



An Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais,
Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta
Department of Further and Higher Education,
Research, Innovation and Science

Ireland's Skills Strategy: A Vision for Our Tertiary System

ETF Peer Learning Event - 27th January 2026

What is the Vision

A world-leading further and higher education, research, and skills system where **everyone** is empowered to reach their potential and drive Ireland's economic and social progress.

We want to harness education, skills, research and innovation as drivers of the economy, resilience and inclusion.

Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

- A new Ministry
- A new emphasis
- Key priority: To expand pathways to skills, reskilling, and apprenticeships that match Ireland's evolving workforce needs

Scale of System

Institutions:

- 14 Higher Education Institutes
- 16 ETBs (Education & Training Boards – responsibilities include FET)
- 1,500 Buildings
- 3rd Largest Public Sector footprint

Budget:

€4.6 Billion

The Future Is Now

- Economic and Geopolitical Uncertainty
- Digitisation and AI
- Demographic Trends
- Constant and Quicker Change in how we live, work and learn.

Complex challenges but also present opportunities for the sector to lead, adapt and respond.

OECD REVIEW

- Four priority areas examined:
 - Securing a **balance in skills** through a responsive and diversified supply of skills
 - Fostering greater participation in **Lifelong Learning** in and outside the workplace
 - Leveraging skills to drive **innovation** and strengthen the **performance of firms**
 - Strengthening **skills governance** to build a joined-up skills ecosystem

Centrality of Lifelong Learning

- **Encourage building the habits and skills of lifelong learning** (evidenced by engagement with formal learning programmes) to support job security, career progress through upskilling and changing careers through reskilling
- Contribute to keeping the **Irish workforce diverse and future-focused** and, thereby, attractive and competitive
- Contribute to a **seamless transition** between education and the workforce and between sectors

We Are Highly Educated

- One of the highest rates of participation in higher education across the OECD
- **But** just above the EU average in terms of adult participation in learning
- **And** we lag best in class by a considerable margin
- **Our Unique Selling Point** and Ireland's success depends on continued investment, in building on what we have, and in leveraging innovation in what and how we deliver.

Enterprise as Key Partners

- A vital part of Ireland's approach
- National Skills Council
- Regional Skills Fora
- Skillnet Ireland
- *Enterprise Connect* in the ETBs
- Programme design, work based learning etc.

Specific OECD Focus on Lifelong Learning

Making Lifelong Learning more flexible and accessible through:

- Online, modular or bitesize courses
- Stackable micro credentials and digital badges
- Focus on workplace skills and a learning pathway
- Recognition of Prior Learning.

What if everything you've learned in work, in life, or elsewhere could help you move forward?

Recognition of Prior Learning helps you make the most of the knowledge, skills, and experience you already have. It allows your learning, wherever and however it was gained, to be formally recognised. This can lead to access to a course, exemptions from certain modules, or other forms of credit, so you don't have to repeat learning you've already mastered.

OECD Recommendations on RPL

- 6.1: Strengthen the capacity of education and training providers to offer recognition of prior learning, including by establishing national guidelines outlining the procedures and processes of RPL.
- 6.2: Improve awareness of and access to recognition of prior learning, including tools for individuals to accumulate and display their non-formal and informal learning.
- 6.3: Implement a mechanism for recognising and rewarding informal, on the job learning provided by employers.

Policy Direction

A key initiative in response to this recommendation and to the need to support learners who are already in the workplace:

- National RPL in Higher Education Project
- Collaborative initiative working to embed and expand RPL across 14 partner higher education institutions
- Funded by the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 3 (Innovation and Agility).

RPL in Higher Education Project

Three main aims, which are:

- to continue to embed, streamline and promote RPL, particularly the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, across the sector in a manner that is coherent and consistent;
- to work with employers to increase access and progression opportunities in areas of skills needs;
- to enhance the sector's capacity to operate RPL by developing useful tools, materials, resources and professional development opportunities for staff.

RPL in Higher Education Project

A substantial amount of work including development of toolkits, and testimonials:

[Home | Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\)](#)

Relevant learning can then be assessed and, if it meets the required standard, be recognised by a higher education institution and used by the applicant to:

- Gain entry to a programme in higher education
- Start a programme at an advanced level, like year 2 or 3
- Gain module exemptions or credit for learning already achieved

RPL in Further Education

- Forthcoming FET Strategy has four priority areas including Quality with Innovation.
- Action to advance a flexible, learner centric ecosystem, through modular provision, micro-qualifications and other micro-learning initiatives.
- RPL a key enabler - and practical steps to advance in the FET system are already in place, like the partnerships between KCETB and SETU.

RPL Supports for Staff – Underpinning Innovative Approaches

Under the auspices of the National Forum for Teaching and Learning and in conjunction with the RPL in Higher Education Project, staff who teach can learn how to:

- Explain the concept of RPL and reflect on its application within their own setting;
- Reflect on the potential impact of RPL for an institution, its staff and students;
- Identify existing policies and consider their alignment with practice;
- Analyse the relationship between programme and module learning outcomes and the RPL candidate.