

Co-creating for Change: Ireland's National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Higher Education Project

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This article outlines steps taken and insights gained to date during Ireland's National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Higher Education Project (2020-2025), a national initiative that is defined by co-creation. As this article illustrates, the co-creation process includes a complex and varied web of stakeholders; the Project Management Team and the Project Leads who manage the rollout of the project across Ireland's universities, technological universities, and institutes of technology are key among these. Notably, Project Leads are based within their respective higher education institutions and, consequently, engage regularly with diverse higher-education staff and learners. This article is written from the perspective of the Project Management Team and, as a result, focuses on the approach that has been followed by the latter to date in supporting Project Leads.

Firstly, to set the scene, RPL practice in Ireland is discussed in brief. Ireland has demonstrated innovative RPL activity, with deep-seated commitment to good practice; nonetheless, a series of challenges have prevented RPL from becoming a mainstream higher-education activity nationally. The National RPL in Higher Education Project – with 14 publicly funded higher education institutions as partners and funding from the Irish government – offers a unique opportunity to meet these needs. Work undertaken by the Project Management Team to date is summarized, categorizing these as relating to “planning,” “people,” and “pilots.” In so doing, the project's deliverables are viewed through the lens of change-management and design-thinking literature, which have informed the evolution of this collaborative work to date. While this project is now at its midpoint, with many of its outputs still in evolution, the observations contained here may be of assistance to those who lead large-scale endeavors in RPL and other fields.

Setting the scene: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Ireland

Internationally, lifelong learning is acknowledged as key to addressing the multiple social and economic challenges faced by humanity, including the green transition, digitalization and automation, global migration and displacement, and the urgent need to upskill and reskill large sections of the workforce. RPL has a variety of positive strategic impacts – in relation to lifelong learning, workforce development, and widening participation – each of which is central to the project's vision. RPL is a key enabler of lifelong learning and skills development, as it makes visible and gives formal value to learning that has been acquired in a range of contexts and at various stages in a person's life. Valuing and recognizing learning, regardless of where it has occurred (for example: in the workplace, in community settings, or in the home) can significantly

improve an individual's self-esteem and well-being, facilitating new and accelerated learning opportunities, supporting social inclusion, and strengthening employability (QAA Scotland, 2022). Recognizing this, RPL is rightly being viewed as an increasingly important component of learning activity within Ireland's higher education sector.

Reflecting the value that is placed on RPL nationally, and in response to statutory requirements, higher education institutions throughout Ireland have RPL policies and procedures in place. In Ireland's higher education institutions, prior learning may typically count towards entry, advanced entry, credit, or exemptions from modules.

¹ In some higher education institutions, innovative RPL activities have emerged involving a range of employers and relating to programs and courses at various National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) levels. Although this article focuses primarily on Ireland's higher-education system, policies, procedures, and outstanding examples of good practice are also evident in Ireland's Further Education and Training (FET) sector. Indeed, RPL networking involving FET, higher-education stakeholders, and others is a widely recognized strength in Ireland. A good example of this is the RPL Practitioner Network, which welcomes people working with and/or interested in RPL, enabling collaboration and sharing of practice across multiple sectors.

While Ireland has demonstrated innovative RPL practice, with deep-seated commitment to good practice, progress to date has been fragmented, with examples of the most ground-breaking activity being concentrated in certain higher education institutions or within specific units thereof. A series of obstacles have prevented RPL from becoming a mainstream higher-education activity nationally. Several sectoral challenges and needs have been identified, which include:

- Greater coherence and consistency of policy and practice within, and across, higher education institutions would be desirable. A national RPL Framework, including agreed definitions and a shared understanding of RPL, would be invaluable in this regard. Upon the development of such a national Framework, it would be timely for institutions to review and revise their RPL policies to bring about greater consistency both institutionally and sectorally.
- Notwithstanding some well-known examples and specific centers of innovative practice, engagement among, between, and across higher education institutions, the labor market, and civic and civil society organizations to reach individuals for whom RPL offers important opportunities continues to be limited nationally.
- The overall visibility of RPL as a valuable opportunity for learners has considerable scope for enhancement.
- Consistent, systematic data collection is needed within and across higher education institutions in order to measure RPL activity.
- Additional practical resources and guidelines for staff and learners, as well as professional development opportunities for staff involved in the RPL process, would be beneficial.
- Resources (both time and finance) are essential for the enhancement of institutional commitment to RPL and to the growth of learner numbers on a long-term, sustainable basis.

These observations echo those that have been identified independently by Murphy (2019) on behalf of Cedefop, the European Commission, and the European Training Foundation. A detailed overview of RPL practice in Irish higher education has also been outlined by Goggin et al. (2015), which includes similar findings.

Against this backdrop, the National RPL in Higher Education Project has emerged. This project began its life as a collaboratively written proposal, which was led by national RPL experts and senior leaders across Ireland's higher education sector. The project's development and implementation are co-sponsored by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Higher Education Association (THEA), representative bodies of publicly funded higher education institutions in Ireland. Co-creation has been an essential factor in the evolution of this project, from proposal to implementation stage; it is a vital element of design thinking (Vaugh and Ryan, 2015). The proposal was submitted to a competitive funding call under the Irish government's Human Capital Initiative; the latter call sought the submission of proposals that would enhance Ireland's innovation and agility in higher education and would respond to future skills and workforce needs. This particular focus derives from the source of funding: the National Training Fund, which was established as a dedicated fund to support raising the skills of those in, or preparing for, employment.

The application resulted in a five-year project (2020-2025) with government investment of €6.9 million, which provides a highly beneficial human-resourcing commitment and financial support. Thus, the project has the potential to have transformative effects on Ireland's higher education sector. As a highly collaborative, all-of-higher-education endeavor, it has a unique opportunity to address the challenges listed above. The goal of the project is to continue to embed and streamline RPL (in particular, the recognition of informal and non-formal learning) across Ireland's higher-education sector, and to work with employers to increase access and progression opportunities in areas of skills needs. Essentially, the purpose of the project is to move RPL from the margins to the mainstream in higher education.

The project is coordinated by a three-person Project Management Team based in THEA, with 18 half-time Project Leads managing the rollout of the project across 14 universities, technological universities, and institutes of technology. It takes place in the context of significant development in Ireland's higher-education landscape, with five technological universities having been formed through the consolidation of two or more institutes of technology each. Strategic guidance is provided to the project by a Steering Group, which draws its membership from senior sectoral leaders, enterprise and learner representatives, and national and international RPL experts.

Considerable progress has been made as a result of this project, which is at its midpoint at the time of writing. The next section will outline some key steps taken by the Project Management Team to date, summarizing these under the headings of 'planning', 'people', and 'pilots'. In so doing, the project's deliverables will be viewed through the lens of change-management and design-thinking literature, which have informed the evolution of this collaborative work to date.

National RPL in Higher Education Project: Planning, People, and Pilots

Planning

The evolution of the project's work largely mirrors well-established change-management trajectories. Similar to many change-management initiatives, a key early phase of the project entailed establishing a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1995). This was initially achieved through two detailed qualitative and quantitative surveys, which were completed on behalf of each participating institution by Project Leads. Information gathered was both for the purpose of developing an up-to-date evidence base, for the benefit of the project as a whole, and to enable reflection and action planning at the institutional level. The surveys revealed, unsurprisingly, that the starting point for each institution varied. As a whole, however, the survey findings served to bolster the sectoral commitment to work together towards a major, collective shift in RPL policy, procedure, and practice in Irish higher education, and to identify some common areas that warrant attention and action. In so doing, ultimately, the aim was to enhance the quality and quantity of RPL activity that is taking place institutionally, for the benefit of higher-education staff and learners.

To aid the transition from analysis to action, an RPL Action Plan template was first developed by the Project Management Team in consultation with Project Leads and the Project Steering Group in late 2021. The template was designed to act as a practical tool for higher education institutions to identify and track their own activities in seeking to achieve shared outcomes, which relate to priority areas of institutional culture, policy and procedure, targeted initiatives, and engaging with RPL for enterprise/workforce development. In developing the Action Plans, Project Leads were advised to consult and engage with a wide range of staff members within their higher education institution and to obtain the endorsement of the finalized Action Plan from a senior institutional leader. Thus, while Project Leads are likely to have led the process, Action Plans and their implementation are framed as a large-scale endeavor, reflecting the many ways in which institutional colleagues could play a role in the project's success.

A recommended early action for institutions was the formation of an Institutional Implementation Group to guide the roll-out of activity within each institution. In so doing, a 'guiding coalition' is assembled with sufficient authority, legitimacy, and critical mass to lead the institutional change effort (Kotter, 1995). Involving a wide range of institutional staff helps to reduce barriers to change by creating psychological ownership, promoting the dissemination of critical information, and encouraging feedback during implementation (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). Thus, people with the right knowledge, skills, and authority are inclined to join the change process. For the Project Management Team, a key aspect of creating ownership is acknowledging that each institution has a unique mission, context, and community; therefore, each Action Plan is also unique. In addition to outlining shared outcomes, sample actions are suggested in the Action Plan template as a catalyst for institutional reflection: for example, creating a publicly accessible, plain English webpage on the institution's approach to RPL and a communications plan, providing professional development to those who support RPL applicants, and engaging with local and regional employers to explore the potential for new RPL opportunities in areas of skills needs. Such actions are

not prescribed, as it is important for each institution to determine its own sequence of activity.

As noted above, the work of institutionally based Project Leads and the Project Management Team is interconnected and mutually reliant. The RPL Action Plans facilitate a two-way flow of information and action. They serve as a mechanism to translate the project's objectives and work packages into defined areas of meaningful action for each higher education institution. Reciprocally, as all Action Plans are shared with the Project Management Team, they are useful in informing project planning and activities. They ensure a cohesive approach, both at the sectoral and the institutional level, without which actions would have the potential to disintegrate into a set of unrelated and confusing activities.

Each of the project's partner higher education institutions drew up and implemented the first in a series of RPL Action Plans, which concluded at the end of September 2022. Following the agreement of an updated Action Plan template and the institutions' preparation of a second round of plans and associated activities, the next phase of work is underway.

People

In the previous section, the vital role played by the people who populate this project may be inferred. When viewed superficially, activities taking place as part of the project might be classified into two categories: initiatives that are led by the Project Management Team, and tasks that are institution-led. This would be a false dichotomy, however. Closer examination reveals that all such work is interconnected and mutually reliant. In seeking to achieve the project's aims, developing the national network of Project Leads as a 'community of practice' has been important. While the latter term is of relatively recent coinage, the phenomenon to which it refers is age-old (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Communities of practice are groups of people who are committed to a shared area of interest and who learn together and from one another. Clearly, RPL in higher education is the shared domain of interest for all who participate in this project; learning through relationship-building and the development of shared good practice are among the community's goals. The learning process has a core role in communities of practice: 'thinking together' forms the foundations of such communities (Pyrko et al., 2017). A key aim of the Project Management Team is to provide the required infrastructure to support this community of practice, enabling it to succeed (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). To date, this has been achieved through regular meetings of the national network of Project Leads, shaped by discussion-based agendas; training and developmental opportunities; the creation of focused, informal groups to respond to defined needs; and technological tools for collaboration, among other elements. As will be noted later in this article, each institution is encouraged to develop its own community of practice, which would involve the institution's current and prospective RPL learners and the staff who support them.

From the Project Management Team's perspective, many of the project's deliverables benefit from engagement with stakeholders within, as well as beyond, the broad context of its main higher-education constituents. Indeed, one of the design principles for cultivating communities of practice is opening and maintaining dialogue between

'inside' and 'outside' perspectives (Wenger et al., 2002). Notably, higher education institutions are complex systems, consisting of an array of touchpoints, processes, procedures, and policies, and are home to a diverse community of students, administrators, faculty, partners, and leaders (Vaugh et al., 2022). Thus, there is a wide range of directly and indirectly relevant stakeholders with whom co-creation can, and should, take place. As will be noted later in this article, adopting a phased, consultative approach has served the project well to date in progressing major new outputs. Undertaking work in a 'test and learn' cycle facilitates buy-in from a wide range of higher-education audiences and ensures that outputs have been thoroughly developed, tested, and interrogated prior to finalization. The range of stakeholder groups involved in such a phased approach typically widens at each stage. An iterative, consultative, and incremental approach such as this is central to design processes, providing an opportunity for ongoing learning and an expectation of safety in change-making and improvability (Kang et al., 2022).

As noted above, co-creation and design thinking are closely interrelated. Throughout its implementation, the project's actions and outputs have been shaped by the needs of those who engage with RPL – particularly, learners and higher-education staff. (Notably, much of the project's learner-related activity is led by Project Leads and takes place at the institutional level, as these are the places where learners apply and study.) In so doing, this embodies the spirit of design thinking: a human-centered approach to innovation that puts people's needs at the forefront of the innovation process (Gruber et al., 2015). The design-thinking process places significant importance on understanding and empathizing with the human experience in order to make better decisions and create meaningful interventions (Vaugh et al., 2020). If RPL processes do not give paramount importance to the needs of those who make use of it, whether these are potential applicants or those who support them, problems will invariably ensue.

To fully embed design thinking into the project's work, the Project Management Team commissioned in-depth 'user' experience research, which has been undertaken with a subset of three higher education institutions in Ireland and in partnership with design-thinking experts, Maynooth University Innovation Lab (Mi:Lab). Mi:Lab has created an innovation framework for higher education, which is known by the acronym 'ARRIVE' and is shaped by the consecutive stages of Audit, Research, Reframe, Ideate, Validate, and Execute (Vaugh et al., 2022). As well as entailing traditional desk-based research, this work was informed by a series of workshops and interviews with RPL learners (past and present) and higher-education staff whose work leads them to engage with RPL. Within the context of RPL, higher-education staff are a diverse group (including those who receive inquiries about RPL, those who mentor applicants, and those who assess applications) and, accordingly, they experience varied challenges and have myriad needs. Findings from this collaborative research noted the importance of having an RPL community of practice within each institution, the need to develop clear, common, and human-centered application and assessment processes, and the value of communicating and promoting RPL. While the research will benefit the subset of higher education institutions that volunteered to take part, it is expected that the findings will also be useful to the wider set of higher education institutions involved in this project.

Such work has been invaluable in enabling a profound understanding of the needs of those who avail of, and those who work with, RPL.

Pilots

Some experts portray the change process as a linear progression through successive stages; however, such processes rarely unfold in a direct, straightforward fashion (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). On the contrary, revisiting and reiterating prior steps are to be encouraged (Kang et al., 2022). Iteration is central to design processes, providing an opportunity to learn, to take risks, and to make improvements. Iterative, incremental change models have been demonstrated to be successful in higher-education settings (Kang et al., 2022). Mirroring this, a recurring approach in the project has been to revisit steps taken and to treat strategies and outputs as improvable on an ongoing basis. To date, this approach has enhanced stakeholder buy-in and project success.

Following an extensive consultation process, a Pilot Framework for RPL in Higher Education has been developed and approved in principle by senior leaders in the project's 14 higher education institutions. Notably, as this is a pilot, the Framework will evolve and further develop as it is implemented in higher education institutions, with feedback being given to the Project Management Team at defined intervals. The Framework's main aim is to support higher education institutions in Ireland to develop a shared understanding of RPL and to achieve coherence and consistency in policy and practice. The Framework shows that RPL is underpinned in institutions by two core values, learner-centeredness and quality assurance, explores the principles that support these values, and outlines the key components of the RPL process. In change-management terms, the Framework serves as a 'vision' to help direct the change effort; it has been communicated widely throughout project stakeholders, encouraging and empowering them to transform this 'vision' into action at the institutional level (Kotter, 1995). A compelling vision presents an image of the future that is easy to communicate and that organizational members find appealing; it provides overall direction and serves as the foundation from which to develop plans and strategies (Fernandez & Rainey, 2006). The Framework seeks to fulfill these aims. Most higher education institutions are now actively reviewing and revising their RPL policies and procedures in light of the Framework.

Over the following months of the project, the Framework will be supplemented by a series of practical, accessible tools and resources, which will be co-created by the Project Management Team and the network of Project Leads, as well as by a range of national and international experts in relevant fields. These tools and resources will include practical toolkits for higher-education staff; staff training and professional development; materials to aid enterprise engagement; and guidance for data collection, analytics, and reporting. In relation to the latter, a Pilot Technical Definition of RPL has recently been developed and approved in principle by senior leaders in the project's fourteen higher education institutions. The definition sets out in detail that which constitutes (and, conversely, that which does *not* constitute) RPL activity. The collection of data is essential in order to quantify the extent of RPL activity underway within institutions. Over time, such information will be useful to institutions in enabling them to identify trends and track progress in relation to the quantity of RPL activity taking

place. Once again following a pilot approach, this Technical Definition was tested by a subset of institutions in late 2022 prior to its finalization. Following this, technical work may take place; institutions will be invited to apply the technical definition to their institutional RPL data-collection systems and processes. Similar to other project activities, this task is designed to be incremental; systematic planning, including creating a series of manageable 'wins', is essential (Kotter, 1995). Inevitably, transformative endeavors take time, and momentum is lost without short-term goals to meet and celebrate.

While the above-described outputs largely relate to internal institutional matters, other aspects of the project's work focus on external engagement, such as piloting new or enhanced engagement between higher education and employers. This is appropriate, given that engagement with external organizations and enterprises is increasingly part of the higher-education mission. A goal of the project is to work with employers to increase access and progression opportunities in areas of skills needs. While there are a number of factors that facilitate university-business cooperation, relationship-related factors are among the most prominent drivers of this for both Irish academics and other higher-education representatives. Thus, any effort focused on enabling and increasing cooperation between enterprise and higher education should focus on relationship development as a key success factor (Galán-Muros et al., 2017). External engagement must be an institution-wide commitment – not confined to individual academics or projects (Goddard, 2009). However, in practice, relationships between Irish higher education institutions and external entities are often operationalized by means of a series of separate and distinct units. As a result, the experience of an external partner is not one of a single, seamless relationship but of many disparate and different relationships with various parts of the institution (Sheridan & Fallon, 2018).

Support from key external stakeholders figures prominently in successful change efforts; amongst these, enterprise and employers are key. To date, the project has focused on identifying and documenting examples of good practice in the area of RPL practice for enterprise and sharing learning across the Project Leads and institutions. The project is shifting towards institutional 'RPL for Enterprise' activity through the development of a series of pilots, which will run across partner higher education institutions during the 2022/23 academic year. Desired outcomes of the pilots include increased RPL practices for access and progression in areas of skills needs, a network of 'RPL for enterprise' active higher education institutions and academic practitioners, and the identification of opportunities for adapted and additional higher education programs and courses. Several of these institution-led initiatives will entail progressing current relationships or developing new interactions with enterprise, working towards developing a more comprehensive and seamless approach to managing such external linkages.

Next Steps and Beyond

As noted above, Ireland's National RPL in Higher Education Project is now at its midpoint; consequently, much work is ongoing, and many outputs are currently in development and will be published on the project website in due course. At the conclusion of institutions' first Action Plans, there was evidence of significant activity

being underway, particularly in relation to the internal and external promotion of RPL and the review of institutional policies in order to align with the Framework; much work is planned by institutions – for example, in relation to RPL for enterprise. It has been correctly noted that successful change management lies in anchoring changes, normalizing new approaches, and planning for succession (Kotter, 1995). With projects of finite duration such as this, considering sustainability and impact beyond the project's timespan is particularly important. Though planning for impact is an ongoing consideration, the success of the project in this regard can only be judged after its conclusion. With the matter of long-term impact in mind, next steps for the Project Management Team will include the development and launch of a suite of practical resources, including downloadable guides and toolkits, online training and professional development, and a sectoral RPL website. These will provide clear and comprehensive information and support for potential and current learners, higher-education staff, and employers. In disseminating these tools, a key objective is to illuminate the potential of RPL and to promote it to diverse audiences as an effective and efficient pathway to, and through, higher education.

As previously noted, the overall aim of this project is to embed and streamline RPL in higher education institutions across Ireland, laying the groundwork for RPL to become a mainstream higher-education activity, with innovative practice becoming a widespread phenomenon across the sector. The steps and processes outlined in this article may be of assistance to those who lead large-scale endeavors in RPL and other fields. The underlying message is clear, however: in order to affect change and achieve successful outcomes in the context of initiatives of considerable scale and ambition, co-creation is key.

¹ Full awards on the basis of prior learning are also available in a smaller subset of higher education institutions; this is dependent on their individual policies.

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