

## **Recognition of Prior Learning in Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland**

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### **Introduction**

This essay offers an overview of the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Further Education and Training (FET) sector in Ireland. Current practice around RPL in FET adheres to national policy requirements and continues to be responsive to industry through increased provision and enhanced employer engagement. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is a key tool and allows learners to progress to other FET qualifications, gain access to higher education, or seek employment. FET in Ireland encompasses Initial Vocational Education and Training (IVET) centers (including FE Colleges, Training Centres), work-based learning, and foundation-level programs. The needs of the learner remain central, with an emphasis on fostering social inclusion and the development of soft skills / transversal skills wherever possible. (UNESCO defines transversal skills as: “Skills that are typically considered as not specifically related to a particular job, task, academic discipline or area of knowledge and that can be used in a wide variety of situations and work settings (for example, organizational skills). UNESCO gives six categories of transversal skills: 1 Critical and innovative thinking. 2 Interpersonal skills. 3 Intrapersonal skills. 4 Global citizenship. 5 Media and information literacy. 6 Others.” (Skills and Education Group, 2019).

The three case studies featured in this article focus on the development of RPL in the context of the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs), which constitute the majority of the publicly funded FET sector.

### **National Policy Requirements for FET RPL Practices**

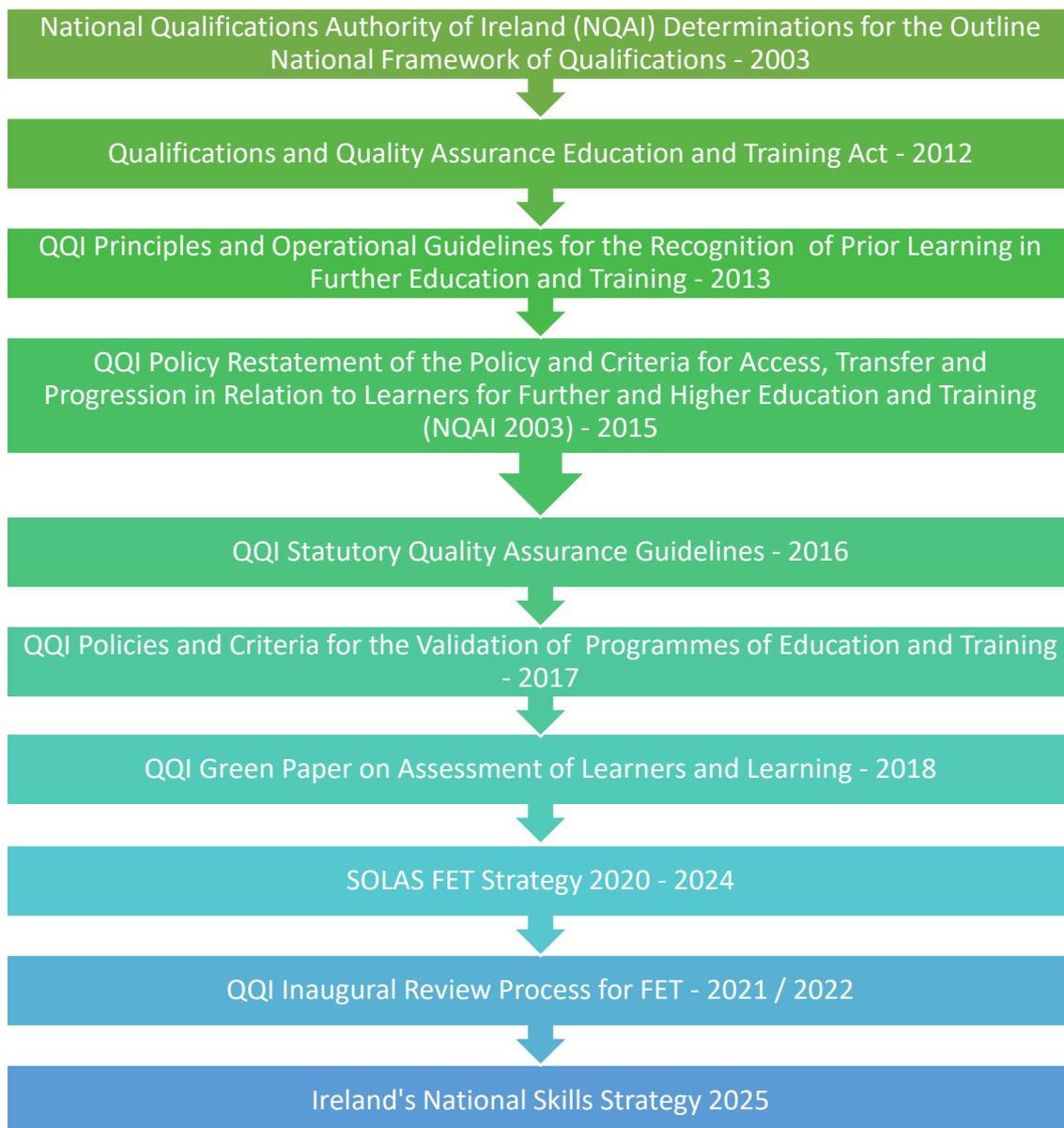
The policy framework for RPL in education and training in Ireland is largely rooted in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). In principle, all framework awards should be achievable through RPL. This conviction ultimately places RPL as a potential contributor to all awards.

The national policy approach stems both from legislation and from the Determinations of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), which were published when the NFQ was established. The approach sets out that the Framework should be “structured to facilitate learner entry, and to promote transfer and progression so that learners are encouraged to participate in the learning process to enable them to realize their ambitions to the full extent of their abilities” (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2003).

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (as amended) requires that Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) establishes policies and criteria for access, transfer, and progression (ATP) on which basis providers establish policies and procedures that they will implement. These must include credit accumulation for transfer, encompassing the formal assessment of knowledge, skill, and competence previously acquired by learners.

**Figure 1**

*Key Policy and Legislative Developments towards the Mainstreaming of RPL across FET in Ireland*



Source: (Higgins & Hogan, 2021)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland published both the ATP Policy (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2015) and the Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning in Further and Higher Education and Training (National

Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005), following consultation with stakeholders in 2013. QQI Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2016) require that providers should give fair recognition of qualifications, periods of study, and prior formal, informal, and non-formal learning, enabling flexible learning pathways. Providers should take account of European developments such as those associated with the EQF, the 2012 recommendation, and recognition principles. Program validation policy for FET (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2017) providers sets out that programs must include procedures for RPL for access, and where appropriate for advanced entry and exemptions. According to these policies, assessment in general should be fit for purpose, straightforward, efficient, timely, and transparent, including assessment for RPL. The amended legislation further underscores that the responsibility for responding to the RPL needs of individuals lies with providers, and FET is a vital part of this national response, having an extensive reach into communities nationally (Quality and Qualifications Ireland, 2018).

The recent QQI Inaugural Review Process for FET (2021 / 2022) emphasized the role that RPL must play in the FET provider's provision. Within FET, all providers have RPL policies though these are variable in terms of implementation. There are some advanced practices, where RPL is embedded in services at the ETB level. RPL is very evident across the new Apprenticeship programs. RPL is also part of an essential response to employers and employees as individuals under national initiatives such as [Skills to Advance](#), as illustrated in the case study below from Donegal ETB.

The Recognition of Prior Learning is directly referenced in the SOLAS Further Education and Training Strategy 2020- 2024 (SOLAS, 2020) Priority area of Creating Pathways, and in the National Skills Strategy 2025 (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

In response to policy and legislative developments, but also due to the commitment of FET staff who are invested in the process, RPL continues to grow across FET in Ireland. Providers are now more open to promoting and implementing RPL for learners than previously.

## **Upskilling the FET Sector to Date / Developing Staff Capacity**

### ***The RPL Practitioner Network Ireland***

[The RPL Practitioner Network Ireland](#) was proposed in 2014, and publicly launched in 2015 as an inclusive cross-sectoral network of practitioners who are involved in implementation and policy-making for RPL. It provides a unique meeting ground for public and privately funded further, higher, and community education and training practitioners. Providers from youth, community and voluntary sectors, civil society, trade unions, and partnership groups also participate along with recruitment and employer groups, policy leads, and representative bodies.

The network constitutes a community of practice to consider aspects of RPL and inform and develop thinking, practice, and policy leading to greater awareness across FET and Higher Education sectors.

The RPL Practitioner Network Ireland contributes to the development and implementation of professional development (PD) opportunities for RPL practitioners and leads the delivery of cross-sectoral RPL PD initiatives nationally. Since the inception

of the network, a number of these cross-sectoral events have been held annually. PD events organized by the network target providers and practitioners from across all provision and are well attended by FET. During COVID, the network implemented a series of 'energizing' webinars which were delivered by RPL practitioners. These webinars engaged a wide range of education and training staff in focused and lively conversations on emerging questions using examples from practice.

The network continues to promote cross-sectoral RPL activities and initiatives in Ireland and internationally.

### **Professional Development (PD) Initiatives**

The ultimate goal for RPL in FET is that it will be mainstreamed and available to all applicants, outside of specific projects. Many opportunities have been made available in the Irish context to upskill and further develop FET staff capacity. The RPL Practitioner Network, the Further Education Support Service (FESS), and Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) have been key drivers in providing and supporting PD opportunities for RPL in the FET sector to date. These events are ongoing.

RPL Professional Development events and courses delivered nationally have included;
Munster Technological University- RPL: Policy, Practice, Pedagogy NFQ Level 9, 10 Credit Award (2016/17 ongoing)
Atlantic Technological University – NFQ Level 9, Special Purpose Award in RPL (2020)
Munster Technological University NFQ Level 7 CPD in Prior Learning for Adult and Community Educators (2021)
RPL Practitioner Network National Conferences (Bi-Annually 2015 – 2019)
National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning RPL Digital Badge (2020)
Further Education Support Service (FESS) National PD Sessions (Annually 2019- Present)
Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) Mainstreaming RPL Conference (2021) <sup>1</sup>
RPL Practitioner Network Webinars “Energising RPL Conversations and Inspiring Communities of Practice” (2021)

Local PD training initiatives continue both within and across ETBs. FET providers continue to deliver local training programs in RPL for their staff, often drawing on the experience of more experienced FET providers and colleagues to deliver this training.

### **Launch of the RPL Toolkit for Education and Training Providers**

The Further Education and Training (FET) Service of Donegal ETB and the FET Division of Limerick and Clare ETB have collaborated to develop and make available a [Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\) toolkit](#) for use by all ETBs.

The toolkit was developed as part of the two-year SOLAS-funded Validating Competencies of Care Sector Employees (VCCSE) Skills to Advance collaborative project which is featured below as a case study. It contains guidelines, information, and

practical tools to support ETB FET services understand and implement RPL. Practical tools included are links to exemplar RPL FET policies, promotional material, an RPL application form and guidance document, an RPL assignment brief to guide structuring evidence of learning; an assessment rubric to support grading and maintain the integrity of the process. While the FET sector in Ireland delivers provision from levels 1 to 6 on NFQ, equivalent to levels 1 – 5 on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), the VCCSE toolkit (launched in June 2022) toolkit focuses on NFQ level 5, or level 4 on the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).

Following the launch in June 2022, the toolkit has been made available in hard copy across all ETBs. It is envisaged that the toolkit will now be used to support the implementation of RPL in FET nationally.



*Launch of the RPL Toolkit for Education and Training Providers, Donegal, 30 June 2022*

## **RPL Case Studies from Education and Training Boards**

In the following section, we present three recent RPL case studies from the ETB / FET sector. These case studies provide a snapshot of the provision and implementation of RPL across ETBs. Donegal ETB's Validating Competencies of Care Sector Employees (VCCSE) case study shows how a large number of participants from an "at risk" sector of employment in a disadvantaged rural location, were able to achieve awards at NFQ level 5 (EQF level 4) through RPL. This case study has led to the development of the RPL toolkit for Education and Training Providers cited above, which is currently being adopted by practitioners nationally. The Cork ETB case study shows how a direct link with one company allowed participants to achieve awards at NFQ levels 4, 5, and 6 (EQF levels 3, 4, and 5). The case study from Kilkenny Carlow ETB demonstrates how it was possible to use RPL to allow learners to achieve certification during the pandemic when work placement was not possible.

### ***Case Study 1: Donegal Education and Training Board***

(With Martina Needham, Formerly Donegal ETB, Siobhan Murray, RPL Coordinator, Donegal ETB)

### ***Validating Competencies of Care Sector Employees (VCCSE) Skills to Advance collaborative project***

The primary objective of VCCSE was to validate skills, knowledge, and competencies that Care Sector Employees gained through workplace training and mentoring. This sector, identified as “at risk” due to low qualifications, had a low level of engagement with FET. Supporting Working Lives and Enterprise Growth in Ireland (SOLAS, 2018) identified the need to nurture talent already in the workplace, and emphasized that ‘low level’ and ‘at risk’ employees needed support to acquire nationally recognized qualifications to sustain employment and career advancement. Several ‘low-level’ employee groups, including Care Sector Employees, were identified. The National Development Plan 2018-2027 also identified this sector as a future growth area. Similarly, Working Together for Health (Department of Health, 2017) emphasized a need to support the mobility of employees within this sector, mitigate Brexit curtailment of mobility, and prepare for the future needs of society and the economy.

The secondary objective was to develop an RPL structure and toolkit of resources, test these for potential replicability across other sectors and enterprises, and then make them available to the FET service nationally.

VCCSE focused on the care sector in year one. During this stage (September 2019 to June 2020), one hundred and thirty-six Care Sector Employees, with minimum qualifications and limited opportunities for advancement, achieved NFQ level 5 Major Awards (EQF level 4) through RPL. In year two, the focus was on refining the RPL tools and processes by implementing them across several other sectors.

The management and oversight of VCCSE were supported within current ETB resources, including administration, governance, and communications.

Additional staff resources included:

- RPL Coordinator
- Panel of RPL Mentor/Facilitators – training was within current resources
- Project Administrator
- Panel of Subject Matter Experts to assess the participants’ portfolios

The monitoring of assessment was within existing ETB resources:

- Internal verification
- External Authentication
- Results approval

VCCSE enabled participants to validate their experiential learning. Participant progress was monitored, and their feedback was sought. Results demonstrated enhanced employment opportunities and improved confidence. A significant number of this cohort - deemed “hard-to-reach” and unwilling to engage with lifelong learning — progressed to other FET provision.

Donegal ETB and Limerick and Clare ETB are now mainstreaming the RPL process as part of provision. Engagement with the care sector continues, with more staff engaging in the process. The project was subsequently replicated across several other sectors, including the financial sector. The result was an additional four hundred and three people who availed of RPL in Donegal ETB in 2021.

## **Case Study 2: Cork Education and Training Board**

*[with Ciaran Lynch, Adult Education Officer, Cork ETB, and Mike Lyons, Professional Learning and Development Support, Cork ETB]*

### **Work-Based RPL Program with Nutribio**

Cork Education and Training Board (Cork ETB) initiated a work-based RPL program with Nutribio, a company based in the Port of Cork, Ireland. This program was a unique work-based Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pilot –project carried out by Cork ETB in collaboration with staff at Nutribio in 2021.

This initiative arose from discussions between Cork ETB and Nutribio to determine how RPL might be implemented in the particular work setting. Preliminary meetings revealed Teamwork and Team Leadership as subject areas where Nutribio staff could readily identify and document significant evidence of prior learning, as a starting point. Subject matter experts (SMEs) and mentors were then assigned and a cohort of fourteen work-based learners came forward to participate following internal communication at Nutribio.

Accordingly, the four stages of validating non-formal and informal learning were applied.

#### *The Four Stages of RPL*

*Stage 1-Identification: This involves identification of the areas of learning already achieved informally and non-formally in the workplace or in other settings such as the community.*

*Stage 2-Documentation: This involves the preparation of a portfolio of evidence by the RPL candidate showing how the learning was achieved.*

*Stage 3-Assessment: The assessment is carried out by a subject matter expert who examines the portfolio evidence against the Learning Outcomes of the specific course descriptor applying quality assurance measures to ensure that the portfolio meets the required standard.*

*Stage 4-Certification: This final stage is completed when the candidate has been assessed and their folder has been deemed to have achieved the required standard of the component subject area. It is crucial to note the certification attained is the exact same as that achieved by a learner in a taught program.*

(Murphy, 2019)

All fourteen Nutribio candidates achieved QQI accreditation across NFQ levels 4, 5, and 6 (EQF 3, 4, and 5) in the areas of Teamwork and Team Leadership.

The Cork ETB Work-Based RPL Team was comprised as follows:

- Program Manager- Adult Education Officer
- RPL Coordinator- Further Education & Training Support Service
- Subject Matter Expert- Teacher/Tutor
- Mentor/Facilitator- Teacher/Tutor
- Adult Guidance Counsellor- Adult Education Guidance Initiative
- Former RPL Candidate - Learner Input

The Nutribio Team was comprised as follows:

- Production Manager, Nutribio Ltd.
- HR Manager, Nutribio Ltd.
- Learner Participants

Initially, Cork ETB planned to adopt a blended approach to implementing the Nutribio RPL Project which was originally intended to involve a combination of online and face-to-face delivery. This plan was disrupted by the public health crisis, and the entire program had to pivot to an exclusively online delivery mode over ten weeks (April 2021 – June 2021) using both Moodle and Teams as virtual learning environments.

Sessions were recorded and stored to allow for flexible participation. Session recordings were exclusive and private to the RPL team and Nutribio candidates and were not retained following the completion of the program.

All RPL Toolkit documentation required by the team to assist learners in preparing the final portfolio containing the learning statements and supporting evidence was also available on Moodle and subsequently transferred to OneDrive for assessment.

**Project Outcomes.** Members of the workforce with many years of experience were provided with formally and nationally recognized certification for skillsets that they had previously acquired in informal and non-formal settings.

The project evaluation also demonstrates increased motivation and greater understanding of their role within the wider company structure and operations. The project also revealed workers' skillsets that had heretofore, not been as visible to management.

Cork ETB plans to continue this work-based or cohort-based model of RPL provision in other settings. A Cohort-Based RPL Policy is currently in draft and a training schedule to support the establishment of this embryonic service has been arranged in conjunction with Cork ETB's Professional Learning & Development Support Service

Cork ETB RPL Professional Development Schedule

Phase I

A professional development opportunity to Cork ETB staff entitled Introduction to Recognition of Prior Learning for Work Based Learners. This program was provided over two days in October 2022 and was attended by eighteen staff members.

Phase II

RPL Practitioner Tool-Kit Training to develop a diverse panel of subject matter experts and mentors at Cork ETB is scheduled for March 2023. This RPL Teacher Toolkit Training provides learning practitioners with a set of teaching, learning, and assessment instruments for subject matter experts and mentors guiding students through an RPL program to accredit those candidates in a given module. This approach is in line with and in anticipation of the creation of a national panel of SMEs and mentors in consultation with Education & Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and the RPL Practitioner Network Ireland.



Members of Nutribio workforce receiving their QQI certificates from Cork ETB

**Company Feedback**

When commenting on the project's impact at Nutribio, Donal O'Sullivan (Chief Executive) said:

"Great teamwork and outstanding team leadership are prized values for us. We have always known that these skills were present across the

entirety of our workforce and very visible to us in our day-to-day operations. However, not everyone on our team had the important piece of 'paper qualification' to stand over... the QQI certification achieved by our team through the pilot is of the exact same standard and standing as that delivered in a traditional training program. Other RPL benefits have also included gaining an increased visibility and identification of our existing in-house skillsets which, in turn, will result in the company improving its development of our recruitment strategies and promotion opportunities."

As part of the evaluation and feedback process, Una Kelly (Nutribio Employee and Participant) remarked:

"I wasn't sure exactly of the expectations at the start, however as the RPL program progressed, I began to identify my skills and work environment; I learned I was involved in a lot more teamwork than I had initially thought. I found the putting together of the evidence of my prior learning to be a very good experience."

**Case Study 3: Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB)**

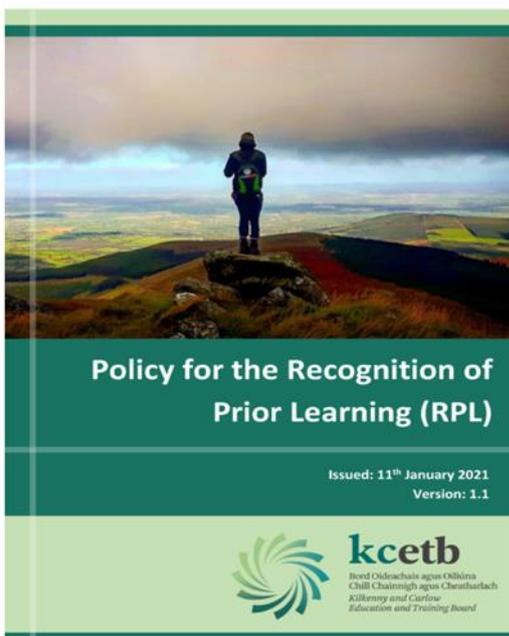
*[with Sarah Barron, Adult Education Officer, Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB)]*

**RPL for Work Placement during the COVID-19 Pandemic 2020**

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 meant that Kilkenny and Carlow Education and Training Board (KCETB) centers and colleges had to move to the remote delivery of teaching, learning, and assessment. Further Education and Training (FET) learners participating in programs that required access to work placement were particularly disadvantaged when trying to meet the requirements of their award when placements were no longer available to them. It was found that many FET learners had vocationally relevant life and work experience, which could be recognized to achieve certification for the mandatory work placement element of the award. Recognizing this experience would enable them to meet the requirements of the work experience/work placement minor award and subsequently the overall program. This would allow them to progress to employment or higher education.

KCETB published its Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy in November 2020, following the expertise gained during a Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) pilot run with the Defence Forces in 2018. This pilot enabled KCETB to create a robust

Quality Assurance (QA) procedure for RPEL which in turn was the key corner stone for the COVID-19 response in late 2020. This process involved learners initially completing an expression of interest form detailing their experience to ensure that their application could be progressed. This was then reviewed by the mentor and assessor. If sufficient evidence was presented, the learner then met with the mentor, was furnished with an assessment brief, and was advised on the further evidence required to progress their application. Learners were supported on an ongoing basis by the mentor as the primary point of contact, with the assessor providing input where necessary. The completed portfolio of evidence was reviewed by the assessor and mentor. The entire process was supported by the QA Office to ensure that it met the requirements of the award. Once all the paperwork was assessed, the applications were forwarded by the QA Office to an RPL External Authenticator (EA) to authenticate the results in advance of submitting the awards to QQI for certification.



*KCETB Policy for RPL*

In total ten learners participated in this process, with the majority coming from part-time programs in Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) at NFQ Level 5 in Healthcare Support (5M4339), Early Childhood Care and Education (5M2009) and one learner from a full-time Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Level 6 Horsemanship program (6M3503). The KCETB QA Department took the lead in the process and was supported by mentors and assessors in the relevant subject areas. The staff supporting this process comprised of one Adult Education Officer, one QA Coordinator, one mentor, and three subject-specific assessors. The time commitment from both the assessors and mentors was significant given the complex nature of the work placement

requirements across the range of programs.

This initiative served to raise awareness of the availability of RPL within KCETB to center managers and teaching staff. It also enhanced the organization's capacity to offer RPEL to a broader range of learners across our services by broadening our assessor base. The learning from the process also enabled us to review our RPL policy with a revised policy issued in November 2021. (KCETB, 2022). We are continuing to grow our capacity to offer RPL opportunities to our learners by offering professional development opportunities to teaching staff to further enhance our assessor base. A targeted promotional campaign to make learners and employers aware of RPL options is also being explored.

## **TOBAR**

Along with the more detailed case studies presented in this essay it is important to note the Tobar Project as a key element of RPL across FET in Ireland.

TOBAR, a national Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pilot project between ETBs Defence Force personnel (2018 -2019), has been a significant driver for RPL in the FET sector. During the main pilot project, 10 ETBs worked with a cohort of up to 10 soldiers with no or low NFQ level skills who prepared an RPL portfolio for awards in FET. For many ETBs, this was their first initiative in RPL. Major and minor awards in transversal skills and vocational skills were made across NFQ levels 3-6. ETBs have continued with TOBAR and by December 2020 a total of sixteen cohorts had completed certification with 386 minor awards, 21 major awards, 91 learners with a further 4 cohorts due for completion. An RPL Handbook and toolkit resources were developed. An Evaluation Report of TOBAR commissioned by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) is available (de Paor, 2021).<sup>2</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This synopsis of RPL in FET in Ireland has identified the underpinning key policy developments. The central role in the promotion and development of RPL across FET by the RPL Practitioner Network is noted. This network is unique, allowing the exchange of RPL experiences and expertise across all sectors. The key role of Professional Development in RPL for FET has been explored, where initiatives that continue to contribute to the implementation of RPL in the sector have been cited. The certified courses that have been made available through higher education providers have increased the number of FET practitioners with RPL. This continues to enhance provision nationally. Shorter continuing initiatives including national conferences and seminars facilitate opportunities for these practitioners, together with experts from other sectors, to share and compare practices.

Sharing of expertise and practices is ongoing, both within and across ETBs. This sharing is evident from the case studies submitted where the Donegal ETB case study was implemented together with Limerick Clare ETB, and has produced a toolkit for sharing across the sector funded by SOLAS through the Skills to Advance Initiative. The drive of ETBs to use innovative practices to enhance their provision through RPL is evident from all case studies. The Cork ETB case study illustrates how relationships with industry can facilitate the achievement of certification through RPL. The Kilkenny Carlow ETB study shows how an ETB which has established policy and procedures around RPL was able to use this as a response to the modifications required by the COVID- 19 pandemic.

As RPL continues to increase across FET, further developments have been identified. The RPL Toolkit for Education and Training Providers will allow for more streamlined approaches, where required. Less experienced providers, or those commencing RPL, will now find the implementation processes more accessible. Two professional development seminars organized by FESS and focused on the toolkit will support this. The promotion of RPL by ETBs must be encouraged. As we have seen, much activity is happening. The appointment of new "RPL Officers" in a small number of ETBs is very encouraging, and hopefully, more appointments will be made across the ETBs. These

appointments recognize the growing importance and incidence of RPL. The future for RPL remains positive in the Irish FET context.

## Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge the ETBs cited for making these case studies available. We also wish to acknowledge Andrina Wafer, Head of International Mobility and Prior Learning, QQI for her support in the compilation of this essay

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<sup>1</sup> Conference materials and resources available at <https://library.etbi.ie/library/RPL>

<sup>2</sup> This case is also detailed in the essay by Cathal de Paor included in this Special Issue of PLAIO.

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## About the Author



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Siobhan began her career as a FET teacher. She has also held national roles in the co-ordination of language initiatives and European projects.