Recognition of Prior Learning for the Irish Hospitality Sector

Developing a new framework to make skills visible

This article outlines a pilot RPL (recognition of prior learning) project for the Irish hospitality sector. The project used an industry-standards framework across all levels in the sector to capture on-the-job learning and make hospitality skills visible, for the benefit of both employees and employers. The project was carried out in collaboration with City and Guilds and the education and training boards of Kilkenny Carlow and Dublin Dun Laoghaire.

Eileen Cullen
Training Services & Innovation Manager, Kildare Wicklow ETB

Our journey starts

Direct research with stakeholder groups and representative bodies in the Irish hospitality sector showed us that the challenges faced by the industry were significant. High employee turnover rates and a lack of transparency over employee skills levels presented difficulties with recruitment.

From the employees' perspective, many had developed high levels of skills but had not pursued education or training in a formal setting, so they had no qualifications or certification to validate their competencies and expertise.

Our team journey took us through the trials and tribulations of stakeholder delivery, riding the roller coaster of challenges and opportunities, agility, a growth mindset, and resilience. We count our blessings, recognising the opportunity provided through SOLAS's Innovation Through Collaboration funding 2019–2021 and through our collaboration with Kilkenny Carlow Education and Training Board (ETB), Dublin Dun Laoghaire ETB, and our partners City and Guilds.

The project to develop a recognition of prior learning (RPL) framework for the Irish hospitality sector, with support from City and Guilds, was also informed by previous research into the skills needs of employment sectors in Ireland, outlined in the following reports:

- Hospitality Skills Oversight Group Report 2018
- Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland 2018
- The Mid-East Regional Skills Forum 2018
- Vacancy Overview 2018 – SOLAS/National Skills Council
- Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET): Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025

The project tackled recommended actions in these reports and supported government policy strategies targeted at the following areas:

Skills shortages

- A shortage of hospitality talent, with a lack of people entering the industry to make up the shortfall. There were over 5,000 chefs required in Ireland alone.

Staff retention

- Staff turnover in hospitality is among the highest of all industries, at 30%–50% for entry level.

Career progression

- Because people can't see a clear route to better paid or management roles, they either leave the industry early – so there's no return on investment for the employer for their training – or they don't come to work in the industry in the first place.
- Hospitality is not seen as a 'proper', long-term career, but rather a poorly paid, low-skilled, short-term option. This leads to a loss of talent and to difficulty in recruiting at all levels.

> **Our team journey, driven by the impacts of the pandemic, saw us in kitchens, sitting rooms, and bedrooms as we navigated the new landscape of remote working.**

Reduced talent pool

- With so many people entering and leaving the industry, there is a lack of visible talent for the whole industry to draw from. Talent may not be spotted, as a person's full range of skills and experience is not visible to an employer.
- Busy industry organisations are focused on guest experience and managing day-to-day operations, often neglecting their key assets. The value of a skilled workforce cannot be overestimated.

Too busy to develop staff

- A lack of alternative training options designed to meet the Irish hospitality sector has made it difficult to access training and development.

No RPL framework for hospitality skills

- Hospitality skills have little visibility. A great meal or service doesn't just happen, but the skill set used to create that experience is not very visible.

Novel approach

Using an industry-standards approach ensured buy-in from industry. Since most skills development happened in the workplace, it was essential

to capture the industry perspective rather than the national frameworks standards.

Digital credentials offered the ability to brand and market badges to a particular organisation, and allowed the linking of certification to digital platforms such as social media and professional profiles, making skills more visible.

Taking a different road

Disruption to the original plan due to Covid-19 gave our team further opportunities to adapt and respond to industry demands for online processes and portals, enabling the seamless provision of stakeholder service throughout the project.

Our team journey, driven by the impacts of the pandemic, saw us in kitchens, sitting rooms, and bedrooms as we navigated the new landscape of remote working. With the help of technology and project management tools, such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and customer relationship management (CRM) systems, we navigated our project's twists and turns, modifying its objectives and delivery methods to keep moving forward.

Our team's ability to respond and adapt are testament to the team's own growth mindset and resilience, focused on stakeholders and the project deliverables. Stakeholder engagement was delivered through two routes: an individual route, whether employed or unemployed, and a corporate route, which targeted employers, training providers, and community organisations (Figure 1).
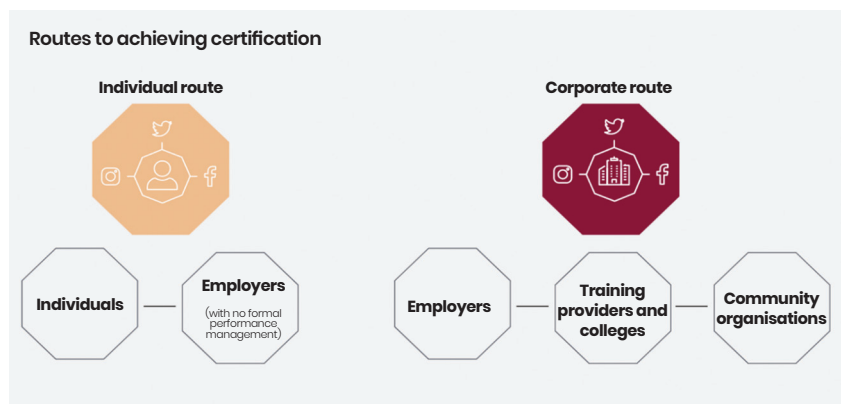

Figure 1: Routes to achieving certification

Digital credentials or badges were issued to successful applicants across various job roles, with a set of standards behind each role.

Every certification has its corresponding handbook that set out the skills, competencies, and knowledge required to attain a digital badge. To achieve certification, an applicant has to demonstrate competencies at three levels:

1. *Core skills*: Transferable skills which are required for all job roles as relevant to the level you are at.
2. *Role-specific skills*: Specific to the job role that the badge is issued against.
3. *Professional development*: Demonstrate understanding of the hospitality industry and progression opportunities. Demonstrate learning or training that has been undertaken to maintain or upskill.

Miles covered

The measure for success doesn't just sit with the certification of stakeholders; there are also the hard-working, dedicated employees in the hospitality business:

- The individual route for this pilot project saw 225 individual badges issued.
- The corporate route validated two hotels, which issued 96 certificates through their performance management process.
- Kildare Wicklow ETB, as a training provider, issued certification to 15 national commis chef learners; the programme was validated as a commis chef badge, which included substantial work experience over two years.

With a multitude of factors such as our own team-building experience, newfound skills, processes, networks, and the building of abilities, we met and tackled the barriers faced by stakeholders, be it lack of resources, digital skills or support. Key deliverables for this RPL project included:

- greater participation than expected
- establishment of advanced links with the hospitality sector
- development and adoption of RPL procedures that validate and credit experiential learning and skills development acquired on the job
- industry validation of the framework and procedures for RPL in the hospitality industry
- newly devised training programmes, developed and road-tested in collaboration with industry
- research and review compiled of employers' and employees' experiences and perceptions before and after the pilot programmes.

Many other projects and initiatives emerged from this work, such as the Developing Leaders in Hospitality programmes, and the Green Manager programme delivered nationally with 15 other ETBs, responding to gaps identified through this programme.

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"Working as a Chef I noted that a lot of the workforce lack some sort of formal qualification I feel that the digital badge is a great idea for both employees and employers to recognise their chefs not just as a worker but as someone who has worked hard to achieve a skillset.

It shows my commitment to the job in and out of the kitchen and that I am working hard to push my career along to be the best that I can. Having the accreditation of City & Guild's which is a globally recognised body in terms of education and training will provide me with so many opportunities nationally and internationally from here on forward."

Michael Gaul
WorldChefs Chef de Partie Badge

The road ahead

We rode the wave of research, applications, planning, budgets, learning, pivots, and success. On reflection, all was made possible through collaboration, team spirit, and creativity. Valuable learning and outcomes are embedded in the way our team thinks and operates. We are ready to meet the future challenges and the success of securing a second Innovation Through Collaboration project funding in the experience economy.

There are possibilities for other RPL frameworks in other sectors based on the principles and learnings from this project. Greater strategic partnerships and collaboration with our sister ETBs, industry bodies, and stakeholders, to meet future demands and growth, are the only way forward.

For more information, see:
https://kwetbmarinehouse.ie/your-future-your-skills/.

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