE. This will also address the multiple calls for a coherent national approach to RPL (Goggin et al., 2015; DES, 2011, 2016; Cedefop, 2018).
- The project will promote the development of a range of resources and materials (procedural templates, tools, case studies, etc.) that will help build capacity in the sector and will make the practice of RPL easier for HEI staff, particularly in relation to assessing informal and non-formal learning.
- Project leads are being appointed in each of the 19 participating HEIs. These key personnel will coordinate the streamlining of policies, procedures, and systems across their HEIs in a way that is coherent and consistent with the emerging National Policy Framework. To ensure that measures introduced are tailored to what will work locally, each HEI will be asked to identify steps to be taken to embed RPL into existing governance and quality structures.
- RPL in HE will be actively promoted, particularly to enterprise, in order to achieve the ambitious target of 6,000 annual RPL admissions by 2025.

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Celebrating the works of the 2021 graduation class at the Institute of Art, Design and Technology (IADT)



Aoibh Foyne from Laois, 22-year-old graduate of Animation at IADT, watches as her final year project *The Big Head* is projected onto the wall of the Lexlcon Library in Dún Laoghaire.