

## Lessons from an Evaluation of an RPL Project in Further Education and Training in Ireland

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### Abstract

Tobar was a pilot cohort project in the recognition of prior learning (RPL) that ran in 10 Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in Ireland, in partnership with the Irish Defence Forces (DF). The project, which gets its name from the Irish word for “well” or “spring,” a reference to people’s life experience as a source of knowledge, enabled soldiers to use their military and other learning to demonstrate learning outcomes required for gaining awards at levels 2 to 5 (EQF, European Qualification Framework). This required a “boundary crossing” between the disorganized amalgam of prior experiential knowledge and the codified knowledge of the qualification (Harris, 2014). As of December 2020, a total of 91 learners had achieved 386 component minor awards, with 21 of these also achieving major awards. Coming together as a group of Further Education and Training (FET) providers, under the auspices of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), enabled the providers to share knowledge, mobilize collective intelligence, take account of the systemic nature of RPL issues, and increase confidence in the use of RPL at the local level using a common approach. Based on the conclusions, recommendations are proposed for incremental mainstreaming of RPL, according to three different levels — strategy, structure, and practice. These features of the project provide valuable lessons for the mainstreaming of RPL in VET provision more generally.

### Introduction

A key idea in lifelong learning is that individuals should be able to build on all prior learning, irrespective of when and where this has taken place. The COVID-19 crisis added further significance to this, given that upskilling and reskilling are sure to become ever more important. At a European level, the EU [European Union] Council recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning has been a significant milestone in preparing for greater provision for the recognition of prior learning (RPL), requiring all member states to have validation arrangements in place (EU Council, 2012).

In his review of the implementation of RPL, Maurer (2021) demonstrates how global adoption can best be understood as a process of policy diffusion, in different stages – a “pioneering stage” of early adopting countries, a “policy attraction phase” when other countries come on board, and a “global standard phase,” in which the model is decontextualized and countries worldwide are

expected to adopt it (Maurer, 2021). This last phase has the most relevance for many countries, including Ireland.

The conditions needed for RPL to become a more established part of the Further Education and Training sector are now quite favorable in Ireland. The national FET [Further and Education and Training] strategy (SOLAS, 2020) has identified RPL as “a real attribute and selling point for FET,” recommending that RPL models that have been piloted should now be mainstreamed (SOLAS, 2020, p. 48). This is a reference to the increasing use of cohort RPL projects involving education and training providers and employers. RPL is increasingly pursued on a collective basis in “the more economically influential spaces of the labor market, workplace, and human capital imperatives” (Cameron, 2014, p. 115). In addition to the benefits for the individuals themselves, it allows organizations to “know how good its people are,” taking “full advantage of their knowledge and skills” and enabling them to progress further (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015, p. 35). RPL becomes a tool where education and training providers work in partnership with whole organizations in recognizing and relating individual knowledge to organizational knowledge.

Within this context, this article examines what lessons may be learned from a cohort pilot project in RPL to inform the wider mainstreaming effort that is needed in RPL provision. There is a well-established practice of using pilot projects in education and training to test an idea before implementation on a larger scale. Pilot projects are used to test viability, provide clarity, and learn more about various issues before embarking on the main project, including for example, roles and responsibilities, knowledge gaps, stakeholder engagement, financial management, project processes, risk and cultural issues (APM, 2020). The project in question was the subject of an evaluation carried out by this author (DePaor, 2021).

### ***Tobar - a Pilot Project in RPL***

Tobar ran over a period from 2018 to 2019, enabling members of the Irish Defence Forces (DF) to gain various awards based on their prior learning. The particular needs of the target group derived from the fact that Irish Defence Forces personnel could retire at a young age, with some just in their 40s, and in a position to take up other work. Although having already completed numerous military courses, as documented in their official army CV, the highly defined and regulated nature of their work meant much of their learning was not so readily understood or recognizable in a civilian context.

The 10 participating Education and Training Boards (ETBs) worked collectively and in partnership with the Defence Forces, through the auspices of Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), with input from other stakeholders such as Quality and Qualifications Ireland, the state agency responsible for promoting the quality, integrity, and reputation of Ireland's further and higher education system. The significance of this effort as a pilot project in RPL derived from the fact that it extended to all forms of learning, i.e., not just formal learning but also non-formal and informal, and provided for the achievement of full awards, not just for program entry or exemption. Launched in October 2017, each ETB was to work

with up to 10 learners locally for each cycle of the project, in collaboration with the local barracks. Professional development was provided using a series of workshops involving key national stakeholders such as QQI [Quality and Qualifications Ireland] and experts drawn from Donegal ETB and Munster Technological University, formerly Cork Institute of Technology. A project handbook on RPL was prepared, which ETBs were invited to modify in line with local needs.

Even though a cohort approach enabled collective learning, learners worked individually, using their own prior learning to gain their own chosen awards. The four phases presented in the 2012 Recommendation and further developed in the guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning (CEDEFOP, 2015) were used to structure the RPL process: identification, documentation, assessment, and certification. Learners documented their relevant prior learning using various forms of evidence to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes for the target awards. They were supported by ETB staff in this task, using a blend of group and one-to-one meetings, giving them access to career guidance, mentoring, including formative feedback on their work, and culminating in assessment, internal verification, external authentication, results approval, and finally certification.

The identification phase at the outset helped ensure that learners were only likely to choose those awards for which they already had the necessary prior learning. Any outstanding learning outcomes for which they did not have the required prior learning, became the focus of additional learning activities, which were then evidenced. As of December 2020, a total of 16 cohorts had completed certification with a further four due for completion soon after. The completed cohorts comprise two initial pre-pilots, a pilot project undertaken by each of the 10 ETBs in the main cycle, and four other follow-on cycles completed in three ETBs. A total of 91 learners achieved awards which included 21 major and 386 minor awards, placed from levels 2 to 5 (European Qualifications Framework).

Tobar reflected various policy priorities at a national and European level and was a significant new departure in terms of RPL activity in Ireland, involving a coordinated approach across ten ETBs. The project aligned with the needs of the intended beneficiaries, given the extent of the experiential learning gained by military personnel in the course of their work. It also aligned with the DF commitment to lifelong learning and preparation for transition to civilian life through external accreditation. Tobar is of interest not simply as a project in its own right, but also as a source of further learning, for any future iteration of the project involving the DF, and for mainstreaming within the FET sector.

### ***RPL and the Irish Defence Forces***

While Tobar was introduced as a way of responding to the needs of those personnel about to retire with low levels of qualification, once the project got underway it attracted interest from a wider profile. This included those planning to leave at a later stage, as well as those who had no immediate plans to leave but who saw it as a way of enhancing their role within the DF in the meantime. The

need to prepare military personnel for their eventual transition to civilian life has drawn attention to the potential of RPL in many armed forces throughout the world. However, much RPL activity has been geared towards learners who have gained advanced technical knowledge and skills (e.g., engineering and technology), as opposed to learning of a more general nature. Yet, more can be done to address the “disconnect between the education and training they receive in the military and the credit they receive in the civilian world” (Lumina, 2019, p. 3). This disconnect accounts for the high level of RPL undertaken by army personnel in many countries, by making their skills more visible to others such as potential employers and education and training institutions. The practical realities of life as a DF member mean that accreditation through attendance at a scheduled taught program may not be so feasible, given unpredictable work schedules and where “the mission comes first.”

An important part of the Irish Defence Forces’ statement on lifelong learning is external accreditation, which is pursued, “where it is appropriate to military skills and capability requirements since the primary intended outcome is improved operational effectiveness” (Government of Ireland, 2015, p. 76). Accreditation is also aimed at “making the Defence Forces more attractive as a career and increasing retention rates...thus rewarding members for their participation in lifelong learning (2015, p. 76).” This points to the interest in RPL from a Defence Forces point of view. The current tagline on the Irish Defence Forces website, “Strengthen the Nation,” could also be read with that in mind, i.e., assisting members to prepare for life outside the Defence Forces whenever that might happen.

The generic nature of many of the awards which the ETBs made available to the soldiers was also a good fit with the Defence Forces policy on training and education, which is geared towards preparation for military operations but also includes an emphasis on generic competences such as problem-solving and flexibility in a context of, as the White Paper on Defence puts it, “complex and changing demands of missions.”

## **Methodology**

The data are taken from an evaluation of the Tobar project involving a group of Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in partnership with the Irish Defence Forces (DF) over a period from 2018 to 2019. Work on the evaluation coincided with the beginning of the public health crisis that began in March 2020. A mixed methods methodology was used comprising interviews with project coordinators and DF management, online surveys, and document analysis. Two online surveys were administered, one for all ETB practitioners involved in the project (including administration, assessment, guidance, mentoring, project steering, and quality assurance) and one for learners. The administration of both surveys used a similar approach. An invitation was emailed to each of the ten coordinators who then forwarded it to the relevant staff and learners. Patterns and themes were identified in the narrative data collected using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The evaluator was supported by a group having first-hand experience with Tobar, who advised on matters relating to the project context, data collection, contact with stakeholders and evaluation participants, etc. The evaluator also reported to the ETB's National Advisory Committee on different occasions during the evaluation. These mechanisms reflected the needs of a management-oriented evaluation, where "the decision-maker's concerns, informational needs, and criteria for effectiveness guide the direction of the study" (Worthen & Sanders, 1987, p. 77). Online qualitative surveys provide a "wide angle lens" on a topic, while also allowing for richness and depth, even if some responses may be brief (Braun et al., 2021, p. 641).

## **Results**

Key enablers and impediments, many of which revolve around the same issues, including practical arrangements for RPL and its implementation, communication about RPL and its promotion, developing system capacity, and achieving coherence nationally, emerged from the lessons learned.

### ***Enablers: Views of Staff and Learners***

In one of the open-ended survey items, staff and learners were asked to identify key enablers that helped ensure successful participation. There were numerous references to the competence and commitment of project staff: "enthusiasm from within the team;" and "energy of staff who believed in the transformative power of the process." The key role of the coordinator, who assumed much of the responsibility for driving the project, was also cited: "coordinators and their experience in RPL." The relationship between the ETB and the local barracks was also noted: "the willingness of the DF and ETB to have open and frank discussion;" and "a dedicated contact person in the DF local barracks." The national scope of the project with the involvement and support of key stakeholders was also considered crucial: "national working group for sharing resources and expertise was very beneficial."

Learners referred to the helpfulness of the ETB staff, the new learning that accrued from their participation, their increased confidence, and the practical arrangements that were conducive to their participation. Learners were complimentary of the various ETB staff who provided support; "all the tutors were excellent and very understanding and very helpful." Responses focused in particular on the mentors: "mentors were brilliant;" "mentors...made it easier to understand the process." Another recurring theme was the value of the project experience itself as a way of learning about themselves, and their increased awareness of the value of their prior learning. Learners indicated that the RPL process was not simply a recording or documentation of what they already knew, but involved significant new learning, and they developed a greater awareness of the value and significance of their learning in the DF and its transferability beyond the military. There is therefore more learning involved than that which is simply "prior." Many also referred to the confidence gained: "It gave me the confidence to know I will be able to return to education at a further date with no worries."

### ***Impediments and challenges: views of staff and learners***

The most frequently reported challenge was related to time pressure: “time, very labor intensive;” “time constraints.” The availability of staff with the required competence was also problematic, i.e., finding teachers who had the required expertise in assessing work produced in the particular subject area but also experience in RPL (as distinct from assessment of work produced as part of a taught program). There was significant relearning and unlearning required for the teachers who took on roles as mentors and assessors: “learning to think differently in terms of evidence and assessment for experienced staff and tutors.”

In their responses to what they found most challenging, learners referred mostly to: time pressure and workload; the return to education; uncertainty about what RPL involved; accessing and using evidence from their military duties; and presenting evidence in a way that was meaningful in a civilian context. Managing the workload along with their other commitments emerged as the most significant challenge; “balancing work, family, and the attention the RPL requires.” RPL was akin to a return to education, which they found challenging: “returning to education after such a long period.” Accessing evidence to demonstrate the outcomes and then presenting it appropriately was also a challenge: “trying to find some of the material;” and “evidence gathering was difficult.”

### **Discussion of Lessons Learned**

Tobar is an important source for informing future development not just within the ETB/DF context, but in other RPL cohort projects as well as RPL provision more generally. The coordinated and collaborative nature of the partnership also made a difference. Key lessons provide the basis for the report recommendations, beginning with strategy, followed by capabilities and structures, and finally, practice.

### ***Strategy and Governance***

Under the auspices of ETBI, the 10 ETBs acted as a consortium, in partnership with the DF using a commonly agreed approach, following the initial Donegal ETB test projects but allowing for certain local adaptation. This collaboration, supported by QQI, enabled ETBs to share knowledge and mobilize collective intelligence, that would otherwise not be available. Other stakeholders added momentum, supporting professional development and toolkit development. This mass mobilization proved to be an important feature in the success of the project and is indicative of what is required for any mainstreaming endeavor, taking account of the systemic nature of many of the issues, where it is more about the multilateral, rather than the unilateral, or even the bilateral. At the same time, there was sufficient scope for ETBs to adapt the project according to local needs. It represented a kind of “push and pull,” where ETBs could address the “push” from various national and European imperatives while opting to “pull” together with other providers in a coordinated and collaborative way. This brings into focus the importance of quality assurance, which in turn is essential for trust and confidence. Embedding a common and consistent approach was seen as desirable in a context where there was much to be learned. For example, one survey

respondent noted: “There was no yardstick to measure against so it was difficult to judge sometimes if the project was on the right track.” While the collaborative effort was enabling, much remained to be worked out afterward at the level of the ETB in order to implement RPL.

Embedding RPL across the FET sector will require continued collaboration between ETBs, for example, promotion, communication, toolkit development, assessment moderation, research and development, and any award-specific expertise. This would be advantageous for visibility and trust, as well as greater efficiency of effort. This also points to the importance of cultural analysis when planning for such partnerships with other groups, whether in the enterprise, voluntary, or community sectors. Sociocultural learning theory shows that attending to this cultural aspect creates the conditions for higher levels of mutual trust and greater levels of cooperation and understanding, enabling people to experiment, learn and develop. Dialogue is the fundamental process by which organizations learn, and relational practices provide the social structure that embeds the dialogue and makes it sustainable (Boreham and Morgan, 2004). This is even more important in today’s environment of networks, partnerships, and strategic alliances (Hitendra et al., 2014).

### ***Capability and Structure***

Providing an effective learner-centered experience – one of the enabling themes in the FET strategy (SOLAS, 2020) — required the effective interaction between various roles (guidance, mentoring, assessment, quality assurance, coordination, steering). In a mainstreaming context, where the scale is very different, such interaction will need the support of a dedicated RPL service. Although learners found the RPL process very rewarding, many found it challenging. High levels of attrition were due to time and workload pressure, as well as challenges in “returning to education.” Support was also provided for portfolio preparation and writing. Elsewhere, portfolio development courses have been considered “a specialized curriculum, methodology, and community of practice through which learners are able to acquire the navigation tools (NT) needed to build a learning portfolio in this transitional space” (Ralphs, 2016, p. 76). Without this support, learners are “restricted to a procedural understanding of RPL and would not know what to include or exclude in a learning portfolio, or how to represent their capabilities” (Ralphs, 2016, p. 76). There was also a view from Tobar coordinators that further streamlining was possible in order to better support learners through the four phases. One coordinator referred to “a certain clunkiness in the process,” adding that greater organization was needed for both learners and staff:

Access to comprehensive guidance from start to finish and beyond certification, helped learners make decisions within the broader context of career planning and lifelong learning. For many mentors, the work required a change in stance from one of direction to facilitation. Learners received ongoing feedback on their portfolios, with the mentor mediating or facilitating this, using what can be termed a pedagogy of questioning. The professional identity of the mentor in RPL requires further development in a mainstreaming context. Mentoring ensures that learners

are supported in negotiating the required 'boundary crossing' between the disorganized amalgam of prior experiential knowledge and the codified knowledge of the qualification (Harris, 2014). There was an additional complication at play in Tobar given that learners were being asked to express their prior learning, gained predominantly in a military context, in an alternative civilian language, or as one learner put it, "Converting army terminology into civilian languages."

The Quality Assurance (QA) unit within each ETB played a key role. Given that RPL represented a new departure for many involved, there was great cautiousness on quality assuring the work. Having QA involved is important for confidence building in any mainstreaming endeavor. Working on an RPL project was a totally new experience for many of the ETB staff, with the potential for having, as they themselves expressed it, a "transformative" impact on their work in FET more generally - quite apart from RPL. Given the technically demanding nature of RPL, it was important that the most suitably qualified staff were available to contribute. Much of this knowledge about RPL is tacit, embodied in practice, and culturally situated. It also calls for a range of professional development provision. Ring-fenced funding and flexibility in staffing enabled ETBs to achieve project goals, using workaround solutions where necessary. Certain cost-efficiencies were possible through working with groups of learners, for some of the time, such as writing workshops. Coordinators believed other savings were achievable as RPL became more embedded in practice.

### ***Practice***

RPL takes place within an assessment culture that has been largely shaped by taught programs. Some assessment practice is common to both taught programs and RPL. For example, the use of integrated assessment by clustering learning outcomes from within and even across modules is ideal for the holistic nature of prior experiential learning. But RPL requires alternative approaches in other cases as Tobar showed.

Additional assessment briefs and techniques were used to complement the portfolio to better accommodate the experiential learning and the evidence available, notably assignment and skills demonstration. Rubrics allowed a holistic assessment of this integrated work against each learning outcome. Percentage grading was used to calculate overall results according to pass, merit, or distinction. All of this required considerable skill on the part of the assessor, and professional judgment in certain cases. Recognizing that alternative approaches may be needed and recording these in policies can bring more clarity and confidence. Issues such as these provide a bank of topics to be addressed in supporting mainstreaming, as part of CPD, so that good practice is shared, and made routine, even while still evolving.

A similar principle underpins both RPL and program design using learning outcomes - What is important is that the learning outcomes align with the knowledge, skills, and competences needed for the award, regardless of how these are achieved, i.e., through prior experiential learning or new learning from a taught program. Yet, using prior non-formal and informal learning to demonstrate

learning outcomes raises particular challenges. Devising an assessment brief for this kind of learning and eliciting available evidence was the subject of much commentary. The use of learning outcomes has long been contested in education and training, with the main debate focused on whether “learning and the outcomes of learning can and should be stated in full-ended, stable, pre-specified and measurable terms or in open-ended, flexible terms with limited opportunities for measurement” (Prøitz, 2010, p. 133). What is important is that the learning outcomes align with the knowledge, skills, and competences needed for the award, regardless of how these are achieved, i.e., through prior experiential learning or new learning from a taught program. Including an RPL perspective in program development could help in making FET provision more RPL-ready. It points to the need for learning outcomes that are open to multiple means of demonstration - in line with the principles of universal design for learning (UDL).

## **Conclusion**

Using a project such as Tobar to inform mainstreaming of RPL provision must be informed by what is known regarding the diffusion of innovation beyond initial projects. For example, “senior management support, recognition of the time needed to change practices, appropriate skill development, contextualized innovation, supportive networks, and a solid institutional infrastructure” (Smith, 2012, p. 173).

Lessons from Tobar point to the need for systems thinking, involving a blend of coordinated actions at a sectoral level, as well as at the level of the individual ETB. Performance agreements and annual service planning should incorporate a range of actions and targets relating to RPL. ETBI should prepare its own program of work to advance this. Planning should take account of other actions and enabling themes from the Irish FET Strategy that can benefit, and in turn benefit from, progress in RPL activity, including a communication strategy. Dovetailing with developments in RPL in higher education will enable a more coordinated approach, contributing to the development of the tertiary education framework as outlined in the FET Strategy.

As for lessons on capabilities and structures, the case for the establishment of a dedicated RPL service at the level of the ETB to support centers and settings seems very strong. This would support RPL for individual learners, as well as cohort RPL through partnerships with enterprise, voluntary, and community groups. Various enabling structures will be required to manage the program of work, including sectoral practitioner working groups to support policy development and practice. Policies for quality assurance should be reviewed so that they accommodate a scaled-up level of activity.

Mainstreaming RPL means providing for a range of situations in which RPL may be appropriate: individual or cohort; program entry, exemption or credit, or full award. The Tobar project highlights the importance of access to career guidance counseling throughout, with mentoring and assessment, geared towards accompanying the learner across the four CEDEFOP phases: identification; documentation, assessment, and certification, phases that are linked together in a

dynamic, rather than linear way. For example, even while the learner is still in the documentation phase, the learner can benefit from having access to formative assessment feedback.

RPL projects such as Tobar takes place in a broader FET landscape in Ireland undergoing transformational change as set out in the FET Strategy. The evaluation results show that RPL can make a key contribution to the realization of the vision in the Strategy, supporting the three pillars of skills development, inclusion, and building pathways - and reinforcing these in its own way.

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