Recognition of Prior Learning

Your Learning Counts

RPL in Higher Education Project

Overview, Achievements and Next Steps

Project Management Team

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HCI Human Capital Initiative

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TUA Technological Universities Association

priorlearning.ie

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Atlantaigh
Atlantic Technological University

DCU
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DUNDALK INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY
INSTITIÚID TEICNEOLAÍOCHTA DHÚN DEALGAN

Institute of Art, Design + Technology Dún Laoghaire

MTU
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Mumhan
Munster Technological University

Maynooth University
National University of Ireland Maynooth

SETU
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Oirdheiscirt
South East Technological University

Trinity College Dublin
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath
The University of Dublin

TU DUBLIN
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta Bhaile Átha Cliath
Technological University Dublin

TUS
Technological University of the Shannon: Midlands Midwest
Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta na Sionainne: Lár Tíre Iarthar Láir

UCC
University College Cork, Ireland
Coláiste na hOllscoile Corcaigh

UCD DUBLIN
University College Dublin
Ireland's Global University

Ollscoil na Gaillimhe
University of Galway

University of Limerick
Ollscoil Luimnigh

Our Partner Institutions

HCI Human Capital Initiative

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PLPL Recognition of Prior Learning
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Critical Advancements

RPL in Higher Education

The project has delivered critical advancements to strengthen institutional capacity, provided greater clarity for learners, and furthered the groundwork for a system where prior learning is recognised as a valued and viable pathway into and through higher education.

- 14 HEIs collaboratively developed the Pilot Framework for RPL in Higher Education.
- The implementation of data collection and reporting mechanisms for RPL.
- Supported an ecosystem of cross-institutional collaboration across 14 partner institutions.
- Creation of a Community of Practice essential to advancing RPL.
- The roll out of the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) RPL Digital Badge.

Key Project Achievements

COLLABORATION BETWEEN PARTNERS

PILOT FRAMEWORK FOR RPL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

RPL STAFF DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

DATA COLLECTION/ REPORTING SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

LEARNER INFORMATION AND AWARENESS RAISING

Collaboration between Partners

Sector-Wide Collaboration Across 14 HEIs

Policy Development & Implementation

Framework for RPL in Higher Education

A shared sector-wide understanding of RPL to drive coherence and consistency in policy and practice across 14 HEI Partners.

The framework provides definitions of key terms related to RPL, outlines principles as well as the 5-stage RPL process.

Pilot Framework for RPL in Higher Education

The Framework shows that RPL is underpinned by two core values:

1. Learner-centredness: The learner is central to the RPL process. A wide range of learners may wish to apply for RPL: RPL is for everyone.

2. Quality assurance: The RPL process is embedded in the quality assurance procedures of each higher education institution and is aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications.

Definition of RPL

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process by which prior learning is formally valued. It is a means by which prior learning is identified, assessed, and recognised by an educational institution as part of its programmes, courses, and/or modules on Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications. This makes it possible for an individual to build on learning achieved and to be rewarded for it.

Development of Aligned Institutional Policies

14 HEIs developed the Pilot Framework for RPL in Higher Education, agreed by senior leaders, this provides a foundation for consistent, coherent practice across institutions.

12 Partner HEIs published revised policies to guide institutional implementation of RPL

Data Collection and Reporting Systems Integration

Standardised data capture initiated across HEIs allows us to ‘count’ RPL learners, ensuring that every learner’s journey is acknowledged and valued.

First National Technical (Data) Definition of RPL

Standardising and Tracking RPL

- Developed and agreed Technical (Data) Definition of RPL (2022)
- To enable consistent RPL reporting for:

Entry, Credit/Exemption
Advanced Entry
Full Award

- Supports integration with HEI data systems:

Banner, ITS, SITS

Pilot Projects

- One HEI led a pilot to test system upgrades and data mapping in Banner, now implemented university-wide.
- Two HEI’s began pilots for ITS and SITS

Learner Data

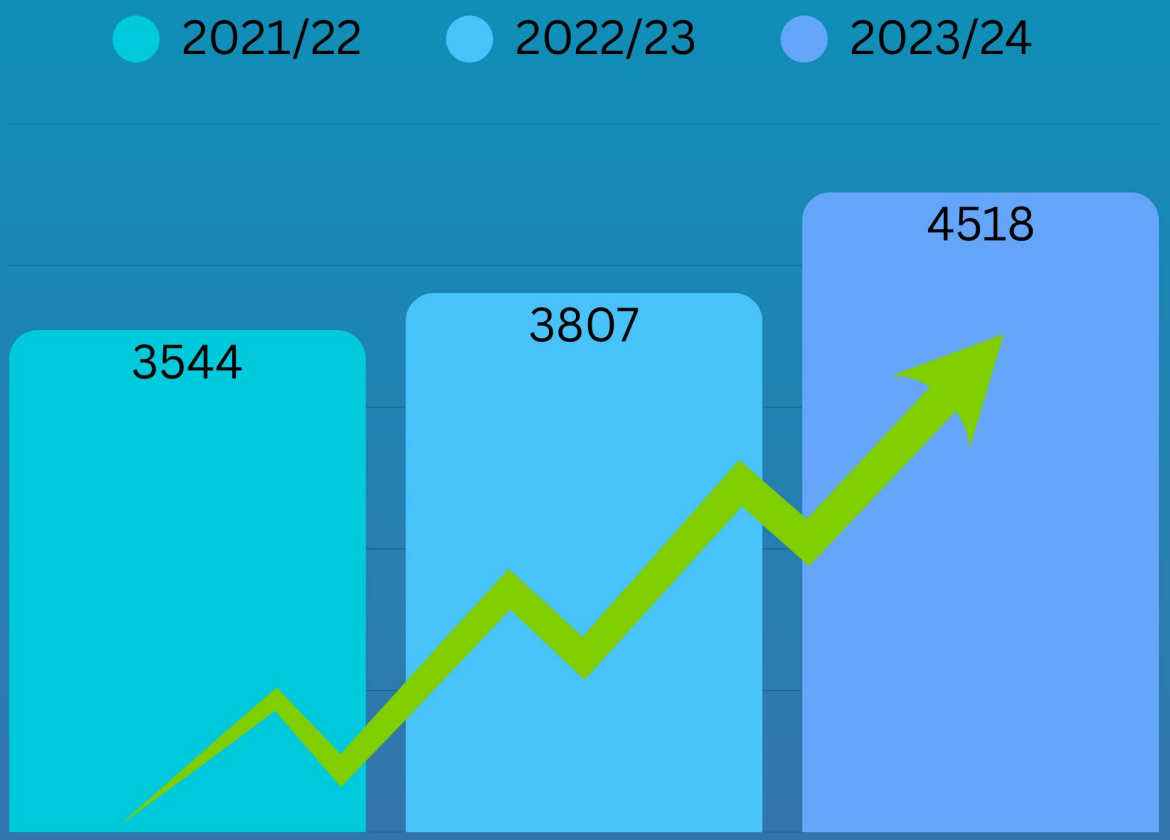
RPL Usage by Purpose

2021 - 2024

Entry	Credit/ Exemptions	Advanced Entry	Full Award
4,379	4,287	1,906	20

2021 - 2024

Almost 12,000 Learners access programmes via RPL



Year-on-year growth in uptake

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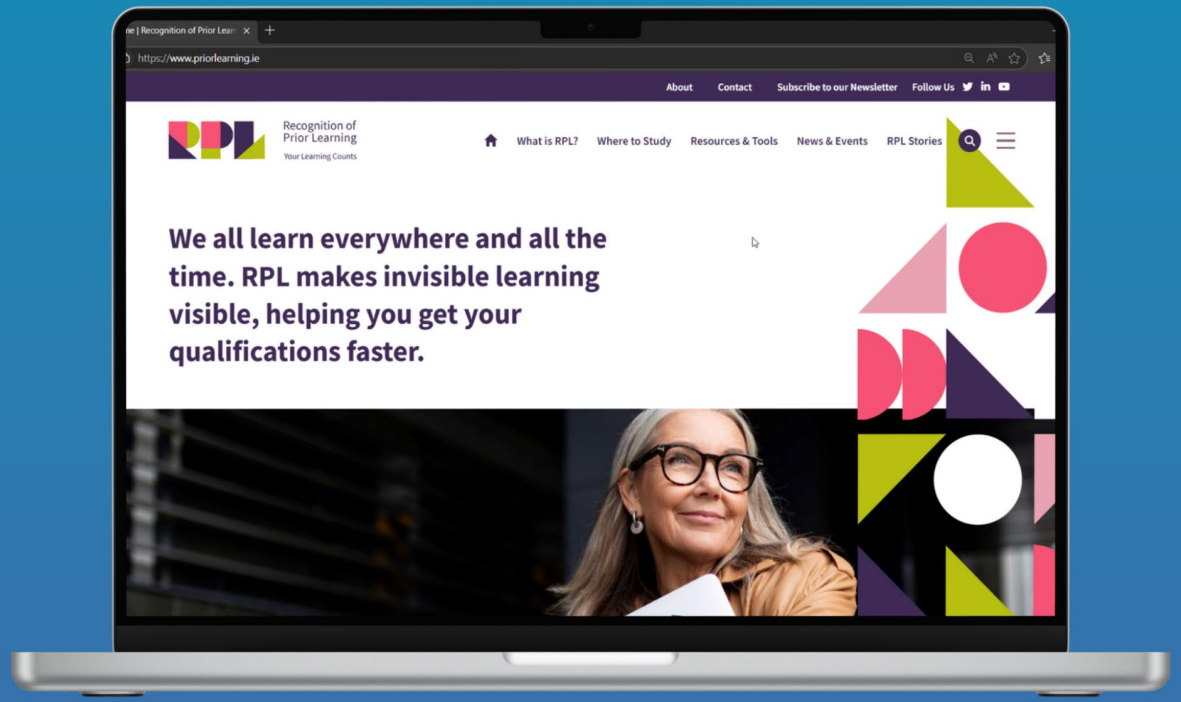
Learner Information and Awareness Raising

Empowering Learners

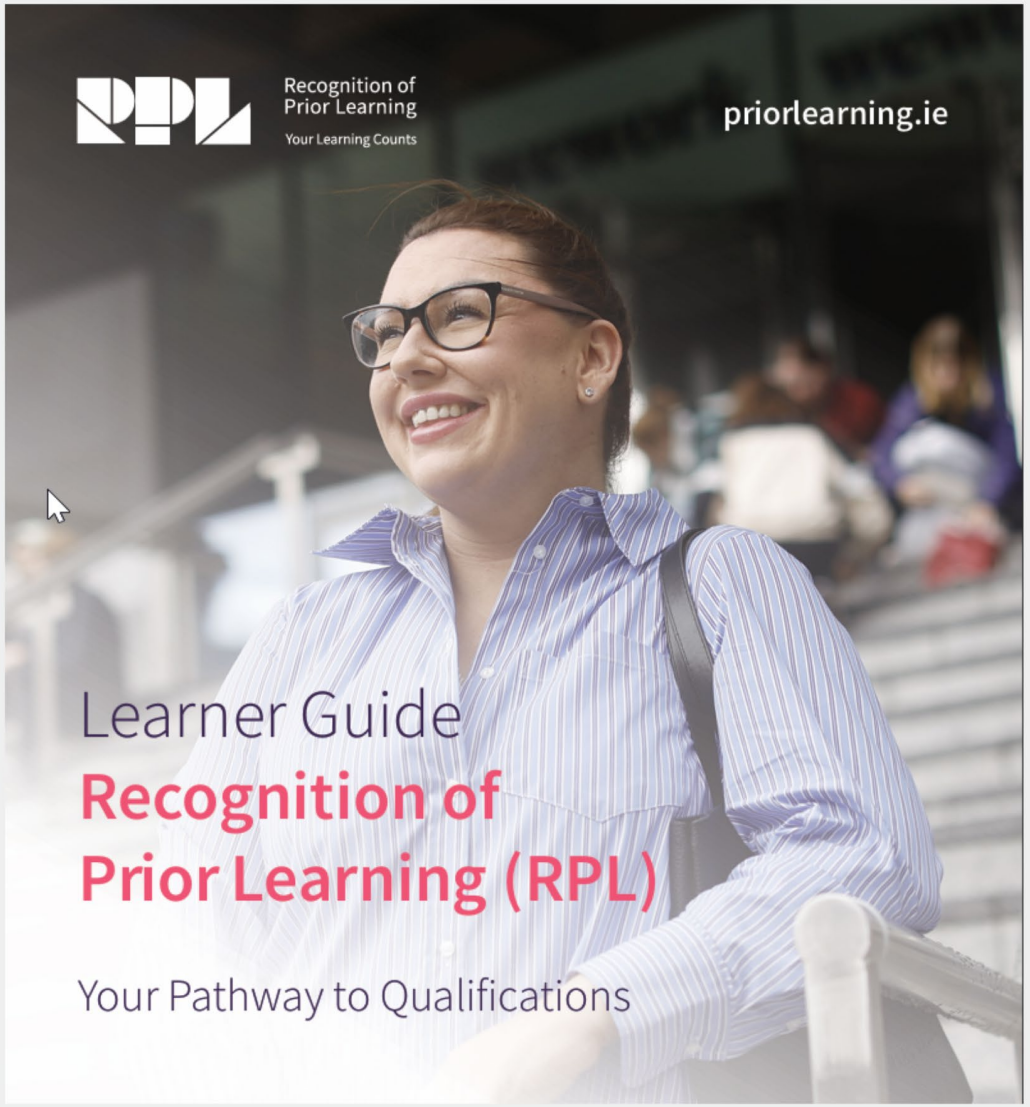
Launched priorlearning.ie as a national RPL information hub



- RPL integrated into HEI websites and programme pages
- Outreach targeting learners, HEI staff, employers, the public.
- Disseminated Learner testimonials to help simplify the process
- Showcased enterprise partnerships through video testimonials
- Increased visibility through priorlearning.ie and active social media channels
- Resources, guides and FAQ's to help learners start and navigate the RPL process

RPL Guide for Learners

- Pathways to Higher Education: Explains how prior learning can be used to gain entry, exemptions, or advanced placement in Higher Education.
- Clear, Step-by-Step Guidance: Learn how to identify, document, and evidence your prior learning.
- Real Stories, Real Impact: See how RPL has helped others upskill, pivot careers, and gain confidence.



RPL in the Media

RPL features in leading national media:

- RTÉ Nationwide
- The Irish Times
- Irish Farmers Journal
- Irish Examiner
- Business & Finance
- Regional press and radio coverage featuring learner stories

IRISH FARMERS JOURNAL

SEARCH

BEEF DAIRY SHEEP AGRIBUSINESS MACHINERY TILLAGE PEDIGREE BUILDINGS PROPERTY

Recognition of prior learning is enabling access to education

Further learning is now a reality for many – including farmers – as skills and experience are acknowledged.

Wow!

The Echo, Wednesday, April 2, 2025 5

'Our work has the power to transform lives'

CHRIS DUNNE meets Dr Ciara Staunton, who was recently appointed as the new National Project Director for Ireland's Recognition of Prior Learning, and finds out about her vision for the project.

Dr Ciara Staunton recently took up the post as National Project Director of RPL which allows learners to gain access to h learnings - whether formal or informal.

Every time distinguished academic, administrator, and advocate for inclusive education, Dr Ciara Staunton graduated, she threw her hat in the air!

"Yes, I did! I must have!" says Ciara, who is married to Steven and who is mother to three teens.

"I was always in a celebratory mood celebrating my achievement."

Graduating from college is always a big deal, isn't it?

"Of course it is," says Ciara, who lives in Carraguline.

"Nobody can ever take that piece of paper away from you."

She always looked the part of the proud graduate.

"I had the whole look; the make-up, the heels, the dress," says Ciara laughing.

"Not to mention all the photographs!"

Today, Ciara is in one of those moods; a celebratory mood.

The 49-year-old is bringing over 20 years of experience at UCC to her new role as Project Director for the National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

RPL Ireland is a National Project funded by the Human Capital Initiative, working in partnership with 14 higher education institutions across Ireland. The project allows learners to gain entry to higher education programmes or receive exemptions based on their prior learning - whether it's formal, non-formal, or experiential.

"My dad, Dr Denis Staunton, working as assistant director in the Centre for Adult Continuing Education and Director of Access at UCC, instilled in me indirectly the huge benefit of education from a young age without really intending to, says Ciara.

How young?

"Education begins from the cradle to the grave," says Ciara, who in her early career held roles in teaching and research, including managing the Forensic Psychology Research Programme and coordinating the MA in Forensic Psychology.

"In Ireland, and here in Cork, we have wonderful pre-school and childcare facilities."

Ciara's mother, in her own role, instilled another passion in Ciara; motherhood.

"Mum was the nurturer," says Ciara. "She was a stay-at-home mum, the nurturer, the most important role of all. Mum and dad were great role models for us kids.

Growing up, Ciara and her sibling considered themselves fortunate.

"Having access to education and going to college, we counted ourselves very lucky and very privileged," says Ciara.

Now Ciara, heading up the RPL project, is helping to enable others to access to the same privilege.

"My two decades in UCC, immersed in academia, teaching, programme management, and research, provided me with a forward-thinking approach to higher education, emphasising inclusivity and accessibility for diverse learners."

RPL plays an important role in recognising the skills and knowledge individuals acquire outside traditional education systems, empowering workers seeking career advancement, migrants integrating into workforce, and those re-entering education after long gaps.

Ciara believes in inclusivity regarding education.

She has delivered lectures in Cork prison.

"There is no measure for the impact of education," says Ciara.

"Knowledge is power. My current research interest is about gender-based violence."

What is her vision for RPL?

"My vision is to see the project embedded as a normal academic activity within Ireland's higher education sector, promoting life-long learning and enhancing opportunities for marginalised groups, ensuring a competitive workforce in a globalised economy."

Outside of work, Ciara enjoys running, strength and conditioning and Hyrox - an indoor fitness competition. "I've taken part in three l events," says Ciara. "Two in I and one in Malaga. I also run completed the Great Railway Eskan, and I've run the Cork Cit marathon. I run 5km and 10 way of socialising with friends. great way to catch up!

"I am an avid fan of exercise,' Ciara.

She is in peak condition, i prime of her life.

She gets it.

"You're right" she says. "I the prime of my life! Look at me very fulfilled.

"I like to be very mindful," Ciara.

"The little mundane things a make up the bigger picture. I be kind, and I like to have posit teractions at meaningful mon Big things come and go. It's all the little things on the journ that. Having commitment and vation, everyone can achieve goals. That is empowering."

Ciara, at the top of her gam loving family life, doesn't doub

Feelgood 15

One word could be key to your best year yet

Do you have an ambitious list of resolutions, or are you skipping the 'new year, new you' cycle? According to YouGov, 43% of adults who made resolutions for 2025 failed in just under a month and fitness, and research tells us that most resolutions are abandoned before the year's end.

Resolutions can ever motivation, inspiration, and feel so good when we need to be fluid. We take on so much at once, leaving ourselves discouraged and burnt-out. What if, instead of piling on more pressure, we took a simpler approach, by choosing a guiding theme for word to shape the year ahead?

Achieving a goal or resolution often requires a meaningful behavioural shift, and unlike launching new things, changing habits is a skill.

Instead of a long list of resolutions, choose a concept — like 'courage' or 'focus' — to guide you through 2025 and influence your daily decisions, says **Gillian O'Gorman**

Research on goal setting, from Dr Gail Matthews at the Dominican University, suggests that writing down goals can increase the likelihood of success, instead of spreading efforts thin across multiple goals.

Oprah Winfrey, for example, has often embraced the concept of choosing a word to live by.

Previously, she chose words like 'Purpose' or 'Balance' to set a theme for the year, but recently she's been choosing a single word.

Last year, I chose the word 'consistency'. After months of starting and stopping habits, I realised I wasn't giving myself the chance to build momentum.

This year, I'm choosing 'ease'. Instead of setting ambitious goals, I'm focusing on small, sustainable changes that feel good and aligned with my values.

Marie Forleo, an entrepreneur, author, and motivational speaker, chose words like 'abundance' and 'joy' to guide her choices and focus on what matters most in her business.

How to choose your word

Here's a simple way to choose your word for 2025:

- **Reflect:** Pause and consider what you need most in your life right now. Focus on areas like health, relationships, or growth.
- **Pause & Trust:** Trust your intuition and let your word emerge naturally through reflection or journaling.
- **Seek guidance:** Use quiet moments, meditation, or prayer to connect with what feels meaningful.
- **Choose:** Pick a word that encourages clarity and aligns with your values. Like 'ease', 'courage', or 'focus'.
- **Live:** Let Kelly your word guide and in a guide your daily decisions and mindset.

The beauty of one word lies in its simplicity. It's easy to remember, flexible enough and true appeal in the year progressed, one word serve as a dynamic guide. It evolves with you and keeps you aligned with your deeper intentions.

Whether you're facing challenges or celebrating successes, your guiding word offers a consistent source of inspiration and direction. As life unfolds, why not choose one word this on how you want your vision for the year?

■ Gillian O'Gorman is a wellness coach

School of life leads to college qualifications

Experience counts if you are considering applying for third-level education through the Prior Learning Project. It can help you gain entry to a broad range of courses, from level-six certificates to level-10 doctoral degrees, writes **Sharon Ní Chonchúir**

Prior Learning project director Ciara Staunton says work and life experience 'can be used to gain entry to higher education courses'. Picture: Dave Conan

Susane Sullivan ran a business selling homemade snacks to retailers, enabling her to gain a place in year three of a four-year course.

THE deadline for CAO applications is looming, and Leaving Certificate students are deliberating which third-level courses will best qualify them for their careers. Those whose school days are behind them, but are feeling restless, may also be ready for a qualification this would allow them to take their lives in a new direction.

They might imagine such a thing to be impossible for several reasons. Perhaps they left school early, or didn't study their required grades. Or work and family commitments mean they don't have much time to study.

Dr Ciara Staunton is the director of the National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) project. She says it aims to remove those barriers, so that more people can enter higher education level in life.

"There are people out there who want to progress their careers, but are having it harder to building them up," she says.

"We show some people can have a wealth of experience based on what they have learned in work and life. RPL places value on that experience, so this they can use it to gain entry to higher education courses from level six certificates right up to level 10 doctoral degrees."

The results we learn outside of the classroom can be just as valuable as those we learn in it, says Dr Mary Quarke, a career guidance counsellor and a research fellow in the School of Education at University College Cork.

"As we progress through life, we learn how to cope and overcome challenges, whether it's illness, managing a household, or other circumstances," she says.

"We learn resilience, dexterity and how to adapt to unforeseen circumstances as well. We get to know ourselves better and develop a stronger sense of all we have to offer. And we all have so much to offer.

We learn many personal and interpersonal skills as we go along, she says. "We learn how to manage time, how to work with others, how to overcome obstacles, and realise success," says Quirke. "Some of the most sought-after competencies include the ability to communicate effectively, to manage and lead others, and to be a creative problem solver. These skills are developed both inside and outside of formal learning environments."

As somebody who completed her PhD in her 50s, Quirke believes that higher education shouldn't be limited to the young and welcomes RPL as a way to make up the bigger picture. I [illegible] and one in Malaga. I also run completed the Great Railway Eskan, and I've run the Cork Cit marathon. I run 5km and 10k way of socialising with friends. great way to catch up!

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widen access to it.

"It doesn't matter if you're 40, 50 or older, you're not over the hill when it comes to education," she says.

"There are many routes now for those who left education years ago. Courses are continuously being developed and changing their entry criteria to recognise experience, including career aftermaths of parenthood.

"Online and hybrid learning can be combined with work, making access easier and ensuring learning can happen alongside busy lives. And learning support is available for those who need it, including those with specific learning difficulties, disabilities or difficulties.

On the fast track

Susan Sullivan is studying for a business-studies degree in the Dublin Institute of Technology.

The 35-year-old, from Dromcollogher, Co Limerick, had been selling homemade snacks to retailers nationwide.

However, when she decided to close this business, her career options were limited, because she had no formal qualifications. This was the main motivation behind her return to education.

She looked at the Dundalk Institute of Technology's website and discovered that her course could be done entirely online.

"I discussed my goals and experience with the RPL lead in the Dundalk Institute of Technology, and he was very helpful. I was able to start with the course modules," she says.

"As a mode of the assessments are spread through RPL, I was able to enrol in year three of a four-year programme, which I'm now working two evenings per week and four Saturdays per month.

"It's a lot as risk or follow a dream, and there were many challenges to overcome, including the half hour round trip up and down to Limerick every day."

However, with considerable help from her family, Susan persevered and is now qualification-earned from a role as the GAA's manager player development lead.

"My aims at the University of Limerick has absolutely propelled me to bigger and better opportunities," he says. "The change of career path is also studies.

Former Westmeath football manager Jack Cooney is another example of someone who has availed of the Prior Learning process to change his career path.

Having done a business degree, followed by a postgraduate qualification in marketing, after leaving school, the 53-year-old, from Killucan, became an area manager for Dunnes Stores.

His Cooney has always had a passion for sports and was excited when he realised this RPL would allow him to combine the hands-on experience he had gained while playing and managing the Westmeath senior football team with the qualification he needed to apply for a manager's position in the University of Limerick.

Securing a education was daunting. "I was worried with time difference and had a lot of responsibilities," he says.

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Jack Cooney: Former football manager did a master's in sports performance.

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- No one needs to be stuck in a career rut anymore. You can change your life and change your career through education

fulfilling and rewarding and something I wouldn't have been able to do, or been qualified for, prior to returning to education."

Learn and learn about yourself

Both students acknowledge this returning to education at all adult is difficult.

"I was nervous at first," says Sullivan. "It had been such a long time since I'd written exams or written an assignment.

"Most of my class came straight from undergraduate programmes, so there was a considerable age gap between us," says Cooney.

"The course content, completing assignments and exams, and learning how to study were all things I was challenging, too. It was combining my course commitments with family commitments, from a time-resource point of view."

Nevertheless, both overcame these difficulties with support from lecturers, other university staff and fellow students.

Cooney now encourages everyone to consider returning to education.

"No one will ever look down a person you're motivated in, but you'll look back more down yourself," he says. "It's refreshing, fulfilling and rewarding to be learning and to be growing. You'll see yourself in many ways you may think you're not capable of, but it's so rewarding when you come through the other side."

Sullivan says her third-level education has changed her life and opened new career prospects. "It's also given me a deeper understanding of business, enhancing my confidence and abilities in the workplace. I'd definitely recommend it. Education offers you the chance to learn about yourself in a way you may not, or haven't what you are."

As we come to a new year, Quirke believes now is an ideal time to consider enrolling in a third-level course, especially for those who feel uninspired by their current job.

"Many of the skills we develop in education can be so rewarding," she says. "We won't just develop new skills. You'll meet new people, widen your network and hear what's happening in other industries and work environments. No one needs to be stuck in a career rut anymore. You can change your life and career through education."

■ The RPL Project aims to help 15,000 learners in Ireland to upskill or reskill over the next five years. For more information, visit www.prioritising.ie. Standard course fees apply.

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Your Learning Counts
Take Your Learning to a New Level
#YourLearningCounts

Recognition of Prior Learning
Your Learning Counts
Qualify Your Knowledge with RPL
#YourLearningCounts

Recognition of Prior Learning
Your Learning Counts
Recognise Your Journey, Qualify Your Future
#YourLearningCounts

Recognition of Prior Learning
Your Learning Counts
Give Your Knowledge the Credit it Deserves
#YourLearningCounts

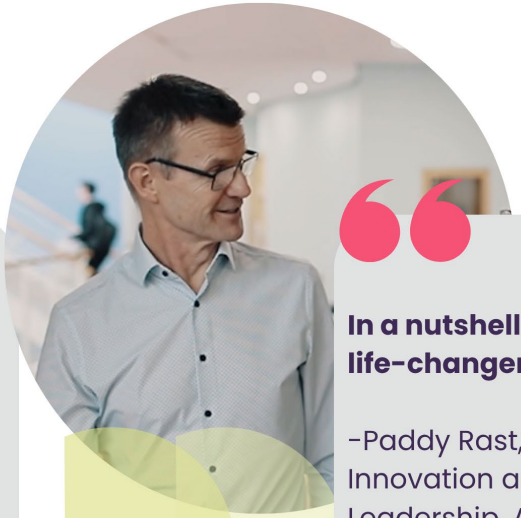
Recognition of Prior Learning
Your Learning Counts
Your Pathway to a Qualification
#YourLearningCounts

I want to encourage others to believe that this is the path for them and that they not only deserve it but have worked towards it, their entire life.

-Evelyn Mc Glynn, BA (Hons) in Business, Social Enterprise, Leadership & Management, Technological University of the Shannon.

Probably one of the best decisions I've made in my life and definitely one of the best years of my life.

-Mike Hanrahan, Atlantic Fellow, GBHI, Trinity College Dublin.



In a nutshell, its a life-changer.

-Paddy Rast, MBS in Innovation and Leadership, Atlantic Technological University

Sharing testimonials to simplify the process and provide real-world examples of how RPL can be applied across a broad range of industries and career paths.

WATCH: RPL Learner Testimonials

Staff Development

Badge Criteria

- Explain the concept of RPL and reflect on its application within your 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.

600

Higher Ed Staff reached through the RPL Digital Badge

Recognition of Prior Learning
Your Learning Counts
RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

> This was a really great programme. The content was excellent and it really enhanced my understanding of RPL both in the Further Education and Higher Education sectors. I would highly recommend it to others.

> One of the best badges I have ever completed...the material and conversations were still very relevant to me. The guest contributors were excellent, a pleasure to listen to.

-Digital Badge Participants

Key Achievements

813 staff registered for the RPL Digital Badge, with **400** badges awarded

51 facilitator badges issued, empowering participants to deliver the badge and support RPL development within their own institutions

70% of badge earners are based in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); of these, more than half hold academic roles

96% satisfaction rate reported among surveyed participants
Strong cross-sector engagement, with high levels of participation from academic and professional services staff.

priorlearning.ie/digitalbadge

Key Resources Delivered

www.priorlearning.ie/resources-tools

RPL Toolkit

Access the RPL Toolkit

- Resource for the Practice of RPL for Academic, Professional, Quality Assurance and Administrative Personnel
- Structured around the 5-stage RPL process: Information, Identification, Documentation, Assessment, Certification.
- Informed by the Pilot Framework, Technical (Data) Definition, and institutional practices.

RPL Exemplars and Templates

- Practical, real-world examples of RPL practice, providing guidance for staff, including assessment templates, and exemplars provided by partner HEI's
- Shared by partner HEI's to guide implementation

Findings of the External Evaluation of the RPL in Higher Education Project

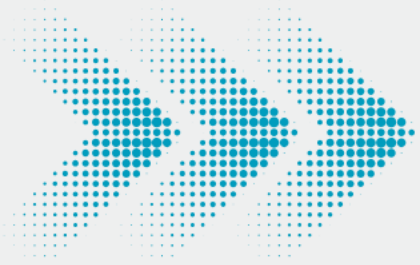
"The initial lifespan of the project has enabled the sector to reach agreement on the necessary preconditions; for example, the technical (data) definition and pilot framework, for establishing a coherent, national approach to RPL across Irish higher education."

-External Expert Evaluation of the RPL in Higher Education Project, p. 77.

Overarching Recommendations

1. Establish a subsequent phase of work in which objectives and key performance indicators (KPIs) target on-the-ground implementation of the National Framework for RPL in HE.

2. Clearly differentiate between objectives and KPIs to be achieved at national level and those to be achieved at institutional level.



Recommendations for National Activity

3. Embed statutory reporting on RPL within HEA's Student Record System to facilitate ongoing reporting on RPL data by HEIs to the HEA.

4. Consider whether HEI reporting on RPL data (see recommendation 3) and/or other direct indicators (see recommendation 9) should be linked to any additional funding to progress RPL practice within HEIs.

5. Coordinate with employer representative organisations to develop a strategy to raise awareness of RPL and ensure the opportunities it presents are understood by enterprise.

6. Require that RPL be considered, embedded by design and made explicit within information pertaining to new programmes or micro-credentials.

7. Ensure that the existing communications material (e.g. priorlearning.ie and RPL stories) and practical resources developed by the project (e.g. pilot framework, case studies) are maintained, hosted and actively promoted for use by the sector, e.g. via the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (NFETLHE). Within this:

a. Facilitate ongoing contributions to a repository of case studies or exemplars of good practice by institutions to maintain the currency of these resources.
b. Enable academic and professional staff in Irish higher education to continue to achieve recognition for their engagement in professional learning via access to the existing RPL Digital Badge.

8. Progress redevelopment of the existing RPL Digital Badge and RPL Toolkit to provide a suite of practical, self-access training resources available for use on demand by institutions and relevant stakeholders.

Recommendations for Institutional Activity

9. At institutional level, propose and agree appropriate indicators of achievement, particularly in the context of any additional funding to progress RPL practice within the HEI. Reasonable example of direct indicators may include:

a. Visibility of RPL in programme information for prospective learners.
b. Visibility of RPL in strategic and operational plans and KPIs.
c. The proportion of academic, external engagement and relevant area (e.g. admissions, registry) staff engaging in RPL training or development activity.
d. Numbers of RPL processes actioned (which may be expected to vary substantially by institutional profile).

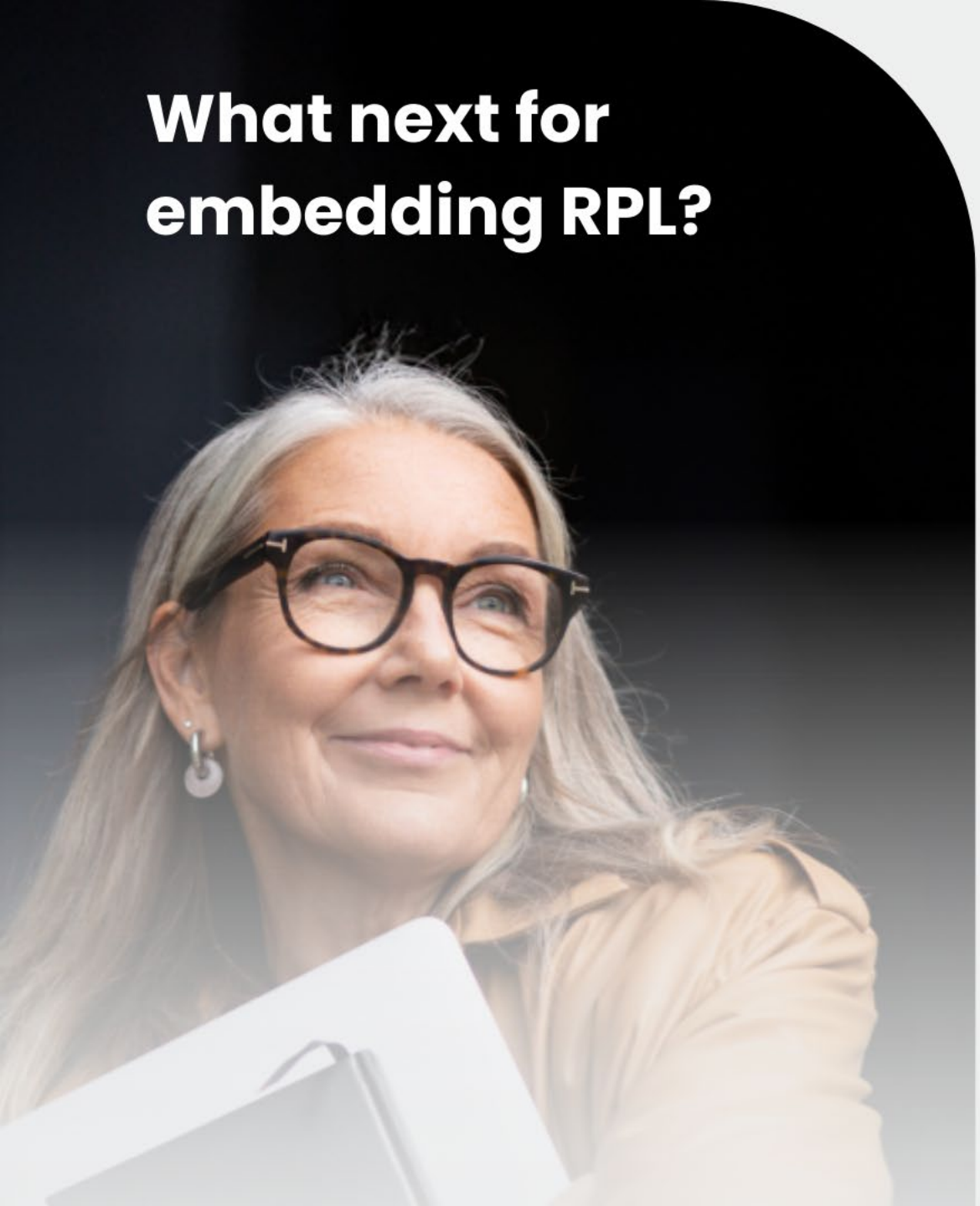
10. In HEIs where the RPL coordinator role exists, clarify the role of RPL in relation to roles and responsibilities for RPL throughout the organisation. Within this:

a. Embed responsibility for RPL appropriately in the role descriptions as relevant for academic and professional staff.

11. Embed RPL in the industry communications, external engagement and enterprise strategies of institutions, particularly in relation to cohort RPL.

12. Raise the profile of RPL in communications and promotions material targeting prospective learners.

What next for embedding RPL?



Key Priority 1: Increasing Capacity across the HEIs (Staff Training & Professional Development)
Enhancing staff knowledge, skills, and confidence to embed consistent RPL practices within and across institutions.

Key Priority 2. Awareness Raising and Learner Engagement
Embedding RPL through National and Institutional Communications & Engagement.

Key Priority 3. Continued RPL Integration
Continued engagement with a range of stakeholders to ensure that RPL is positioned within national and local strategies.

Key Priority 4. Institutional and Stakeholder Engagement
Networking, engaging, consulting and collaborating to inform the development and actioning of key priorities.

Key Priority 5. Targeted Initiatives
Designing and delivering focused RPL initiatives.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Your Learning Counts

RPL Resources Available at:

priorlearning.ie

Thank you

priorlearning.ie

Human Capital Initiative

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