

Údarás Náisiúnta  
Cáilíochtaí na hÉireann  
National Qualifications  
Authority of Ireland



# **OECD Thematic Review on Recognition of non-formal and informal learning**

## **Country Background Report**

### **Ireland**

**Author: Anna Murphy, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland\***

**\* with the assistance of the national RNFIL Advisory Group, particularly representatives from the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC)**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	ii
Component 1. Contextual factors .....	1
Component 1.1. Demographic change .....	1
Component 1.2. Internationalisation .....	6
Component 1.3. New Information Communication Technology (ICT).....	8
Component 1.4. Economic developments and skills shortage/ mismatch.....	10
Component 1.5. Social developments .....	15
Component 1.6. Others.....	17
Component 2. Description of institutional arrangements .....	21
Component 2.1. Political and legal framework .....	21
Component 2.2. Governance and the role of government.....	34
Component 2.3. Resources .....	37
Component 2.4. Others.....	41
Component 3. Description of technical arrangements .....	41
Component 3.1. Qualifications, qualification systems, qualifications framework.....	41
Component 3.2. Credit accumulation and transfer .....	50
Component 3.3. Assessment methods and procedures.....	51
Component 3.4. Others.....	56
Component 4. Stakeholder behaviour.....	57
Component 4.1. Characteristics of stakeholders .....	57
Component 4.2. Access .....	57
Component 4.3. Participation.....	59
Component 4.4. Incentives and disincentives .....	60
Component 4.5. Others.....	62
Component 5. Case studies on benefits and barriers .....	63
Case study 1 - Failte Ireland (National Tourism Development Authority).....	64
Case study 2 - Killester College of Further Education, City of Dublin Vocational Education College	66
Case study 3 - Lionra Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) project, 2006-2007.....	68
Case Study 4 - Masonite Ireland and RPL .....	72
Component 6. Conclusions .....	73

## Introduction

This draft country background report on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Ireland has been completed as part of an OECD activity on the 'Recognition of Non-formal and informal learning' (2006-2008) in which Ireland participates. The report was drafted in 2006/07 by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland with the assistance of an Advisory Group and, in particular, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council and the Further Education and Training Awards Council.

## Purpose and Scope of the Report

The aim of this report is to document and review the current scenario with regard to the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning insofar as it relates to qualifications. It describes in detail the existing policy with regard to the recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning and the technical and procedural arrangements that have been put in place by Irish institutions and other actors in the area to facilitate such recognition. This focus is in line with the Irish national policy approach to the Recognition of Prior Learning and the development and implementation of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications.

## Definitions

The definitions used in the report are those set out in the *Principles and Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in further and higher education and training, 2005*<sup>1</sup> which are compatible with the definitions used in the OECD activity *The Role of Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning*.

The term 'prior learning' refers to learning that has taken place, but which may not have been formally assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. 'Formal learning' takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education and training providers, is assessed and attracts awards. 'Informal learning' refers to experiential learning, often unintentional, that takes place through life and work experience. 'Non-formal learning' takes place alongside mainstream formal systems of education and training. It may be intentional and may be assessed but it does not lead to nationally recognised qualifications. Examples of non-formal learning are certain work-based education and training, learning for leisure and adult literacy programmes/courses. The term 'recognition' refers to the process by which prior learning is given a value, i.e. the identification, assessment and acknowledgement of learning achieved. In the context of this report, that value relates to a qualification and can take the form of entry to a programme, credit/exemptions from programme requirements or access to a full award/qualification. The term 'RPL' is used in this report, unless otherwise stated, to refer to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as concerns awards/qualifications. Informal learning and non-formal learning per se are not considered in this report.

## Structure of the report and limitations

The format and structure of this report are in line with those developed by the OECD Secretariat in its guidelines for the activity. The guidelines also called for the completion of statistical annexes on participation, expenditure, outcomes, learners, mobility and transition and programmes in relation to non-formal and informal learning. It was not possible to complete these annexes owing to the absence of relevant data that would allow for comprehensive reporting and analysis on either a national scale or with regard to sectors or levels of education and training. There is a lack of statistics in general on RPL (e.g. participation rates, scale of activity, impact on/follow-up for individuals) and differences in the

---

<sup>1</sup> NQAI (2005), *National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* <http://www.nqai.ie/en/Publications/File,824,en.doc>

interpretation and use of RPL in practice. This reflects the shared responsibility for policy and practice across various government agencies, awarding bodies, education institutions etc. There is also a difficulty in capturing all RPL activity in respect of qualifications – in general, practice is not widely reported or publicised by education and training providers or awarding bodies. It tends to be small-scale and localised. Different understandings of the term RPL also apply and make comparisons and rigorous analysis difficult. Also, limited evaluation of activity has taken place to date. Hence, this report is largely descriptive and, for the first time, attempts to draw together the main features of RPL in Ireland: the socio-economic context, legal and policy framework, technical arrangements and practice. The concluding section of the report summarises the main findings and indicates the next steps to be taken in considering the future role of RPL in meeting broad policy objectives in education and training, employment and workforce training policies and in meeting the needs of disadvantaged groups.

**July 2007**

## **Component 1. Contextual factors**

### **Component 1.1. Demographic change**

*The impact of demographic change, especially concerning migration and ageing populations, is one major policy concern in many OECD countries. Population ageing will increasingly affect most OECD countries over the coming decades. To respond to an ageing labour force, in some countries, the labour market has been opened up to those aged over 55 and to the inflows of immigrant workers in order to sustain economic development (OECD, 2003). Both ageing and immigrant populations represent diverse communities. Both older workers and immigrants may behave significantly differently for recognition practices depending on whether or not they are part of the active labour force. It also enables a wider policy vision to identify key policy issues such as education and training policies, labour market and human resource development policies as well as migration policies. Therefore, this section aims to explore possible impact of demographic changes on education, training, and recognition of skills.*

*1.1.a) How have the profiles (age, ethnicity, sex, socio-economic backgrounds) of learners changed/diversified for overall post-secondary education institutions (higher education, further education and vocational education and training, professional training, etc.)? Provide evidence of correlation, if any, between the changing profiles and admission and graduation rates.*

#### ***Population growth***

Preliminary Census data for 2006 record that the population of the State increased by 318,000 persons between 2002 and 2006 to reach the highest recorded census of population level since 1861<sup>2</sup> The preliminary total recorded in the 2006 Census was 4 235 000 compared with 3, 917 000 in 2002. The main factor in the increase was migration. Average annual net migration was 46, 000 over the four year period compared with an annual average of 26,000 for the 1996-2002 period.

Data from the 2005 Labour market Survey, second quarter,<sup>3</sup> show that of the 4.1 million residing in the State, 2.8 million were aged between 15 and 64; 853 000 were under 15 and the remaining 460 000 were aged 65 or above. Of those aged between 15 and 64, 1.9 million were in employment. Of those economically inactive (839 000), 303 500 were in education and training and 85 500 were actively seeking employment. The labour force has increased by about 17% in the period 2002-2006 with employment growth providing the main stimulus. Non-Irish nationals represented almost half the increase in employment in the period and they accounted for almost one in eight workers in the 2006 Census of Population.<sup>4</sup>

#### ***Education and Training***

Over the last 25 years (1980-2005), the number of students at primary level has fallen by 17%, reflecting the changing demography in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> However, numbers have been rising since 2001 in line with rising births and inward migration from the mid-1990s. Second level students increased by 12% reflecting the increased participation rate in post compulsory education. At third level the number of full-time students more than tripled from 41,000 to almost 136,000 over this period.

---

<sup>2</sup> From: *Census 2006 – Preliminary report*, Press Release 19/07/06, Central Statistics Office [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)

<sup>3</sup> Figures reproduced from National Skills Bulletin 2006, FÁS for the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, [www.fas.ie](http://www.fas.ie)

<sup>4</sup> Central Statistics Office, *2006 Census of Population - Principal Socio-economic results*, June 2007, at [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)

<sup>5</sup> Figures from Department of Education and Science, *Annual Report 2005*, forthcoming 2007

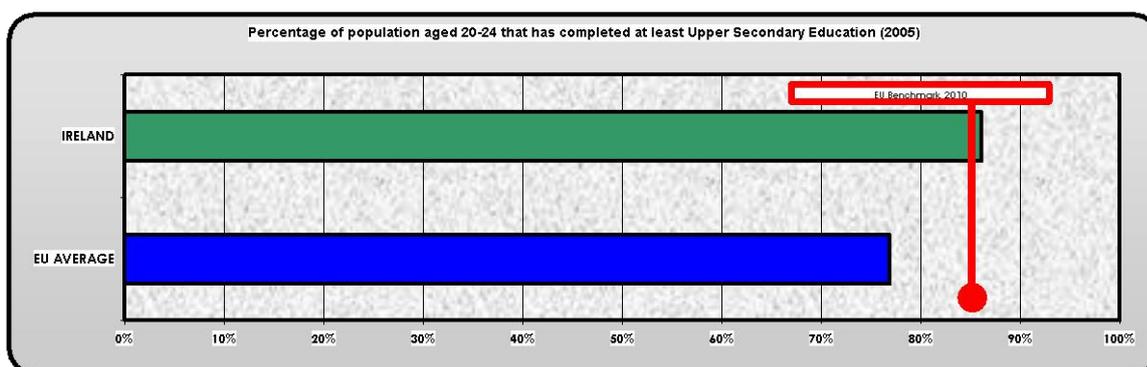
Based on recent birth data, the increase in enrolment at primary level is set to continue and may reach the 1980 level by the year 2014. At second level, enrolment increased up to 1996/97 and has declined since. This decrease is set to continue until 2007/08 when enrolment should increase, in line with the increase in primary enrolment.

Whilst overall rates of participation in education and training have increased over time, inequity of access and participation remains. In 2004, it was estimated that over 750,000 adults (those aged between 25-64) have little or no formal education qualifications. In some areas, participation in third level education remains very low and students from disadvantaged groups remain under-represented.

	1980	1990	2000	2005
<b>1st level</b>	551,319	543,744	439,560	458,114
<b>2nd level</b>	297,747	343,045	345,384	332,407
<b>3rd level</b>	40,613	68,165	119,991	135,891 <sup>6</sup>

### Percentage of population aged 20-24 that has completed at least upper secondary education (2005)

Completing upper-secondary education (Leaving Certificate or equivalent) is increasingly important not just for successful entry into the labour market, but also to allow students access to the learning and training opportunities offered by higher education. The 2005 completion level for the EU was 76.9% while that for Ireland was 86.1%, just above the EU Benchmark for 2010.

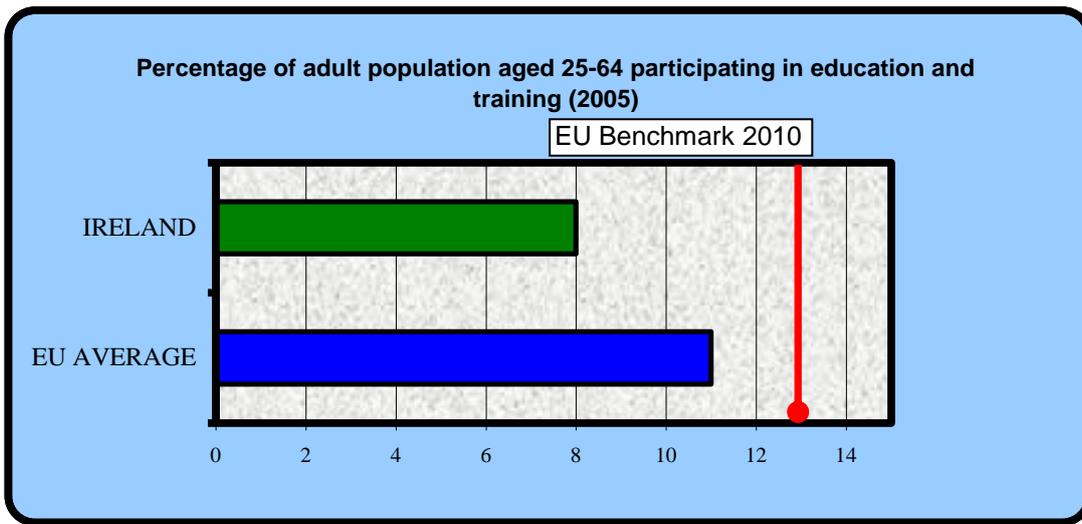


Source: Department of Education and Science

### Percentage of population aged 25 - 64 participating in education and training

In a knowledge society, individuals must continuously update and complement their knowledge, competencies and skills for personal and professional development. The Labour Force survey in 2005 showed that, in the EU, the average percentage of the population aged 25-64 participating in education and training is 11.0%. Ireland's percentage is 8.0%. Both figures are below the EU Benchmark for 2010 of 12.5%.

<sup>6</sup> Provisional Figure

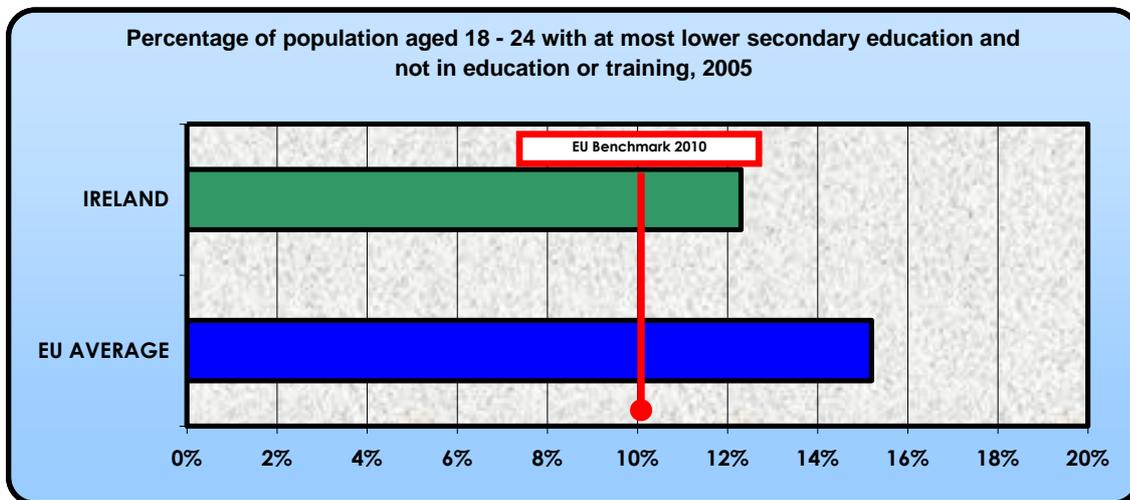


Source: Department of Education and Science

**Percentage of population aged 18 - 24 with at most lower secondary education and not in education or training (2005)**

Encouraging young people to participate in post-compulsory education is vital for their social and labour-market integration, since those who leave school without qualifications are in danger of being left behind in today's increasingly competitive society.

The average rate of early school leaving in the EU is still high but decreasing steadily. In 2005, the EU average was 15.2%, while the figure for Ireland was 12.3%. However, both figures are still in excess of the EU Benchmark for 2010 of 10%.



Source: Department of Education and Science

*1.1.b) Describe participation patterns in different sectors of education and training with respect to the demographic change (ageing population and migration).*

The National Skills Strategy, *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*,<sup>7</sup> March 2007, includes an analysis of the educational attainment levels of the labour force. This shows an overall shift towards higher levels of educational attainment. The overall labour force has expanded rapidly from 1.64 million in 1997 to almost 2.1 million in 2006, due to a combination of rising participation rates, population growth and migration. Of those in the labour force aged between 25-64, it is estimated that in 2005, one third had completed some form of higher education (compared to one quarter in 2000). The corresponding proportion of the labour force that had completed education to lower secondary education level decreased from just over one third in 2000 to 28% in 2005. The figures for those completing primary level education only dropped from an estimated 60% in the 1970s to 11% in 2005. There has been a more pronounced shift towards participation in higher education amongst the 25-34 age cohort of the labour force over time.

The report above also shows that the percentage of the population aged between 20 and 24 who have completed upper secondary education or equivalent stands (2006) at 86.1% (p.71). An alternative indicator of educational achievement at this level is the retention rate for completion of the Leaving Certificate programme (which typically marks the completion of upper secondary education), estimated to be 83.8% for the 1996 cohort (the most recent cohort for which this is available) (p.71). This figure does not take into account the numbers of early school leavers who participate in/complete other education and training programmes e.g. Youthreach, community training schemes and apprenticeships and attain related qualifications (e.g. at levels 4-6 in the National Framework of Qualifications).

*1.1.c) Describe, if any, national policies on migration (e.g. the low-skilled or high skilled) that were formulated to respond to demographic change.*

### **Migration**

Strong, sustained economic growth rates and increased in employment rates since the 1990s have led to these changes in migration arrangements. As a consequence of this and of low unemployment rates, labour and skills shortages have appeared. This necessitated an increase in overseas workers. In 1999, 6, 000 work permits were issued (to non-EEA workers) and this figure increased to 48, 000 in 2003. Since enlargement of the European Union in May 2004, access to the Irish labour market was extended to the ten new Member States. The previous requirement for work permits for nationals of these Member States was dropped on their accession to the EU. The decision to allow immediate access to the labour market reflected the strong growth in employment in Ireland since the 1990s (from 1.1 m in 1991 to 1.9m in 2005).<sup>8</sup> Nationals from Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the EU in 2007 are required to obtain work permits prior to entry into the Irish labour market. All citizens of the European Union, with the exception of those from Bulgaria and Romania, have unrestricted access to the labour market. All nationals from the countries of the European Economic Area (EEA) likewise have such access. Non-EEA nationals require different kinds of permits to work in Ireland.

The 2004 report of the Enterprise Strategy Group, *Ahead of the Curve*, estimated that 420,000 new workers would be needed in the Irish economy over the period 2001-2010 and that a considerable number of these would have to come from overseas. It proposed that there be a strategic skills-based immigration policy to attract and retain highly skilled workers from outside the EU to support enterprise development. A report from the National Economic and Social Forum, *Migration Policy*, 2006, examined the impact of migration on the labour market, economic development and social cohesion. It recommended, *inter alia*, that there be more clarity about the policy approach to migration and a 'whole-of-government' approach to migration

---

<sup>7</sup> Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007,p.63-66 [www.skillsireland.ie](http://www.skillsireland.ie)

<sup>8</sup> CSO, Quarterly National Household Survey, Second Quarter, September 2005

policy. Since then, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform have reformed existing migration legislation and are developing new systems, processes and procedures to regulate the flow of third country labour into Ireland.

A new system and regulations for access to the labour market were introduced in the 2007, on foot of the Employment Permits Act 2006. The following key employment permits now exist:

- work permit (issued to an employer as permission to employ a specific, named, non-EEA national, for a specific job, for a specific period of time)<sup>9</sup>. These are mainly for occupations for which Green Cards will not be issued and a limited number of occupations where there are significant labour shortages and it can be shown that these shortages cannot be met from within the European Union. Labour market texts apply to such permits.
- An intra-company transfer scheme operates to allow for the transfer of senior management, key personnel or trainees who are foreign nationals from an overseas branch of a multinational corporation to its branch based in Ireland
- A Green Card permit system replaced the working visa/work authorisation system in January 2007. The Green Card are available for occupations where strategic skills shortages exist, which cannot be met from within the EEA.<sup>10</sup> The list of occupations to which the scheme applies will be kept under review.
- work permits for spouses and dependants of holders of employment permits
- non-EEA graduates from Irish higher education institutions. Third level graduates with a primary, masters or doctorate degree may apply for permission to remain in Ireland for six months after graduation to seek employment and if successful, can seek a Green Card or Work Permit.
- Graduate scheme which allows graduates from third-level institutions enter the labour market

As part of the new arrangements, a number of new protections for migrant workers who are working in Ireland will be introduced.

The National Skills Strategy, 2007, highlights the important role that immigration is likely to continue to play in future economic development. It recommends action to address the recognition of qualifications of immigrant workers and the promotion of English language skills. It underlines the importance of the recognition of qualifications and the ability of migrants and potential employers to be able to recognise and compare migrants' qualifications. The main tools to achieve this are the processing of applications for recognition by migrants and general actions to relate the National Framework of Qualifications to other frameworks and systems of qualifications. The strategy report also draws attention to the long-term issue of the full integration of migrants into the formal education and training system. It notes the work of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland in developing an integrated approach to the recognition of

---

<sup>9</sup> [www.entemp.ie/publications/labour/2006/emppermitsact2006.pdf](http://www.entemp.ie/publications/labour/2006/emppermitsact2006.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Under this system, Green Cards will be issued for two years initially and will normally provide a pathway to long-term or permanent residency thereafter. The arrangements will comprise immediate family reunification and immediate access to employment for spouses. The Green Card system will apply to an extensive list of occupations in the annual salary range above €60,000. Green Cards will be available for a more restricted list of occupations in the annual salary range from €30,000 to €60,000, which will include occupations in the information technology, healthcare and construction, financial services, internationally traded services and pharmaceutical or bio- technology sectors (from speech by Minister of State for Labour Affairs, Tony Killeen, TD, New York, 20 October 2006)

international qualifications and the need to increase awareness of the one-stop shop for recognition that it offers, Qualifications Recognition Ireland ([www.qualificationsrecognition.ie](http://www.qualificationsrecognition.ie)).

There are no national integration strategies with regard to migrants. The Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is currently coordinating work on integration policies for migrants which may include action in relation to education and training. The main focus of education and training policy with respect to migrants concerns the recognition of their qualifications (where these have been gained outside Ireland) and the development of language training. In this connection, the Reception and Integration Agency and the Department of Education and Science are engaged in work on the development of a National English Language policy and framework for legally resident adult migrants in Ireland.

*1.1.d) Describe changes, if any, of higher education institutions' admission policies to respond to the demographic change such as starting to practise recognition of non-formal and informal learning.*

Changes in admission policies reflect demographic change, in particular the higher participation rates on the part of those completing secondary school education in third level, and broad government objectives to promote equality and lifelong learning, as reflected in legislation (concerning higher education institutions as well as equality in general). The access programmes<sup>11</sup>, in place since the late 1990s, promote access to higher education by students from disadvantaged groups. A number of these have been supported by funding under Targeted Initiatives by the Higher Education Authority. These programmes reflect the universities obligations under the *Universities Act, 1997* to promote equality and facilitate lifelong learning through the provision of adult and continuing education. The activities taken on foot of this objective include access strategies, policies, practice and specific actions to increase participation. Some institutions operate alternative routes of entry to learners such as the seven higher education institutions which operate the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) scheme with designated secondary-level schools. In 2003, the National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education was established within the Higher Education Authority to oversee policy and practice in educational access and opportunity for learners who are under-represented in higher education. Those groups are: those with a disability, socio-economically disadvantaged learners, those from the traveller community and ethnic minorities, and mature students. In 2004, it published an Action Plan 2005-2007 which sets out goals and actions for access. It has also issued a number of research reports on the issues (see [www.heai.ie](http://www.heai.ie)).

The extent to which informal and non-formal learning is recognised/assessed for general admissions in higher education is difficult to measure as data on this is not available. RPL is used in respect of entry to particular programmes at both under-graduate and post-graduate levels. In most cases, mature students are accepted onto under-graduate programmes on the basis of age alone, subject to availability of places, without any assessment of prior learning. See also Component 4.2 below.

## **Component 1.2. Internationalisation**

*1. Internationalisation is a growing phenomenon in education and work. International mobility is high on the education and training policy agenda and relevant policies have been developed at regional and international levels such as: the Lisbon Strategy, the Bologna Process, the Copenhagen Declaration, the European Qualification Framework, the European Credit Transfer System for higher education (ECTS), the new credit transfer system for vocational and education and training (ECVET), Europass, and Euro Profile, in Europe; MERCOSUR, in Latin America; ASEAN and APEC, in Asia and the Pacific; and NAFTA, in North America and Mexico; and the UNESCO/OECD guidelines for cross-border higher education, at the international level. Internationalisation is spurred by the increased flow of people due to*

---

<sup>11</sup> For an evaluation of access programmes, see Higher Education Authority (2006) *Towards the best education for all: an evaluation of access programmes in higher education in Ireland.* ([www.heai.ie](http://www.heai.ie)).

*migration and the growing activities of multi-national firms by transferring functions, expatriating human resources, and increased foreign direct investment. Internationalisation is an important factor, which has an impact on stakeholder behaviour and institutional and technical arrangements for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, especially in a form of recognition of qualification or credit transfer linked to the formal education sector. Therefore, this section aims to explore the possible impact of the internationalisation of education, training, and recognition of skills.*

Ireland participates fully in the European education and training agenda, notably the Bologna process, the Copenhagen process, the development of a Framework of Qualifications for the Higher European Area, the development of a European Framework of Qualifications and a credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET). It also participates in key OECD activities in education and training including the activity on the Role of Qualifications Systems in Promoting Lifelong Learning (2001-05). In addition, there is cooperation in education and training with specific countries or regions including the development of recognition agreements with countries that do not have qualifications frameworks. Such an agreement was finalised with the Chinese authorities in 2006. Other initiatives include the cross-referencing of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications with Frameworks in place in the United Kingdom (2005).

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland has established a qualifications recognition service, "Qualifications Recognition-Ireland" within the Authority. The service provides advice on the recognition of international qualifications and represents Ireland in the National Reference Point network of centres and in the ENIC/NARIC networks. By the end of 2006 approximately 1200 written applications had been received by the Authority's recognition service for that year, in comparison to less than 350 received at the close of 2003.<sup>12</sup> A commensurate increase in applications is anticipated in 2007.

The NQAI worked with the Department of Education and Science on drafting (EU) Council conclusions on Common European Principles on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (2004). The Authority and Awards Councils are involved in follow-up on implementation of these principles and developing them further in the area of quality assurance.

Irish higher education institutes have participated and continue to participate on a number of EU-funded projects relating to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. These can act as a catalyst for activity in specific domains. The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) was a partner in the Valuing Learning from Experience (VaLex) Socrates-Gruntvig project. The Irish aspects of the project included a survey of practice in higher education institutions and the development of a model of APEL ([www.valex-apel.com](http://www.valex-apel.com)). Currently, the National University of Ireland, Maynooth (NUIM), represented by the Department of Adult and Community Education, is a partner in VPL-4, Reaction. This is a Gruntvig funded, 7-partner project which is reviewing the recognition and accreditation of adults' experiential and non-formal learning. It is developing evaluation tools, models and manuals for recognition and accreditation, and recommendations for policy-makers. One aspect of NUIM's involvement includes the development of a model of assessment of prior experiential learning for groups of students.<sup>13</sup> The University of Limerick, represented by the Department of Lifelong Learning and Outreach, is a partner in VPL-2. This is a Leonardo da Vinci funded, 15-partner project tasked with formulating recommendations for policy makers on European and national level in order to work on a common base for accreditation of prior learning and competencies, experiences and skills.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> These figures refer to applications only and do not include enquiries received by Qualifications Recognition-Ireland that did not progress to applications. In addition, the service also handles an extensive number of recognition queries by e-mail and telephone, and makes available a growing body of information on international qualifications on its website

<sup>13</sup> Further information on the project is available at <http://reaction.vdu.lt>.

<sup>14</sup> Further information on the project is available at <http://www.vpl4.eu/>.

*1.2.a) Describe national economic, labour, and/or educational policies or current practices, if any, that indicate that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is part of integration strategies of migrant population (highly skilled, low skilled and refugees).*

None to date. However, RPL practitioners note that particular difficulties in gathering and demonstrating evidence of prior learning and, in some cases, English language competency can be encountered by migrants. Additional issues concern their broader integration into the education and training system.

*1.2.b) Describe national policies or higher education institutional approaches, if any, that are currently being taken to promote cross-border mobility by increasing comparability/compatibility, visibility and portability of learning outcomes through non-formal and informal learning.*

National policy approaches are designed to facilitate all learners resident in Ireland and thus have a potential to facilitate cross-border mobility. Similarly policies and practices of providers of education and training generally apply to all learners, regardless of where they have acquired their prior learning. No specific measures are being taken in respect of cross-border mobility in this area.

### **Component 1.3. New Information Communication Technology (ICT)**

*The increasing use of ICT in daily life (school, work, households, public domains, etc.) means that ICT is also transforming education and training in various ways, ranging from teaching/learning, administration, research, to social networking. The ever-changing new ICT can have an impact on the institutional and technical arrangements by establishing new qualifications<sup>15</sup> to recognise new skills that are required for a knowledge society, such as ICT literacy. It may also have an impact on the individual by giving an incentive to take up the recognition process by using a new way of recording and accumulating the individual's learning assets. One relevant example to recognition is the e-portfolio<sup>16</sup>. E-portfolios are often discussed as an emerging trend to record learning achievements and to manage knowledge or skills assets and as a potential tool to further develop the knowledge society/economy. Also, the length (e.g. shorter training due to the emerging learning objectives?) may act as an incentive for an individual to take such training and get the outcomes recognised. The impact of ICT on the issue of recognition is important to explore as it will affect both the demand and supply sides of recognition.*

*1.3.a) Provide evidence of modularisation of learning and new recording systems of learning outcomes, if any, that are opened up by new information and communication technologies.*

It is difficult to assess the extent to which ICT is impacting directly on the provision of education and training opportunities. A number of providers are exploiting e-learning opportunities; they have developed and continue to develop distance learning. For example, Oscail, the National Distance Education Centre has since 1982, offered third level distance education to adults. It currently offers six programmes (three leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees and two leading to Masters Degrees which are accredited by Dublin

---

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Certificates issued by industries such as Microsoft and Cisco, the European Computer Driving Licence, the International Computer Driving Licence, etc.

<sup>16</sup> To date, there is no single definition of e-portfolio. An e-portfolio broadly refers to an electronic way for learners to store, present and manage their learning achievements. E-portfolios can include electronic copies of assignments, essays, test papers, reports by assessors and teachers, CVs, testimonials (written and verbal), comments from peers and colleagues in work. They can store or link to (for example) audio evidence, video evidence, plus video links to the workplace, school or college for 'live' interviews and web links to relevant Internet sites.

City University).<sup>17</sup> FÁS, the Training and Employment Authority also provides elearning through its eCollege.<sup>18</sup> Modularisation is increasingly a feature of higher education and training provision.

In both higher and further education and training, there is a constant upgrading of existing programmes, assessment methodologies and qualifications to meet new demands and respond to new developments, including in ICT. It would appear that modularisation, the development of credit systems and the introduction of the Diploma Supplement and the Certificate Supplement are creating new market opportunities/demands for IT solutions. A number of higher education institutions are exploring the possibility of e-solutions for the Diploma Supplement. Some exploratory work is also underway to assess the issues in the use of e-portfolios specifically in the recognition of prior learning. New ICT tools are being developed and used to support the learning environment and assessment across all levels and providers.<sup>19</sup>

Within the further education and training sector, a new information technology system is being developed by the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), which, in time, will capture all qualifications data concerning learners and providers including enrolments, qualifications achieved, types of qualifications and the standards of these qualifications. This will provide a useful tool, which, for the first time, will address the sector as a whole. Within higher education and training, the Institutes of Technology have a single Information Technology system in place referred to as the 'Banner' system. This facilitates the recording of learner information against modules and/or subjects. Universities each have their separate IT systems.

*1.3.b) Provide a list of new qualifications that have been opened up by new information and communication technologies. Provide evidence, if any, that the certificates by the major industries carry equivalent (or more or less) currency in the labour market than academic qualifications.*

It is not possible to gather evidence about the volume, growth or relative value/currency of qualifications that are offered in Ireland by industries or global corporations, for example, Microsoft and CISCO, compared to other qualifications and or about their relationship to non-formal and informal learning. In the Irish context, the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) aims to include and relate all qualifications to each other, regardless of profile. At present, the Framework includes qualifications made in the formal education and training system (i.e. by the following awarding bodies: the State Examinations Commission, Higher Education and Training Awards Council, Further Education and Training Awards Council, the universities, the Dublin Institute of Technology and any institution with delegated authority to make awards). The broad policy objective in relation to qualifications offered by other awarding bodies is to include or align them with the National Qualifications Framework. This would provide quality assurance and relate them with a wide range of existing qualifications in the Framework. Processes have been put in place (2006) to meet this objective (see [www.nqai.ie](http://www.nqai.ie)).

*1.3.c) Describe current national policies or practices of e-portfolio as a tool to record learning outcomes or 'learning assets'? What have been achieved and what have been challenges.*

The use of e-portfolios is being explored by a number of institutions. Also, it is being addressed as a joint action by a number of higher education institutions, funded by the Higher Education Authority's Strategic

---

<sup>17</sup> See [www.oscail.ie](http://www.oscail.ie)

<sup>18</sup> Some of these courses lead to certification by global corporations. See [www.fas-netcollege.com](http://www.fas-netcollege.com)

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, on-going research projects at DEIS, Cork Institute of Technology (<http://www-deis.cit.ie/projects.html>)

Initiatives, to explore *inter alia* the use of e-portfolios to facilitate the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). This project is in the early stages of development.

#### **Component 1.4. Economic developments and skills shortage/ mismatch**

*Strategies for a move towards a knowledge economy and integration into the global economy should be planned in line with the development of sustainable labour force and active citizenship. This would require appropriate skills acquisition and harmonisation at various levels: i.e. constant progression of individuals' skills and capacities, better allocation of human capital within organisations, greater flexibility in transferring skills from sector to sector in society at large, and more focus on regional economic developments such as Learning Regions. The recognition of skills, knowledge and experience (i.e. non-formal and informal learning outcomes) seems to be of increasing importance in giving such human capital assets visibility and mobility. Therefore, the economic macro picture of a country (national economic policies, labour policies, etc.) will allow us to add a dynamic dimension of analysis, rather than a snap shot of current practices, to our study.*

*1.4.a) Describe legal framework, policy, programmes, and research, if any, that address the issue of recognition of knowledge, skills, and competencies through experience. Are they linked to the human capital development theories with respect to the economic developments or labour force issues? Are there any specific policies at the regional level linking investments in human capital with economic developments such as 'Regional Development' and 'Learning Regions'?*

The question of recognising knowledge, skills and competences through experience is addressed at national level, in the development of principles and guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) (described in Component 2.1 below). These have been developed in follow-up to the introduction of the NFQ and in the broader context of government policy in support of lifelong learning. There is no known research carried out in Ireland which links RPL specifically to human capital development theories or labour force theories. However, the national skills strategy, 2007, (discussed in 1.4b below), draws on theories of human capital development and studies of the returns on investment in education and training (chapter 3) in support of broad measures to enhance the skills profile of the population. It notes the need to progress the issue of recognition of prior learning as one element of the objective to upskill the population (p.99).

In broad policy terms, Towards 2016, the 10-year Framework Social Partnership Agreement, 2006-2015 (June 2006)<sup>20</sup> and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013,<sup>21</sup> launched in January 2007, set out the vision and objectives for Ireland's socio-economic development. Both underline the importance of lifelong learning and set out objectives and action to be taken in this regard.<sup>22</sup> The NDP is a high level strategic document which provides the framework for investment over the next seven years. In particular, it sets out the investment necessary to maintain national competitiveness and promote regional development within a sustainable economic and budgetary framework. Investment in education will be a priority, with an emphasis on building the knowledge economy. It sets out that lifelong learning is the guiding principle for education and training policy in the context of the Lisbon agenda. It foresees investment of some €25.8 billion in human capital over the period 2007-2013 with a focus on upskilling, early school leavers, literacy, lifelong learning and with particular emphasis on retraining those with least educational attainment.

---

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached\\_files/RTF%20files/Towards%202016PartnershipAgreement.rtf](http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/attached_files/RTF%20files/Towards%202016PartnershipAgreement.rtf)

<sup>21</sup> [www.ndp.ie](http://www.ndp.ie)

<sup>22</sup> See also *Towards 2016, First progress report*: <http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?locID=566&docID=3235>

In the period 2003-2005, the Forum on the Workplace of the Future, established by the National Centre for partnership and Performance (NCP) at the request of the Government, carried out consultations, research and analysis on a national workplace strategy. Its final report, *Working to our advantage: a national workplace strategy*<sup>23</sup>, 2005, sets out a vision of the workplace of the future and recommendations for action to achieve this. Its key findings point to the need for more investment in training of those in the workforce, greater access to training and a continuous learning and development facility that enables individuals to identify and assimilate knowledge, skills and abilities acquired in different contexts (p. 83). The strategy calls for resources to support individuals in managing their lifelong learning progression, collaboration at a regional level between business and education, more training initiatives and the removal of barriers to access. It calls for a more integrated approach on the part of government agencies, departments and education providers responsible for policy development, funding, co-ordination and delivery to achieve greater take-up of learning, ongoing learning, flexible delivery and access to third-level education that would recognise the portfolios of learning that have been acquired in the workplace (p.83). These recommendations suggest a potential role for RPL in meeting future workplace needs.

The promotion of regional development has been a long-standing objective of economic policy, and a key element of this has been and remains the investment in human capital. This features in for example, successive national development plans and social partnership agreements. A number of higher education institutions and other providers are involved in projects to promote learning regions (e.g. EU-funded initiatives and others such as the Atlantic University Alliance (<http://www.aua.ie/>)).

*1.4.b) Describe overall skills mismatch/shortage in your country. Do you have any economic policies designed to respond to the issue of skills shortage or skills mismatch? In what sectors/industries has the issue been most conspicuous?*

The Expert Group on Future Skills (EGFSN) was established in 1997. The Group's mandate (revised in May 2007) provides that it will act as the central national resource on skills and labour supply for the enterprise sector. Specifically, the Group:<sup>24</sup>

- advises Government on future skills requirements and associated labour market issues.
- advises Government on how best to meet identified needs; and on priority training requirements
- ensures recommendations made are adequately assessed by the relevant responsible authorities

The National Training Advisory Committee (NTAC) was merged with the Expert Group in January 2004 and the Group's mandate was expanded to incorporate the responsibilities formerly held by the NTAC. These include advising the Minister for Enterprise Trade and Employment and the Minister for Education and Science on the overall strategy for enterprise training in Ireland and on the priority training needs of the enterprise sector, with a view to raising the skills of people in employment.

The EGFSN has issued reports on overall skills needs of the economy as well as skills needs of specific sectors such as engineering, ICT and construction. Since 2004, its priorities include research on skills and competencies being acquired by graduates participating in particular courses of education; input into skills-based immigration policy; and review of existing projections of sectoral skill needs.

In September 2005, the Department of Enterprise Trade & Employment (DETE) requested EGFSN to undertake research to underpin the development of a National Skills Strategy including the identification of

---

<sup>23</sup> Available at [www.ncpp.ie](http://www.ncpp.ie). A second report of the High Level Implementation Group on the workplace strategy was published in April 2007 implementation.

<sup>24</sup> See details of the Group's mandate, 2007-2009, and its work, see its website, [www.skillsireland.ie](http://www.skillsireland.ie)

the skills required for Ireland to develop over the period to 2020 as a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy. This was published in March 2007 (see [www.skillsireland.ie](http://www.skillsireland.ie)).

The vision articulated in the strategy is that of achieving by 2020 a well-educated and highly skilled population which contributes to a competitive, innovation-driven, knowledge-based, participative and inclusive economy. Key to achieving this is to upskill the existing resident population, increase participation in the workforce and attract highly skilled immigrants. The strategy sets out that this should entail action in respect of three strands: increasing training and adult education; increasing retention rates at second level; increasing participation in third-level education and training, and action in respect of immigrants (recognition of qualifications, English language programmes and integration into the formal education and training system). The strategy contains the following targets and actions:

*Key Proposals for 2020:*

- 48 percent of the labour force should have qualifications at National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) Levels 6 to 10 - from Higher Certificate to PhD level;
- 45 percent should have qualifications at NFQ levels 4 and 5 - Awards equivalent to Leaving Certificate Examination;
- The remaining seven percent are likely to have qualifications at NFQ levels 1 to 3 (i.e. below Junior Certificate) while aiming to transition to higher levels.

*Skills Road Map to 2020 - Achieving the Vision*

- An additional 500,000 individuals within the workforce will need to be upskilled and to progress by at least one NFQ level over and above their current level of education and training;
- The Leaving Certificate retention rate for young people should rise to 90 percent;
- By 2020, the proportion of the population aged 20-24 with NFQ level 4 or 5 qualification (Leaving Certificate or equivalent), should be increased to 94 percent;
- The progression from second- to third-level education should increase from 55 percent to 72 percent.

The report also highlights the need for:

Integration of immigrants into the education and training system, at all levels;

- Career guidance and mentoring for those at work;
- Assistance for individuals and companies in identifying their skills needs;
- More awareness programmes that highlight the benefits of education and training; and,
- Education and training provision which is flexible and responsive to the needs of employers and employees

*1.4.c) Provide evidence, if any, of increasing or decreasing economic and social disparities in your country (e.g. poverty rate and gini-co-efficiency) among certain groups (low skilled, immigrants, youth, older workers, etc.). Provide also, if any, relevant documents addressing policies issues (economic, social, labour market, etc.) that account for such trends.*

The most up to date data on poverty in Ireland is contained in the results of the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) for 2005.<sup>25</sup> The survey results show that the overall rate of consistent

---

<sup>25</sup>Published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Nov. 2006, at [www.cso.ie/eusilc/default.htm](http://www.cso.ie/eusilc/default.htm). The text above refers to results reported by the Office for Social Inclusion ([www.socialinclusion.ie](http://www.socialinclusion.ie)) which has overall responsibility for developing, co-ordinating and driving Ireland's [National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007 - 2016](#).

poverty in 2005 was 7.0%, down from 8.8% in 2003. The results also show a decrease in the ‘at risk of poverty’ rate in Ireland from 19.7% in 2003 to 18.5% in 2005. The reduction results in part from the successful implementation of policies to move persons from unemployment into employment and to provide substantial real increases in incomes and improvements in other services for persons not in a position to enter employment. The survey revealed that there has been a significant decrease in consistent poverty rates for lone parent households from 31.1% to 27.2%, a drop in consistent poverty levels for people with disabilities from 21.7% to 17.4%, and a substantial drop in the number of older people ‘at risk of poverty’ from 27.1% in 2004 to 20.1% in 2005. Also reflected in the findings is the impact of employment in ensuring that people achieve a good standard of living, with only 1.7% of people at work experiencing consistent poverty. The survey also contains for the first time information on poverty rates based on nationality, with non-Irish nationals experiencing a higher ‘at risk of poverty’ rate (26.9%) compared to Irish nationals (18.0%). Non-Irish nationals also experience a higher consistent poverty rate at 13.1% compared to Irish nationals at 6.6%.

*1.4.d) Provide data, if any, which points to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a way of re-distributing human capital and solving the issue of skills mismatch and skills shortage and, therefore, a way to drive economic development.*

No data or studies on Ireland available on this issue. A recent (March 2007) essay on Irish productivity finds that there is evidence to support the argument that investment in the education of individuals raises their productivity, and is a critical factor in the risk and persistence of unemployment, that training and upskilling also increase individual’s productivity, output and employability.<sup>26</sup>

*1.4.e) Provide data or research results, if any, that point to a certain group that would benefit most from the recognition system for their skills (e.g. retirees, older workers, women, immigrants (highly- skilled or low-skilled), part-time workers, unemployed youth, etc.)*

The Irish experience of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in both higher education and further education and training (FETAC pilot project and previous activities in the sector) indicates that RPL which is linked to qualifications is generally applied with respect to adult and community education as offered by higher education institutions, on the one hand, and, on the other, those in the workplace. The term ‘adult and community education’ is used in this report to describe the range of programmes and courses offered by higher education institutions from dedicated centres to adults and community-based groups. In general, higher education institutions tend to see these programmes and outreach activities as their lifelong learning agenda. These are generally characterised by partnership approaches to programme design, are generally part-time and may be delivered outside the higher education institution. Programmes meet different purposes – from access to higher education, leisure, personal development, community development to, in some cases, continuing professional development. For these programmes, prior learning can be recognised for entry, credit or exemptions although in many cases, this is not formally assessed. In the past, many of these programmes did not lead to qualifications that were integrated into the mainstream of higher education qualifications. Increasingly, credit and progression opportunities towards other qualifications are built into such programmes

In the workplace, different groups of workers can be involved in seeking access to programmes at all levels on the basis of RPL. The following kinds of activity/groups can be identified:

---

<sup>26</sup> C. Kavanagh and E. Doyle (2007), ‘Human capital and productivity in an Irish context’ in *Perspectives on Irish Productivity*, Forfás: Dublin, March 2007

a) workers without formal certification/qualifications who use RPL to achieve nationally recognised qualifications in their relevant fields. This also occurs where new regulations setting out qualifications required for practice are introduced or are planned e.g. in social care, nursing, security, quarry management<sup>27</sup>;

b) employees of enterprises that develop programmes with providers to upskill the workforce, re-train the workforce and/or enhance the knowledge base within a company;<sup>28</sup>

c) employees in sectors of the economy such as hospitality where there is an objective to enhance the profile and professionalism of the sector by recognising prior learning and bridging the gaps, if any, between this and learning in respect of the relevant formal qualification.<sup>29</sup>

*1.4.f) Provide data or research results, if any, that discuss some issues to link the recognition of non-formal and informal learning with the non-formal and informal economies.*

None available

*1.4.g) Please provide a list of occupations to which the recognition of non-formal and informal learning can be counted as a part of entry (e.g. teachers, engineers, journalists, etc.). Of the list, which occupations are regulated professions which require a licence to practise the occupations?*

It should be noted that the extent to which professions and occupations are regulated in law in Ireland is generally less extensive than that in other countries. In general, arrangements for the formal education and training for occupations and for professions are shared between providers and professional bodies (including those with statutory functions to make or recognise qualifications). This means that, in general, providers, operating within the overall arrangements of awarding bodies, determine entry requirements for programmes and whether prior non-formal and informal learning can be recognised as part of these.

The introduction of new regulatory requirements has led to the development of RPL processes to allow persons already performing functions to the required standards achieve new qualifications, without having to undertake those qualifications from scratch. RPL can be used for entry into and/or advanced standing in relevant programmes of education and training. Arrangements for this have operated for some time in regard to the nursing profession (see section 3.1 below).

---

<sup>27</sup> Athlone Institute of Technology developed a programme leading to a Bachelor of Engineering in Quarry Management with the Irish Concrete Federation and the quarrying industry to provide a qualification in quarry management to meet the requirements of new legislation. The programme is structured to facilitate entry at different levels of the programme in line with applicant's prior learning. Bridging studies are also offered to those who do not meet entry requirements.

<sup>28</sup> An example of this is the partnership between Masonite Ireland and Sligo Institute of Technology through which three programmes were developed to meet specific training needs at a time when the company was undergoing major transformation. RPL is built into the programmes. Participants include adults who have not previously accessed third-level qualifications. See case study in Component 4 below. A second example is that of the Construction Industry Federation PREP project to recognise the work-based learning of those in small and medium sized enterprises with a view to achieving broader recognition of this, develop career structures for employees and promote continuing learning. This project was included in the FETAC pilot project (see section 2.1.g below).

<sup>29</sup> Fáilte Ireland has operated an RPL process for some years for persons wishing to access formal qualifications for waiter/waitress, bartenders, chefs and accommodation assistants. This activity was included in the FETAC pilot project (see section 2.1.g below).

Engineers Ireland, a chartered body representing all branches of engineering in Ireland, is charged with establishing and maintaining proper standards of professional and general education and training for admission to its various categories of membership and ensures that the titles of Chartered Engineer, Associate Engineer and Engineering Technician of the Institution are confined to suitably qualified candidates. It has procedures in place to facilitate applicants who may not hold formal engineering qualifications, at an adequate level, but can demonstrate suitable knowledge and expertise in a branch of engineering over a 5-20 year period and have a track record of functioning appropriately to its titles of CEng, AEng, Eng Tech.

The Building Control Bill is currently under debate in the Houses of the Oireachtas. One of the elements of the proposed legislation is the setting out of standards for and registration of the title of 'Architect'. It is envisaged that RPL procedures will be put in place to facilitate the registration of those persons who do not have the requisite formal qualifications but who have been practicing as architects and who meet the required standards.

### **Component 1.5. Social developments**

2. *Learning for leisure and pleasure and for personal development is very common in some OECD countries, and it is said that it yields benefits associated with democracy and citizenship and, such participation in civil society will affect economic and social benefits of individuals and, thus, have a positive benefit on the whole of society (World Bank, 2002). A new diverse set of competencies and skills required to participate in the knowledge society and economy is being defined (OECD, 2003c; Rychen and Salganik, 2003; European Commission, 2002). Individuals are expected to be self-reliant in their own acquisition of new skills and capacities such as media literacy, environmental literacy, health literacy, science literacy, ICT literacy, financial literacy, cultural literacy, literacies for the workplace, etc<sup>30</sup>. However, many of the new skills and 'literacies' are gained through non-formal and informal learning. Not recognising such skills and capacities may lead to a loss not only for an individual but also for an organisation and even for a society at large. Analytical work on the social aspects and the costs of the failure to recognise such skills and capacities could be of added value to our study.*

*1.5.a) What are the newly evolved 'skills and competencies' to live in the knowledge economy, which have been identified to date? Provide a list of such skills and competencies.*

From the perspective of the qualifications system, the National Framework of Qualifications is based on learning outcomes - standards of knowledge, skill and competence. The Framework sets out the learning outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking qualifications at a given level in the Framework. The levels range from the very initial stages of learning, level 1, to the most advanced, level 10. The intention is that all measurable learning should be covered by the Framework in the context of lifelong learning i.e. all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.<sup>31</sup> The three strands of knowledge, skill and competence are further broken down into eight sub-strands in order to capture different outcomes of learning and to be as comprehensive as possible. The sub-strands are:

- Knowledge – breadth and kind;
- Know-how and skill – range and selectivity;

---

<sup>30</sup> A new literacy approach is discussed in the ASEM lifelong learning thematic report 2: integrated approaches in lifelong learning and recognition of prior learning. Available at: [http://www.uvm.dk/asem/reports/asem\\_thematic\\_report\\_2.pdf](http://www.uvm.dk/asem/reports/asem_thematic_report_2.pdf)

<sup>31</sup> European Commission, 2001, *Communication,, Making a European Area of Lifelong Learning A Reality.*

- Competence- context, role, learning to learn and insight.

These standards are used to develop the building blocks of the Framework and, in particular to set standards for award-types and named awards in the Framework. The award-types are major, minor, special purpose and supplemental. Within each type are found individual named awards e.g. within the respective major award types, level 6 Advanced Certificate Craft-Electrical, Honours Bachelor Degree Software Development. The outcomes for any major award would be significantly broader and expressed in more general terms than typical workplace-related skill sets. In the case of other award-types in the Framework (special purpose, minor and supplemental), it is much more likely that there would be direct correspondence between the outcomes required for the qualification and the skill set relevant to the workplace, occupation or specific area of activity.

It is in this context that qualifications in the Framework reflect the skills, knowledge and competence needed for different purposes (e.g. economic, social, personal) are developed. The strands and sub-strands were not designed to capture any particular set of skills, even generic skills. However, the learning outcomes correspond in many ways to generic skills and aim to recognise and promote the recognition of diverse kinds of learning achievements. At each level in the Framework, at least one major award-type is defined and an award-type descriptor sets out a generic specification for all awards of that type. Within that specification, it is the responsibility of the awarding bodies to set standards for individual named awards in various fields of learning: in other words, they apply the generic learning outcomes from the Framework award-types to specific fields. Thus, where a named award relates closely to a workplace situation, it is to be expected that the skills required in that workplace will be reflected in the learning outcomes for the award.

The awarding bodies (Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC), the Dublin Institute of Technology and universities) develop standards for qualifications in their respective domains. FETAC has a detailed policy on the setting of award standards in further education and training at levels 1-6 in the Framework (see [www.fetac.ie](http://www.fetac.ie)). It is currently developing a new common awards system and within that envisaged that all major awards would include a minimum of 15% of generic skills. These would include basic skills such as literacy and numeracy, communication, team working, planning, problem solving, and customer handling. This reflects their relevance to personal development, participation in society and community, employment and access to additional education and training. HETAC has defined standards in five fields for awards at levels 6-10 (Art and Design, Business, Computing, Engineering and Science) and interim standards for all other fields (see [www.hetac.ie](http://www.hetac.ie)).

Providers in further and higher education and training are responsible for programme development in respect of awards made by the awarding bodies (these range from Institutes of Technology, universities, private colleges, further education centres to providers operating in specific fields such as Failte Ireland (tourism/hospitality) and Teagasc (horticulture/agriculture). In the higher education and training domain, there is increasing investment in research and graduate education. These are key to developing Ireland as a knowledge society in the new global economy. The National Development Plan, 2007 – 2013, foresees an investment of €7.5 billion in Science, Technology and Innovation. Among other things, the government aims to double the number of Researchers and PhD students in universities by 2013, to drive the country's research agenda and to meet industry's growing demand for a highly qualified workforce. Key elements of this drive are to develop Masters and PhD programmes the following:<sup>32</sup>

- Feeder pathways which will enhance access to the best of university education.
- New programmes of lifelong learning and skills development.

<sup>32</sup> For more details see: [http://www.iaa.ie/core\\_activities/fourthlevelirelandintro.html](http://www.iaa.ie/core_activities/fourthlevelirelandintro.html)

- Strong links to external stakeholders, with opportunities for placements in relevant economic sectors.
- Investment in the arts, humanities and social sciences to promote the research, scholarship and creativity to complement scientific, technological and commercial advances.
- Taught elements in generic skills and advanced disciplinary courses.

At a national level, as described in section 1.4.b above, the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs<sup>33</sup> has been identifying skills needs and actions to address them. In the context of the National Skills Strategy, 2007, it notes that all occupations are becoming more knowledge-intensive, with a corresponding rise in the requirement for qualifications and skills. It emphasises the general need for employees to acquire generic skills. It identified the following key elements in a generic skills profile:<sup>34</sup>

- Basic/fundamental skills – such as literacy, numeracy, IT literacy
- People-related skills – such as communication, interpersonal, team-working and customer-service skills
- Conceptual/thinking skills – such as collecting and organising information, problem-solving, planning and organising, learning-to-learn skills, innovation and creativity skills, systematic thinking

*1.5.b) Provide evidence, if any, that recognition of this type of learning has led to the uptake of further learning or professional progression.*

The need for generic skills and literacies described above are impacting on the development and design of both programmes and qualifications. It is likely that minor, special purpose and supplemental award will be used to specifically capture generic skills or discrete sets of knowledge, skills or competence for particular purposes e.g. to meet specific management needs, operational requirements, health and safety or regulatory requirements. The qualifications system is structured to facilitate different volumes/scales/range of learning outcomes in line with learner needs. It is expected that that this will provide greater learning opportunities for all learners, more linkages between qualifications and thus more access, transfer and progression routes for learners.

*1.5.c) Provide evidence, if any, that recognition of this type of learning contributes to democracy and citizenship; lower crime rates; better health?*

The rationale for the National Framework of Qualifications is that it will contribute to lifelong learning – in personal, social, economic and civic contexts. The recognition of prior learning in relation to achieving qualifications is part of this vision. There is no evidence to-date on the contribution to democracy and citizenship of this kind of recognition. It should be noted that there is some evidence of the contribution of non-formal and informal learning to democracy and active citizenship. The report of the Task Force on Active Citizenship (2007),<sup>35</sup> for example, notes the importance of formal and non-formal education to supporting active citizenship,

### **Component 1.6. Others.**

*1.6.a) Provide other contextual factors or trends that you think are influential – directly or non-directly – that drive changes of institutional and technical arrangements and stakeholder behaviour concerning*

<sup>33</sup> It has reported on skills needs in relation to management development amongst small and medium-sized enterprises, innovation, sales and marketing skills and language skills.

<sup>34</sup> Tomorrow's Skills: towards a national skills strategy, p.48-50

<sup>35</sup> Available at: <http://www.activecitizen.ie>

*recognition of non-formal and informal learning which have not been addressed in Component 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, and 1.5*

As indicated in the previous sections, a mix of factors - demographic pressures, economic developments, economic and social policy and planning, broader developments in education and training at national and international levels, and the development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications are impacting on the development and expectations of and demand for the recognition of prior learning. There is increased funding available to enable more early school leavers and adult learners to re-enter education and training and progress through it. The implementation of the National Skills Strategy with its objective that 500 000 individuals in the workforce upskill and progress by at least one level from their current level of education and training is likely to impact on the demand for RPL. However, as indicated in the sections below, the availability of dedicated funding for the recognition of prior learning has had and continues to have a major influence on practice.

*1.6.b) Provide historical background on how the recognition of non-formal and informal learning started to rise on the policy agenda in your country.*

The growth in RPL in Ireland since the early 1990's is due to a number of inter-related factors including:

1. the recognition of the importance of lifelong learning and demands to develop alternative routes into education and training, alternative routes to qualifications and more flexibility for adult learners
2. the promotion of equity of access and participation in higher education, in particular and the need to provide alternative entry routes and pathways to programmes and qualifications,
3. the introduction of statutory regulation concerning qualifications required for the workplace and continuing professional development needs
4. changing demographic factors which are put pressure on most higher education institutions to broaden their learner profile
5. the availability of funding for RPL activities
6. availability of information and guidance to adults to enable them return to education and training by identifying appropriate education and training programmes. Services include the Adult Education Guidance Initiative and Qualifax.<sup>36</sup>

At present, in 2007, these factors are still relevant. The development of the National Framework of Qualifications creates a new context for RPL. It aims to facilitate and encourage RPL through action at national level, by awarding bodies (the awards Councils, FETAC and HETAC, the Dublin Institute of Technology and the universities) and by providers of education and training.

#### *Background to RPL in Ireland - Lifelong Learning*

McGrath (2002) traces the development of RPL to the government committee report on Adult Education of 1973 which recommended that adult education should come within the remit of the National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA – its successor body is HETAC) and that within the context of developing programmes, there should be a facility to recognise prior work-based learning. The issue was taken up within the context of developing credit systems within higher education, which was stepped up with the introduction of its credit system (see section .1 below). Since then, reports and policy proposals from the adult education community in particular have underlined the importance of accreditation of adult education programmes at all levels and the need to develop RPL to fully recognise the learner achievements and

---

<sup>36</sup> [http://www.ncge.ie/adult\\_guidance.htm](http://www.ncge.ie/adult_guidance.htm). Qualifax is the national database of programmes in higher and further education and training available at <http://www.qualifax.ie/>

embed them in the qualifications system.<sup>37</sup> The *White Paper on Adult Education, Learning for Life* (2000) addressed the question of accreditation of prior learning and work-based learning. It identified a need to streamline and simplify processes, to develop more flexible forms of certification and assessment (such as modular, outcomes-based and credit based systems) and to provide systemised supports to guide learners through these processes. It recommended that the idea of a national training programme for learning assessors be explored. This would allow for enhanced provision and meet the guidance and assessment needs of learners (pp.132-134).<sup>38</sup> Whilst the overall approach to improving RPL has been subsequently followed, the specific suggestion for a national training programme has not been implemented.

From the late 1990s/2000, the development of the NFQ and policies on access, transfer and progression were seen as key elements in advancing the national RPL agenda. The importance of RPL and the need to address policy, funding and technical issues surrounding it was raised in consultations on the development of the Framework.<sup>39</sup> Geoghegan (2007) cites a number of different drivers for specific pilots/schemes for RPL in the early 1990s. These included a social justice imperative, valuing of volunteer work, regulatory demands for accreditation and craft practitioners in the community and voluntary sector.<sup>40</sup>

Specific initiatives were taken by the NCEA to develop RPL practice in the higher education institutions within its remit. Also, across all higher education institutions, involvement in EU-funded projects on RPL acted as a catalyst for practice. The introduction of statutory regulation was a key factor in the development of RPL for cases where existing workers who had not achieved the relevant qualifications needed to be certified in order to continue to operate in certain sectors. The general need for certification of skills on the part of employees and employers was a driving factor behind schemes to accredit prior learning in the retail, construction, childcare and craft areas.<sup>41</sup> The introduction of higher standards/qualifications as a requirement for professional practice is in some cases a catalyst for RPL.

### *RPL practice in 2007*

Currently, RPL is used in different areas of higher education: admission to undergraduate programmes (where institution-wide approaches are generally followed), specific access initiatives for disadvantaged groups and mature students; admission to post-graduate programmes (where responsibility is usually located at the level of department/centre which manages programmes); adult and community education and

---

<sup>37</sup> See Combat Poverty Agency (1994), *Can you credit it?: Aontas response to NQAI (2001) Towards a national framework of qualifications*, February 2002

<sup>38</sup> It recommended that the new Workplace Learning Unit (*of the then to be established National Adult Learning Council*) would explore with the NQAI the feasibility of establishing a panel of Learning Assessors and Designated Assessment Centres for the purposes of accreditation of prior learning and accreditation of work-based learning, and to support the quality of provision in this area (p.189).

<sup>39</sup> For example, Waterford Institute of Technology submission to NQAI on consultation process on development of the national Framework of Qualifications , <http://www.nqai.ie/en/FrameworkDevelopment/Discussiondocuments/submissionsreceived/File,1106,en.doc>

<sup>40</sup> For example, Geoghegan notes that the social justice imperative that was a driver for the development, in the early 1990s, of a part-time jobs scheme for the unemployed which had an APL element. The APL dimension was intended to 'value' participants informal learning and involved the development of an AP(E)L module by the linked higher education institution, National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Some 700 portfolios were presented under the scheme.

<sup>41</sup> FÁS, the National Training Authority, in the 1990s provided RPL in partnership with employer organisations and trade unions to offer certification concerning certain occupations and in the retail and banking sectors (D McGrath, *The Republic of Ireland: the story of the Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning*, in N. Evans (1997), *Experiential Learning around the world*, Higher Education Policy 52.

continuing professional development/workplace learning. This reflects the diversity of factors that influence RPL for specific groups or fields of learning. The changing profile of learners, levelling-off in demand for higher education from the school leaving cohort aged 17-23 is having some impact on demand for RPL.

The introduction of statutory regulations concerning the workplace remains a driver for RPL practice for the workplace. Childcare, social care,<sup>42</sup> construction and security are a number of examples where RPL is currently being applied. In other areas, the interest in professionalisation and in enhancing the profile of work has had some impact on RPL. There, RPL is promoted as a means to recognise existing skills and competencies achieved in non-formal and informal contexts as well as to encourage participation in education and training. Much of this workplace RPL is taking place within the context of 'further education and training' provision. Note that the term 'further education and training' refers to programmes offered and qualifications made at levels 1-6 in the National Framework of Qualifications by FETAC. These include adult and community education, youth education and vocational education. Programmes are offered by a wide range of providers in diverse settings, including BIM, Fáilte Ireland (CERT), FÁS and Teagasc centres, Vocational Education Committees (VECs), adult and community education and training centres, youth centres, and in the workplace. Programmes range from literacy, languages, and business to apprenticeships and specific workplace/sectoral needs.

At a national level, government agencies, representatives of employers and trade unions are, in 2007, in various ways considering the potential of RPL to meet upskilling and training needs in the workplace. There is no concerted or, as yet, concentration on RPL as such but, as indicated in earlier sections, it is seen to have a role in the general context of meeting the national skills strategy, lifelong learning and the national workplace strategy. It is a means, for example, to recognise existing skills and experience and to use prior learning as a stepping stone to further learning.

The development and introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications since 2003 is also facilitating and encouraging RPL. The framework explicitly aims to recognise all learning achievements including prior learning. It does so by:

- establishing a national point of reference or basis for RPL - learning outcomes
- promoting alternative pathways to qualifications.
- promoting a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications

The Framework and the new architecture of awards being developed in both further and higher education and training – including credit systems, major, minor, supplemental and special purpose awards – are also more conducive to RPL in that they extend the number and diversity of reference points for recognising prior learning achievements. Additional developments in modularisation/unitisation create flexibility. At a broader policy and funding level, the national priority of increasing access to education and training for diverse groups of learners and disadvantaged groups is also supportive of RPL.

---

<sup>42</sup> The Open Training College and Dublin Institute of Technology ran a pilot project, funded by the then Eastern Regional Health Region (now Health Executive Agency) and the VaLex Socrates-Gruntvig research grant to accredit staff working in residential care settings and setting for people with disabilities. It was recognised that this could assist in enhancing the qualifications of social care professionals. See [www.opentrainingcollege.com](http://www.opentrainingcollege.com) for details.

## **Component 2. Description of institutional arrangements**

### **Component 2.1. Political and legal framework**

*2.1.a) Describe, if any, clear political will or statements and policy responses in your country on lifelong learning which are explicitly linked to recognition of non-formal and informal learning.*

*2.1.b) Do you have legal regulatory frameworks concerning recognition of non-formal and informal learning? Please state – yes, under development/discussion, or no. For those who answered ‘No’, describe possible reasons for the inexistence as well as possible future prospects. For those who answered ‘yes’ or ‘under development/discussion’, please answer to the following questions from 2.1.c to 2.1.f.*

*2.1.c) Describe the aim(s) and principles stated in the framework?*

*2.1.d) Describe the historical background in which this issue has been taken up. What are the most important drivers for formulating the legislation? If there has already been any reform of the legislation, describe the change and the pressure under which the change was made.*

*2.1.e) What areas of competencies do governments have or intend to have? Are there any specific areas that are regulated by law. To what extent do social partners play a role in professional recognition?*

Owing to the interplay between the different questions above, the following section addresses them as a whole (questions 2.1. a – 2.1.e.).

A number of national initiatives have been taken in the 1990s and especially since the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications, 2003, to advance the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

#### *Historical context - Higher Education and Training*

The early impetus for the accreditation of prior experiential learning stemmed from the 1973 *Adult Education Report* which promoted this as a means to facilitate increased participation. It recommended that the NCEA whose remit was to promote, co-ordinate and develop higher education outside the university sector, accredit adult education courses. The NCEA’s initial policy (1978) on the matter did not lead to significant take-up. In the 1980s, following the *Commission on Adult Education Report*, 1984, the NCEA took further steps to develop a credit system and, in 1987, developed further its policy on ‘work experience and experiential learning’. Under this, students could achieve credit for this for a maximum of 25% of the quantity of learning on any approved course. The NCEA was also prepared to approve arrangements for exemption for relevant work experience. Again, take-up of this option in the 1980s, was low. At that time, higher education institutions were mainly concerned with accommodating increasing numbers of school leavers. In 1993, the NCEA published a policy on Prior Experiential Learning which defined prior experiential learning, the extent of exemption or credit to be granted for it and set out guidelines and criteria for the process. Following this, the policy was widely promoted and seven pilot projects were organised. Subsequent to that, practice developed within institutions. In the university sector, RPL activities, where they emerged, largely focused on adult and community education programmes and access for mature students and were not generally widespread.

#### *Historical context - Further Education and Training*

In the 1990s, a number of bodies in the further education and training sector (which includes basic education, community and adult education, vocational education and training other than primary or post-primary education or higher education and training) developed RPL actions and practices. These bodies included FÁS (the national training authority) Fáilte Ireland (the national tourism development authority)

and the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA). Following the establishment of the Further Education and Training Awards Council in 1991, which encompassed the former awarding bodies in the sector, a policy for the Recognition of Prior Learning for the sector as a whole was agreed (2005) and work continues to be actively done in this area.

As discussed in section 1.6b above, successive government reports on adult education and reports from organisations representing the sector called for the development of mechanisms and supports for the accreditation of prior learning. The Report of the Task Force on Lifelong Learning (2002)<sup>43</sup> also noted the importance of APEL and that the then emerging national qualifications framework should support this. It also noted that action in the workplace to identify the knowledge, skills and competence necessary to execute tasks associated with specific occupations would facilitate access to the accreditation of prior learning (p.51).

### ***Current legislative context***

The following section describes the development of a national approach to the recognition of prior learning in the context of the National Framework of Qualifications.

The National Framework of Qualifications, introduced in 2003 to promote lifelong learning, aims to bring greater coherence to the national qualifications system. It facilitates and encourages RPL. It explicitly aims to recognise *all* learning achievements including prior learning. It does so by:

- establishing a national point of reference or basis for RPL - learning outcomes
- promoting alternative pathways to qualifications
- promoting a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications

Three purposes of RPL are set out in the Authority's *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (October 2003) (<http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/documents/atp.pdf>) as being:

- entry to a programme leading to an award
- credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements
- eligibility for a full award

While RPL for access, credit/exemptions is generally practiced, the concept of making full awards on the basis of RPL is a relatively new one for Ireland (there is some international practice of this). The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 sets out that learners may seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC without having participated in specific programmes.

The various roles and responsibilities of the Authority, awarding bodies and providers for RPL are set out in the Authority's policies and procedures. The Authority's main role is to encourage the continuation, expansion and further development of processes for RPL and to promote the co-ordination and harmonisation of these by providers (pp.22). The role of the awards Councils is to develop their awards systems in support of RPL, ensure that providers implement procedures concerning the development and publication of statements of arrangements in respect of programmes for RPL, monitor practice and in manage direct applications for awards (pp.25-26).

### ***Principles and Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning***

In June 2005, the NQAI adopted and published *National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* (<http://www.nqai.ie/en/Publications/File,824,en.doc>). It is a policy of the Authority to promote the co-ordination and harmonisation of processes for the recognition of prior learning

---

<sup>43</sup> [www.entemp.ie/lfd/lifelong.pdf](http://www.entemp.ie/lfd/lifelong.pdf)

on the part of education providers and awarding bodies. The development of national principles and operational guidelines are a first step in this direction. They were developed with the assistance of an Advisory Group drawn from diverse sectors of education and training. They drew upon national and international practice including the common European principles on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (2004) which were adopted during the Irish Presidency of the EU. The principles and guidelines address issues of quality, assessment, documentation and procedures for the review of policy and practice. They aim to encourage the development and expansion of processes for RPL so that providers and awarding bodies may:

- communicate their commitment to the recognition of prior learning
- bring coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning
- remove difficulties that may confront an applicant wishing to transfer within and between the different education and training sectors.

### **National Principles and Guidelines for RPL, 2005**

#### ***Principles for the Recognition of Prior Learning***

The principles for the recognition of prior learning are addressed to education and training providers, awarding bodies, and those in the workplace. The principles are available to those who are developing systems of recognition of prior learning and to those who wish to make use of the prior learning that has been recognised by other providers or awarding bodies.

#### ***General***

- The recognition of prior learning will give value to all learning, no matter how that learning is achieved.
- Participation in recognition is a voluntary matter for the individual.
- The recognition of prior learning will be part of an inclusive approach to learning by education and training providers and awarding bodies.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for access, transfer and progression to education and training and for the achievement of an award.
- Recognition of prior learning will provide opportunities for learners to participate on an active basis in society in general and within a workplace context.

#### ***Quality***

- Recognition of prior learning should be fully embedded within the quality assurance procedures of providers and awarding bodies.
- Recognition of prior learning should maintain the standards of the National Framework of Qualifications and its awards.
- Processes for the recognition of prior learning should be credible to all

stakeholders.

- The outcomes-based approach of the National Framework of Qualifications supports the attainment of awards through diverse routes, including the recognition of prior learning, and such recognition of prior learning will maintain and support the standards associated with the National Framework of Qualifications and its awards.

#### ***Communication/documentation***

- A clear statement of the policies, processes and practices of the education and training providers and awarding bodies for the recognition of prior learning should be available to all users.
- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be clearly documented.
- Processes and practices for the recognition of prior learning should be communicated openly and clearly to all. (Applicants, education and training staff and assessors).

#### ***Assessment***

- Assessment criteria for the recognition of prior learning should be published, made explicit to applicants, and applied consistently and fairly.
- Assessment criteria should be based on learning outcomes of awards or standards of knowledge, skill and competence set out in the National Framework of Qualifications and by the relevant awarding bodies.
- Assessment and verification mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning should be appropriate and fit for purpose.

#### ***Process***

- Guidance and support should be available for applicants and all involved in the processes of recognition of prior learning.
- An appropriate appeals mechanism should be in place.
- Recognition of prior learning processes should be easy to understand, fair and transparent, and be conducted in a reasonable time frame.
- The recognition of prior learning processes should be organised in such a way that they do not create barriers for the applicant.
- Appropriate resources to support the processes for the recognition of prior learning should be in place.

### ***Guidelines***

It is suggested that further and higher education and training awarding bodies and providers would each develop policies and procedures for recognition of prior learning which would each have the following elements:

- Review and updating
- Operational approaches
- Assessment
- Applicants
- Communications

### ***Review and updating***

- Each further and higher education and training awarding body will review and update the policies and procedures that it has in place for the recognition of prior learning following the publication of these guidelines and each body will review its policies and procedures on a regular basis in the future.

### ***Operation of RPL***

*2.1.f Describe, if any, operational systems to put the legal framework into practice. Who set up the system(s)?*

The national principles and guidelines also address the operation of RPL, which is largely a matter for awarding bodies and providers. The following issues are addressed:

#### ***Operational approaches***

- The units, modules, programmes and awards that can be achieved on the basis of recognition of prior learning should be identified.
- Where any limits are put in place on the proportion of learning that can be recognised as prior learning, these should be explicitly stated. (In the case of direct applicants, the awards Councils cannot put in place any such limits for their awards)
- The roles and responsibilities of those involved in the process should be clearly set out, for example, the applicant, the assessor, and any other persons or boards/committees involved in recognition processes.
- Process should ensure that, where possible, the applicant can complete the recognition process in a shorter time than it would take to achieve the relevant unit, module, programme or award.
- Collaboration across sectors and between awarding bodies, providers and stakeholders should be encouraged.

### ***Applicants***

- Applicants should be fully informed of the application process, the stages within it and the nature and range of evidence that is considered appropriate to support a claim for the recognition of prior learning, including the learning outcomes against which prior learning will be assessed.
- The availability of guidance and support to applicants in the submission of evidence for assessment will be promoted. There should be contact points for advice and support and they should be clearly signalled.

### ***Communications***

- Information for learners/applicants should be clear, accessible and fit for purpose.
- Awarding bodies should promote the availability of the recognition of prior learning.
- Awarding bodies should publish information on a regular basis describing the extent to which their policies on the recognition of prior learning have been implemented and setting out good examples of practice.

### ***Role of Awards Councils***

There are two strands to the RPL activities of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). Under the first, they set out policy for providers who offer education and training programmes leading to their awards (or to providers who have delegated authority to make their own awards) and oversee implementation by them of RPL. They also make awards directly to learners on the basis of RPL. In 2006, HETAC published *the Recognition Policy, Criteria and Process for a Direct Application to HETAC for a Named Award* (see <http://www.hetac.ie>). HETAC has made three awards directly to learners on the basis of RPL (a Masters Degree, 2005; a Doctoral Degree, 2006 and an Ordinary Degree, 2007). Three applications are currently being processed (mid-2007). HETAC has also developed an overall policy on experiential learning concerning providers. It is refining this policy and its approach to direct applications for awards in the light of experience.

Providers who offer programmes leading to HETAC awards have responsibility to facilitate RPL for learners. The providers include the Institutes of Technology, private colleges and others including the Garda College and Military College. Most Institutes of Technology have adopted or are operating RPL based on HETAC policy and the national RPL policy and guidelines. Much of the current RPL activity can be traced back to the first APEL Policy published by HETAC (formerly NCEA). In 1993, for example, the Garda College developed a Bachelor Degree at a senior level based on experience in various ranks and assignments. This programme is up and running to date. A range of practice and experience exists across the sector. For example, Cork Institute of Technology introduced an RPL policy in 2005.<sup>44</sup> This sets out the purposes of RPL, principles and rules that apply (e.g. concerning the award of credit, grading, awards classification and ceilings). The RPL policy has been introduced for an initial two year pilot period following which it shall be reviewed. In 1996, it established the Department of Education Development

---

<sup>44</sup> See R. Coughlan, Examples of Good Practice – Cork Institute of Technology, for European Inventory on the Validation of non-formal and informal learning, [www.ecotec.com](http://www.ecotec.com), presentation to Accreditation and Assessment in Higher Education, NQAI/NUIM, January 2007 (at [www.nqai.ie](http://www.nqai.ie)) and DEIS website, <http://www-deis.cit.ie/rpl.html>

(DEIS) with a remit that included the development for RPL policy and practice and provision of support. This is only higher education institution that has such dedicated institution-wide support structures in place. DEIS has dedicated RPL officers who offer support in for registered students who seek credit or exemptions for their prior learning (whether accredited or experiential).<sup>45</sup> Over the period 2000 – April 2007, the total number of portfolios submitted to date is 1060. Some 260 portfolios were submitted in the academic year 2006/07 (to April 2007).

In the area of further education and training, FÁS, Fáilte Ireland and the National Council for Vocational Awards (NCVA) operated a range of different processes for the recognition of prior learning since 1990.<sup>46</sup> In 2005, FETAC, which took over responsibility for qualifications in the sector as a whole, agreed a Policy on RPL and published draft guidelines on RPL.

([http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL\\_Policy\\_and\\_\\_draft\\_\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL_Policy_and__draft__guidelines.pdf) ). Providers are responsible for the facilitation of learners through RPL for access to programmes, exemptions from/credit for programme requirements and access to FETAC awards. The FETAC draft guidelines aim to support the implementation of RPL by providers especially those for whom RPL is new. In 2006, FETAC undertook a pilot project with a small number of providers to begin implementation of RPL and to identify the implementation issues for FETAC and providers. An evaluation report on the findings of the pilot was completed in 2007 (see 2.1.g below).<sup>47</sup> This report reiterates FETAC's policy approach which is that all providers must, as part of their quality assurance requirements, commence the development and implementation of policies and procedures to facilitate learners with prior learning to access programmes and to gain exemptions from programme requirements. In relation to learner's directly accessing FETAC awards on the basis of RPL, FETAC policy states that providers have responsibility for this but must be specifically quality assured to offer RPL for awards. This aims to ensure credible, rigorous, fair and effective processes. In addition, FETAC encourages the development of specialised centres of excellence in the delivery of RPL for the purpose of making awards in specific fields of learning. Where an individual makes a direct application to FETAC for an award on the basis of prior learning FETAC plans to refer the individual to an appropriate provider for assessment and support where appropriate.

#### *Role of universities and Dublin Institute of Technology*

The individual universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, who are autonomous awarding bodies as well as providers, are each responsible for RPL in their respective areas. In drafting the national principles and guidelines on RPL above, the Authority requested that they each would consider them in the context of developing their own procedures. In this context and that of facilitating access, transfer and progression in general, DIT has put in place a framework for RPL. In the universities, the purpose of RPL is limited to entry to programmes, credit towards/exemptions from programme requirements. To the extent that RPL occurs, it is generally not regarded as a core activity for institutions, that activity tends to be localised in particular centres or Departments. The extent of practice also relates to overall institutional contexts and priorities concerning student intake (ranging from those where demand remains high and where there is less pressure to develop further access routes, at one end of the spectrum, to those who face falling student enrolments or which place increased emphasis on meeting the needs of part-time and mature students).

---

<sup>45</sup> See webpages on RL in CIT at <http://5pieces.com/rpl/index.htm#>

<sup>46</sup> FÁS worked with the Irish Electricity Supply Board to accredit semi-skilled linesmen and fast-track them through an electrical apprenticeship programme. Fáilte Ireland accredits prior learning for workers in the tourism, catering and hotel industry and awards certificates on the basis of assessment of portfolios.

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL\\_Evaluation\\_Report\\_2007.pdf](http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL_Evaluation_Report_2007.pdf)

Much of the focus of RPL at institutional level in higher education is on the accreditation of prior *certificated* learning. Activity concerning the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, usually known as the accreditation of prior experiential learning, ranges from broad frameworks and institutional policies (in DIT, 2006, the University of Limerick, 2006, and National University of Ireland, Galway, February 2007<sup>48</sup>, with plans to introduce this in University College Dublin in 2007), to general use of RPL for access for particular student groups (e.g. adult learners/ mature students) and specific practice in fields such as nursing, adult and community education, and continuing professional development/programmes for the workplace. Institutional level policies emphasise quality assurance – the need for quality assurance is also the driver for institution-wide policies. The practices of RPL in general stemmed from individual departments or centres in response to meeting student needs, attracting diverse groups of students, meeting regulatory requirements for certification and/or participation in research projects in the area of RPL.

An example of an institutional approach to RPL is that in operation in DIT. It has, in the context of the national Framework of Qualifications and national principles and guidelines, set out a broad framework to support RPL through establishing a dedicated RPL unit, developing operational principles and policy to be applied across all faculties. It is intended that RPL would build on existing practice (where it is available for non-standard and exceptional case entry and for entry at advanced standing). It should be available for all levels of education and training for the purposes of entry to programmes, credits and/or exemptions from programme requirements. The issues to be addressed include embedding RPL in quality assurance, assessment, appeals, coherence of awards, documentation and records, staff development, guidance and support for staff and applicants and liaison with the relevant stakeholders.

The RPL policy of the University of Limerick sets out the purposes of RPL (for entry, credit/and or exemptions from programme requirements), general principles on quality assurance, integrity of the awards system and standards, assessment and information and guidance for applicants.

*2.1.g) Provide information on, if any, evaluation of how the system has or has not worked.*

One of the major difficulties in evaluating the scale and impact of RPL is that no composite figures are available for students who apply for access, credit or exemptions through RPL. It is possible to obtain data for mature student entry to higher education but these do not indicate whether RPL was a factor or not in facilitating entry. It is possible that individual departments/centres and providers have such records (e.g. Cork Institute of Technology collects data on applications submitted) and some data is available for learners involved in pilot projects. In general, the learners assessed under this route are integrated into the normal structures and student records of providers. Similarly, in the further education and training sector, qualifications achieved with the use of RPL are not separately recorded or reported by programme providers. Currently, there is no separate recording of how awards have been achieved by the awarding body, FETAC. Certificates awarded do not make any reference to achievement through the RPL route. With the development of a new FETAC ICT system it is planned to record for statistical purposes the achievement of an award by an individual through RPL. In that way, FETAC will be able to account for the numbers of learners attaining awards through RPL as it is a significant means to enable learners to access, transfer and progress within the National Framework of Qualifications.

In general, there is little systematic evaluation of RPL practice from the perspective of RPL itself or lifelong learning although individual RPL projects have been evaluated within the broader context in which they took place or from funding perspectives e.g. the Open Training College Network/DIT pilot

---

<sup>48</sup> In February 2007, Academic Council approved in principle the policy on APL developed by Lionra for the participating higher education institutions in its APL project and is currently refining and adapting that policy for NUIG (see Component 5 below for Lionra project). This will involve examining current practice, suitable options and resources and implementation issues. An officer has been appointed to co-ordinate this activity.

project in social care (2005), the WIT/NALA pilot project on adult literacy. Such projects generally identify common issues around implementation and the benefits/costs associated with RPL. These also surfaced in the evaluation of a FETAC pilot project (below). This is partly due to the relatively small scale of activities, the disparate nature of practice, and in many cases, its relatively short history and/or pilot nature. In general, the RPL agenda has largely been and is largely focused on developing recognition processes and supports, and, more recently, in the case of higher education and training, developing institutional policies. However, it is commonly argued that a key issue concerning RPL is that of a lack of dedicated funding and resources, for example, to train mentors, assessors, develop documentation and tools, raise awareness and fund running costs (see also section 2.3 on resources).

It is a statutory requirement that providers who have programmes validated by either of the two Councils or with authority delegated by either of the two Councils to make awards themselves, as well as the Dublin Institute of Technology, implement the NQAI's procedures on access, transfer and progression. This includes RPL and actions in this area will be addressed in the context of a study of implementation of the Framework by the NQAI. This is planned for late 2007/2008. As part of this, the implementation of these arrangements by the universities is also to be reviewed. The Lionra project on the accreditation of prior learning (described as a case study in Component 5 below), currently underway, will be evaluated on completion.

HETAC is currently (2007) evaluating progress under access, transfer and progression and in this context is reviewing RPL. As part of this, it undertook a survey of institutional activity on RPL. The further development and facilitation of RPL will be considered as a result of this evaluation.

The paragraphs below address the evaluation of a FETAC pilot project on RPL which operated in 2006, and which generated recommendations for its future policy and activity. Many of the findings here echo the experience with RPL in higher education institutions.

### ***Evaluation of FETAC pilot project on RPL***

A pilot project on RPL was formally launched in December 2005 with 9 providers (Table 1 below) and operated for one year. Participating providers undertook to offer RPL as an element of their activities, with support and guidance from FETAC. The objectives of the pilot project were to:

- undertake recognition of prior learning with a small group of providers
- enable these providers to gain experience of recognition of prior learning procedures
- identify good practice in RPL by providers
- identify the issues for providers in the context of implementing recognition of prior learning.

#### ***Range and type of providers participating***

Participating providers represented a broad, diverse range of sectors and providers. They included public and private, small and large, and urban/rural-based providers. All participating providers had agreed their quality assurance arrangements with FETAC prior to participation. The group included two former awarding bodies, a college of further education, an industry body, two community education providers, one national voluntary body and two private providers. Some had sophisticated resources and facilities for RPL whilst others had few. Of the 9, 1 offered RPL for the purpose of access to programmes. Two providers did not offer RPL but explored how RPL would be established as part of their service provision. One provider withdrew from the project. Five providers actively engaged in RPL with learners for the purposes of attaining awards.

*Learners' achievements*

A total of 50 learners achieved major and minor awards in a variety of fields and levels on the National Framework of Qualifications. Awards were achieved in bar management, childcare, community development, construction, health and safety, security, supervisory skills, and professional cookery. All 50 learners who achieved awards were employed at the time when they engaged in the RPL process. All were experienced workers in the sectors relevant to the awards attained. A very small number did not complete the RPL process.

Table 1 Overview of FETAC pilot project

<i>Provider</i>	<i>Type of provider and RPL project activities</i>	<i>Assessment Methodology</i>
Construction Industry Federation	An industry employer representative association led project with small and medium sized companies in the construction sector. Project Completed with 6 learners achieving FETAC minor awards. A further RPL project has also been initiated.	Portfolio approach to FETAC awards. Learners facilitated by individual mentor. Verified by external examiner. Learners individually located and employed in construction companies in the BMW region.
Citizens Information Board (formerly Comhairle)	Citizens Information Board led project for experienced advisers both employed and voluntary 6 employed and voluntary advisers participated. Two level 6 NCVA Minor Awards achieved by learner participants.	Structured assessment based approach to RPL. Learners facilitated by one mentor. Evidence of assessment verified by external examiner. Learners employed in the Board in Dublin and midlands.
Failte Ireland – the National Tourism Development Authority	RPL facilitated for individuals seeking recognition employed in hospitality and catering sector 21 employed persons from the hospitality and catering sector achieved full major awards	Portfolio and full assessment approach implemented by provider. One mentor managed and facilitated the learners with subject matter experts for skills audit and assessments. Panel of experts used for assessment interview. Learners employed in range of hospitality businesses attended Failte Ireland in Dublin for participation.
Killester College of Further Education City of Dublin VEC	RPL facilitated for access to programmes by persons applying for courses Process and procedure put in place over 3 enrolment sessions to facilitate access for potential earners with RPL to gain entry to programmes. Not known how many of them have taken up places.	All staff involved in this approach. Open days used to facilitated learners with enquiries for courses. Informal interview approach adopted with developed criteria for selection. Learners comprised adults from the north city area.
Security Institute of Ireland	Provider planned to facilitate RPL for minor award at level 4. No learners completed the process	Portfolio approach planned with small team of mentors. Learners drawn direct from industry but did not complete.
Eiri Corca Baiscinn /Kilrush Community Childcare Early Years Project	6 learners seeking full award in childcare at level 5. 6 learners achieved 4 minor modules which combined with the mainstream modules will achieve full major awards in childcare at level 5	Portfolio approach implemented. One tutor acted as mentor to facilitate the learners. Independent assessor appointed to assess the portfolios and external examiner verified. Learners all employed in childcare service in Co Clare area.
Tallaght Partnership	Initial plans for 2 groups of learner in healthcare The partnership explored the option of RPL for their learner as part of the service provision. RPL itself deferred until such time as learners present themselves.	Approach not defined as the RPL did not become a reality in this case. Learners were new to the sector area and needed full training.
Teagasc – Irish Agriculture and Food Development Authority	Organisation policy to be prepared on RPL by Teagasc. Some individual cases referred to Teagasc but no formal RPL at this stage. Teagasc explored the option of RPL for their	Actual implementation of RPL has yet to be formally undertaken. One individual has been assigned key responsibility for RPL matters.

		learner as part of the service provision. RPL itself deferred until such time as learners present themselves.	
Chevron Services	Training	Project led by Chevron in response to request from Private Security Authority to test RPL as an option in this field 10 persons employed achieved FETAC minor award at level 4.	Portfolio approach with a small team of mentors (2) and project manager facilitating the learners. Regional spread of learners. External examiner verified the Portfolio evidence. Learners were employed in security on national basis.

### *Results of Project Evaluation*

The project was evaluated with an emphasis on gathering feedback from providers and learners during and at the end of their RPL experiences.<sup>49</sup> Findings were collated in respect of different groups – providers, learners and external examiners.

The following issues arose for *providers*:

- despite a general awareness of RPL, there was a lack of a detailed understanding of how RPL works in practice
- there was an interest in exploring the potential for RPL as part of overall service provision and in order to meet learner needs
- the need for the workforce to attain qualifications for practice provided a motivation to explore and develop RPL in sectors such as childcare, construction, hospitality and security
- Although employers were not directly involved in the pilot projects, as all the participants were employees, the employer’s support, encouragement and facilitation of participation was critical to the success of the projects.
- The main resource constraint for providers was time to organise and implement the project
- The availability of provider’s own funding, public funding (national and EU) was critical to provider involvement.
- The training and availability of mentors was also a key resource issue
- The availability of overall support (documentation, advice, training) to each provider was important, especially for those with little or no experience of RPL. This support was generally provided by FETAC.
- Different providers have different perspectives on the utility and feasibility of RPL for their areas of activity/learner groups they work with. For example, one provider indicated that RPL was not considered to be part of its remit (as participation in programmes rather than achievement of qualifications was most important for its learner group) while others strongly supported RPL (e.g. where it was necessary for meeting employment requirements).

The following issues arose for *learners*:

- Many were unaware of RPL
- The need to attain formal qualifications to meet employment requirements was a key motivating factor
- Almost all learners felt that attaining a qualification was very important
- Some stated that, had they known the amount of work involved in the RPL process, they would have taken a programme leading to a qualification instead of the RPL route

<sup>49</sup> The methodology is described in the evaluation report, available at: [www.fetac.ie](http://www.fetac.ie)

- Time was considered to be a major issue
- All expressed satisfaction with the outcomes of the RPL process and the formal recognition of their learning

The following issues were raised by *external examiners*:

- they each had prior awareness and experience of RPL
- they were satisfied that the process of verification of achievement of learning outcomes was of an equivalent standard to the standard external examination processes used by FETAC with the additional element of interviews with candidates.

The evaluation found some commonality of viewpoints about the need for supporting documentation, tools and advice to both providers and learners about the RPL process. The clear designation of roles (of mentors, assessors etc.) was also highlighted. Also, the need to develop greater understanding and use of learning outcomes was identified as an issue for providers. The support and involvement of stakeholders, e.g. employers was also identified as an important issue. All cited the need for adequate time and resources to engage in the activity and successfully complete it. It was also noted that the level of award sought has important consequences for the assessment methodologies used and that some learners encountered literacy and communication difficulties in respect of awards at levels 4.

Overall, the pilot project has shown that there is a need to develop RPL practices in Ireland in the further education and training sector. A recommendation in the evaluation of the FETAC pilot scheme is to brief providers about RPL approaches and methods and to devise material for the FETAC website on RPL for stakeholders and learners. The results of the project were disseminated a seminar in May 2007 (see [www.fetac.ie](http://www.fetac.ie)).

*2.1.h) Describe outreach activities or awareness-raising activities of the (recognition) framework or the operational systems. How are the objectives of outreach/awareness-raising activities made visible? Which audience(s) do the activities principally target?*

The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (October 2003) (<http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/documents/atp.pdf> (p.26) address the issue of provision of information on RPL to learners and others. It sets out that providers have a particular role to play in this area. They are required to develop a statement of arrangements available in respect of each of their programmes for RPL, for entry, for credit towards and exemption from an award and for access to a full award. These statements should define the purposes for which recognition should be used, i.e., to enable entry to the programme, to provide exemption from programme requirements or credit towards a full award, or to establish eligibility for a full award. Where RPL is used to enable entry to a programme, the statement of arrangements available should indicate to learners the competences needed to succeed on a programme. In cases of providers whose programmes have been validated by FETAC or HETAC, or who have delegated authority from HETAC or FETAC to make awards, this statement must be consistent with the policies and procedures of the relevant Council.

The national principles and guidelines (2005) set out the following guidelines in respect of information/communication on RPL:

- Information for learners/applicants should be clear, accessible and fit for purpose.
- Awarding bodies should promote the availability of the recognition of prior learning.

- Awarding bodies should publish information on a regular basis describing the extent to which their policies on the recognition of prior learning have been implemented and setting out good examples of practice.

In general, providers adopt different approaches to the availability of information on their RPL processes/procedures. In general, information is made available in the context of specific programmes for specific groups of learners. There is limited availability of information and lack of promotion of RPL as a discrete activity. This can be attributed to a number of factors, including lack of resources. In general, learners or prospective applicants are not familiar with the concept of RPL and so RPL may be best communicated in terms of general entry or access arrangements for programmes/awards. There is also a reticence amongst some providers/applicants to widely publicise the availability of RPL processes given their limited resources to operate RPL. Pilot schemes often include in their objectives the stimulation of interest on the part of learners in RPL e.g. workplace initiatives (FETAC pilot project above) and the Lionra project, carried out by a network of five Institutes of Technology and one university (see Component 5 below).

The evaluation of the FETAC pilot project (2007) contains a recommendation for FETAC to enhance its guidelines for providers to more clearly inform them of their responsibilities in RPL, brief providers about RPL approaches and methods, use material for the FETAC website to provide information to stakeholders and learners and gather and publish data on RPL in the sector as well as identify and acknowledge on its website all providers who have been specifically quality assured to offer RPL for the purpose of enabling learners to access full awards.

## **Component 2.2. Governance and the role of government**

*2.2.a) List all actors in governance and create a matrix of who (e.g. government, quasi-government, assessment centres, public educational institutions, private for-profit education providers, professional bodies, etc.) does what (provides academic/ professional recognition, overseas assessment, etc.) for providing non-formal and informal learning as well as recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes. If there is more than one body responsible for an action (e.g. recognition).*

**Table 3. List of ‘who does what’ for the Recognition of Prior Learning**

<i>Who?</i>	<i>What?</i>
Department of Education and Science	Determines overall policy on education and training. Provides major funding
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Determines overall policy on education and training for enterprise/economy. Provides major funding for employment-related training.
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)	Oversees development and implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications and related policies on access, transfer and progression  Promotes coordination and harmonisation of processes for RPL  Reviews implementation of arrangements for access, transfer and progression by universities
Higher Education and Training Awards	Develop new awards (major, minor, special purpose

<p>Council, Further Education and Training Awards Council</p>	<p>and supplemental)</p> <p>Develop and oversee quality assurance amongst providers</p> <p>Delegate authority to make awards to institutions</p> <p>Develop overarching credit system for the HETAC sector</p> <p>Develop RPL policy for providers and oversee implementation of this and national principles and guidelines</p> <p>Ensure policies on access, transfer and progression are implemented by providers</p> <p>Develop and facilitate the making of awards directly to learners on the basis of RPL</p>
<p>Universities and Dublin Institute of Technology</p>	<p>Responsible for determining own RPL and requested to consider national principles and guidelines in developing own policies</p> <p>Implement NQAI policies on access, transfer and progression</p>
<p>Recognised institutions with delegated authority from HETAC or FETAC to make awards</p>	<p>Develop policies and procedures consistent with national principles and guidelines</p> <p>Develop statements of arrangements for RPL in respect of programmes leading to awards in the NFQ</p> <p>Implement NQAI policies on access, transfer and progression</p> <p>Implement NQAI policies on access, transfer and progression</p>
<p>Providers (i.e. person who, or body which, provides, organises or procures a programme of education and training) whose programmes are validated by HETAC or FETAC</p>	<p>Develop and offer RPL processes to learners</p> <p>Develop statements of arrangements for RPL in respect of programmes leading to awards in the NFQ</p> <p>Implement NQAI policies on access, transfer and progression</p>
<p>Higher Education Authority</p>	<p>Overall statutory responsibility for advising on, planning and developing higher education and research. It is also the funding authority for the universities and a number of designated higher education institutions. Within this context, it</p>

	allocates funding to higher education institutions and operates Strategic Initiatives Fund (includes funding for RPL)
--	---

2.2.b) *Create the above same matrix for recognition of formal learning for comparative purposes.*

It should be noted that the above bodies have parallel responsibilities in respect of formal learning. In addition to these bodies, private providers offer informal learning which does not lead to or relate (by way of credit/exemptions) to qualifications that are included in the National Framework of Qualifications. Some professional bodies also offer such informal learning.

In addition to the bodies listed above, the State Examinations Commission is responsible for the assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state. The providers in this case are schools (primary and secondary).

2.2.c) *Describe the competencies (direct and indirect role) of government in the practice of recognition. Under which of the following three models would your country be classified with respect to governance: 1) a 'predominance-of-industry' model; 2) a 'predominance-of-public authorities' model'; and 3) a 'shared responsibility' model<sup>50</sup>. Explain why that model fits into your country context. If there is a trend to shift to another model, describe driving forces for such change. Describe the details. If none of these corresponds to your country, describe your own country model.*

The model is one of shared responsibility model which fits within the overall context of shared responsibilities for education and training in the formal system. The national approach to RPL is to link it to the National Framework of Qualifications. The main purposes of RPL are to provide entry, credit, exemption or access to full qualifications that are in the Framework.

The specific responsibilities of government, agencies, awarding bodies and providers for RPL are shared in the context of their overall roles in education and training (e.g. funding, provision, quality assurance) and underpinning legislation.

2.2.d) *Describe, if any, inter-ministerial approaches to the issue. Describe also the policy objectives behind such approaches as well as positive results and challenges to date.*

The Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment are responsible for developing overarching national policy on education and training. Within this context, they jointly support the development of the National Framework of Qualifications. The Framework is explicitly based on a vision of lifelong learning. It is within this context that a RPL is being developed and promoted. The strategic approach to RPL is to bring coherence to the qualifications system through the Framework, to promote flexibility, develop alternative pathways to qualifications and new types of qualifications. This provides some continuity with the previous and existing qualifications system as well as the introduction of new elements such as an overall shift to emphasise learning outcomes as the basis for qualifications and the development of new award-types – minor, special, supplemental and special purpose. The latter developments facilitate RPL by creating a common basis or reference point for the assessment of prior learning as well as creating a greater diversity of qualifications that prior learning can be assessed against.

<sup>50</sup> See <http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/pdf/recognitiondraftsynthesis.pdf>

In general, the public policy concept for RPL in Ireland fits broadly with those of ‘credit exchange’ and ‘development’ as described in the draft country background report from South Africa (January 2007, p.38-41). As the draft report on South Africa sets out, the ‘credit exchange’ model is largely concerned with the fit between prior non-formal and informal learning and competence to perform certain tasks or roles to a pre-defined standard (the latter can be reflected in qualifications). This model does not challenge existing education and training standards or qualifications which reflect them in any fundamental way. In a similar way, the ‘development’ model focuses on the learning acquired by an individual (rather than competence) and establishes a fit between this and the learning associated with qualifications (and/or units of qualifications). The basis for establishing this fit could be learning outcomes. As with the ‘credit exchange’ model, the provider/and or awarding body retains power over what knowledge, competences or skills matter (as they have retain control over the qualifications and programmes leading to them). These models broadly echo RPL practices in Ireland where RPL is generally used to access qualifications, to seek credit or exemptions. There may, in some cases, be scope for iteration on learning outcomes to be attained between learners/applicants for RPL, employers (or other key stakeholders) and education and training bodies, in particular where new education and training programmes are being developed.

However, the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999 heralds a radical break with the traditional route to qualifications in a provision which enables a learner to directly seek a qualification from an awards Councils (FETAC or HETAC) on the basis of RPL. This means that a learner does not have to follow a particular programme but can seek a qualification directly on the basis of having achieved the learning outcomes associated with the qualification he/she seeks. This is a new development and it remains to be seen what impact this will have (see section 2.1.f).

From the perspective of workplace learning, there is increased national interest and exploration of ways to facilitate and encourage education and training for the workplace as reflected in the National Skills Strategy (2007) and the National Workplace Strategy (2006). RPL is increasingly seen to play a role meeting such workplace needs.

Unlike the case in other jurisdictions, there is no specific system in place or planned by government for RPL. Rather, RPL is being promoted in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications and as part of measures to promote access, transfer and progression for learners. This means that there is no dedicated system of mentoring, assessment or funding for RPL. A major challenge in the future is to address the resourcing issue.

### **Component 2.3. Resources**

*2.3.a) Who is/are the financing body(ies) for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning? What is the policy thinking behind such financing? What is the annual budget 2004/2005? (Please convert to Euro.) Provide data, if possible, on the breakdown of how the budget has been spent.*

*2.3.b) If the system has existed for some years, please provide the budget data from the beginning. Has there been any increase/decrease of budget for recognition of non-formal and informal learning since a framework/system has been taken up? If so, describe any elements that have driven such change.*

There is little dedicated funding of RPL activities in Ireland by the main funding agencies, with the exception of relatively small specific project-funding. There is little information available on the cost of RPL projects and activities. In the main, the RPL is financed by universities and providers of education and training from within their overall budgets. It is not mainstreamed into general funding arrangements for education and training.

In 2003, some €542m of public funding was allocated to support further education and training in Ireland.<sup>51</sup> This funding is allocated to the main groups of providers: further education centres, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc, Bord Iascaigh Mhara and FÁS. To-date, some specific RPL projects in the further education and training area have been financed through publicly funded workplace training initiatives e.g. the Construction Industry Federation received funding under the Equal project<sup>52</sup>, the Ballymun Job Centre has received EU funding (Leonardo da Vinci) for RPL.

In 2002, a total of €1,413m public funding was made available to the higher education and training sector. As in further education and training, providers generally allocate resources to RPL from their general budgets and details for this are not available. In the past, the Higher Education Authority supported specific RPL projects in the context of targeted funding of access initiatives in higher education. IN 2003 and 2004, funding was allocated to the University of Limerick for research and development of an APEL system (as part of its initiatives to increase mature student participation) and to Dublin City University (to appoint an APEL director and develop a centralised APEL system and procedures).

In the past, the following pilot projects were carried out involving higher education institutions<sup>53</sup>:

- Dublin Institute of Technology OMNA project for early childhood care and education, 1995-1997, funded under the EU European Social Fund, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform and the National Development Plan. The project aimed to facilitate learners who had not completed second level education but who were likely to have significant experiential learning to acquire qualifications in the sector.
- Waterford Institute of Technology/National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) project to develop qualifications for literacy scheme organisers. An element of this included the availability of exemptions for modules on the basis of RPL
- National University of Ireland/National Rehabilitation Board (NRB) project to develop an accelerated route to qualifications for practitioner-trainers in the disability sector for those who already had qualifications and experience in the field.
- Dublin Institute of Technology participation in the VaLex project (Valuing Learning from Experience), 2003-2005, funded by EU under Socrates-Gruntvig. This aimed to develop and test a theory-based model for APEL in higher education suitable for experienced practitioners who did not have a professional qualification in their field of practice. Additional funding was made available by the Eastern Area Health Board to develop a pilot for the social care involving DIT, the Open Training College and St Michael's House.

In 2006-2007, specific funding for RPL is provided by FÁS under the training for people in employment initiative to the Lionra project (case study in Component 5 below); and under the first tranche (total budget of €42m) of the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Initiatives Fund (2007-11) for a consortium of higher education institutions. The latter project on RPL is one of a four-stranded project on Education in Employment which received a total of €2.6m from the HEA (matching funds of €2.6m are to be provided

---

<sup>51</sup> Source: FETAC, Statistical Report, 2006.

<sup>52</sup> EQUAL is co-financed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the European Social Fund (2000-2007). It seeks to identify and address fundamental forms of discrimination and inequality in the labour market through the development of new and innovative policies and practices initiated by EQUAL Development Partnerships (<http://www.equal-ci.ie/index.html>)

<sup>53</sup> These projects were identified and analysed by Dr. Bernadette Anne Geoghegan in her PhD thesis (unpublished, 2007).

by the partner institutions).<sup>54</sup> Nine higher education institutions are participating in the RPL strand, which has a total budget of €2.14m. It broadly aims to standardise RPL policies and procedures, embed RPL in mainstream policies and procedures, recognise RPL as an important input in identifying existing skills of the workforce and develop on-line tools for the RPL process e.g. e-portfolio. This will involve two areas of activity to include staff training, mentoring and marketing, and the development of documentation, procedures, accredited modules on portfolio development and mentor training and piloting. It is envisaged that the learning from the Lionra project will be built upon in this project.

In both higher and further education and training sector, funding issues will need to be addressed in order to both start activity and to sustain it, particularly when pilot projects are completed. This is particularly true for the significant number of providers who will have to gain the knowledge, skills and competences to implement RPL in line with national principles and guidelines. The FETAC pilot project demonstrates that it is costly to effectively resource RPL.<sup>55</sup> There is relatively little activity in the further education and training sector and providers are seeking public funding to implement RPL. Early indications from the HETAC direct application award process also indicate that the administration of RPL demands significant resources.

*2.3.c) Who pays for the assessment and recognition processes? If an individual is to pay, how much does it cost him/her? Break down the costs by levels assessed or by types of subjects assessed, if relevant. Are there any cost-sharing arrangements between educational institutions and employers, between education institutions and government, etc.? Describe the cost arrangements.*

Funding of RPL, to date, is managed within existing funding systems for education and training. Resources are generally provided from within existing budgets or are funded by external agencies as special (pilot) projects. The key staff costs associated with RPL are a) mentoring of applicants (before, during and after assessment on the RPL process and the development of portfolios); b) assessment of evidence, and possibly, c) overall management of the process. Depending on the organisation, these costs may be met from within existing budgets or may require special funding. In the case of the learners in the workplace, additional costs may be incurred to release staff to participate in RPL. More recent initiatives undertaken by the Institutes of Technology indicate a move towards on-site (in the workplace) provision of RPL programmes, e.g., to accommodate shift-workers. In addition, there are costs associated with awareness raising, development of documentation and tools and administration of applications. For workplace specific projects, the costs are generally shared between the provider, applicant and possibly the employer and external funding body, within the overall budget allocation for the project. A key issue raised in the FETAC pilot is the burden of costs placed by RPL on providers. In respect of costs to the individual, a number of reports on RPL practice highlight the large investment of time required to complete the process. More work needs to be done on the costs involved in developing and implementing different forms of RPL (e.g. for entry, credit/exemption, full award) in all sectors and on developing appropriate cost/benefit analysis models for RPL.

#### *Examples of costs*

One example of costs provided by a higher education college relates to a pilot project (2005) which facilitated seven applicants to enter programmes at the Ordinary Bachelor Degree Level through a non-formal/informal learning. The development and operational costs (covering staff, management and

---

<sup>54</sup> The participating institutions are: Cork Institute of Technology, Athlone Institute of Technology, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dundalk Institute of Technology, Galway Mayo Institute of Technology, Institute of Technology Sligo, Letterkenny Institute of Technology, National University of Ireland Galway and University College Cork.

<sup>55</sup> FETAC, *Evaluation of RPL Pilot project 2007*, at [www.fetac.ie](http://www.fetac.ie).

overheads) was some €48,000. The cost to deliver RPL per RPL applicant per module was about €1,700 and the estimated cost projected per applicant per module if delivered on an ongoing basis was €1000. These costs were significantly higher than those incurred in relation to operating standard programmes.

Some providers have streamlined costs by, for example, developing documentation and guidelines on portfolio development for all RPL applicants. In one case, a module on portfolio development has been developed as part of an Honours Bachelor Programme in community development and education. This aims to equip students with capacity to assist others in developing portfolios for various purposes. Currently, the possibility of students taking this module as a means to learn to develop their own portfolios for RPL is being explored. This would ease administration for the institution and provide supports to potential RPL applicants. However, notwithstanding common approaches, RPL applicants all have unique issues to be addressed which, even with structural supports in place, require significant one-to-one mentoring. The costs to the institution are likely to vary depending on the structures in place, level of prior learning achieved by the applicant and object of the RPL process (entry, credit/exemption, full award). It appears that costs associated with programme entry are less than RPL for other purposes.

#### *Costs to the individual*

Information regarding how much of the financial costs of the RPL process are borne by the RPL applicant is limited. In further education and training, most higher education colleges and institutes have not carried out detailed costing exercises on RPL assessment activities due to the low number of applicants and limited scope of activity. Where applicants are few, the full cost of the RPL assessment is not normally passed on to the applicant but is absorbed by the institution. Evidence from higher education providers indicates that, in some cases, the applicant must bear 40% of the cost of the module concerned or, where relevant, pay the fee and/or assessment costs associated with the module/programme in question. In publicly-funded institutions, where fees are charged to applicants, the fee charged to applicants is based on the cost of the module, unit or award in question. Such fees are generally charged in a sliding scale. Note that this fee only applies where an application has been submitted and does not relate to initial queries or mentoring that may occur before any application for assessment is submitted. It should be noted that the individual generally bears a substantial cost in terms of the investment in preparing portfolios for assessment – in some cases this can exceed the workload incurred in completing modules for which credit/exemptions are sought.

The question of fees to be charged to applicants who seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC on the basis of RPL is expected to be considered as practice develops.

*2.3.d) How many assessment centres and/or assessors exist to date? Where are such assessment centres located? Please specify the areas/regions with characteristics of such areas/regions (e.g. the average income, the income disparity, etc.) How was the decision made of where to locate such centres? How much does it cost to maintain such centres and/or assessors? How many training programmes for assessors exist: specify how many in a given year, if there are significant increases per year? How much does it cost to train such assessors? Break down by levels assessed, if relevant.*

There are no dedicated assessment centres for RPL in Ireland. Rather this activity, where it is practiced, is either offered alongside existing assessment arrangements of providers or tends to be a pilot or once-off project. Responsibility for assessment generally rests with those who provide education and training programmes. These range from the universities and Institutes of Technology to over 1,400 further education centres.<sup>56</sup> The latter are found throughout the state and include adult and community training centres, vocational education committees, FÁS training centres, literacy centres and work-based learning

---

<sup>56</sup> FETAC, *Further Education and Training in Ireland, A quantitative Analysis*, December 2005, p.9 at [www.fetac.ie](http://www.fetac.ie)

centres. With respect to qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications, assessment is organised within the context of overall policies and procedures established by awarding bodies.

## **Component 2.4. Others**

*2.4.a) Provide any other institutional arrangements that you think are the most important characteristics that exist in your country, which have not been addressed in above Component 2.1, 2.2, and 2.3.*

In contrast with some European countries, the RPL arrangements in Ireland that lead to qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications are fully integrated with the existing arrangements for qualifications e.g. they operate within the overarching funding arrangements, rules and regulations on provision, quality assurance and assessment. The policy approach is to integrate RPL with the existing qualifications system rather than develop a separate system of regulation for RPL. However, it should be noted that informal and non-formal prior learning continues to be recognised for purposes that are not connected to qualifications or may lead to qualifications that are outside the Framework and thus lack national recognition.

## **Component 3. Description of technical arrangements**

### **Component 3.1. Qualifications, qualification systems, qualifications framework**

*3.1.a) What term does your country use for 'Recognition of non-formal and informal learning'? Please provide the original term in your own language as well as the literally translated term in English. Please describe if the term has certain connotations, implications, specific associations, etc.*

The terminology used in Ireland in respect of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning has evolved over time and in respect of different levels of practice. The work to develop national principles and guidelines for the recognition of prior learning (2005) included developing a common working definition of RPL as a means to promote common understandings and usages. This definition includes formal, non-formal and informal learning. The definition took account of existing usage and practice at national and European Union levels. The following definition of RPL was agreed:

“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 be formally rewarded for it. The term ‘prior learning’ is learning that has taken place, but not necessarily been assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. Prior learning may have been acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal routes.”<sup>57</sup>

This definition emphasises prior learning and conceptualises RPL as a process of distinct stages. The term RPL encompasses other definitions which may be used in local settings e.g. Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL); Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL); Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL); Recognition of prior learning (RPL); Accreditation of Prior Learning and Achievement (APL&A); Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC); and Learning Outside Formal Teaching (LOFT). The terms APL and APEL remain in use in universities, providers and in some workplace contexts. However, a common understanding of the term RPL and the concept is emerging.

The definition of RPL should be understood in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications and the purposes of RPL. The purposes of RPL are set out in the Authority’s Policies, Actions and Procedures

---

<sup>57</sup> NQAI (2005), *National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning* <http://www.nqai.ie/en/Publications/File,824,en.doc>

for Access, Transfer and Progression (October 2003) (<http://www.nfq.ie/nfq/en/documents/atp.pdf> ) as being:

- entry to a programme leading to an award
- credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements
- eligibility for a full award.

*3.1.b) Describe if recognising of non-formal and informal learning is likened to, or embedded into, qualifications, qualification systems, or qualifications framework in your country. Provide data, if any, illustrating the impact of such linkages*

*3.1.c) What kinds of qualifications (e.g. certificates, diplomas, degrees, licenses, etc.) are more linked to recognition of non-formal and informal learning? What are the difficulties or obstacles in linking recognition of non-formal and informal learning to qualification systems or qualification framework?*

The overall national policy approach is to link RPL to qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications. This is supported by national policies on credit in higher education and the principles and operational guidelines for RPL (described in Component 2). The Framework reinforces the key principle of lifelong learning to bring about a cultural change and focus in education and training provision. The national policy approach is to develop RPL in respect of qualifications in the Framework rather than to devise a separate system or set of qualifications achieved on the basis of RPL. This supports the underlying aim of valuing all learning achievements equally, regardless of routes or pathways towards them, and of relating them to each other on the same basis (i.e. learning outcomes). All qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications are available under the RPL route. Prior to its introduction, qualifications that were linked to RPL tended to be outside the formal qualifications system i.e. the qualifications were particular to the students/programme and were not generally transferable or integrated into the formal qualifications structures of institutions or national awarding bodies. The full implementation of the Framework, the progressive inclusion of awards in it<sup>58</sup> and the development of new types of qualifications are expected to increase the possibilities for developing RPL in the future.

Prior learning achievement is assessed against the learning outcomes associated with programmes, or parts thereof, that lead to qualifications in the National Framework, or in the case of direct applications to the awards Councils, qualifications in the Framework.

The outcomes of RPL are :

- entry to a programme where an applicant has not acquired the formal qualifications usually required for entry
- credit which provides the learner with advanced standing or exemptions from units of the programme which lead to a qualification on the National Framework of Qualifications. Within the HETAC sector, most institutions currently apply ceilings of maximum of 50% of programme learning outcomes which can be obtained through RPL.

---

<sup>58</sup> Having included the awards made by national awarding bodies in the framework (States Examination Commission, HETAC, FETAC, the universities and institutions with delegated authority to make awards), the process of including awards made by other bodies e.g. those with a statutory responsibility to make awards and awarding bodies based outside the jurisdiction is underway since late 2006. See [www.nfq.ie](http://www.nfq.ie) for details.

- Achievement of a qualification in the NFQ based on an assessment of learning outcomes associated with that qualification. This RPL route is referred to as a ‘direct award’. It enables direct access to all qualifications on the NFQ without reference to a programme by means of a direct application to the awards Council (FETAC or HETAC).

In general, there is widespread practice of RPL for programme entry in both further and higher education and training. One of the projects undertaken as part of the FETAC pilot (2006) saw a further education college review existing informal arrangements for recognising non-formal and informal learning for entry to programmes as part of a more inclusive approach to admissions. This resulted in the integration of RPL into its formal admissions policy.

*Specific areas in which learners access RPL:*

#### Workplace

In work-related cases, the RPL process is used to ascertain the kind of learning needed by individuals or groups to bridge the gap between their existing learning achievements and those required in the workplace. This can lead to the design of specific programmes or units. This has been used in respect of prior certificated learning as well as (uncertified) experiential learning (where higher levels of qualifications are subsequently introduced, for example, this is well established practice in respect of nursing). An example of this is the two year Bachelor of Engineering in Quarry Management (Ordinary Degree) which was designed to provide a formal qualification for personnel working in the quarries sector and those seeking appointment as quarry managers. A range of entry levels are facilitated including that of the recognition of a minimum of five years approved experiential learning. Exemptions can be given for appropriate experience in relevant areas.<sup>59</sup> The programme was designed by Athlone Institute of Technology and the quarrying industry.

In the case of the Nursing profession, prior learning achievement may be assessed in respect of the Ordinary Bachelors Degree, Honours Bachelor Degree and post-graduate qualifications. This allows nurses who achieved the relevant qualifications for practice at a previous time, which were at lower levels than currently required for practice, to access qualifications now required for practice. For example, nurses who graduated in 1980 with a Certificate in Nursing may apply to undertake a one year Bachelor of Nursing Studies programmes. Some such nurses may currently work in senior positions e.g. Clinical Nurse Specialist but may not have qualifications to recognise this level of learning. Should they provide evidence that they have adequate experience at this level, they may be exempt from taking access modules required for entry and instead progress directly onto the programme.<sup>60</sup> A similar situation exists with respect to post-graduate qualifications where prior certified and uncertified experiential learning is recognised. Most of the demand relates to entry to programmes. Exemptions can also be given on the basis of RPL subject to ceilings.

Another example of programmes where entry is on the basis of RPL in a relevant area are occupational/work-related programmes e.g. undergraduate Diploma in Arts (adult guidance and counselling) offered by NUIM.

In the area of post-graduate education and training to meet professional development and/or personal development needs, prior learning may also be used for entry to programmes. Examples include the higher diplomas in personnel management; in learning, development and work-based training and in safety, health

---

<sup>59</sup> This programme has been accredited by the Institute of Quarrying. For details see <http://www.ait.ie/courses/engineering/ndtechquarry.shtml>

<sup>60</sup> In other cases, applicants may be required to complete access modules in order to enter Honours Bachelor Degree programmes. See entry requirements for Bachelor of Nursing(Honours) degree, Dublin City University, [www.dcu.ie](http://www.dcu.ie)

and welfare at work offered by UCC.<sup>61</sup> At present, the inclusion of related qualifications associated with these programmes in the National Framework of Qualifications is being progressed by the universities.

In the construction sector in general, FÁS has operated the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS)<sup>62</sup> since 1997 to give access to experienced non-craft operatives to qualifications and registration cards (for employment) required under workplace health and safety regulations. The three main categories of workers in question, to date, are plant operators, roofers and scaffolders. Experienced workers undergo specific training and assessment programmes and upon successful completion acquire a registration card and qualification (FETAC award). The list of tasks for which workers must have registration and qualifications was expanded in the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Construction) Regulations 2006. Training and assessment in these areas is currently (2007) being put in place for new entrants. It is anticipated that some 60,000 registration cards have been issued in the period 1997-2007 and that a significant number of other cards have been renewed in that period (in accordance with regulatory requirements).

FÁS also operates an exemptions process for registered apprenticeships whereby apprentices with relevant experience and/or qualifications may acquire exemptions from a full phase of the apprenticeship. This has operated for some time.

In further education and training, a pilot project with nine providers operated by FETAC in 2006 indicated a demand from learners to acquire qualifications in certain fields due to work-related requirements and regulations. An example of this is the requirement for a (NFQ) Level 4 minor award in security guarding for national licensing purposes and subsequent employment.

#### Higher education - mature students and adult and community education

RPL is generally operated in the context of increasing access and participation by specific groups of learners (mature students, disadvantaged groups) and, in particular, in the area of adult and community education, continuing professional development and in some specific fields. In many cases, institutions (at central level) are first focussing on extending entry routes by recognising a wider range of prior 'certificated' learning. As this is achieved, attention then shifts to the recognition of prior experiential learning.

Usually, mature students (i.e. those over 23 years of age) are eligible to access programmes on the basis of age alone, subject to availability of places. Access programmes are generally designed to prepare mature students for participation in higher education and may be tied to entry to the institution offering the access programme. These allow for progression to programmes leading to Honours Bachelor Degrees and other qualifications. Foundation programmes are generally designed for individuals who have been out of the formal education system and now wish to enter higher education.<sup>63</sup>

Programmes in adult and community education generally lead to qualifications at levels 7-9 in the NFQ. They can lead to major or minor awards. RPL can be used for entry, credit and/or exemptions. Many of these programmes are offered on a part-time basis. In some cases, entry can be achieved on the basis all

---

<sup>61</sup> See Centre for Adult Continuing Education, Programme Guide, 2006/07, University College Cork

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.fas.ie/en/Training/Employee+Training/Construction+Skills+Certification+Scheme/> and Health and Safety Authority, [www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)

<sup>63</sup> An example of this is the National University of Ireland, Galway foundation courses in science, technology and engineering and in business/commerce. There are no specific entry requirements for this course (Leaving Certificate standard is desirable).

forms of RPL while only certified prior learning can be recognised for exemptions and/or credit.<sup>64</sup> Some of these programmes are designed to facilitate access to other qualifications. In an increasing number of cases, successful completion of adult and community education programmes leads to entry to programmes leading to major awards on the NFQ and/or credit towards those programmes i.e. they provide pathways to the more established qualifications system.<sup>65</sup>

*Difficulties or obstacles in linking recognition of non-formal and informal learning to qualification systems or qualification frameworks:*

Many of the difficulties encountered in Ireland are similar to those identified in general studies and reports on RPL e.g. thematic group report in the OECD's 2007 report *Qualifications Systems: Bridges to Lifelong Learning*<sup>66</sup> and have been indicated in earlier sections of this report. In general, the pace and scope of implementation of the NFQ will impact on the availability and use of RPL. The framework assists RPL by setting out overall standards and describing learning outcomes under three strands - knowledge, skill and competence - as the basis for qualifications; by introducing level descriptors; and by developing new types of awards. There is research evidence (e.g. VaLeX survey, internal survey of practice by HETAC, evaluation of FETAC pilot project) which points to the positive role of learning outcomes in creating a common basis or reference point for RPL.

For all sectors of education and training, obstacles to linking RPL to the NFQ occur when the programme/unit/module leading to the qualification on the NFQ is not adequately or fully described in terms of learning outcomes and/or where the applicant has difficulty in interpreting the learning outcomes. The evaluation of the FETAC pilot project (2007, p.16) notes that in some cases providers and learners had difficulties in understanding and interpreting the concept of learning outcomes. It is expected that this situation will improve with the full implementation of the Framework. This lack of fit makes it difficult to both present and assess prior learning achievement. There may also be some fields of study where the assessment of prior learning on the basis of learning outcomes alone may be difficult or contested. For example, a number of respondents to the VaLex survey of RPL practice in higher education (2004)<sup>67</sup> stressed that 'the use of learning outcomes for AP(E)L is conceptually difficult in a higher education context where knowledge is not generally pegged to measurable occupational competence standards' (p.5). This point also relates to education philosophies and attitudes to learning outcomes, on the one hand, and perceptions of RPL on the other. In practice, in the university sector, RPL assessment is carried out on the basis of achievement of, as appropriate, learning outcomes, curriculum and/or programme standards and objectives. Practical difficulties also relate to the 'fit' between learning outcomes as described in the NFQ and the kinds of evidence that is deemed eligible for assessment as well as the assessment methodologies for qualifications at different levels in the Framework. There is some evidence to suggest, for example, that the portfolio approach may not be appropriate for qualifications at lower levels of the Framework.

---

<sup>64</sup> For example, for entry to NUIM Bachelor of Arts in Local Studies and in Community Studies (modular evening part-time).

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, details of credit and progression routes for Adult continuing education diploma programmes in the Centre for Adult Continuing Education, Programme Guide, 2006/07, University College Cork. Another example, of a programme that leads to an undergraduate diploma and is a pathway to an Honours Bachelor of Science Degree is the Diploma in Rural Development offered by four universities by way of distance learning. This is the National University of Ireland Distance Learning Programme in Rural Development offered, since 2004, by NUI Maynooth, NUI Galway, University College Dublin and University College Cork

<sup>66</sup> [http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,2340,en\\_2649\\_33723\\_38465013\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.oecd.org/document/53/0,2340,en_2649_33723_38465013_1_1_1_1,00.html)

<sup>67</sup> See *AP(E)L in higher education in Ireland*, [http://www.valex-apel.com/content/news-events/june\\_04\\_nature\\_ap.doc](http://www.valex-apel.com/content/news-events/june_04_nature_ap.doc)

In the past, the lack of nationally recognised qualifications outside the major award-types restricted the potential value of learning achieved through RPL (as many programmes and qualifications linked to RPL were not themselves widely recognised or integrated into the national qualification system). The development of minor, special purpose and supplemental awards in the NFQ is expected to open up greater possibilities for RPL. The implementation of the Framework and wider availability of credit, modularisation and flexible part-time programmes are factors that facilitate RPL. Broader awareness of RPL amongst providers and learners and greater awareness and use of learning outcomes across all sectors are also important.

The diffuse nature of responsibilities and practice for RPL within and amongst providers and the absence of data collection on RPL, makes it difficult to develop a comprehensive view of the scale of activity and degree to which RPL is resisted or incentivised. The lack of discussion or debate at institutional level could mask resistance and/or reflect a lack of awareness or lack of demand for RPL. At a philosophical level, where RPL is debated, there is some resistance to RPL in the university sector on the basis that it challenges the ownership and production of knowledge outside the academy. Linked to this, Geoghegan (1996, 40) argues that the conceptualisation of access to higher education in Ireland is generally framed in terms of structures and infrastructure but with little challenge to universities' role in framing knowledge within their own elite constructs. Perceived threats to quality assurance and maintaining integrity of the university's awards system are also sources of resistance. For example, the policy of University of Limerick explicitly states that 'in applying RPL the University will be cognisant of the need to ensure that the integrity of its awards is rigorously guarded and that academic standards are maintained. The learning achieved by the applicant must be equivalent to the learning outcomes or performance criteria already set down for the programme of study and must be supported by evidence as required by the university'.<sup>68</sup>

In higher education, there appears to be a general lack of awareness of RPL amongst staff, an absence of institutional policy (with some exceptions) and lack of dedicated resources for RPL. Pockets of practice exist within institutions but are generally not widely known. The extent to which practice exists is linked to the overall openness of existing admissions policies (which may meet the needs of diverse learners including those that seek RPL for access), overall student numbers (which may reduce the pressure to develop RPL routes) and academic structures which may mitigate against offering RPL for credit and exemptions. The latter concerns delivery, assessment and marking systems, under-developed credit and modularisation/unitisation which can create barriers to RPL. In institutions or fields of learning where demand for student places is high, there is little perceived need to develop RPL policies.

At a technical level, RPL poses a challenge to assessment processes and methodologies in all sectors of education and training. The contextualisation of prior learning and the transfer of that learning to a different learning context can be difficult. Providers may be unfamiliar with assessment methodologies used for RPL. Moreover, it can be the case that the applicant needs to have reflective and conceptual skills to gather and present evidence of prior learning that are at a higher level than that of the qualification in question and which may not be required of learners who take the traditional route to the qualifications. The VaLex survey (above) noted that practitioners in higher education noted the lack of fixed assessment criteria, lack of grading and apparent lack of uniformity as weaknesses in the arrangements which existed at that time (2004).

The consequences of introducing RPL for overall approaches to assessment, programme design, grading, credit and the subsequent valuation of learning can also hinder the introduction of RPL. For example, the

---

<sup>68</sup> Presentation by Dermot Coughlan, Director, Lifelong Learning and Outreach, Recognition of Prior Learning, the University of Limerick experience, presented to Conference on Accreditation and Assessment in Irish Higher Education – the emerging scenario', Maynooth, 26-27 January 2007

policy document of the Dublin Institute of Technology (2006, p.9) notes the wider implications of introducing RPL as follows:

‘A fully implemented strategy will require a conceptual shift in understanding of the learned curriculum as well as the taught curriculum. It will also require conceptual shifts in approaches to assessment mechanisms, and to assessment criteria as they relate to experiential learning, both prior and concurrent. It will also require a change in how prior experiential learning is dealt with in the design of programmes, especially in cases where programmes are designed with, and for, companies/organisations/adults in the workplace. This dimension of RPL requires both intellectual consideration and resourcing’.

Likewise, in some cases, uncertainty about employer’s acceptance of RPL and in particular the existence of regulatory stipulations concerning the kind of learning required for practice can act as constraints.

*3.1.d) Describe if there are differences in such linkages depending on whether the qualifications are professional or academic recognition. Can the link be a means of establishing ‘legitimacy’ both in working life and in the academic education system?*

Within the context of the qualifications system and the NFQ, the distinction between professional and academic recognition does not arise. Qualifications that are included in the Framework may also be ‘recognised’ or accepted by professional and regulatory bodies for practice. In general, professions, especially where they have a statutory power to make or recognise awards, are involved with programme providers in programme design and standards setting (see section 3.3c below). Their main concern is that of ensuring that relevant standards are achieved. The route taken by a learner towards qualifications is largely a matter for the programme provider (unless legislation stipulates otherwise or is otherwise agreed between providers and professional bodies). In some cases, the professional body may itself develop an RPL process or work with providers to develop one, particularly in cases where new regulatory requirements are introduced.

*3.1.e) If your country has a national qualification framework or is in the process of establishing one, what is the relationship between the development towards recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the development of the qualification framework? Can one be a driver for developing the other? Or, do the qualification framework and its implementation in practice and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning develop in parallel?*

The development of the National Framework of Qualifications and its relationship to the Recognition of Prior Learning was set out in Component 2.1 above. The introduction of the learning outcomes-based framework, the development of new types of qualifications and overall measures to improve access, transfer and progression for learners will facilitate RPL. It is envisaged parallel action to develop national guidelines and principles for RPL for providers and awarding bodies will further support the practice of RPL and help co-ordination and harmonisation across the various sectors. In practice, it is recognised that action on a number of fronts is needed and that the implementation of the Framework is generally a critical factor in developing further RPL. It should be noted that Framework implementation is a long term process and involves significant change in all sectors of education and training.

*3.1.f) What are some potential threats of recognition of non-formal and informal learning to higher education institutions, employers, and individuals? How can resistance from such sectors/groups be overcome to embed the recognition of non-formal and informal learning into the qualification systems or qualification framework?*

There are many factors, common to both further and higher education and training that inhibit the development of broad-based RPL activities (e.g. from comprehensive policies to marketing of RPL outside specific fields or cases) at present. These include:

- lack of awareness, knowledge and understanding of RPL amongst providers (at all levels within them) and learners
- RPL is generally a marginal activity for providers – the market for RPL is seen to be small and non-lucrative. There are competing priorities in higher education in particular (both on staff and institutions)<sup>69</sup> RPL is costly in terms of time and staff to operate. Lack of tools, supporting documentation and detailed guidance also hinders activity.
- academic and teaching staff as well as employers are often sceptical about the value of learning achieved in a site or location other than the formal one. There are perceptions that RPL offers an easier and sub-standard route to a qualification; that it may threaten the integrity of qualification standards and in some cases, could undermine provider/institutions reputations and standards. There is no evidence or research carried out to date on employer or employee perceptions of RPL, in general.
- some higher education institutions fear that inconsistent or un-coordinated institutional approaches to RPL could lead to applicants shopping around for the maximum level of exemptions, advanced standing or credit for their prior learning.
- the assessment of prior learning is often viewed as being (extra-) difficult or impossible in some fields of learning and can be seen as a threat to the traditional methods of learner assessment. There is also an additional challenge to ensure fairness between ‘traditional’ and RPL assessment mechanisms.
- there is uncertainty about the level of demand for RPL at all levels and, in general, a sense amongst institutions that demand for RPL is small. Therefore, investment in developing processes and supports might not yield sufficient returns for providers. In general, the resourcing of RPL is deemed to be too high by many small providers.
- the individual applicant faces difficulties in terms of workload in preparing a portfolio and, in some cases, the reflective skills required to describe prior learning. This effort often exceeds the effort of participating in the programme/module as a full-time learner. The time taken to complete the RPL process may also be a disincentive. Absence of mentoring and guidance can also inhibit RPL.

---

<sup>69</sup> For example, in higher education, the competing priorities are, in particular, the current public policy objective of developing and extending fourth level education (post-graduate level), enhancing quality, reforming academic structures, meeting new roles in the knowledge economy and as concerns lifelong learning, and operating within a context of tight financial constraints (marked by high dependency on direct state funding).<sup>69</sup> This is leading to an increased range and diversity of programmes, more flexible delivery modes, and new partnerships or linkages with community, industry and workplace groups. With respect to universities, they are working to include the full range of awards in the National Framework of Qualifications, developing further their credit systems and, where not already practiced, modularisation. These developments will impact on the opportunities to develop RPL. Within this context and the overall demographic factors shaping participation, universities differ in respect of their responses and objectives.

### *Addressing concerns and difficulties*

- a) There is a need for greater clarity on the part of policy-makers in particular about the potential for RPL to meet policy objectives (which would inform funding and the scale of RPL that is wished for).
- b) A systematic and consistent approach to quality in RPL policies and procedures could address perceptions about integrity of standards and value of learning. The explicit embedding of RPL processes and procedures into existing quality arrangements and institutional policies, as is the practice in some institutions, would assist.
- c) Raising the general awareness of RPL and its potential value and linking this to other institutional activities/objectives such as increasing adult participation, programme design, learning outcomes, alternative forms of assessment and new teaching and new more innovative methods of teaching and learning.
- d) Training for mentors, assessors and others engaged in operating RPL is necessary.
- e) The provision of public funding for RPL activities could encourage the spread of RPL activity and make it sustainable.
- f) Joint approaches by institutions and providers to developing and sharing documentation, developing assessment tools, information, advice and general support for potential RPL applicants at the very initial stages of the process could potentially offset some of the high initial resource costs incurred by institutions during the start-up phase and early stages of RPL. This approach is currently being tested in a pilot project between the universities and Institutes of Technology (Lionra Project – see case study, component 5 below).
- g) Proactive initiatives on the part of national agencies in supporting of RPL such as support for networking, developing more detailed guidelines, awareness-raising, dissemination of practice and co-ordination with funding agencies could be undertaken. The need for this was one of the main findings of the FETAC pilot project evaluation.
- h) Specific research could be undertaken to follow-up the progress of learners who have achieved recognition of their prior learning in specific domains. This could assist in identifying areas for future action.
- i) The evaluation of FETAC pilot project contains recommendations for national bodies, providers and funding agencies to address current challenges and weaknesses in the system. These include encouragement for the development of specialised centres of RPL excellence in the delivery of RPL, action to address quality assurance, the development of templates and tools to assist and support providers, and improved communication to providers about their responsibilities for RPL. It is also recommended that FETAC should gather and publish data on learner's use of RPL, develop further its guidelines and procedures and monitor activity in the area. FETAC supports the recommendations in the National Skills Strategy to develop new initiatives to support flexible and responsive training provision and adequate funding to ensure learners move one step up the national framework of qualifications. It also recommends that providers should develop RPL as a new strand of their quality assurance policies and procedures, that all providers should commence the development and implementation of RPL policies and procedures. They should have appropriately trained personnel, resources and supports for RPL in place. The report also recommends that funding agencies should address the issue of appropriate funding for providers to offer RPL for entry, credit and/or exemptions as well as to providers that can enable learners to access full awards on the basis of RPL.

### **Component 3.2. Credit accumulation and transfer**

3.2.a) Describe 'formal' academic credit arrangements or systems for non-formal and informal learning, if they exist. What are general policies, objectives, and regulatory frameworks for such credit arrangements? How are the arrangements used - at similar levels, between different levels, or between different sectors? Provide data, if any, of actual users (number of users, at what level, which sector, number of users who went through a transition path (from school to work; work to school; school to a higher school, etc.)

3.2.b) Who is/are responsible for credit arrangements or systems for non-formal and informal learning? Are the arrangements different to those set up for formal learning?

3.2.c) How is credit counted? Please specify how credits are counted, and on what basis, in your country.

3.2.d) What are the incentives or disincentives for participants to gain credit and providers to give credit?

3.2.e) Describe, if this is the case, how the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is integrated in the vocational education and training (VET) system through credit system: e.g. the dual system to integrate experiential learning.

3.2.f) Provide data, if any, concerning how the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is integrated in the higher education (HE) system through credit system: e.g. research on the growing number of (take-up of) internships, etc.

#### **Overall national policy approach to Credit**

Following the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – in partnership with education and training stakeholders, through its Technical Advisory Group on Credit – has been working towards the development of a national approach to credit. A twin track approach has been pursued (one for further education and training, and one for higher education and training), as the way forward on credit is more clearly signposted for higher education and training at this time within the context of the Bologna process and the general acceptance and use of ECTS in higher education institutions.

#### **Credit in Higher Education**

As part of this process, a set of 'Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training'<sup>70</sup> were developed, and adopted by the Authority. All Irish higher education awarding bodies are operating within these arrangements.<sup>71</sup> The operational guidelines recommend that a typical credit volume or credit range be established for each major award-type from levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions and current practice in the Irish higher education system as follows:

Level 6 Higher Certificate	= 120 credits
Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	= 180 credits
Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	= 180-240 credits
Level 8 Higher Diploma	= 60 credits
Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	= 60-120 credits
Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma	= 60 credits

<sup>70</sup> The principles and operational guidelines are available at: <http://www.nqai.ie/en/Publications/File1,843,en.doc>

<sup>71</sup> In addition, in the HETAC sector, a common credit system, the *Accumulation of Credit and Certification of Subjects' (ACCS)* has operated since 1989.

Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research) do not usually have credit values assigned them. National discussions on developing a possible credit range for these qualifications are at an early stage.

### ***Credit arrangements in Further Education and Training***

There are as yet no specific credit arrangements in the FETAC awards system for further education and training. FETAC is in the process of designing a single awards system for the sector which will facilitate and meet some of the overall objectives of credit systems. All new FETAC awards will be developed in the context of the National Framework of Qualifications. From 2008, all new FETAC awards are expected to will include characteristics which will directly facilitate and support credit, accumulation and transfer. Currently, (2007), most but not all FETAC major awards are divisible into minor awards (which can be stand-alone or combined to make up a major award).

### **Component 3.3. Assessment methods and procedures**

*3.3.a) Describe the assessment arrangements. Who carries out assessments, and with what type of approaches? Who validates the results of the assessments? How long will the assessment procedures take? If methods or procedures vary depending on sectors, list the name of the sectors and the methods used for the recognition for the sector. Describe different stages that participants go through (what they would experience) to get their non-formal and informal learning recognised.*

#### ***1) Overall approach to assessment, HETAC sector***

##### *a) Assessment of applications for entry, credit/exemption*

Assessment of prior learning for entry, credit and exemptions is carried out by providers within the HETAC sector within the context of general policies and procedures on assessment developed by HETAC and providers, the national principles and guidelines for RPL and HETAC policy on RPL. Assessment methods are tailored to the object of RPL. The most common method used is that of a portfolio. This can include a curriculum vitae, project work, direct evidence-based material - e.g. previous publications, essays, evidence gathered/verified and written examinations. An interview or viva voce may form part of the assessment procedure. Generally, preparation for assessment requires substantial inputs from the applicant. Provider supports range from initial guidance to individual mentoring and to fully established programmes for applicants on how to develop the portfolio of evidence. The mentor is not usually involved in the assessment process. Assessment process is normally carried out by a member of academic staff/trainer from the department/centre offering the module/subject/programme. Results of the assessment process are normally processed in line with providers's standard assessment process and procedures. In the Institutes of Technology, this typically involves processing results through an RPL committee or a programme board or through a college examination board meeting which may or may not involve external moderation by an External Examiner.

The typical stages of assessment involve: pre-assessment consultation, submission of RPL application; interview with the applicant; preparation of the portfolio, assessment of portfolio, outcome. The length of time taken to complete the assessment process is variable. The national principles and guidelines (2005) state that the process should be conducted in a reasonable timeframe. The Lionra APL project study (Component 4 below) found that the entire process could take up to 12 weeks from the submission of the initial application to a determination.

In all cases, the assessment methodology used depends upon the type of evidence provided and the level of the award, exemption or credit sought. For example, where applicants have published extensively and the award sought is a postgraduate research award a public viva voce examination is a compulsory part of the

assessment carried out. Third party verification of prior learning is also an important part of the assessment process.

*b) Assessment of applications for full awards (direct application)*

Prior to the submission of an application to HETAC, an initial consultation is carried out between HETAC and the applicant to discuss the nature, range and scope of the life experience and learning achievement that typically arise under this policy. The principal criterion in submitting an application is that the applicant must be able to demonstrate that he or she has attained the relevant HETAC standards for the award sought. The standards of knowledge, skill and competence for each HETAC named award are the basis for assessment. For non-research awards, evidence must be given to show that the learning has contributed to the applicant's knowledge, skill or competence, up to and including the level of the award sought. For research degrees, particularly at doctoral level, there must be evidence of also making a substantial contribution to knowledge in general. In the case of research degrees, the assessment process will be carried out having regard for HETAC's Policy on Taught and Research Programme Accreditation Policy, Criteria and Processes ([www.hetac.ie](http://www.hetac.ie))

The assessment process will determine if the evidence provided by the applicant for the learning achievement [and verified by a third party] is the true work or achievement of the applicant and has reached the required standards for the award sought. At present HETAC selects and engages an external panel of three expert assessors. They, together with HETAC, decide on the type of assessment mechanism(s) to be applied. HETAC may also request the assistance of a higher education provider in forming an opinion as to whether an applicant has achieved the standard of the award sought. Following the recommendation of the assessment panel HETAC will a) make an award; or b) decline to make an award. The assessors may also identify gaps in the applicant's knowledge skill or competence where the applicant is unsuccessful.

**2) Overall approach to assessment, FETAC sector**

*a) Assessment by Providers (entry, credit/exemption)*

Assessment for entry, credit and exemptions is carried out by providers within the context of FETAC's draft policies and guidelines ([http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL\\_Policy\\_and\\_draft\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.fetac.ie/rpl/RPL_Policy_and_draft_guidelines.pdf) ). RPL is carried out by providers with respect to entry to a programme, and credit/exemption from programme requirements. Providers are responsible for determining detailed procedures within the context of their quality assurance policies and FETAC's award arrangements. Assessment of prior learning of individuals is subject to the same criteria that providers apply concerning standard assessment. Assessment focuses on the demonstration of achievement of the standards (learning outcomes) for an award by the learner. The FETAC draft guidelines emphasise that, with respect to RPL for entry, providers should set out minimum acceptable criteria for successful participation, and the applicant should be given an opportunity to highlight the relevant prior learning in relation to these and entry criteria. In relation to exemptions, the evidence presented by the applicant must demonstrate clearly how, when and where the relevant programme requirements are met. Assessment may be carried out directly by them or by a suitably qualified third party – the key criterion is that assessors have appropriate expertise in the relevant field. In all cases, the assessment process is externally verified to ensure consistency and compliance with standards. An appeals mechanism should also be put in place. To-date, assessment is not carried out for credit and this will be possible once FETAC has developed its credit system for the further education and training sector.

The FETAC draft guidelines set out a wide range of possible sources of evidence that may be the basis for assessment. These include work experience, training, personal experience, work/projects completed, voluntary work. The draft guidelines also set out that the evidence must meet 70% of all the learning

outcomes required for entry, exemption. The evidence is also scored on the basis of a scale of 0-100%. Evidence is scored and graded by the assessors. Criteria of sufficiency, currency, authenticity, and validity must be followed.

b) *Assessment for full awards (direct application to FETAC)*

In the case of direct applications to FETAC for a full award, FETAC engages providers to carry out assessments. Prospective applicants are advised to seek the assistance of a provider in identifying an appropriate award. An initial application is made to establish eligibility for an award and, if successful, a portfolio or collection of evidence is submitted by the applicant for assessment. Eligibility criteria include assessment of the commitment and ability of the applicant to undertake the assessment process. Assessment for a full award is based on the standards for the given award that the applicant seeks. The range of evidence that can be presented is the same as that for applications for entry or exemption. Assessors return one of three possible decisions: the applicant reaches the required standards; almost meets the required standards and needs to provide additional evidence, or has not provided the required evidence to prove that he/she has met the standards for the award. The applicant may be required to undertake further assessments(s) as appropriate to demonstrate achievement of the standards (2005, p. 8). The overall assessment process is subject to the same guidelines and policies that apply in the case of assessment for programme entry or exemptions.

**3) Overall approach to Assessment, University sector**

The situation with respect to assessment arrangements within institutions in the university sector is similar to that in the HETAC sector, the major exceptions being that they do not offer direct access to qualifications and that they are each responsible for their own policies. Assessment is carried out by academic staff in the relevant field and usually involves assessment of a portfolio of evidence. In general, the principles of fairness, transparency, validity, reliability, accountability and a right of appeal for the applicant apply. The form and range of relevant evidence is determined within the context of overall policies and the programme of learning in question. The University of Limerick, for example, provides for the following sources of evidence: participation in exactly the same form of assessment as other students entering or already on the programme of study, portfolio, demonstrated skill or competence, reflective papers or journal articles that relate previous learning to the stated learning outcomes of the programme or module in question, evidence from the workplace or other setting where the student has applied their learning or competence and testimonials of learning or competence.<sup>72</sup> Where relevant, this may be followed by a viva voce. The assessment is also subject to external examination, in like manner to the processes followed in respect of formal learning.

*3.3.b) Describe assessment methods and procedures. Provide data on advantages and challenges for the different types of assessment (e.g. competence-based assessment, summative assessment, portfolio assessment, etc.) What are the principle drivers of costs of different types of assessments to different actors? Provide evidence, if any, that certain types of assessment may become beneficial or a barrier to certain participants (e.g. psychological, financial, etc.).*

For entry/or exemption for subjects on a programme, the portfolio requirement is the most widely used assessment mechanism. Assessment may, in some cases, involve an interview. There is some evidence provided to suggest that for certain fields of learning and in particular at Ordinary and Honours Bachelor Degree level, the workload for the applicant to complete the learning is particularly significant. The level of work required for completion of the portfolio can exceed the effort required by typical higher education learners to complete the subject/module in question. The concern is that this could be a deterrent to

---

<sup>72</sup> Presentation by Dermot Coughlan (2007) footnote 58, above.

applicants. A number of institutions are looking at the possibility of developing electronic portfolios as a means to reduce the workload of applicants. Developing familiarity with the portfolio method is an issue for some applicants.

There is little evidence available on the costs/benefits of different kinds of assessment and their effects on applicants.

*3.3.c) Describe the current relationship between academic standards, professional standards, and occupational standards in your country. Who owns and controls such standards? Are there any overlaps?*

The awarding bodies (FETAC, HETAC, universities, DIT and institutions with delegated authority from the awards Councils) are responsible for the determining of standards for awards included in the national framework of qualifications. Detailed policies and procedures for the determining of standards of knowledge, skills and competence for awards have been developed by these bodies. In developing these standards, they have regard to the needs of learners, industry and workplace needs.

In December 2006, the FETAC Council agreed policies in relation to the implementation of a Common Awards System, which will enable the ongoing development of new awards. When implemented, the Common Awards System will take the place of the existing and varied processes of the former awarding bodies FÁS, Fáilte Ireland (CERT) Teagasc and NCVA awards developed as part of the Common Awards System will be published in the form of Award Specifications. A Standards Advisory Board was established in March 2007 to oversee and manage the development of new FETAC awards. Members of the Advisory Board include representatives of industry, social partners and providers. A number of Standards Development Groups will be set up in 2007 to develop awards in accordance with the Awards Plan.

In November 2003, the HETAC Council adopted the generic award-type descriptors of the National Framework of Qualifications (the Framework), as Interim Standards, for the development of programmes on the Framework. In 2005, the Council adopted award standards for five fields of learning – Art and Design, Business, Computing, Engineering and Science. The Interim Standards will continue to be the standards for awards in all other areas.

### **Professional Bodies and Accreditation/Recognition**

*From 'And Never the Twain Shall Meet'? Exploring Quality Assurance and Professional Accreditation/Recognition in a Changing World, Context Paper for Participants at the Irish Higher Education Quality Network conference, 17 October 2006, Dublin (www.iheqn.ie)*

There are over one hundred professional bodies operating in Ireland with membership numbers ranging from less than one hundred to several thousand. There are currently no grounds set by the State regarding the basis upon which professional bodies can be established or recognised. The role and functions of professional bodies can include the regulation of a profession or of the use of a professional title, representing and promoting the advancement of a profession, providing opportunities for the continuous professional development of members and protecting the public interest by setting standards and ensuring that members perform in accordance with these standards.

There are relatively few regulated professions in Ireland. For those professions that are regulated, a competent authority is assigned to determine the eligibility or otherwise of applicants seeking to work within that field. The role of the competent authority in this context is to maintain a register of persons whose qualifications are recognised for the purpose of working in the profession and to review and make decisions on qualifications presented from abroad, in accordance with the relevant EU Directives. A

number of other professions have informal or voluntary systems of registration organised by the respective professional body.

The accreditation/recognition processes in place for reviewing the provision of professional education and training in higher education and training institutions varies from body to body and often depends upon the basis under which the professional body was established. Professional bodies can be established by statute or Charter and their memberships and/or their qualifications can also be recognised by statute or Charter. These professional bodies award qualifications that may lead to membership and/or registration. Some professional bodies that are not based in statute or Charter have, nevertheless, strong public recognition for their membership and/or their qualifications.

Some professional bodies do not make awards themselves, but provide membership or registration based on the achievement of the awards of other awarding bodies (predominantly in the higher education and training sector) or other criteria not administered by the professional or registration body. Other professional bodies provide for membership or registration following an assessment process similar to that used for the award of qualifications in higher education and training, again often subject to additional criteria. Accreditation/recognition processes carried out by professional bodies range from full institutional reviews to the review of a syllabus submitted by a higher education and training institutions.

*3.3.d) Has the issue been raised in your county of how the assessment practice should be balanced with the right of individuals to have their learning completely independent of assessment and recognition processes? Describe the nature of the debate to date, if any*

There has been some debate, particularly in the community and voluntary sector and in the adult education sector, preceding the introduction of the National Framework of Qualifications, on the value of accreditation of informal and non-formal learning for learners. The issues raised included the formal accreditation of programmes of informal learning (by awarding bodies) as well as the valuing and formal recognition of individual's non-formal and informal learning (which would entail assessment of the individual's learning). A research report, published in 1994, by the Combat Poverty Agency<sup>73</sup> identified the value attached by learners in the sector to having their learning (formal, informal and non-formal) formally assessed. This was sought in order to achieve qualifications that have broad value and understanding outside the local context e.g. in terms of progression, acceptance in the workplace, transfer to other programmes. A major research finding was the large interest amongst learners and programme providers in having the option of formal recognition available to learners (at the time, such recognition was not generally available for community-based programmes). The research also found a preference for assessment to be optional rather than to be a requirement for programme participation. The other issues raised in the report that have a bearing on assessment are the interests of the community/learners in safeguarding the ethos and value of their learning and in negotiating assessment arrangements with programme providers/awarding bodies. This shows how control of assessment is connected with the larger debate about what learning and whose learning is valued and the extent to which existing power structures are challenged (or not) by different approaches to RPL.

The development of the NFQ and the associated development of a comprehensive awards system in the further education and training awards sector have brought new possibilities for the recognition and assessment of RPL (an integrated system of qualifications, shift to learning outcomes as the common basis for assessment in respect of all learning, including non-formal and informal). The broad thrust of national

---

<sup>73</sup> Mary Kelly (2004) *Can you credit it? Implications of accreditation for learners and groups in the community sector*, Combat Poverty Agency

policy is to link RPL to qualifications on the framework – this means that prior learning must be assessed in order to achieve those qualifications.

A major innovation in respect of RPL was introduced in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 which sets out that learners may seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC without having participated in specific programmes. This formally de-couples qualifications from programmes and underlines the shift in emphasis towards learning outcomes (rather than for example time spent on programmes or curriculum content).

*3.3.e) How is the recognition of non-formal and informal learning quality-assured in your country? Who is responsible for the quality assurance process? How is the issue of quality assurance treated in the internationalisation context?*

Within higher education and training, RPL practice takes place within the context of the overall quality assurance arrangements for higher education. These involve different roles, as provided under the Universities Act, 1997 and the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 – for the institutions and the awarding, funding and supervisory bodies.<sup>74</sup> The overall policy thrust is for institutions to have ownership and responsibility for their own quality assurance. One of the main issues prompting the development of institutional policy on RPL is the need to safeguard standards and the integrity of the qualifications. This finds expression in the ways in which RPL practices are embedded in quality assurance procedures within institutions or in specific RPL procedures which address quality issues e.g. in principles of fairness, transparency and robust assessment processes. Quality assurance can be critical to achieving internal support, encouraging practice and building credibility in RPL. The overall trend is to apply existing principles and procedures for quality assurance, where relevant, to RPL. In the case of the assessment of direct applications for HETAC awards, HETAC engages a minimum of three assessors/examiners (including international examiners) for the assessment of each application for a direct award to ensure that appropriate standards are reached.

FETAC's policy approach is also to embed RPL in the quality assurance arrangements of providers registered to offer programmes leading to FETAC qualifications. Only providers that are registered with FETAC and have the requisite quality assurance arrangements in place can offer RPL in respect of FETAC awards. The evaluation report on the FETAC pilot project (2007) recommends that providers who wish to offer RPL for awards and who can show evidence that they can do so should be specifically quality assured by FETAC to offer RPL for the purpose of enabling learners to achieve an award in a particular field of learning. It identifies the key issues to be addressed as: information for learners, mentoring and advice, allocation of roles and responsibilities, professional development of staff, assessment, ensuring achievement of standards and monitoring and review of policies and procedures.

#### **Component 3.4. Others**

*3.4.a) Provide any other technical arrangements that you think are the most important characteristics that exist in your country, which have not been addressed in above Components 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3.*

None.

---

<sup>74</sup> For details on these see, Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance / Quality Improvement for Irish Higher Education and Training, Irish Higher Education Quality Network (IHEQN), at [www.iheqn.ie](http://www.iheqn.ie)

## Component 4. Stakeholder behaviour

### Component 4.1. Characteristics of stakeholders

4.1.a) Identify all possible stakeholders involved (with specific characteristics) and complete a list below to complement the list for Component 2.2. The 2.2 list is to map out governance and the role of government while this list aims to map out the relationships among providers of non-formal learning; types of informal learning; recognisers of such learning; types of recognition to be received; kinds of regulatory framework of such recognition; and main users of such recognition.

Note that in the Irish context, a single set of arrangements concerns the recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning. These are set out in the table below.

**Table 5. Non-formal and Informal learning (Characteristics of Stakeholders Grid)**

Provider of non-formal learning (e.g. universities, for-profit private companies, enterprise in-house training, government, NGOs, etc.)	Recogniser of non-formal learning (e.g. government, quasi-government, universities, companies, professional bodies, trade unions, etc.)	Types of recognition received (e.g. academic qualifications such as degrees, diplomas, credits, awards, certificates, etc.; and professional qualifications, etc.)	Regulator (e.g. quality assurance agency, professional body, government, etc.)	Main user(s) (Specify)	
Public and private providers of education and training.	Recognition by FETAC or HETAC in the case of achieving full award on the basis of RPL  -FETAC, HETAC, university, Dublin Institute of Technology and providers with delegated authority to make awards  - recognition by providers/awarding bodies in the case of entry, credit and exemptions  - recognition by statutory bodies in accordance with relevant legislation	1. Acceptance to enter a programme  2. Credit towards programme requirements  3. Exemption from programme requirements  4. Qualifications	FETAC, HETAC, universities, Dublin Institute of Technology and providers with delegated authority to make awards	<input type="checkbox"/>	People after army service
				<input type="checkbox"/>	High skilled immigrants
				<input type="checkbox"/>	Low skilled immigrants
				<input type="checkbox"/>	Retired people (Specified the retirement age in your country.)
				<input type="checkbox"/>	Unemployed (over 30 years old)
				<input type="checkbox"/>	NEET (Not in Employment nor in Education or Training) age between 15/16-30
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Others (Specify)				
				<input type="checkbox"/>	Those in the workplace, professional, adults, those in the community, those who have not completed upper secondary education

### Component 4.2. Access

The term access is understood in the following sections to refer to access to RPL processes by individuals. That access can take the form of programme entry, credit/exemptions and access to full awards. The term access is usually understood in the context of Ireland's education and training system to refer to the access by disadvantaged groups to education and training programmes in general.

*4.2.a) What are the eligibility criteria for going through the recognition process? If it differs in different sectors/levels (e.g. HE, VET, upper secondary, basic education, professional, etc.), describe different entry requirements for different levels/sectors.*

The specific criteria for RPL for entry, credit/exemptions and access to full awards are determined in respect of the qualification in question and more broadly in the context of overall admissions policies/arrangements of providers. In general, in respect of qualifications the National Framework of Qualifications, the key entry criterion is that applicants must show evidence of having attained the factors necessary as a basis for successful participation in the relevant programme.<sup>75</sup> The general eligibility criteria in respect of those seeking RPL are: significant prior learning in a field relevant to the programme, personal motivation to participate, capacity/aptitude to understand and be able to participate in the process, availability of support and time to participate.

*4.2.b) How many educational institutions at different levels practise the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as an admission policy?*

It would appear that all higher education institutions and many providers of further education and training use RPL for programme admissions, in particular in respect of mature students and disadvantaged groups. In the further education and training sector, the former awarding bodies of Fáilte Ireland, FÁS, NCVA and Teagasc have significant experience of operating RPL and continue to offer it for entry as well as exemptions (however, statistics on this are not available). The objective of FETAC is that all providers within its remit will offer RPL for access, credit and/or exemption from programme requirements and that all must develop appropriate processes for this. All providers who are registered to offer FETAC awards must agree their arrangements for RPL as part of their quality assurance systems with FETAC.

*4.2.c) Describe (the situation of) access to information and effective communication. Is there a one-stop information service centre or help-desk for questions which may arise concerning the recognition system? What medium has been used (leaflet, CD-ROM, website, etc)? If there is a website, please provide the figure of 'click ratio (how many clicks per month – please provide all the records available since the launch of the website.)'. Attach an example. What media channels have been used to publicise the existence of such medium (newspaper, journals, free journals, publicity on the metro, etc)? Specify the names of such media channels.*

Limited information is generally available on RPL as such. The general trend is for providers to indicate in documentation on course material that access to programmes can be achieved by traditional (formal or certified learning routes) or the equivalent, thus leaving open the option for RPL without actually naming it as such. This also applies to most programmes although in some cases such as nursing where RPL is widely practiced for credit/exemptions, its availability is clearly indicated in programme material (written and web-based). Any communication takes place within the context of overall marketing/communication of programmes through websites, course materials etc. of the different providers. There is no national one-stop-shop for information on RPL. Usually, the availability of RPL becomes known through indirect channels e.g. in the context of general information materials on specific programmes, qualifications, special projects or access programmes.

As indicated in the Lionra case study (Component 5), significant efforts are required to stimulate awareness of RPL. It used a variety of channels – from local media to workplace presentations – raise awareness. This was also identified as an issue to be addressed in the FETAC pilot project evaluation (2.1.g above). It appears that the limited information made easily available on RPL is linked to resourcing

---

<sup>75</sup> NQAI (2003) Policies, actions and procedures for access, transfer and progression for learners, p.32

issues (including availability of funding for communications/awareness) and concerns on the part of providers that it may not be able to meet increased demands for RPL.

### **Component 4.3. Participation**

*4.3.a) How many people have actually completed the process at different levels? Provide evidence, if any, on the patterns of participants (gender, age, socio-economic groups, ethnicity, employment status, marital status, educational levels and their family educational levels)?*

In general, higher education institutions do not gather data on learners who achieve access, credit/exemptions for prior learning. Those accessing programmes by way of RPL are not generally identified in student enrolments, although some groups of learners such as mature students can be identified. Likewise those who have achieved credit or exemptions as a result of RPL are not separately recorded or identified in overall student records (although some data may be available at local level). Some statistics may be available for particular programmes or pilot RPL schemes on the basis of direct requests to institutions and departments/centres offering RPL. An exception to this is Cork Institute of Technology which through the DEIS records students already registered with the Institute who have applied for credit/exemptions on the basis of RPL. These show that some 1060 portfolios of prior experiential learning were submitted over the period 2000- April, 2006.

Fifty persons participated in the FETAC pilot project. This involved a mix of 50 persons male and female from variety of socio-economic backgrounds. They were all employed at the time. No further details on their status is available.

*4.3.b) Provide details of any survey – national household survey, user survey, etc. – that explains any linkage of the background of participants and the uptake of the recognition process.*

None available. Note that national surveys on lifelong learning (e.g. 2003 Quarterly National Household Survey survey and labour market surveys carried out by the Central Statistics Office, [www.cso.ie](http://www.cso.ie)) to-date concern participation in non-formal and informal learning only and not the recognition of prior learning for programme entry, credit/exemption or access to full awards.

*4.3.c) Provide evidence, if any, that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning worked as an innovative pathway for disadvantaged groups to get on the 'learning leads to learning' and 'training leads to training' track. Who constitutes the 'disadvantaged group' in your country?*

Given the stage of development of RPL in Ireland, the fact that many projects are one-off pilots and that RPL practice is disparate, there is little available evidence or analysis of the subsequent up-take of learning by those who have had their prior learning recognised. It is generally acknowledged that RPL can and does provide an access route to education and training for disadvantaged groups. The adult education, community and voluntary sectors have traditionally argued the case for RPL as a way to facilitate and encourage persons within those sectors to achieve public/national recognition for their learning, to recognise the kind of learning that they engage in, support personal development and self-esteem, and potentially, encourage a return to education and training. Engagement in the process of RPL – e.g. the identification of prior learning, development of portfolios can itself guide persons to appropriate education and training programmes and give confidence about ability to succeed. In some cases, in particular higher education institutions, there are increasing pathways between adult and community education and professional development programmes, on the one hand, and the 'traditional' education and training programmes of institutions (e.g. certificates, diploma, degree programmes). This means that once a person has accessed and successfully participated in the initial programme, there are increasingly pathways to further (additional) education and training.

The evaluation of the FETAC pilot project (2007) noted that, for those learners surveyed, learners were strongly influenced to take part in RPL in order to attain qualifications needed for the workplace and that gaining a recognised qualification was stated to be very important to all of them. It should be noted that at present, within higher and further education and training, and in the FETAC sector in particular, the demand for RPL is largely from existing experienced workers.

#### *Disadvantaged Groups*

In terms of access to education and training,<sup>76</sup> the following broad groups within this category are:

- students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds
- mature students
- students with disabilities
- students from ethnic minorities.

#### **Component 4.4. Incentives and disincentives**

*4.4.a) Provide evidence, if any, that the recognition of non-formal and informal learning functions as a transitional or multi-directional pathway in your country (e.g. a way to further studies, shorten study period, get a job, change a job, get a better salary, etc.) If it functions as a way to find a job after being unemployed, is there any evidence that the length of unemployment influences the transition?*

There is no available statistical evidence on the progression of persons who have successfully achieved qualifications or accessed them on the basis of RPL. A report to CEDEFOP on case studies of RPL in further education and training sector in the mid-1990s found that, in respect of the workplace, that the motivation for undertaking RPL was linked to statutory requirements for certification of workers, restructuring in the workplace, opportunities to develop and upskill the workforce, employer's interests in having certified workforces and a wish to attain quality standards in the workplace.<sup>77</sup> This suggests that employer motivation is significant in facilitating employee participation in RPL (this finding is borne out in the FETAC pilot project, 2007).

Practitioners in RPL in higher education and training note that RPL serves learners as a route to access programmes, to undertake further studies and to meet qualifications needs in the workplace. There is no available evidence available on whether success in achieving RPL has had an impact on subsequent career progression or salary.

*4.4.b) Provide evidence, if any, of detailed case studies where the actual length of studies was shortened by their recognition of non-formal and informal*

No detailed studies of this nature are available. It is likely that learners who seek minor awards through RPL should be able to attain the major award more quickly than by undertaking formal learning. Other

---

<sup>76</sup> The evaluation of third level access programmes, Higher Education Authority (2006), *Towards the best education for all: an evaluation of access programmes in higher education*, refers to these four distinct groups which are under-represented in higher education (p.9).

<sup>77</sup> *Report to CEDEFOP on Accreditation of Prior Learning, Ireland*, July 1997, by FÁS Training and Employment Authority

than that, RPL appears not to be a shorter route to achieving qualifications – the process is time-intensive regardless of qualification and level of education and training in question. The FETAC evaluation report (2007), for example, finds that some learners surveyed indicated that, had they known how much work was involved in taking the RPL route to credit/exemptions, they would have taken the formal route instead. In cases where credit or exemptions have been achieved by RPL, learners often opt to participate in the related programme components without formal assessment. The national principles and guidelines (2005) state that RPL processes should be conducted in a reasonable time frame. The process should ensure that, where possible, the applicant can complete the recognition process in a shorter time than it would take to achieve the relevant unit, module, programme or award. However, it should be recognised that the pre-assessment phase of RPL (including where potential applicants may be encouraged to apply, where potential applicants are informed about possibilities and the process) can involve considerable investment of time.

*4.4.c) Provide data, if any, of the returns of investments for different stakeholders. Any evidence of better private returns of investment (e.g. earnings) afterwards? Is there any evidence of fiscal returns? Is there any evidence of recognition that this type of learning contributes to democracy and citizenship, lower crime rates, and better health as social outcomes of learning?*

No evidence available for Ireland.

*4.4.d) Provide data, if any, of practices of fiscal incentives for employers (e.g. tax incentives).*

There are financial incentives available to employers in support of workplace education and training through the National Training Fund and through participation in EU-funded projects. In some existing cases of workplace training (e.g. construction, hospitality sectors, Lionra APL project in higher education and training sector), employers are partially funded to engage in RPL activity. There is however no dedicated public funding line for RPL per se.

*4.4.e) Has the government made an explicit statement about promoting equity and social cohesion by using the recognition of non-formal and informal learning? If so, what kinds of schemes exist?*

There are limited references in the public discourse on equity and social cohesion to the possibility that RPL, as part of overall packages or measures, can assist in achieving government objectives. To-date there are no explicit government commitments in this area concerning RPL.

*4.4.f) Explain whether or not there is stigmatisation of qualifications issued by the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (as opposed to qualifications from formal education. Are such qualifications seen differently in the academic world and/or in the labour market? If yes, have there been any attempts to change such effects and to increase up-take of such recognition? What strategies have been tested so far?*

There is no evidence of any such stigmatisation. This may be due to the linkage of RPL to existing qualifications included in the National Framework of Qualifications; the relatively low numbers of learners who achieve access, credit/exemptions through this route, and a lack of public knowledge about whether students have taken an RPL route or not. The main issue concerns, in some quarters, scepticism about the validity of in particular informal or experiential learning, perceptions that RPL involves easier routes to qualifications and in the case of access to full qualifications, fundamental concerns about the validity of awards that can be achieved without any associated formal education or training (particularly in higher education and training). Some of these concerns can be and have been addressed through awareness-raising, discussion, debate and direct experience of RPL.

There is some evidence to suggest that, where for example, it is specified that particular qualifications must be achieved in order to be eligible to apply for jobs, grants etc., those who have achieved those

qualifications or progressed in education and training on the basis of being recognised as having achieved equivalent learning outcomes, may encounter difficulty. This difficulty appears largely to do with lack of awareness of RPL and, more broadly the shift in emphasis to learning outcomes that the National Framework of Qualifications is bringing about. This suggests that the implementation and increased awareness of the Framework and its broader implications will be important to broader acceptance and support for RPL.

*4.4.g) Describe any incentives or levers that promoted public-private partnership in the recognition practices in the labour market. What schemes or incentives exist to encourage Small and Medium-sized Enterprises to engage in the recognition arrangements?*

As indicated in earlier sections, the need for certification of workers (often driven by regulatory requirements), interest and need for upskilling and ability to access public funding for workplace training are key factors in encouraging enterprises and employers to engage in training and in RPL in particular. The FETAC pilot projects show that support from employers to release and support workers who engage in RPL is important to employee engagement in RPL.

#### **Component 4.5. Others**

*4.5.a) Provide data on arrangements of collective agreement that exist in your country. If there are accomplishments gained by collective agreement for recognition of non-formal and informal learning, please provide details (driving forces, technical arrangements, beneficiaries, etc.)*

None in place. However, the social partners have expressed interest in RPL in the broader context of supporting workplace education and training and labour force upskilling.

*4.5.b) Provide any other stakeholder information that you think illustrates the most important characteristics in your country, and which have not been addressed in above Component 4.1, 4.2, 4.3, and 4.4*

It might noted that informal and non-formal education and training which does not lead to qualifications is widespread but that this report is focused only on informal and non-formal learning that is/may be recognised in respect of qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications.

## **Component 5. Case studies on benefits and barriers**

*Currently, the existing work provides the evidence of benefits in fragments. This section aims to initiate collecting data in a systematic way – starting with case studies. The Secretariat has identified benefits from existing work and framed them into categories, being aware that there is some overlap in categories: i.e. economic, educational, social and personal. Please provide some evidence with case studies if such benefits are identified in your country. On the contrary, if tension or resistance exist as barriers to such benefits, please also describe such cases.*

Four case studies are presented below. Two of these were carried out as part of the FETAC pilot project (Failte Ireland and Killester College of Further Education). The third is an on-going, joint project in higher education institutions, the Lionra APL project and the fourth concerns a workplace initiative, on-going, developed in partnership between industry and an higher education institution (Masonite Ireland – Institute of Technology, Sligo)..

## Case study 1 - Failte Ireland (National Tourism Development Authority)

1. Description	
Centre name and product/service area	National agency with responsibility for tourism development and education and training for the hospitality sector in Ireland.
Purpose/objective of RPL	RPL offered to persons in the industry with skills in professional cookery and bar management. The RPL process is part of a strategy of Failte Ireland to achieve recognition for skilled personnel in the hospitality sector. Most of the participants acquired their skills informally at work in a lifelong learning capacity and had no formal education and training in the sector.

2. RPL Processes and procedures	
Elements of prior learning to be included	Prior learning of applicants considered to include: Lifelong learning including knowledge, skills, ambitions, attitude, generic & specific competences, know-how, performance, experience within the hospitality sector
Steps in the procedure to be followed by the applicant	Initial contact made with Failte Ireland and FETAC by individuals seeking recognition of skills Group briefing on the process by RPL Coordinator and FETAC Comprehensive skills analysis of each individual with a subject matter expert and detailed learning outcomes for the award involved. Initial assessment of the skills analysis of the individual Formal assessment of practical and theoretical skills of the individual and/or a portfolio with interview to determine competence Results of assessment processed in the standard process used for assessment of learning by Failte Ireland. This includes results approval and awarding of FETAC certificates
How was the applicant informed/contacted?	By post, email, telephone and by attendance at the centre for the skills analysis and assessments. Individual is responsible for participation in the process. Individual paid a fee of €85 to register and participate.
Tools/instruments/methods are used for identification and valuation of competences?	RPL/APL Briefing notes and presentation; RPL/APL brochure; Individual application forms; Skills analysis statements of learning outcomes – workbook and notes and assessment records for individuals tests
How is informal learning measured and valued?	Informal learning is assessed by practical and theory assessments based on the learning outcomes for the awards.
Which criteria are used to accept candidates for RPL?	In 2006, 22 candidates participated – all completed the process.
What kinds of advice/feedback may be made by assessors or	- Thus far all applicants have been successful - All affirmation of the applicant's ability, competences and

mentors, guiders, peers, examiners, etc?	experience at the assessment phase have been shown to have a strong positive effect on the applicant. One candidate has indicated that she wishes to continue her education to a higher level.
What are the subsequent steps in the validation process?	Where the applicant is deemed suitable he or she is called for the briefing and undertaken the skills audit. If the applicant is deemed unsuitable he or she is referred to another programme of education and training.

### 3. Quality Assurance

What overall quality assurance arrangements are in place?	The centre is a FETAC Quality Assured provider with policies, procedures in place for all aspects of its education and training service provision to learners.
---	--

### 4. Outcomes

<p>What were the overall outcomes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- for the organisation in charge</li> <li>- for the target group</li> <li>-</li> </ul>	<p>This process is in place for around 10 years. Fáilte Ireland values this service to individual in the industry and continues to offer the service presently. There are some indicators at the organisation may use other providers to undertake the APL process on their behalf but this has not happened to date.</p> <p>The RPL/APL process has a direct impact on the individuals who participate in respect of formal recognition of their skills, knowledge and competence which has a positive impact on their employment prospects.</p>
--	---

### 5. Issues identified in RPL process

<p><b>Strengths</b></p> <p>RPL encourages inclusiveness and provides better more focussed support to students (learners). RPL provides access to awards for individual who would otherwise not achieve recognition and national certification</p>	<p><b>Opportunities</b></p> <p>RPL/APL is of particular value in a sector where there is much informal and non formal learning and mobility of workers within the sector. This is the case for the hospitality sector.</p>
<p><b>Weaknesses</b></p> <p>RPL is resource intensive and skilled personnel such as mentors and assessors are critical to its successful implementation.</p>	<p><b>Threats</b></p> <p>Structural changes in Fáilte Ireland and review of strategic objectives may lead to a reorganisation of provision. Existing capacity may need to be redeveloped, i.e., staff may need training in RPL processes.</p>

## Case study 2 - Killester College of Further Education, City of Dublin Vocational Education College

Description	
Centre name and product/service area	College of further education providing full time and part time programmes to an increasing number of adult learners
Purpose/objective of RPL	RPL utilized to access programmes. RPL implemented as an access tool for adults who have not acquired entry level (formal) qualifications. The group concerned have not completed second level education and have relevant life experiences.

2. RPL Processes and procedures	
Elements of prior learning to be included	Prior learning of applicants considered to include: knowledge, skills, ambitions, attitude, generic and specific competences, know-how, performance, experience.
Steps in the procedure to be followed by the applicant	All staff briefing on the RPL process prior to recruitment of new learners. RPL included as part of the standard application process Potential students are interviewed. Information on RPL is included in the prospectus of the centre RPL process operated during the course of open days for potential applicants
How was the applicant informed/contacted?	By telephone and informally by dropping in to the open day
Tools/instruments/methods are used for identification and valuation of competences?	Candidates were interviewed to evaluate their prior learning
How is informal learning measured and valued?	Initially this was accomplished using a five-point Likert scale of ability / suitability by the course tutor. This proved to be unwieldy and was replaced by a three-point scale. Assessment mechanism is kept under review.
Which criteria are used to accept candidates for the procedure?	In 2006, all applicants were successful. 26 of a total of 41 who were offered programme places took them up.
What kinds of advice/feedback may be made by assessors or mentors, guiders, peers, examiners, etc?	- Thus far, all applicants have been successful - All affirmation of the applicant's ability, competences and experience at the assessment phase have been shown to have a strong positive effect on the applicant.
What are the subsequent steps in the valuation process?	Where the applicant is deemed suitable, the offer of a programme place is made, if the applicant is deemed unsuitable the possibility of suitability for another programme is investigated.

### 3. Quality Assurance

What overall quality assurance arrangements in place?	The centre is a FETAC Quality Assured provider with policies, procedures in place for all aspects of its service provision to learners.
---	---

### 4. Outcomes

What overall outcomes were reached: - for the organisation in charge - for the target group	As the process has been in place since September 2005, it is too early to evaluate its impact on the organisation. It has enabled individuals to access to further education
---	---

### 5. Issues identified

<b>Strengths</b> RPL encourages inclusivity and provides better support to students	<b>Opportunities</b> Using RPL as an access mechanism will open further education learners who might otherwise not even consider the possibility of engaging in further education
<b>Weaknesses</b> Discussions are ongoing with FETAC to determine best practice with respect to evaluation criteria	<b>Threats</b> None identified

### Case study 3 - Lionra Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) project, 2006-2007

#### Background<sup>78</sup>

Líonra, the higher education network for the Border, Midland and Western (BMW) region of Ireland was established in 2001. Membership of the network comprises the five Institutes of Technology, namely Athlone (AIT), Dundalk (DKIT), Galway-Mayo (GMIT), Letterkenny (LYIT), Sligo (IT Sligo), the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG), St Angela's College, Sligo and the BMW Regional Assembly. It aims to provide a collaborative response to the education and development challenges facing the BMW Region.

#### Project Aims and Objectives

The APL project received funding from FÁS - the National Training Authority - under the 'Training for People in Employment Initiative'. It seeks the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in Information Technology (IT) for companies operating in the BMW region. The project aims to meet the expressed need across the region for upskilling of IT skills among the workforce, particularly in small and medium enterprises. Many employees in these enterprises have acquired some knowledge and skills relating to IT, but these are often uncertified. Gaps in their IT knowledge/skills need to be identified and addressed. The initial timeline for the project was extended from 12 to 15 months and runs from March 2006 to July 2007.

All of the participating Institutes of Technology in this project offer Higher Certificate Courses in Office Information Systems or equivalent. They agreed to develop a common APL methodology for awarding exemptions to IT modules on such courses. APL would enable them to offer those who qualify for exemptions a fast track to attaining a Higher Certificate.

#### *Major project deliverables*

- General awareness training in APL processes delivered in enterprises across the BMW region.
- 20 mentors in selected companies across the BMW region trained to support staff in portfolio preparation re APL of their IT skills.
- Third Level Certification in APL mentoring provided for these 20 mentors.
- 250 individuals trained in portfolio preparation. Mentoring provided for these people while they are producing their portfolios.
- Three staff members who are IT subject matter experts trained in portfolio assessment in each participating Líonra Network college.
- 250 portfolios assessed, individual gaps in learning identified, exemptions from IT subjects offered, and third level certification awarded in individual IT subject areas where merited.
- Common methodology for APL in relation to IT subjects developed and agreed by Líonra Network of colleges.

#### *Project methodology*

A core team of 4 people was involved the project with support of a steering group, Lionra and its member colleges. Two full-time APL facilitators were employed and located in two of the Lionra institutions and with a remit to cover all participating institutions. A project administrator and project leader (part-time position) oversaw the project. The project addressed three main areas: policy, project activity and systems issues.

---

<sup>78</sup> This is an edited versions of a more detailed case study prepared the Lionra APL project team, April 2007, for this activity. Its contribution is gratefully acknowledged.

1. Policy A draft policy on accreditation of prior learning was developed based on national and international research. This was circulated to the Registrars of participating institutions for discussion and eventual adoption as institutional policy.

2. Project Activity Project activity in 2006 involved creating awareness of APL, development of policy for APL for adoption by participating institutions within the timeframe and remit of their own operations, development of a common methodology for APL within participating institutions, raising awareness amongst employers and employees, and academic staff, developing promotional materials, common training materials and common documentation for use within institutions. In 2007, the main focus has been on training APL applicants and preparation of portfolios.

The project is due to finish at the end of July 2007, thus activity is still ongoing. By early May 2007, 237 people in employment received training in APL awareness, while 180 people received training in portfolio development. Some 70 portfolios were prepared and submitted for assessment. As a suitable module in mentoring was not available in time, an NQF Level 6 minor award in mentoring was developed by AIT and will be delivered to 20 mentors in May-June 2007.

There was a significant response to training for staff in most of the institutions. Training for potential applicants was also delivered. Whilst the project has focused on applicants with Information Technology Skills, a noticeable feature is the number with skills in other areas, e.g., in engineering, science, construction who seek recognition of their prior learning. Every potential applicant is facilitated under the project.

3. Systems issues It became apparent early on in the project that issues were being identified which relate to systems activity within institutions. These could not necessarily be solved within the timeline of the project but could be identified and addressed either directly by institutions or by another project. These issues include: the recording of APL applicants and their results within the IT 'Banner' system used by the Institutes of Technology and NUIG's own system, Quercas (IT systems used to track learners, assessment, results) and (in)ability to insert exemptions, grades, credits into these systems. The need for an appeals mechanism for applicants also arises.

## **Project Benefits**

The Lionra/FAS project has actively promoted the concept and methodology of APL to industry in the BMW region. The benefits to employees from the project have been

- the opportunity for people in the workplace who have developed IT skills (or other) through non-formal and informal learning to have them recognised for credit or exemption
- the chance to complete other modules as well
- the chance to register for other parts of a programme with the intention of achieving a full award

Issues identified in dealing with applicants include:

- APL can be a complex process to explain
- Lack of awareness of the concept of lifelong learning
- Feeling that they 'have to do the course' to ensure they achieve the qualification
- perception that the burden of work exceeds the benefit
- difficulty for the learner in interpreting learning outcomes
- demand for entry using APL is higher than demand for exemption or credit

Uptake by potential applicants influenced by:

- Perceived difficulty of the process
- Desire by candidates to learn and not just receive recognition for prior learning
- Perceived cost of completing programmes (part-time course costs are high and full-time students that receive exemptions are no longer classified as full-time by Department of Education and Science with the result that Institution concerned loses student subvention for them)
- Lack of flexible learning opportunities

Benefits to companies from APL include:

- stimulating employee interest in education and training
- using APL as a means of benchmarking employee learning
- the prospect of a better qualified workforce
- APL can act as a motivator for the workforce
- Helps employers invest in training in the areas where it is most needed
- Acts as a tool for staff retention and good relations
- helps upskill people in the workplace by providing access to third level education and training

Issues identified in dealing with industry include:

- marketing APL is an issue due to the lack of a defined customer base. Targeting industry broadly generates enquiries for a broad range of modules and programmes and benefits the higher education institutions by creating awareness of programme availability. However, the workload involved in dealing with these enquiries is significant.
- without the marketing effort, APL will generate only random applications.
- companies generally want recognition for their training programmes rather than recognition of the prior learning of employees

## **Education benefits**

For the participating institutions it has

- provided a policy on APL for the Lionra institutions to adopt and implement within their own timeframe and operational priorities
- provided an APL resource - the APL facilitators - to whom enquiries and potential applicants can be directed
- provided resources in the form of promotional materials and procedures for dealing with APL applicants
- provided training on APL for academic, admissions and access staff in the participating institutions
- provided an access route into some programme for applicants (other than IT-related), e.g., in Construction Technology
- provided information on the interests and needs of local industry in relation to education and training outside of standard programmes
- raised awareness with potential learners i.e. those in the workplace, of education opportunities in the participating institutions
- provided information to institutions on the type and nature of programmes that are of interest to learners in the workplace e.g. part time programmes, programmes offering certification in the form of minor awards

Issues identified in relation to institutions include:

- the time and resources required to promote, inform and process applicants is far in excess of that for standard student body

- standardisation of modules and assessment across schools would assist development of APL and currently this is a complication
- quality standards must be maintained and this is also perceived as a problem in APL assessment
- obtaining syllabi for modules can be an issue and frequently the learning outcomes are difficult to interpret from a APL perspective especially for the applicant – therefore causing significant additional workload on mentor/facilitator

***Initial conclusions of the Lionra APL project***

The project indicates the need for a national strategy on RPL. It indicates the role of RPL in recognising the knowledge, skill and competence individuals have acquired in informal settings such as the workplace and in their private activities. Attention needs to be given to developing an understanding of the language of certification, e.g., award, learning outcomes and assessment; to the time to develop a portfolio of evidence related to an award and to resources and support for applicants throughout the RPL process. For providers, there is a need for funding, training, more flexible provision and adaptation of IT systems to manage RPL. For Awards Councils, the project indicates a need for more awards in different fields of learning and at different levels, the need for minor, supplemental and special purpose awards and clear procedures for applicants. At national level, the project suggests that funding of RPL is a major issue to be addressed.

#### **Case Study 4 - Masonite Ireland and RPL**

A project developed in 2002 between Masonite Ireland, a producer of timber compounds and the Institute of Technology, Sligo brought work place learning requirements together with the experiential learning of the workers and resulted in a tailor designed programme for Masonite workers. The programme consisted of modules taken from four different Higher Certificate programmes in Engineering that were running on a full-time basis in the College in the areas of Mechanical, Electronic, Industrial and Automation/Computer Aided Precision Engineering. The programme was delivered over a two-year duration on-site in Masonite near Carrick-on Shannon. Expertise from Masonite provided occasional practicals, tutorials and some lectures. In November 2004, 17 graduates of the programme received a Higher Certificate in Engineering in Combined Studies. Many graduates emerged with an interest in progressing to the next level of qualification on the National Framework. Seven further employees subsequently graduated with a bachelor of Engineering in Mechatronics, Level 7, in November 2006.

This initial collaboration with Masonite resulted in the development of a new Bachelor Ordinary Degree programme at level 7 of the National Framework of Qualifications. This new programme commenced in September 2005 and is called a Bachelor of Science in Manufacturing Management. It was designed to up-skill the Masonite employees in their positions and to increase the competency, confidence, efficiency and knowledge of the employees and in turn promote the company to a higher position in the economy "value chain". It is aimed at employees demonstrating a potential for progression into team-management positions. It was developed jointly by the Department of Business and the Department of Manufacturing and Engineering in the Institute of Technology Sligo. The overall objective of the programme is to develop front-line Managers in a manufacturing environment by improving human resources and business skills while improving operational and technical capability. Fifteen employees entered this programme in the first cohort. Programme delivery facilitates shift work and uses a blended approach consisting of on-line lectures and pedagogy delivery on-site in the company, therefore minimising disruption to the company operations.

Masonite employees underwent an RPL process, administered by IT Sligo, to facilitate entry to the Bachelor Degree programme. This involved the recognition of prior certification and the assessment of prior experiential learning gained in the work place. The outcomes of this process were quantified on a scoring chart. Depending on the score achieved, the learners gained either access to the BSc in Manufacturing Management programme, were required to undertake supplementary learning before gaining access or were advised to undertake a level 6 programme of study before entry to the BSc.

## Component 6. Conclusions

*6.a) Which national goals, if any, in your country, reflect/incorporate 'the recognition of non-formal and informal learning' ?*

*6.b) What strategies (short-term, mid-term and long-term) are needed to put into operation the 'recognition of all types of learning outcomes – including formal, non-formal and informal learning' in your country? What are the most challenging tasks for policy-makers in this respect?*

*6.c) Address important policy issues for your country which have not been addressed in any of the previous components/sections*

*6.d) Please describe how much the 'Lifelong Learning for All' strategies are implemented at post-compulsory education level in your country?*

*6.e) Please list some 'factors' which you think are necessary conditions to realise the 'Open Learning Society' scenario, i.e. the society that provides learning opportunities any time in life and gives values to any types of learning outcomes.*

These conclusions, in line with the broad thrust of the questions above, briefly summarise the key findings of this report and indicate areas that could be considered in developing more focused national policy on the Recognition of Prior Learning.

The recognition of prior learning in Ireland is closely associated with the promotion of lifelong learning and the full implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. The term 'recognition of prior learning' is used in this report to refer to the recognition of (prior) non-formal and informal learning for qualifications. The term 'prior' concerns learning that has taken place, but has not been formally assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. The focus of the report reflects the national policy approach to RPL which is to support its use in entry to programmes, credit towards/exemption from programme requirements and access to full qualifications which are in the National Framework of Qualifications. The report does not address non-formal and informal learning per se but only how prior informal and non-formal learning is recognised in respect of qualifications. It is not the intention of national policy that all learning should lead to qualifications or indeed that all learning can or should be assessed in respect of qualifications. Neither is it the intention that all informal programmes should lead to qualifications. Instead, the approach is to facilitate an individual who seeks to have his/her prior learning recognised and to devise appropriate mechanisms for this.

For some decades, as the report shows, RPL has been used in Ireland to facilitate broader access to education and training programmes (particularly by adult learners in further and in higher education and training), to meet workplace requirements and personal needs/interests of learners. The number of learners who avail of RPL has been and remains small compared to those who access education and training qualifications by formal routes. There is a range of practice and experience in RPL in many fields of education and training. However, it is noted that there is little statistical data available on the scale of RPL, demand for it, submissions/applications for RPL, outcomes of assessment and outcomes/follow-up for individuals. There is also limited analysis, to date, of the issues at play in relation to the three distinct areas of RPL activity - programme entry, credit/exemptions and access to full awards. The use of RPL for access to full awards is a new development, provided for in the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, and practice is limited to the work of the awards Councils, HETAC and FETAC.

Since 2000, key national developments relating to RPL are the introduction of legislation, national principles and guidelines, policies of Awards Councils, the National Framework of Qualifications and the

availability of some dedicated funding for RPL practice. The implementation of the Framework and associated policies on access, transfer and progression support RPL by providing a common reference point for the assessment of prior informal and non-formal learning and by introducing a broader, integrated range of qualifications against which prior learning can be assessed.

The main drivers for RPL in 2007 are the need to meet specific workforce requirements, to open up access to education and training programmes, to increase participation levels as well as to meet personal development goals. The main obstacles are lack of dedicated funding for RPL, uncertainty about demand, limited awareness and understanding of RPL (within and outside education and training sectors), the resource-intensive, individualised nature of RPL and technical difficulties in developing and implementing RPL particularly for credit/exemptions and full awards. It is clear from the report that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to RPL cannot be taken, given that RPL focuses on the individual, that different issues arise in relation to object of RPL (entry, credit/exemption, full award) and to the context in which RPL operates (i.e. workplace, community, education/training centres). The report indicates the importance of safeguarding the integrity of awards systems, maintaining quality and rigorous approaches to assessment in the practice of RPL. The bodies with key responsibilities for RPL (including the NQAI, awards Councils, universities and providers of education and training, funding agencies) have overall responsibilities in respect of the recognition of 'formal' learning and must balance this with their roles in RPL. Clearly, as the report shows, there are limits to what each can achieve in RPL.

#### *Devising next steps for national implementation plan for RPL*

This report suggests that there is a need to examine more closely the role that RPL can play in achieving broad policy goals, in particular that of increasing access to education and training, and to identify areas or target groups in which RPL can be most effective and how to support this. The interaction between RPL and policies encouraging non-formal and informal learning, on the one hand, and policies for formal learning, on the other also needs to be taken into account. It is considered that there needs to be discussion of the options and future implementation arrangements amongst all key stakeholders (including government departments, agencies, funding bodies and providers). The Qualifications Authority intends to advance with such discussions in advance of the visit of the international review panel later in 2007.

The following are areas and issues to be considered in this context:

- the role of RPL in national employment and workforce training policies e.g. in the National Skills Strategy and in meeting new regulatory requirements for work. The report shows how RPL can address the needs of particular target groups who need to access qualifications to meet statutory requirements or to upskill. It could also play a role in skills audits and human resource policies in general. The general question of the certification/accreditation of informal workplace education and training programmes needs to be taken into account.
- Separate consideration of RPL for entry, credit/exemption and access to full awards in order to assess the potential each can play in achieving national policy objectives. For example, an avenue for exploration is the greater integration of RPL assessment criteria and methodologies for programme entry with standard assessments/approaches to entry criteria for programmes.
- Funding of RPL. Consideration of financing models to support different applications of RPL needs to be advanced
- The role of RPL in assisting disadvantaged groups. It's potential to support existing employment and guidance services by identifying individual learner's or groups of learners' prior learning and assessing that against individual/group needs and/or workplace/education and training objectives

could be explored. This could address the difficulties many individuals face in identifying both their 'level' of prior learning achieved and education, training and other opportunities appropriate to their needs.

- Common practical difficulties facing awarding bodies and providers in developing RPL for credit/exemptions and access to full awards. The possibility to address these through partnerships, collaboration, joint initiatives could be explored. Issues include staff development, documentation, assessment tools, awareness-raising, data collection and sharing of practice.