THEMATIC REVIEW
AND COLLABORATIVE POLICY ANALYSIS
RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND
INFORMAL LEARNING

IRELAND

COUNTRY NOTE

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Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Directorate for Education
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List of Acronyms

AIT	Athlone Institute of Technology Higher education institution
CIF	The Construction Industry Federation (CIF) actively represents and serves over 3,000 members covering businesses in all areas of the Irish construction industry
CIT	Cork Institute of Technology Higher education institution
CBR	Country background Report
DETE	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
DES	Department of Education and Science
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology Higher education institution
DCU	Dublin City University Higher education institution
DKIT	Dundalk Institute of Technology Higher education institution
ECTS	European Credit Transfer System
EQUAL	EU Social Funds Programme
Engineers Ireland	Engineers Ireland Representative body of the engineering profession in Ireland
ESF	European Social Funds
Failte Ireland	Fáilte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority, established to guide and promote tourism as a leading indigenous component of the Irish economy.
FÁS	Ireland's national training and employment authority
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council National awarding body for the further education and training sector
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GMIT	Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology Higher education institution
HET	Higher Education and Training
HEA	Higher Education Authority The Higher Education Authority is the statutory planning and development body for higher education and research in Ireland
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council HETAC is the qualifications awarding body for third-level educational and training institutions outside the university sector.
IBEC	Irish Business and Employers Confederation Provides a wide range of services to over 7,500 member businesses and organisations from all sectors and of all sizes. It is the national voice of Irish business and employers.
ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions The largest trade union organisation in Ireland, representing and campaigning on behalf of over 770,000 working people. 56 unions are currently affiliated to ICTU.

IT Sligo	Institute of Technology, Sligo Higher education institution
IT Tralee	Institute of Technology, Tralee Higher education institution
IVEA	Irish Vocational Education Association Represents the interests, at national level, of Ireland's thirty-three Vocational Education Committees (VECs) which provide adult and further education in Ireland
IUA	Irish Universities Association The representative body for the seven Irish universities.
Lionra Project	Lionra is a higher education network for the Border, Midlands and Western (BMW) region of Ireland, comprising seven institutions. Its aim was to provide a collaborative response to the education and development challenges facing the BMW region. The APL project seeks the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in Information Technology for companies operating in the BMW region.
LYIT	Letterkenny Institute of Technology Higher education institution
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
NQAI	National Qualifications Authority of Ireland Developed and implements the Irish National Framework of Qualifications
NUIG	National University of Ireland, Galway Higher education institution
NUIM	National University of Ireland, Maynooth Higher education institution
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RPL	Recognition of Prior learning
RNFIL	Recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning
RNFIL Advisory Group	The RNFIL Advisory Group consists of representatives of governments departments, public bodies, higher education awarding bodies. It was formed to inform regarding the work on the development of the Country Background Report, prepare for the OECD RNFIL visit.
Skillnets	Skillnets is an enterprise-led support body whose mission is to enhance the skills of people in employment in Irish industry to support competitiveness and employability.
SIF	Strategic Innovation Fund The Strategic Innovation Fund is a five year fund established by government to stimulate innovation in higher education institutions.
Teagasc	Teagasc is the Agriculture and Food Development Authority. It is the national body providing integrated research, advisory and training services to the agriculture and food industry and rural communities.
UCC	University College Cork Higher education institution

List of acronyms (continued)

UCD	University College Dublin Higher education institution
UL	University of Limerick Higher education institution
VEC	Vocational Education Committee

Section 1
Introduction

1.1 Background of the project

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL) is high on the policy agenda in many OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development). In 1996, the OECD education ministers agreed to develop strategies for "lifelong learning for all". The approach has been endorsed by ministers of labour, ministers of social affairs and the OECD Council at ministerial level. It is an approach whose importance may now be clearer than ever. Learning is a continuous process that takes place throughout life and in many settings. The concept of "from cradle to grave" includes formal, non-formal and informal learning. If learning is only recognised as the outcome of formal teaching, most of what is learnt is not recognised. From a policy point of view, when developing learning for economic and social benefits, this wider recognition of learning is clearly more effective. From the point of view of an individual, learning for its own sake may be sufficient for some but, for others, the recognition of learning outcomes may need to be incorporated into formal qualifications. The outcome of the whole process of recognition of non-formal and informal learning may bring benefits to the individual and society.

How much evidence is there on the benefits of such recognition? Do governments know enough about the impact of national policies on such recognition? Under what conditions can such recognition be beneficial for all? To begin to answer these questions, a project entitled *Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning* was launched in 2006.

1.2   Purposes

The overall purpose of this OECD activity is to provide policy makers with useful options for generating effective, beneficial and equitable systems of recognising non-formal and informal learning by:

- taking stock of existing institutional and technical arrangements;

- developing indicators to measure the benefits and risks and collecting evidence on who benefits and who is at risk;

- collecting evidence of what is working and what is not working within current systems; and

- exploring effective, beneficial and equitable models based on the review of existing practices.

The focus of the activity is non-formal and informal learning settings. Nevertheless, it also covers the formal education sector where, for instance, the recognition of informal and non-formal learning provides a means of entry or re-entry into the formal education sector, or where a country has an overarching recognition system for overall competencies or learning outcomes, which covers formal, non-formal and informal settings.

1.3 Thematic Review and Collaborative Policy Analysis: working methods

The working methods consist of: 1) desk-based research and 2) two types of field research. The field research is composed of: a) Thematic Review and/or b) Collaborative Policy Analysis. The desk-based research aims at providing guidance for the preparation of a country background report; developing framework for data collection (qualitative and quantitative) and analysis. The purpose of the Thematic Review is to advance understanding of stakeholder behaviour and to investigate what is working and what is not working with current practices.

The Collaborative Policy Analysis aims at allowing countries to test an idea in a small-scale, cost-contained, consultative manner.

As one of over 20 countries participating in this OECD activity, Ireland opted for a Thematic Review of its recognition system and Collaborative Policy Analysis on the theme "Transparency of the system". *Transparency of the system concerns how to communicate to stakeholders (target users, educational institutional managers, education and training practitioners, policy makers and/or general public et cetera) that such a system exists in the country.*

A team of three experts subsequently visited Ireland during the period 4-8 February 2008. The visit was organised and coordinated by the NQAI, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, in consultation with the OECD Secretariat. This Country Note is based on the country background report prepared by the NQAI, materials provided during the visit and interviews with key stakeholders, policy makers, academics, practitioners and citizens.

1.4 Working visit and Country Note

The OECD team visited Ireland on 4-8 February 2008 and engaged in a full programme of visits and meetings arranged by the Irish steering group. Annex 3 shows details of the programme and the participants in all of the meetings that took place. The study programme provided an overview of developments of RNFIL (Recognition of non-formal and informal learning) policies and practices, both from an institutional, system, individual and sectoral perspective.

This Country Note has been prepared by the Rapporteur (Kees Hagens), the Expert (Alison Harold) and the OECD leader of the review team (Miho Taguma). The review team would like to express their appreciation to the steering group, the authors of the CBR, as well as a wide range of officials and individuals involved in the visit (Appendix 3). The review team also would especially like to thank Ms. Anna Murphy, Director of Research and Strategic Development at NQAI, and Ms. Carmel Kelly, who assisted and guided us throughout the working visit.

This Country Note on Ireland forms part of the OECD's Thematic Review of the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning.

Section 2
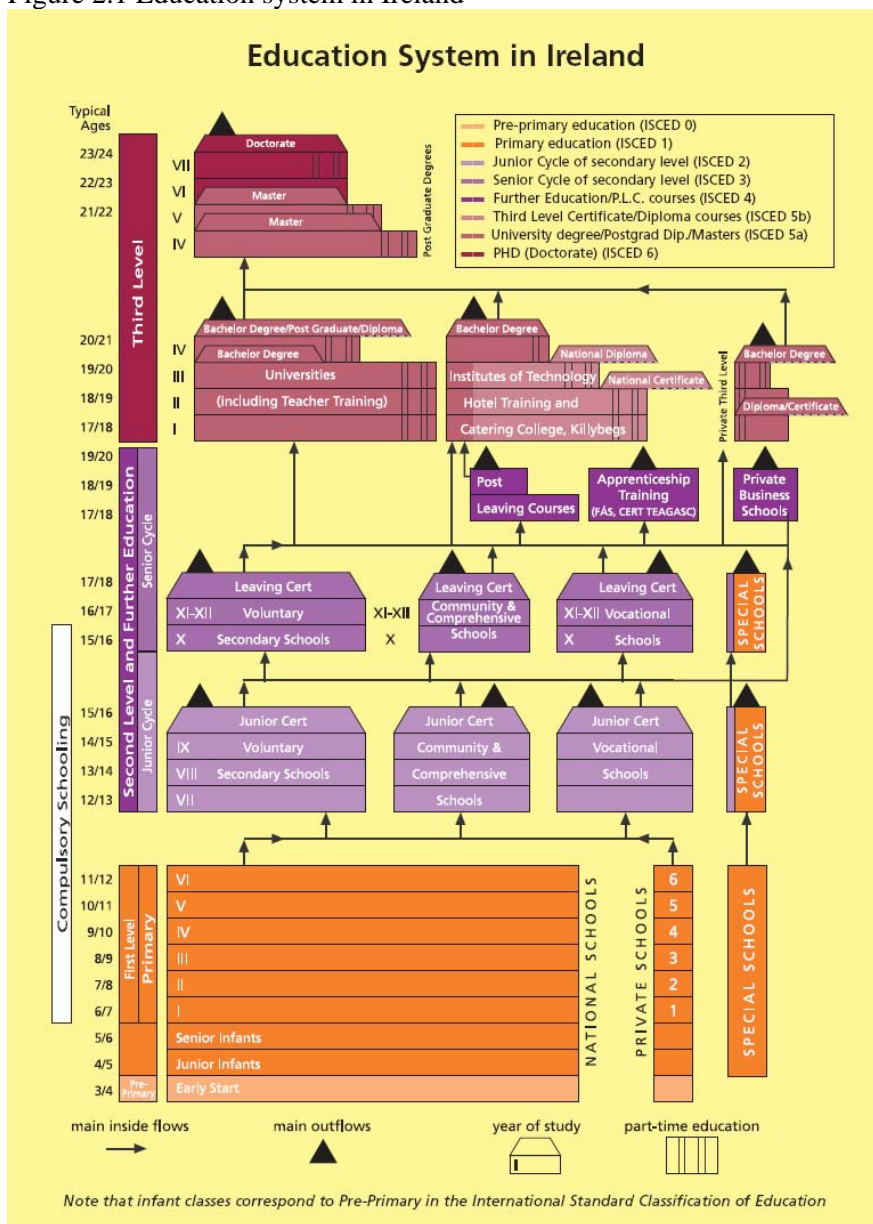## *The formal education system and the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes in Ireland*

2.1 Institutional arrangements

2.1.1 Educational structure, awarding bodies and providers

The formal education system is depicted in the scheme below.

Figure 2.1 Education system in Ireland

Source: Department of Education and Science, Statistical Report 2005/06, 2008.

Further Education and Training
The Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC), established in 2001, is the statutory body responsible for making all Further Education and Training awards in Ireland. This includes setting standards for its awards. Programmes leading to FETAC awards are provided by a broad span of quality assured providers, illustrated below.

Further Education and Training Providers. These include Vocational Educational Committees (VEC's), secondary schools, the workplace, community and voluntary bodies, comprehensive schools and community schools/colleges and a variety of adult learning and community education centres. There are currently 680 registered providers with some 1,300 centres of Further Education and Training registered.

- *FÁS.* The national training and employment authority offers a wide range of vocational training, apprenticeships, training and employment services for the employed and unemployed. FÁS has training centres and also offers programmes in partnership with Institutes of Technology.

- *Teagasc.* Teagasc provides further education and training from 33 centres. Programmes cover all aspects of agriculture, including horticulture and food science, and are targeted to meet specific needs of farmers and the food industry, in addition to broader vocational certificate programmes. Teagasc also offers programmes in partnership with Institutes of Technology.

- *Failte Ireland* Programmes are provided in the fields of hotel, catering and tourism and are a mix of theoretical and work based learning. They include craft training, adult training and training tailored for enterprises. Failte Ireland also offers programmes in partnership with Institutes of Technology.

- *Skillnets* Skillnets Ltd provides funding to networks of enterprises called 'Skillnets' organised on a sectoral and/or regional basis for the purpose of arranging customized, innovative and cost-efficient training relevant to the needs of their member companies, the majority of which are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs). Currently 123 networks are funded. These operate in sectors as wide ranging as agriculture, design, technology, construction, food & drink, hospitality, manufacturing, space, radio, renewable energy, responsible tourism, restaurants and childcare.

- *Bord lascaigh Mhara.* This organisation operates three permanent centres and two mobile coastal training units. Programmes are provided in fisheries and encompass commercial fishing, aquaculture, communications and health and safety.

- *Vocational Education Committees.* The main state-funded providers of further education programmes are the 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs). Programmes are delivered by the VECs directly in schools, further education colleges, Youthreach, Senior Traveller Training Centres and adult education centres, or through the provision of resources and services to local community education groups. Post-Leaving Certificate Courses (PLCs) are also delivered in a small number of secondary, community and comprehensive schools as are the self-funded part-time classes. PLCs are for those who have completed the senior cycle (upper secondary education) or equivalent. There are currently (2008) 30,188 approved PLC places and this number of participants has grown from 12,000 in 1990.

- *The Workplace.* Learning and training that takes place in companies and businesses is co-ordinated through a range of schemes developed by various agencies and by individual firms.

- *Other providers.* Other providers include private colleges and trainers. Programmes are also available through the Institutes of Technology, the National College of Ireland, Tipperary Institute, professional bodies and some private colleges.

Higher Education and Training

In higher education and training, there are several awarding bodies. The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) is the awarding body for the non-university sector, including the *Institutes of Technology (*with the exception of the *Dublin Institute of Technology*, which is autonomous in the area of awards) and private colleges. *Universities* also grant their own awards.

Providers of Higher Education and training who offer programmes leading to awards in the national Framework of Qualifications (or awards that are nationally recognised awards) are:
-    14 Institutes of Technology;
-    7 Universities;
-    4 National University of Ireland Recognised Colleges;
-    7 Colleges of Education;
-    8 other state-aided institutions;
-    24 other institutions engaged in the provision of education, some, at least, of whose programmes are validated by HETAC;
-    2 other institutions.

2.1.2 Arrangements for RNFIL

The concept
The concept of Recognition of Non Formal and Informal learning is not commonly used in the Irish context. *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* is the term used to refer to the process by which prior learning is given a value, i.e. the identification, assessment and acknowledgement of learning achieved. This learning can be formal, non-formal or informal. . 'Formal learning' takes place through programmes of study or training that are delivered by education and training providers, is assessed and attracts awards. 'Informal learning' refers to experiential learning, often unintentional, that takes place through life and work experience. 'Non-formal learning' takes place alongside mainstream formal systems of education and training. The term 'RPL' is used in this Country Note, unless otherwise stated, to refer to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning relating to awards/qualifications.

Purposes
Three purposes of RPL are set out in the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland's *Policies, Actions and Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression* (October 2003) as being:
- entry to a programme leading to an award
- credit towards an award or exemption from some programme requirements
- eligibility for a full award

While RPL for access, credit/exemptions is generally practiced, the concept of giving full awards on the basis of RPL is a relatively new one for Ireland (there is some international practice of this). The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 states that learners may seek awards directly from HETAC or FETAC without having participated in specific programmes.

Roles
The National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
The Authority's main role in relation to RPL is to encourage the continuation, expansion and further development of RPL processes and to promote the co-ordination and harmonisation of these processes by providers.

The Awards Councils

In general, the role of the Awards Councils is to develop their awards systems in support of RPL, ensure that providers implement RPL procedures, develop and publicise arrangements for RPL, monitor practice and manage direct applications for awards.

There are two strands to the RPL activities of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) and the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC). First, FETAC and HETAC set out policy for providers who offer education and training programmes leading to their awards (or to providers who have delegated authority to grant their own awards) and oversee the implementation of RPL by providers. Second, they also make awards directly to learners on the basis of RPL.

HETAC
In 2006, HETAC published the Recognition Policy, Criteria and Process for a Direct Application to HETAC for a Named Award. HETAC has granted three awards directly to learners on the basis of RPL. Three applications were processed mid-2007. HETAC has also developed an overall policy for providers on

experiential learning. It is refining this policy and the approach to direct applications for awards in the light of experience.

Providers who offer programmes leading to HETAC awards have a responsibility to facilitate RPL for learners. The providers include the Institutes of Technology, private colleges and others including the Garda College and Military College. Most Institutes of Technology have adopted or are operating RPL based on HETAC policy and the national RPL policy and guidelines.

FETAC
Following consultation with stakeholders, FETAC agreed its policy on RPL in 2005. The policy aims to support the implementation of RPL by registered providers by ensuring that learners with prior learning can gain access and/or exemptions within programmes and full awards as appropriate.

Draft guidelines were devised by FETAC to support the implementation of RPL by providers especially those for whom RPL is new. In 2006, FETAC undertook a pilot project with a small number of providers to begin implementation of RPL and to identify the implementation issues for FETAC and providers. An evaluation report on the findings of the pilot was completed in 2007. This report reiterates FETAC's policy approach which is that all providers must, as part of their quality assurance requirements, commence the development and implementation of policies and procedures to facilitate learners with prior learning to access programmes and to gain exemptions from programme requirements.

In relation to learners directly accessing FETAC awards on the basis of RPL, FETAC policy states that providers have responsibility for this but that they must be specifically quality assured to offer RPL for awards. This aims to ensure credible, rigorous, fair and effective processes. In addition, FETAC encourages the development of specialised centres of excellence in the delivery of RPL for the purpose of making awards in specific fields of learning. Where an individual makes a direct application to FETAC for an award on the basis of prior learning FETAC plans to refer the individual to an appropriate provider for assessment and support where appropriate.

Providers offering programmes leading to FETAC awards are responsible for the facilitation of learners through RPL for access to programmes and exemptions from/credit for programme requirements.

Universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)
The individual universities and the Dublin Institute of Technology, which are autonomous awarding bodies as well as providers, are each responsible for RPL in their respective areas. In drafting the national principles and guidelines on RPL above, the Authority requested that each University or Institute would consider these principles and guidelines in developing their own procedures. In this context and that of facilitating access, transfer and progression in general, DIT has put in place a framework for RPL. In the universities, the purpose of RPL is limited to entry to programmes, credit towards/exemptions from programme requirements. To the extent that RPL occurs, it is generally not regarded as a core activity for institutions. That activity tends to be localised in particular centres or Departments. The extent of practice also relates to overall institutional contexts and priorities concerning student intake (ranging from those where demand remains high and where there is less pressure to develop further access routes, at one end of the spectrum, to those who face falling student enrolments or which place increased emphasis on meeting the needs of part-time and mature students).

Principles and guidelines
In June 2005, the National Qualifications Authority Ireland (NQAI) adopted and published *National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Learning*. It is a policy of the Authority to promote the co-ordination and harmonisation of processes for the recognition of prior learning on the part of education providers and awarding bodies. The development of national principles and operational guidelines is a first step in this direction. They were developed with the assistance of an Advisory Group drawn from diverse sectors of education and training. They drew upon national and international practice including the common European principles on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning (2004) which were adopted during the Irish Presidency of the EU. The principles and guidelines address issues of quality, assessment, documentation and procedures for the review of policy and practice. They aim to encourage the development and expansion of processes for RPL so that providers and awarding bodies may:

- communicate their commitment to the recognition of prior learning
- bring coherence and consistency to the recognition of prior learning
- remove difficulties that may confront an applicant wishing to transfer within and between the different education and training sectors.

2.1.3   Funding
In the main, RPL is financed by public providers of education and training from within their overall budgets. This funding originates from government sources. While there is little dedicated RPL funding within overall allocations, specific project-funding is available.

Overall government funding of further education and training is spread across a number of areas including vocational education and training, further education and training programmes (including literacy, back to education, Youthreach and community education). Between 2002 and 2007 expenditure on further education and training (apart from vocational education and training) increased by over 50%, from €256 million to €392 million. In terms of extending opportunity, this increased expenditure meant that in 2007, nearly 49,000 places were provided in further education courses compared with under 44,000 places in 2002. In addition, the adult literacy programme provided for 44,000 learners in 2007 compared with 28,000 in 2002. Funding is allocated primarily through the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment to the main groups of programme/course providers: further education centres, Fáilte Ireland, Teagasc, Bord Iascaigh Mhara and FÁS. To-date, some specific RPL projects in the further education and training area have been financed through publicly funded workplace training initiatives e.g. the Construction Industry Federation received funding under the Equal project, the Ballymun Job Centre has received EU funding (Leonardo da Vinci) for RPL.

In 2007 the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment invested approximately €495 million in all forms of training (source: Department of Education, Trade and Employment). This included training for employment, training in employment and the apprenticeship system. Specifically in relation to training those in employment the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment invested approximately €77 million through its main training providers, such as FÁS, Skillnets and Enterprise Ireland. This provided for training for in excess of 90,000 employees.

In 2006, a total of €1,799m public funding was made available to the *higher education and training* sector (Source: HEA, 2008).As in further education and training, providers generally allocate resources to RPL from their general budgets and details for this are not available. In the past, the Higher Education Authority supported specific RPL projects in the context of targeted funding for access initiatives in higher education and training. In 2003 and 2004, funding was allocated to the University of Limerick for research and development of an APEL system (as part of its initiatives to increase mature student participation) and to Dublin City University (to appoint an APEL director and develop a centralised APEL system and procedures).

In 2000 the National Training Fund was established under the National Training Fund Act, as a dedicated fund to finance a range of schemes aimed at:
- raising the skills of those in employment;
- providing training to those who wish to acquire skills for the purposes of taking up employment;
- providing information in relation to existing, or likely future skills requirements in the economy.

The Fund is resourced by a levy on employers, calculated as a percentage of employee earnings. The Fund supports a range of training schemes operated by FAS, Enterprise Ireland, IDA Ireland, Shannon Development, HEA, IEI and Skillnets. The Fund also supports new initiatives in the area of lifelong learning, as well as the work of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs and de FAS Skills & Labour Market Research Unit.

In 2006-2007, specific funding for RPL was provided by FÁS under the training for people in employment initiative to the Lionra project; and under the first tranche (total budget of €42m) of the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Initiatives Fund (2007-11) for a consortium of higher education institutions for RPL development. The latter RPL project   is one of a four-stranded project on Education in Employment which received a total of €2.6m from the HEA (matching funds of €2.6m are to be provided by the partner institutions). Nine higher education institutions are participating in the RPL strand, which has a total budget of €2.14m.

2.2 Technical arrangements

The National Framework of Qualifications
The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), introduced in 2003 to promote lifelong learning, aims to bring greater coherence to the national qualifications system. It facilitates and encourages RPL. It explicitly aims to recognise *all* learning achievements including prior learning. It does so by:
- establishing a national point of reference or basis for RPL - learning outcomes
- promoting alternative pathways to qualifications
- promoting a more flexible and integrated system of qualifications

The framework is divided into 10 levels, from level one- initial stages- to level 10- doctoral level. School based qualifications are from levels three to five. FETAC (further education and training) qualifications range from levels one to six and HETAC (higher education) and DIT from levels six to ten. Universities' qualifications are from levels seven to ten. There are 16 major awards within the framework and, for each of these award-types, named awards are developed. In addition there are a large number of minor awards. Supplemental and special purpose awards are being developed in line with Framework criteria.
The framework is depicted in the scheme below.

Figure 2.2 NFQ
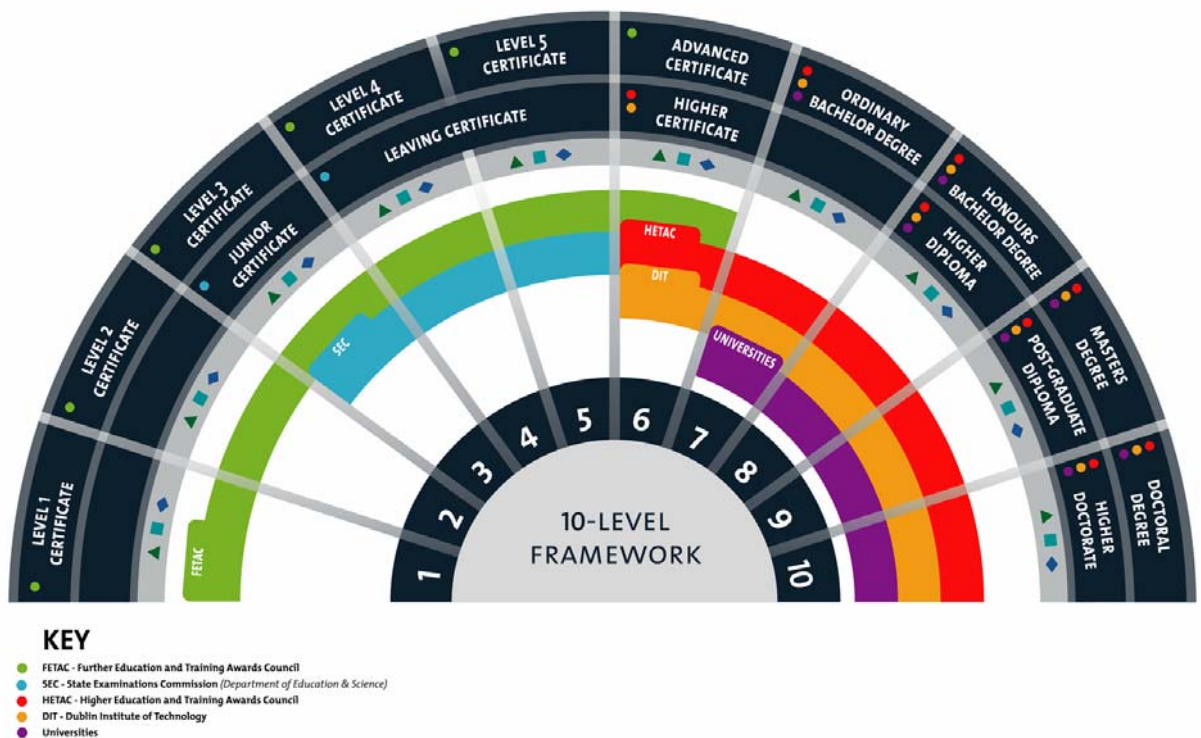
Source: NQAI, 2007.

Credit arrangements

Following the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland – in partnership with education and training stakeholders, through its Technical Advisory Group on Credit – has been working towards the development of a national approach to credit. A twin track approach has been pursued (one for further education and training, and one for higher education and training)The way forward on credit is currently more clearly signposted for higher education and training within the context of the Bologna process. There is a general acceptance and use of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) in higher education institutions.

Credit in Further Education and Training
There are as yet no specific credit arrangements in the FETAC awards system for further education and training. FETAC is in the process of designing a single awards system for the sector, which will facilitate and meet some of the overall objectives of credit systems. All new FETAC awards will be developed in the context of the National Framework of Qualifications. From 2008, all new FETAC awards are expected to include characteristics which will directly facilitate and support credit, accumulation and transfer. Currently, (2007), most but not all FETAC major awards are divisible into minor awards. These can be stand-alone or combined to make up a major award.

Credit in Higher Education and Training
As part of this process, a set of 'Principles and operational guidelines for the implementation of a national approach to credit in Irish higher education and training' were developed, and adopted by the Authority. All Irish higher education awarding bodies operate within these arrangements. The operational guidelines recommend that a typical credit volume or credit range be established for each major award-type from levels 6-9 in the Framework in line with existing ECTS conventions.Current practice in the Irish higher education system as follows:

Level 6 Higher Certificate	=	120 credits
Level 7 Ordinary Bachelor Degree	=	180 credits
Level 8 Honours Bachelor Degree	=	180-240 credits
Level 8 Higher Diploma	=	60 credits
Level 9 Masters Degree (Taught)	=	60-120 credits
Level 9 Postgraduate Diploma	=	60 credits

Doctoral Degrees and Masters Degrees (by research) do not usually have credit values assigned them. National discussions on developing a possible credit range for these qualifications are at an early stage.

Section 3
Thematic Review

3.1   Evidence of current practices – the descriptive part

3.1.1   General characteristics, compared internationally
In this paragraph the general characteristics of Irish RPL practice will be placed in an international perspective. Paragraphs 3.1.2 and further offer a more detailed description of Irish practice.

In Ireland, RPL can be used by learners to gain entry into education or training, to gain credit towards or exemptions from courses/programmes (towards a qualification) and to gain full awards. Ireland is one of a few countries where full awards can be gained by RPL. It should be noted, that the greatest use of RPL is directed at entry and credits or exemptions. Cases where full awards are given, are exceptions.

Access to RPL is open to all individuals, subject to the availability of resources. It is generally offered by providers of education and training in particular for access to their programmes. So, in short: RPL is open and multi-functional.

Figure 3.1 Means to make learning outcomes formally recognised

Means to make learning outcomes formally recognised		Countries cited that cited the means
As an entry or re-entry to an education and training institution		AUS, AUT, IRL, KOR, DNK, MEX, NLD, NOR, ESP, South Africa, GBR
Part of credits or an exemption from some courses/exams towards a qualification	Academic	AUS, BEL, CZE, DNK, IRL, KOR, MEX, NLD, NOR, South Africa, ESP, GBR
	Vocational	AUS, AUT, BEL, Chile, CZE, IRL, DNK, GRC, HUN, IRL, KOR, MEX, NLD, NOR, South Africa, ESP, Slovenia, GBR
As a full qualification	Academic	CZE, IRL, South Africa, GBR
	Vocational	AUS, AUT, CZE, IRL, South Africa, GBR

Source: RNFIL CBR's available as of 10/Sept/07

The goals for which RPL is used, can generally be divided into: "summative" or "formative".

In the "summative" approach, RPL offers an alternative route to the formal recognition of learning (e.g. certificated learning). RPL procedures must be developed in line with standards, quality assurance and assessment policies that apply to the formal system.

In the "formative approach", RPL is used, amongst other things for personal and career development. It does not necessarily lead to formally recognised qualifications. RPL in the formative approach focuses on career modelling, connected to all forms of participation in society, paid or unpaid. An example is the use of RPL combined with a portfolio in which the individual's competences are described, a personal development plan and an overview on possible career choices.

The scheme below gives an international overview of methods used. Irish practice mostly involves interviewing, portfolio methods and self evaluation. The volume of observational assessment (testing the abilities of the participant, by letting him/her perform professional tasks) is relatively small. Formative use of RPL does take place, often in the context of assessing training needs, but the volume of this cannot be quantified.

Figure 3.2 Methods used

Formative use		Summative use	
Instruments	Countries	Instruments	Countries
Interview	AUS, Chile, DNK, IRL, NLD, NOR (dialogue-based), South Africa	Written exams/e-testing	AUS, AUT, Chile, CZE, DNK, GRC, HUN, IRL, MEX, Slovenia, South Africa, KOR, ESP, GBR
Portfolio/e-portfolio	AUS, Chile, CZE, DNK, IRL, MEX, NLD, NOR, GBR	Practical exams/ Skills tests/ Demonstration	AUT, BEL, Chile, DNK, HUN, IRL, MEX, NOR, Slovenia, South Africa, ESP, GBR
Observation	AUS, Chile, NLD, ESP	Oral exams	DNK, GRC, MEX, Slovenia, South Africa
Self-evaluation	BEL, GRC, ESP	Declarative/ Portfolio/ E-portfolio	HUN, IRL, NLD, NOR, Slovenia, ESP, ITL
		Simulations	Chile, DNK, NLD, ESP
		Project evaluation	GRC, IRL, MEX
		Interview	IRL, NLD (criterion-directed)
		Multiple choice exams	Chile, GRC
		Group evaluation/debate	GRC, South Africa

Source: RNFIL CBR's available as of 10/Sept/07

Quality assurance of RPL in Ireland is a component of the quality assurance arrangements that operate within formal education and training.
International examples point up the interaction between policy objectives, target groups and quality assurance.

If the policy objective is to promote lifelong learning amongst the low skilled, rigorous quality assurance and assessment systems may act as a disincentive to potential providers and participants. Rigorous quality assurance and assessment is essential to a qualifications system. For individuals at a considerable distance from the labour market, the competences they aim to attain may not be captured by existing qualifications. Examples of these are simple competences needed for full participation in every day life, such as handling a household budget or handling simple digital techniques (like getting a train ticket from a machine). Quality assurance and assessment procedures associated with obtaining and certifying these may be less rigorous than those in place for qualifications generally available. Note that the Irish National Framework of Qualifications aims to facilitate the recognition of all learning, from the most basic to the most advanced. Qualifications have recently been introduced, through the Framework, for the first time in the areas of basic literacy and numeracy.

On the other hand, providers in many instances would prefer rigorous assessment procedures, to give legitimacy to the RPL results. This is especially true in the higher education sector. For individual participants, this may also be important , in the long run. If the quality assurance is not rigorous, the RPL results may be stigmatised as being of low value.

Figure 3.3   QA approaches

QA approaches		Countries
Explicit QA mechanism	Apply QA systems of formal education and training by sectors to RNFIL	AUS, AUT, Chile, CZE, DNK, GBR (England), GRC, HUN, IRL, NOR, Slovenia
	Apply QA systems of formal education + X	BEL, MEX
	Set up a QA mechanism specific to RNFIL	NLD
	A national approach to QA, embedded in NQF	South Africa, GBR (Scotland) IRL
Implicit QA mechanism	Embed QA in the assessment process	ESP
No mechanism yet in place for RNFIL		KOR

Source: RNFIL CBR's available as of 10/Sept/07

RPL practice in Ireland is mainly funded by Government sources, by education and training institutions (financing RPL from their regular budget) and from international funds. Contributions by employers are small. It should be noted, that direct, dedicated funding of RPL is not generally available (see also paragraph 3.2.2.2).

Figure 3.4 Funding

BEL, DNK, NLD, NOR

AUT, IRL, KOR, NDL, NOR, SVM, S. Africa

AUT, IRL, KOR, NDL, NOR, South Africa

Social partners

Employers

Education and training institutions

BEL, Chile, DNK, GRC, KOR, MEX, NLD

Individuals

AUS, AUT, BEL, Chile, CZE, DNK, ESP (pilot stage), GBR, GRC, HUN, IRL, KOR, MEX, NLD, NOR, South Africa, Slovenia,

Government

RNFIL

Funding /loans international organisations (ESF, WB, etc.)

BEL (ESF), CZE (ESF), GRC (ESF), IRL (Leonardo da Vinci, EOUAL).

Source: RNFIL CBR's available as of 10/Sept/07

3.1.2 Monitoring and evaluation of RPL practice

It is a statutory requirement that providers who have programmes validated by either of the two Councils or with authority delegated by either of the two Councils to grant awards themselves, as well as the Dublin Institute of Technology, implement the NQAI's policies on access, transfer and progression. These include RPL. Universities are also required to consider these policies. Actions in this area will be reviewed in the context of the NQAI study of the Framework's implementation (2008 – 2009).

In general, there has been little systematic evaluation of RPL practice from the perspective of RPL itself or lifelong learning. However, individual RPL projects have been evaluated within the broader context in which they took place or from funding perspectives. Examples are the Open Training College Network/DIT pilot project in social care (2005) and the WIT/NALA pilot project on adult literacy. The Lionra project on the accreditation of prior learning will also be evaluated. Such evaluations generally identify common issues around implementation and the benefits/costs associated with RPL. These issues also emerged in the evaluation of a FETAC pilot project. This is partly due to the relatively small scale of activities, the disparate nature of practice, and in many cases, its relatively short history and/or pilot nature.

Currently in the further education and training sector, qualifications achieved with the use of RPL are not separately recorded or reported by programme providers. Currently, there is no separate recording by the awarding body of how awards have been achieved. FETAC. Certificates awarded do not make any reference to achievement through the RPL route. However with the development of a new FETAC ICT system it is planned to record for statistical purposes the achievement of an award by an individual through RPL. In this way, FETAC will be able to account for the numbers of learners attaining awards through RPL. This will be an important development. RPL is a significant means to enable learners to access, transfer and progress within the National Framework of Qualifications.   Statistical evidence of the use of RPL will be necessary in order to evaluate its impact.

3.1.3 RPL practice at the institutional level in Higher Education and Training

Much of the focus of RPL at institutional level in *Higher Education and Training* is on the accreditation of prior certificated learning. Activity concerning the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, usually known as the accreditation of prior experiential learning, ranges from broad frameworks and institutional policies (in DIT, 2006, the University of Limerick, 2006, and National University of Ireland, Galway, February 2007, with plans to introduce this in University College Dublin in 2007), to general use of RPL for access for particular student groups (e.g. adult learners/ mature students) and specific practice in fields such as nursing, adult and community education, and continuing professional development/programmes for the workplace.

Institutional level policies emphasise quality assurance . The need for quality assurance is also the driver for institution-wide policies. Practices of RPL in general stemmed from individual departments or centres in response to meeting student needs, attracting diverse groups of students, meeting regulatory requirements for certification and/or participation in research projects in the area of RPL.
In Higher Education and Training, a range of practice and experience exists across the sector. Examples of practice at individual institutions are given below.

-   Cork Institute of Technology introduced an RPL policy and practice on a pilot basis under the ADAPT programme in 1999. This policy has been updated on an ongoing basis since then in response to such issues as changing best practice internationally, the establishment of the National Framework of Qualifications and policy development by NQAI and the awarding bodies. The current policy, updated in 2005, sets out the purposes of RPL, and the principles and rules that apply (e.g. concerning the award of credit, grading, awards classification and in the ceilings for applications). The RPL policy also sets out the responsibility for all academics to make the student population aware that their learning

regardless of its origins can be assessed for the award of credit against the learning outcomes of programmes and the modules within them. In 1996, the Department of Education Development led the ADAPT project which set out to research learning within the workplace and the potential for the formal accreditation of that learning within higher education programmes. The full time appointment of a dedicated resource for RPL stemmed from this project. In 1999, RPL became a main-scheme funded activity providing for the training/mentoring of students and staff in the preparation of learning portfolios for the award of credit. This is the only higher education institution with such dedicated institution-wide support structures in place. The Institute has a dedicated RPL academic appointment who offers support for registered students and those seeking advanced entry into programmes in the college based on their prior certificated and/or experiential learning. In the academic year 2006/ 2007 315 portfolios were submitted to the RPL validation board (which is the examination board for the RPL cases). Over the period 2000- 2007, in excess of 2000 portfolios based on informal and non-formal learning have been through the RPL process in the Institute.

- Dublin Institute of Technology. DIT has set out a broad framework to support RPL through establishing a dedicated RPL unit, developing operational principles and policy to be applied across all faculties. It is intended that RPL builds on existing practice ,where it is available for non-standard and exceptional case entry and for entry at advanced standing. It should be available for all levels of education and training for the purposes of entry to programmes, credit and/or exemptions from programme requirements. The issues to be addressed include embedding RPL in quality assurance, assessment, appeals, coherence of awards, documentation and records, staff development, guidance and support for staff and applicants and liaison with the relevant stakeholders.

- The RPL policy of the University of Limerick sets out the purposes of RPL (for entry, credit/and or exemptions from programme requirements), general principles on quality assurance, integrity of the awards system and standards, assessment and information and guidance for applicants.

- Waterford Institute of Technology has formulated an RPL policy and procedures for postgraduate studies, for applicants seeking admission to research degrees.

- IT Tralee has RPL policies and procedures in place. Over the last three years, 25 persons have gone through an RPL procedure.

In addition to RPL practice as a part of institutional policies, there are project based activities, which reach out to enterprises and to groups of workers. Examples are:

- Lionra Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) project. Lionra is the Higher Education network for the Border, Midland and Western region of Ireland. The project is aimed at the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in Information Technology (IT) for companies in the region. The project meets the expressed need across the region for up-skilling of IT skills among the workforce, particularly in small and medium enterprises. The participating Institutes agreed to develop a common APL methodology for awarding exemptions to IT modules. APL would enable them to offer those who qualify for exemptions a fast track to attaining a Higher Certificate. Project activity involved creating awareness of APL within educational institutions, development of policy for APL for adoption by participating institutions, development of a common methodology for APL, raising awareness amongst employers and employees, and academic staff, developing promotional materials, common training materials and common documentation for use within institutions. In 2007, the main focus has been on training APL applicants and preparation of portfolios. By early May 2007, 237 people in employment received training in APL awareness, while 180 people received training in portfolio development. Some 70 portfolios were prepared and submitted for assessment. As a suitable

module in mentoring was not available in time, an NQF Level 6 minor award in mentoring was developed by AIT for delivery to 20 mentors in May-June 2007.

- Dublin Institute of Technology OMNA project for early childhood care and education, 1995-1997, funded under the EU European Social Fund, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law reform and the National Development Plan. The project aimed to facilitate learners who had not completed second level education but who were likely to have significant experiential learning to acquire qualifications in the sector.

- Waterford Institute of Technology/National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) project to develop qualifications for literacy scheme organisers. An element of this included the availability of exemptions for modules on the basis of RPL

- National University of Ireland/National Rehabilitation Board (NRB) project to develop an accelerated route to qualifications for practitioner-trainers in the disability sector for those who already had qualifications and experience in the field.

- Dublin Institute of Technology participation in the Valuing Learning from Experience(VaLex project) 2003-2005, funded by EU under Socrates-Gruntvig. This aimed to develop and test a theory-based model for APEL in higher education and training suitable for experienced practitioners who did not have a professional qualification in their field of practice. Additional funding was made available by the Eastern Area Health Board to develop a pilot for the social care involving DIT, the Open Training College and St Michael's House.

- The programme designed by Athlone Institute of Technology and the quarrying industry, for the two year Bachelor of Engineering in Quarry Management (Ordinary Degree). This was designed to provide a formal qualification for personnel working in the quarries sector and those seeking appointment as quarry managers. A range of entry levels are facilitated including that of the recognition of a minimum of five years approved experiential learning. Exemptions can be given for appropriate experience in relevant areas.

- In the Nursing profession, prior learning achievement may be assessed in respect of the Ordinary Bachelors Degree, Honours Bachelor Degree and post-graduate qualifications. This allows nurses who achieved qualifications for practice in the past, which were at lower levels than those currently required for practice, to access qualifications now required. For example, nurses who graduated in 1980 with a Certificate in Nursing may apply to undertake a one year Bachelor of Nursing Studies programme. Some such nurses may currently work in senior positions e.g. Clinical Nurse Specialist but may not have qualifications to recognise this level of learning. Should they provide evidence that they have adequate experience at this level, they may be exempt from taking access modules required for entry and instead progress directly onto the programme. A similar situation exists with respect to post-graduate qualifications where prior certified and uncertified experiential learning is recognised. Most of the demand relates to entry to programmes. Exemptions can also be given on the basis of RPL subject to ceilings.

- In 2002 IT Sligo developed a project with Masonite Ireland, a producer of timber compounds. A new Ordinary Bachelor's Degree was developed at level 7 of the National Framework of Qualifications- a Bachelor of Science in Manufacturing Management. It was designed to up-skill the Masonite employees in their current positions and to increase the competency, confidence, efficiency and knowledge of employees and in turn promote the company to a higher position in the economy "value chain". It is aimed at employees wishing to demonstrate potential for progression into team-management positions. The overall objective of the programme is to develop front-line Managers in a manufacturing

environment by improving human resources and business skills while improving operational and technical capability. Fifteen employees entered this programme in the first cohort. Programme delivery facilitates shift work and uses a blended approach consisting of on-line lectures and pedagogical delivery on-site in the workplace, therefore minimising disruption to the company operations. Masonite employees underwent an RPL process, administered by IT Sligo, to facilitate entry to the Bachelor Degree programme. This involved the recognition of prior certification and the assessment of prior experiential learning gained in the work place. The outcomes of this process were quantified on a score. Depending on the score achieved, the learners gained either access to the BSc in Manufacturing Management programme, were required to undertake supplementary learning before gaining access or were advised to undertake a level 6 programme of study before entry to the BSc.

3.1.4   RPL practice in Further Education and Training

In *Further Education and Training*, the review team found evidence of RPL-policies at the institutional level, both with several of the sector-oriented providers (FAS, Teagasc and Failte Ireland) and Vocational Education Colleges. Some examples are mentioned below.

- Failte Ireland (National Tourism Development Authority). RPL is offered to persons in the industry with skills in professional cookery and bar management. The RPL process is part of a strategy of Failte Ireland to achieve recognition for skilled personnel in the hospitality sector where most of the participants/learners acquired their skills informally at work. For 2008 Failte Ireland expects to carry out 100 RPL procedures to facilitate the achievement of full awards.

- Killester College of Further Education, City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee. RPL is used to access programmes. RPL is implemented as an access tool for adults who have not acquired entry level (formal) qualifications. The group concerned has not completed second level education but have relevant life experiences.

- Teagasc provides vocational training in the agricultural and food sector, NFQ levels 4–6. The RPL policy of Teagasc complies with FETAC requirements to facilitate access, transfer and progression of learners. The Teagasc approach is to assess prior learning using the standard assessment methodologies and to recognise other certified learning in the appropriate field of learning.

- The FETAC Pilot Project. A pilot project on RPL was formally launched in December 2005 with 9 providers and operated for one year. Participating providers undertook to offer RPL as an element of their activities, with support and guidance from FETAC. The objectives of the pilot project were to:
    - undertake recognition of prior learning with a small group of providers;
    - enable these providers to gain experience of recognition of prior learning procedures;
    - identify good practice in RPL by providers;
    - identify the issues for providers in the context of implementing recognition of prior learning.

    Participating providers included public and private, small and large, and urban/rural-based providers. All participating providers agreed their quality assurance arrangements with FETAC prior to participation. Some had sophisticated resources and facilities for RPL whilst others had few. Of the 9, 1 offered RPL for the purpose of access to programmes. Two providers did not offer RPL but explored how RPL would be established as part of their service provision. Five providers actively engaged in RPL with learners for the purposes of attaining awards. A total of 50 learners achieved major and minor awards in a variety of fields and levels on the National Framework of Qualifications. All 50 learners who achieved awards were employed at the time when they engaged in the RPL process. All were experienced workers in the sectors relevant to the awards attained. A very small number did not

complete the RPL process. The project was evaluated with an emphasis on gathering feedback from providers and learners during and at the end of their RPL experiences.

The evaluation found some commonality of viewpoints about the need for supporting documentation, tools and advice to both providers and learners about the RPL process. The clear designation of roles of mentors, assessors etc. was also highlighted. The need to develop greater understanding and use of learning outcomes was also identified as an issue for providers. The support and involvement of stakeholders, e.g. employers was also identified as an important issue. All cited the need for adequate time and resources to engage in the activity and to successfully complete it. It was also noted that the level of award sought has important consequences for the assessment methodologies used and that some learners encountered literacy and communication difficulties in respect of awards at levels 4. Overall, the pilot project has shown that there is a need to develop RPL practices in Ireland in the further education and training sector. A recommendation in the evaluation of the FETAC pilot scheme is to brief providers about RPL approaches and methods and to devise material for the FETAC website on RPL for stakeholders and learners. The results of the project were disseminated a seminar in May 2007. Plans for further implementation include the agreement of a sub-strand of quality assurance for the provision of RPL by providers for learners seeking full awards.

Besides offering RPL as part of institutional policies and structures, institutions for Further Education and Training also apply a project oriented approach. Several projects have been implemented for enterprises and for their workers seeking entrance onto courses or seeking certificates needed for the execution of their present tasks in the workplace. Examples are the following.

- FÁS, in cooperation with CIF, has developed the Construction Skills Certification Scheme.
  This was done to help the construction sector meet government regulations on minimum standards of knowledge, skills and competence. Project activities are training, assessment, certification and registration. In total 82,000 experienced workers were certified. In 2006 16,000 certificates were issued.

- FÁS introduced a mechanism for 26 craft areas to recognise the prior informal learning of individuals who had completed a time served apprenticeship (the Standards Based Apprenticeship scheme) introduced in 1991 to replace the time-served (informal learning) apprenticeship model. Applicants submit a portfolio of evidence which is then evaluated by RPL assessors. Statistics: FÁS Apprenticeship Services processed 266 RPL applications seeking the full FETAC Advanced Certificate award in the period January 2007 – April 2008. Following an examination of the applications against the qualifying criteria FÁS requested FETAC to award the Advanced Certificate to 233 of the applicants. However, 33 applicants did not meet the qualifying criteria for *full* award recognition and further information was requested.

3.1.5   RPL practice by others
Some professional bodies apply RPL. For example, Engineers Ireland uses RPL as a regular instrument, to assess applicants for membership. In 2007 109 persons asked to be assessed, of which 78 were admitted to the procedure and 36 were awarded the title they were pursuing, after completion of the RPL procedure.

3.2   Issues at stake and options from the international context

3.2.1   The broad perspective: economic and labour market needs

International studies
Ireland has attained some of the highest growth rates in the OECD countries. Per capita income had caught up with and overtaken the EU average. According to the OECD, further progress will require strong productivity growth and continued increases in labour supply[1]. In the 2006 Economic Survey, OECD offers the following recommendations.

Maintaining high rates of productivity growth will require (amongst others) improvements in education and the encouragement of innovation.

To boost labour supply various options are available. Raising *the participation of women in the workforce* is mentioned. Expanding day care for infants and out-of -school care for children will help. From the point of view of labour market participation, childcare supports such as the Early Childcare Supplement could be linked to employment status or made conditional on actually using formal childcare. A mutual-obligations approach for sole parents would help reduce child poverty by assisting parents to get a foothold in the labour market. For *older people*, work incentives in the public-pension and welfare systems could be improved. *Migrants* will also continue to play an important role in alleviating labour supply bottlenecks. The attractiveness of Ireland for immigrants will be influenced by the overall cost of living including house prices, the standard of living, and the quality of public services.

National policies

Economy and labour market
In broad policy terms, Towards 2016, the 10-year Framework Social Partnership Agreement, 2006-2015 (June 2006) and the National Development Plan (NDP) 2007-2013, launched in January 2007, set out the vision and objectives for Ireland's socio-economic development. Both underline the importance of lifelong learning and set out objectives and action to be taken . . The NDP is a high level strategic document which provides the framework for investment over the next seven years. In particular, it sets out the investment necessary to maintain national competitiveness and promote regional development within a sustainable economic and budgetary framework. Investment in education will be a priority, with an emphasis on building the knowledge economy. It sets out that lifelong learning is the guiding principle for education and training policy in the context of the Lisbon agenda. It foresees investment of some €25.8 billion in human capital over the period 2007-2013 with a focus on up skilling, early school leavers, literacy, lifelong learning and with particular emphasis on retraining those with least educational attainment.

The National Skills Strategy, *Tomorrow's Skills: Towards a National Skills Strategy*,[2] March 2007, includes an analysis of the educational attainment levels of the labour force. This shows an overall shift towards higher levels of educational attainment. The overall labour force has expanded rapidly from 1.64 million in 1997 to almost 2.1 million in 2006, due to a combination of rising participation rates, population growth and migration. Of those in the labour force aged between 25-64, it is estimated that in 2005, one third had completed some form of higher education and training, compared to one quarter in 2000. The corresponding proportion of the labour force that had completed education to lower secondary education level decreased from just over one third in 2000 to 28% in 2005. The figures for those completing only primary level education dropped from an estimated 60% in the 1970s to 11% in 2005. There has been a more pronounced

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[1] OECD Economic Surveys: Ireland, OECD 2006.

[2] Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2007,p.63-66 www.skillsireland.ie

shift towards participation in higher education and training amongst the 25-34 age cohort of the labour force over time.

The report mentioned above also shows that the percentage of the population aged between 20 and 24 who have completed upper secondary education or equivalent stood in 2006 at 86.1% An alternative indicator of educational achievement at this level is the retention rate for completion of the Leaving Certificate programme (which typically marks the completion of upper secondary education), estimated to be 83.8% for the 1996 cohort ,the most recent cohort for which this is available. This figure does not take into account the numbers of early school leavers who participate in/complete other education and training programmes e.g. Youthreach, community training schemes and apprenticeships and attain related qualifications for example at levels 4-6 in the National Framework of Qualifications).

The Expert Group on Future Skills Needs[3] has identified skills needs and actions to address these needs. In the context of the National Skills Strategy, 2007, the Expert Group notes that all occupations are becoming more knowledge-intensive, with a corresponding rise in the requirement for qualifications and skills. It emphasises the general need for employees to acquire generic skills. It identified the following key elements in a generic skills profile:[4]
- Basic/fundamental skills – such as literacy, numeracy, IT literacy
- People-related skills – such as communication, interpersonal, team-working and customer-service skills
- Conceptual/thinking skills – such as collecting and organising information, problem-solving, planning and organising, learning-to-learn skills, innovation and creativity skills, systematic thinking.

The Expert Group formulated a vision of the Irish labour market in 2020. Some key figures of the expected situation in 2020 are in the scheme below.

Table 3.1 Irish Labourforce 2020

Total labourforce	2.4 million
Existing workforce	1.4 million
Young people entering workforce	640,000
Net immigration	310,000

Source: FAS, 2007.

Skills needs will change. According to the Expert Group the following will be the major developments in skills needs:
- the services sector will show growth, manufacturing (with the exception of high-end manufacturing) and agriculture will decline;
- professional and personal services occupations will show high growth;
- the need for operatives and agricultural skills will fall;
- craft and clerical skills will show medium growth.

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[3] It has reported on skills needs in relation to management development amongst small and medium-sized enterprises, innovation, sales and marketing skills and language skills.

[4] Tomorrow's Skills: towards a national skills strategy.

The labour force will have to be up skilled to the following levels.

Table 3.2 Up skilling required until 2020

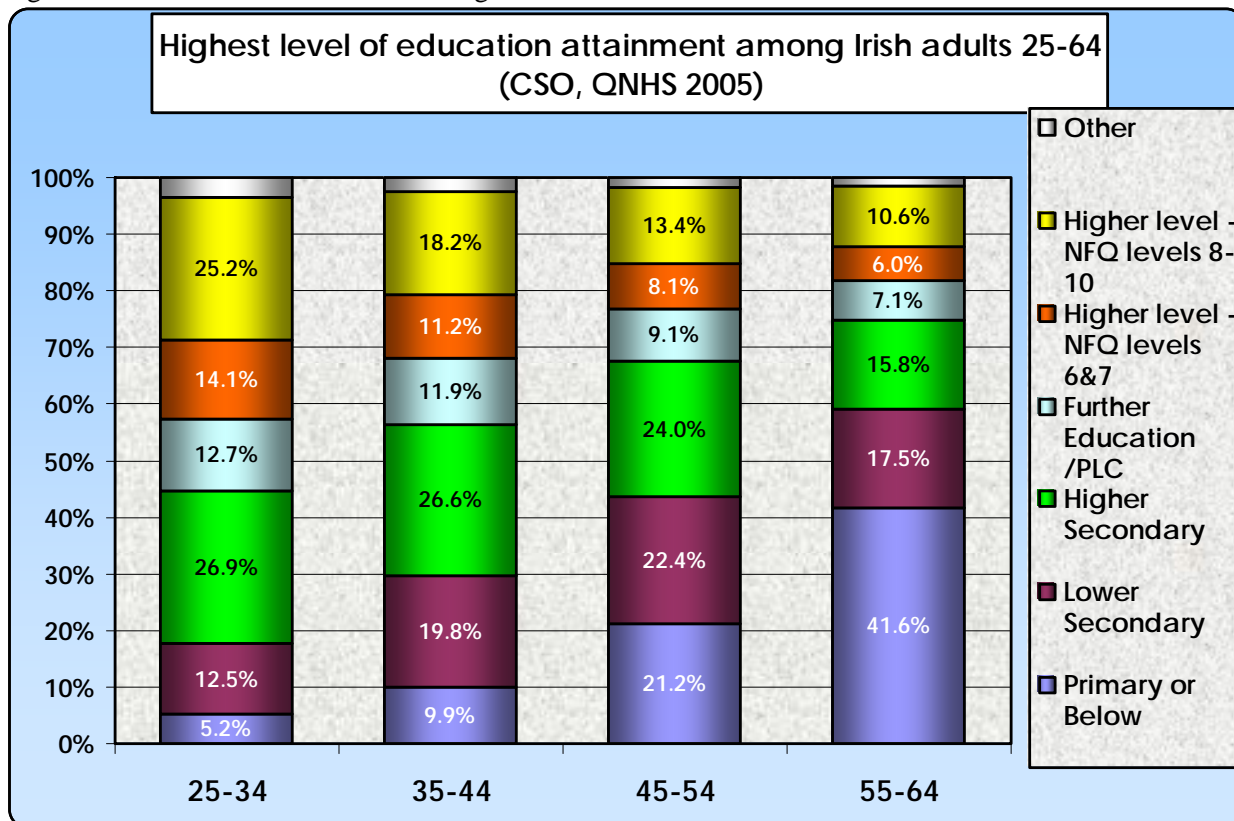| to NFQ level 3	70,000 persons
to NFQ level 4-5	260,00 persons
to NFQ level 6-10	170,00 persons
Total	500,000 persons

Source: FAS, 2007.

The final report of the Forum on the Workplace of the Future, written at the request of the Government (Working to our advantage: a national workplace strategy, 2005), sets out a vision of the workplace of the future and recommendations for action to achieve this. Its key findings point to:
- the need for more investment in training of those in the workforce;
- the need for greater access to training;
- a continuous learning and development facility that enables individuals to identify and assimilate knowledge, skills and abilities acquired in different contexts;
- the need for resources to support individuals in managing their lifelong learning progression;
- the need for collaboration at a regional level between business and education;
- more training initiatives;
- the removal of barriers to access;
- a more integrated approach on the part of government agencies, departments and education providers responsible for policy development, funding, co-ordination and delivery to achieve greater take-up of learning, ongoing learning, flexible delivery and access to third-level education that would recognise the portfolios of learning that have been acquired in the workplace.

Since then, an integrated approach has been followed with the announcement, in February 2008, by the Minister of State Seán Haughey, (Minister for Lifelong Learning), of the establishment of an inter-Departmental Committee on the Implementation of the National Skills Strategy. Work is proceeding on the drafting of an implementation plan which is expected to be published in early 2009.

Educational attainment of the Irish population is depicted in the scheme below. Educational attainment is relatively low among the older age groups.

Figure 3.5 Educational attainment among Irish adults 25-64

Highest level of education attainment among Irish adults 25-64 (CSO, QNHS 2005)

Age group	Primary or Below	Lower Secondary	Higher Secondary	Further Education /PLC	Higher level - NFQ levels 6&7	Higher level - NFQ levels 8-10
25-34	5.2%	12.5%	26.9%	12.7%	14.1%	25.2%
35-44	9.9%	19.8%	26.6%	11.9%	11.2%	18.2%
45-54	21.2%	22.4%	24.0%	9.1%	8.1%	13.4%
55-64	41.6%	17.5%	15.8%	7.1%	6.0%	10.6%

Source: CSO, QNHS 2005.

Social challenges

The most up to date data on poverty in Ireland is contained in the results of the EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) for 2005. The survey results show that the overall rate of consistent poverty in 2005 was 7.0%, down from 8.8% in 2003. The results also show a decrease in the 'at risk of poverty' rate in Ireland from 19.7% in 2003 to 18.5% in 2005. The reduction results in part from the successful implementation of policies to move persons from unemployment into employment and to provide substantial real increases in income and improvements in other benefits and services for persons not in a position to enter employment. The survey revealed that there has been a significant decrease in consistent poverty rates for lone parent households from 31.1% to 27.2%, a drop in consistent poverty levels for people with disabilities from 21.7% to 17.4%, and a substantial drop in the number of older people 'at risk of poverty' from 27.1% in 2004 to 20.1% in 2005. Also reflected in the findings is the impact of employment in ensuring that people achieve a good standard of living, with only 1.7% of people at work experiencing consistent poverty. The survey also contains for the first time information on poverty rates based on nationality, with non-Irish nationals experiencing a higher 'at risk of poverty' rate (26.9%) compared to Irish nationals (18.0%). Non-Irish nationals also experience a higher consistent poverty rate at 13.1% compared to Irish nationals at 6.6%.

The factors influencing participation in education and training throughout life are addressed in detail in the Higher Education Authority's 'Achieving Equity of Access to Higher Education in Ireland: Action Plan 2005-2007' (www.hea.ie). An action plan for the period 2008-2013 is currently being finalised by the HEA (May 2008). This is expected to contain targets for mature student participation, part-time/flexible provision and the development of non-standard entry routes into higher education.

The rationale for the National Framework of Qualifications is that it will contribute to lifelong learning – in personal, social, economic and civic contexts. The recognition of prior learning in relation to achieving qualifications is part of this vision. There is no evidence to-date on the contribution to democracy and citizenship of this kind of recognition. It should be noted that there is some evidence of the contribution of non-formal and informal learning to democracy and active citizenship. The report of the Task Force on Active Citizenship (2007), for example, notes the importance of formal and non-formal education to supporting active citizenship.

The Framework and the new architecture of awards being developed in both further and higher education and training – including credit systems, major, minor, supplemental and special purpose awards – are also more conducive to RPL in that they extend the number and diversity of reference points for recognising prior learning achievements. Additional developments in modularisation/unitisation create flexibility. At a broader policy and funding level, the national priority of increasing access to education and training for diverse groups of learners and disadvantaged groups is also supportive of RPL.

Conclusion
Both international and national research and national policies and action plans show the need for:
- *raising educational attainment levels in general;*
- *up skilling the workforce;*
- *redirecting and training parts of the workforce towards areas with greater employment opportunities;*
- *raising participation in the workforce/education and training for targeted groups e.g. women, older workers and immigrants..*

National policy objectives aim to raise participation in education and training for several groups low skilled individuals, low skilled workers, unemployed persons, immigrants and older people.

RPL potentially has a role to play in meeting individual, societal and national needs, as an instrument for giving people access to education and training, formal qualifications and helping them meet necessary requirements for the workplace. The beneficiaries of RPL could be women who have either never been in the labour market or have been out of the labour market for a significant period of time; young people not in employment or training; older workers with low-level or no formal qualifications; unemployed persons, low skilled individuals, older people in general and immigrants. The objectives of targeting these groups through RPL processes would be growth of the qualified workforce and a decline of poverty and the number of people at risk of poverty.

A start has been made to develop RPL policy and practice. The first phase of development, gaining experience, evaluation and sharing knowledge and experience is in full operation. As experience grows, professionals and organisations are looking ahead: how do we further develop knowledge and infrastructure for RPL, can we mainstream RPL? How? How do we fund it?

In the policy and practice of RPL, a number of issues emerge , that lead to questions and discussion. The most important issues are:
- *developing concrete action plans and determining the role of RPL;*
- *resources (infrastructure, human capital, funding);*
- *awareness and demand;*
- *transparency.*

The general approach to RPL from a policy perspective is discussed in 3.2.2. Resources and awareness will be dealt with in paragraphs 3.2.3 and 3.2.4. Transparency is the focus op the Collaborative Policy Analysis, and will be dealt with in section 4.

3.2.2 *The general approach to economic challenges and the position of RPL*

The challenges facing Ireland, such as up skilling the workforce, redirecting parts of the workforce, raising educational attainment and raising participation in the workforce have been identified, and are acknowledged by all relevant actors. General measures and regulations have been put in place, to stimulate the use of education and training by companies, workers and others.

There are many examples in Ireland of sectoral programs to stimulate the take up of education and training by companies and workers, such as Skillnets, the One Step Up initiative and activities of Failte Ireland. One such example is Skillnets. Skillnets is an enterprise-led support body whose mission is to enhance the skills of people in employment in Irish industry to support competitiveness and employability. Skillnets is funded from the National Training Fund and its stakeholders include leading employer and employee representative bodies. In accordance with the vision contained in the National Skills Strategy and in particular the need to increase the provision of education and training for those that are low skilled, Skillnets pursued a a process of research and consultation with relevant stakeholders. Following this consultation Skillnets significantly changed their funding model to better incentivise and target training towards the low skilled. Skillnets have adopted a sectoral approach; targeting three sectors with a high volume of low skilled workers – retail, private healthcare and the security industry with new training initiatives.

Challenge: making concrete policies and action plans for RPL

Each labour market sector is unique, when it comes to:
- skills mismatch;
- the way workers are educated and trained;
- the innovation speed;
- the level of companies' awareness and expertise in the area of knowledge development and employee career development;
- the level of employee's awareness and motivation for education and training;
- the feasibility of using RPL as an instrument for up skilling workers or giving targeted groups access to work in the sector.

International examples suggest that challenges concerning the workforce are most effectively met by sector specific policies and plans of action. In Ireland, this approach is also used. . There are several examples of projects in sectors, with specific goals in the area of skills, using RPL. The Lionra project and projects and programs of Failte Ireland, Teagasc and FÁS were described in 3.1.3 and 3.1.4.

Although several good examples exist, it seems that more use of RPL in sector specific plans is possible, and would contribute to realising the goals of these plans. In Box 1 some relevant examples of sectoral programmes which have RPL as a prominent element are given. These are just four examples, many more are available in the Country Background Reports of various countries written for this OECD research project.

Box 1. Examples of formative RPL in sectoral training policies

Scottish Qualifications and Credit Framework, Credit rating work based learning and social services
Work based learning is frequently not assessed against learning outcomes and not formally recognised. This is both informal and non formal learning. In order to have programmes of work based learning recognised on SCQF, they need to be credit rated. Credit rating involves determining the level of the outcomes of learning and the volume of outcomes, described in terms of the number of credits. The SCQF social services project supported the credit rating of two programmes of employer developed and delivered work based learning. One programme was in the area of child protection and the other in leadership. Groups of employees can now gain official SCQF credit for this learning. Articulation arrangements which give credit from this learning to university qualifications are now in place.

The Netherlands, Food and Drink Industry: up skilling low skilled workers, RPL and further training
In the Food and Drink sector, different models of RPL have evolved among major companies since 1995. The sector has a relatively old population of workers. Since these workers entered the sector, technology, the production process, responsibilities, et cetera have evolved. A substantial part of the workers operate machines, but their knowledge has not kept up with the innovations within the companies. These workers with low level skills are assessed through an RPL-procedure. Their skills are measured. Based on the RPL results, an individual training plan is made for each participant in relation to skills required in the workplace. To date, more than 2700 low skilled workers went through this process. Apart from upskilling, another purpose has been to further mobility and flexibility within firms by raising the qualifications levels of the workforce in the sector. RPL is not only used to address skills needs, but also to respond to emerging changes. Multinational companies, who are under pressure to restructure divisions exposed to global competition, attempt to respond proactively as part of their social corporate responsibility. The human resource managers from Heineken and Coca Cola acknowledged that RPL is an effective tool in a period of restructuring and lay-offs, to help employees in the transition to other jobs or sectors. RPL is in this context perceived as an instrument that contributes to the internal market efficiency within the sector as a whole. (Country Background Report (CBR), the Netherlands, February 2007).

Canada, Saskatchewan, care sector: individual learning paths
Project that provides a case study in flexible personalised learning pathways for health workers.
The cornerstone of the career pathing process is the integration of holistic portfolio development as a key component of human resource planning. Employees develop a career-focused portfolio that documents and tracks their formal and informal learning experience, serves as a learning plan for future training and development opportunities, and identifies areas of personal career interests. Individually, these portfolios validate the accomplishments and abilities of employees, while providing documentation and evidence that may be applied through RPL processes for certification or academic credits. Collectively, the portfolios provide a "talent inventory" that can be matched with current and future needs of the health sector and serve as a valuable method of career and job matching for both employees and employers, especially in difficult-to-recruit classifications. The intent of the Career Pathing project is to support the success and transformational growth of employees through the development of flexible, personalized career paths. In particular, the project aims to empower Aboriginal employees in entry-level positions to access future career and job options. (CBR Canada, September 2007)

South Africa, construction sector: RPL and further training
The Education and Training Authority (CETA) aimed to recognise and credit workers for learning at the lowest level of the South African National Qualifications Framework (Level 1) and consequently could be classified as a 'redress' project – most of these workers have been employed as unskilled labourers in the industry. While some of the purposes were pragmatic in relation to the skills needs of the sector, the cost of training and the competitiveness of the industry, the project aimed to contribute to the personal development and status of the applicants.

Box 1. Examples of formative RPL in sectoral training policies (continued)

Some important purposes therefore included:

- Individual access to qualifications and opportunities for further learning. The need for RPL in this sector oversubscribed the final results by more than 3,000. Due to limited funding, provision was made for a maximum of 6,000 candidates.
- Improved access to employment that required qualifications. Focussed post-RPL training became a necessity to fill those gaps identified during the initial RPL process. An additional 1,572 persons achieved competency awards as a result of post–RPL training. Sixty-nine persons have participated in entrepreneurial training and have been deemed competent against the relevant learning outcomes specified in those qualifications.
- Awarding formal credits in relation to qualifications. More than 12,000 achievements have been recorded against "core" skills of the mentioned trades. To record these, a database has also been developed as an outcome of this project.
- Three qualifications were developed with the support of the project, through the legislated qualification development and approval process. The occupational areas selected were those of Construction Plasterer, Construction Tiler, and Construction Painter. The project continues to support and evaluate other new qualification development and amendments to existing qualifications including Construction Carpenter, Plumbing, Bricklayer and Mason.
- Development of learning materials for the core elements of the relevant
- qualifications
- 27 equipped RPL locations in 9 Provinces of South Africa

RPL was conducted through three core elements: advising candidates on gaining recognition, assessing learning against standards and learning outcomes; verification of the process and results. To a limited extent, this was followed by "post-RPL training" as mentioned earlier. (CBR South Africa, August 2007).

As pointed out in 3.1.1, RPL in Ireland is mainly used within a summative approach; to gain credits and exemptions, as part of an alternative route to qualifications. The review team has not found much evidence of RPL as an element of conscious policies for career development (the formative approach). This does not mean, that RPL is not used in this way. The project of IT Sligo, carried out in 2002 with Masonite Ireland (3.1.3) and the Lionra project (3.1.3) contain elements of a formative approach. But in general, policies for structured career development for the unemployed or within sectors or regions do not occur on a substantial scale. The international examples mentioned in Box 1 (above) show some international examples of how RPL can be used for career development of workers and (practically) unemployed persons, at various skills levels.

The Scottish Social Services Council provides an example of how RPL can be helpful in developing the social services workforce.

Box 2.   Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), Recognition of prior informal learning
          and the social services sector

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) recognises the potential of the SCQF to support the development of the social services workforce. RPL is a key in the implementation of the SCQF. RPL enables employees to draw from what they have learned from their experience to work towards qualifications for registration with the SSSC and for Continuous Professional Development (CPD). The SCQF in social services project developed RPL guidance and resources for mentors and learners. This focuses on both the formative and summative recognition of informal learning. The guidance supports learners through formative stages as they grow in confidence, recognise the skills and knowledge they have learned from previous experience, and develop the capacity to think and write reflectively. The materials also support learners through assessments towards gaining qualifications. The resources can also be used in recruitment, induction, supervision, appraisal and performance review processes.

A strong characteristic of the Irish system is that it is a multi-functional and open system – having all sorts of use of RPL available for different purposes. It allows for summative use of RPL (gaining qualifications) and at the same time, possibilities exist for targeting specific groups.

Conclusions
- *International examples show, that RPL can be effectively used, within sector specific plans. In many cases, a formative approach is used. This may involve making development plans for competences of the workforce at the level of the sector, the individual enterprise, or the individual worker.*
- *The need for policies that address issues of up-skilling, enlarging and redirecting the workforce and raising educational attainment is recognised by all relevant actors. In addition to sectoral approaches to meeting skills needs, the National Skills Strategy has highlighted the vision for the future development of Ireland's Human Capital. The Strategy specifically deals with the need to up skill the work force and raise the educational attainment of a significant proportion of the workforce (An implementation plan for the National Skills Strategy is currently being drafted by an inter-Departmental Committee (IDC) chaired by the Minister of State and comprising senior officials of the Departments of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Education and Science and Financ)..*
- *Concrete RPL policies and action plans addressing these issues for specific sectors of the economy are not available or limited in scope.*
- *Based on international practice, the use of RPL in a formative way is proven to be useful in sectoral development policies.*
- *The Irish system allows for both summative and formative approaches to RPL.*

3.2.3 Resources: Infrastructure and funding

In this paragraph strengths and challenges in infrastructure and funding are described, as they were found and interpreted by the review team. Challenges are highlighted and followed by relevant solutions and alternatives, taken from the international context.

3.2.3.1 Infrastructure

The following aspects of infrastructure are relevant:
1. Educational and sectoral structures;
2. The NFQ as a frame of reference, transfer and progression;
3. Education and training practice;
4. Human capital: knowledge and motivation to develop and implement RPL.

1. Education and training structures

From an international perspective, the structure of the Irish educational landscape is advantageous for taking up RPL ,or indeed any other innovation in education and training. A general characteristic of the Irish education and training world is a relatively high degree of centralisation.

Awards Councils
The Awards Councils (FETAC and HETAC) play a central role in setting quality standards and stimulating provision of RPL by providers.

Providers
Within the further education and training sector, large providers exist, with close ties to businesses (Failte Ireland, Teagasc, FAS, Bord lascagh Mara). Vocational Education Committees (VECs) are also obliged to establish Adult Education Boards, which are representative of those bodies, statutory and otherwise, in each area concerned with the provision of adult education. They have a membership of not more than 15 persons, made up of two nominees of the VEC, one each from the agricultural advisory service, FÁS and the local statutory library authority and 7 by bodies other than the VEC with an involvement in adult education in the county or borough area. Three more may be co-opted to involve significant interests, such as employers or trade unions. They assess needs and administer the VECs' adult education programme within the limits of the resources made available. Courses have to have a labour market justification. In addition, there are niche private providers of education and training that offer programmes specifically for the workplace. This opens up possibilities for:
- efficient working methods. RPL procedures can be centrally developed by these large providers. This can prevent problems of inefficiency (many different providers developing the same products);
- recognition of the value and outcomes of RPL practice (procedures developed by the large providers are likely to be accepted by schools and sub-contractors);
- tuning RPL and education to the needs of businesses, ensuring RPL in educational services that meet the needs of companies. These organisations seem to have a well developed network within the sectors and have a good understanding of the requirements of business.

The Institutes of Technology, in particular, cater to the educational needs of their region. Contacts with businesses and awareness of their services amongst citizens seem to be well developed. Under the Strategic Innovation Fund, the Institutes of Technology and a number of universities cooperate with each other to develop and share experiences of RPL.

Conclusions
Compared internationally, the Irish educational world is relatively centralised. Also contacts with businesses seem to be well developed. This is advantageous when it comes to reducing development costs,

and establishing acceptance of RPL procedures and outcomes, both among educational institutions and businesses.

2. NFQ

In general all sectors reported a widespread understanding of and commitment to the implementation of the NFQ. Education and training providers delivering across the different levels subscribe to the framework. This included FETAC, HETAC, DIT and the Universities. There was a considerable amount of enthusiasm, and indeed passion, on the part of education and training providers for the potential which this national framework offers to learners, employers and education institutions. Employers and Trade Unions also highlighted the many opportunities the NFQ offers.

Learning outcomes are fundamental in terms of the implementation of the NFQ. Articulation into a qualification can be on the basis of advanced entry with credit. If learners can show the learning they have gained, whether this is non-formal, informal or formal, then they may be granted this credit. This depends on the requirements of the receiving institution. Learning outcomes describe what a learner should know, understand, or be able to do after completing a particular component of learning.

The full potential of the NFQ in relation to RPL lies in the area of embedding the framework in practice. Some examples of this potential lie in structure and mechanisms for access, transfer and progression.

Learners are at the centre of the framework and all learning is recognised. However, the mechanisms for formally recognising or accrediting non formal, informal, and indeed bite sized formal learning are variable. So although all learning can be recognised, not all learning is within the qualifications framework. Informal and non formal learning can be recognised as leading towards an award. There is potential for the accreditation of RPL and bite size formal learning. This can support flexible entry, exit, articulation and progression. The use of RPL can be used in relation to minor, special purpose and supplemental awards as well as the more widely available major awards will advance this.

RPL is closely associated with work-based learning. Learning outcomes are also fundamental to the development of programmes by employers. These can be supported by continuous assessment. In addition some smaller awards are ones that could be picked up in the workplace. These could be supplemental or they could focus on specific or specialised skills for competences to support continuous professional development. Minor and other awards are intended to address this need. In other jurisdictions, this is addressed through giving credit for work-based learning.

RPL can be used for summative assessment or credit towards a qualification. The main focus of practice in Ireland is on this approach. However, RPL can also be used as a formative process- to support employee development, interviewing for courses or for employment, or to support supervision or staff appraisal. It can also be used for confidence building or career planning. While formal, non-formal and informal learning can be defined as distinct entities, in practice they often co-exist and supplement or reinforce each other.

Conclusion
- *RPL needs a framework of reference. The National Framework of Qualifications provides such a structure.*
- *The Framework encompasses all mainstream qualifications.*
- *Levels are clearly described.*
- *There is a clear read across other qualifications frameworks.*
- *Building blocks towards major qualifications (minor awards) are available.*
- *Some challenges are to be met on the subject of transfer from level 6 in Further Education and Training to Higher Education and Training. Bridging activities might be in order.*

3. Education and training practice

Access and transparency of the educational system.
Semesterisation is where the academic year is divided into equal parts with equal weight. Modularisation divides learning into components of equal and measurable length and outcome. Commonly a module addresses one subject or area of study or group of skills. These modules can stand alone or with other related modules or be grouped to make up a larger programme. Likewise, modules ideally lead to minor awards, which also lead to major awards.

There is a great deal of evidence of semesterisation of the academic calendar and modularisation of learning programmes. This was particularly well developed in the FETAC sector. All colleges are moving towards modularity and semesters. Modularisation and semesterisation smooth the way for RPL arrangements.

A modular accreditation approach to Higher Education and Training is quite well established and is being further developed and this could support more flexible access. The review team was given many excellent examples of flexible provision but these seemed to be marginal in many instances.

Challenge: more flexible access and forms of learning

Although modularisation and semesterisation are important steps towards flexible and accessible education and training, the challenges posed by the economy and the labour market demand even greater flexibility in terms of access, scheduling and forms of education and training. Childcare, construction, health and safety are examples of sectors with a need for flexible entry to training and flexible forms.

An item that was regularly highlighted to the team was the provision of part time education and training. Both in Further and in Higher Education and Training, a substantial number of programmes cannot be followed part time. For many targeted groups (workers, people performing care tasks) this is a substantial obstacle to participation in education.

Specific government-backed initiatives have been taken to provide flexible, part-time, learning opportunities for specific target groups. An example of this is the back to Education Initiative (BTEI). This commenced in 2002 and provides for an expansion of flexible part time options across further education. Its priority is those adults with less than upper second level education. The aim of BTEI is to give adults who wish to return to education an opportunity to combine their return to learning with family, work and other responsibilities. Programmes are offered on a part-time basis, in the mornings, afternoons, evenings or at weekends. *Towards 2016*, the national social partnership agreement, provided for the expansion of the BTEI programme by 2,000 places to a total of 10,000 places by 2009. 1,000 of those places were provided in 2007 and a further 500 places were provided in 2008. BTEI eligibility criteria were amended to allow free tuition to any adult with less than upper second level education with effect from 1st September 2007.

Box 3.   International examples of flexible forms of learning
International examples of highly flexible forms of learning are e-learning, distance learning, coaching in the workplace, training in the workplace and individually timed learning paths (the participant can start a course at any moment and complete the programme at his own pace). An example of an institution offering flexible forms of learning is the Open Universiteit Nederland, in the Netherlands.

The Open Universiteit Nederland
Admission is open to anyone aged 18 or over, regardless of prior education. Approximately 18,500 students are currently enrolled. About 70% of these students remain in paid employment throughout their studies, and more than 50% have enrolled because it leaves them free to choose their own time and place of study and lets them progress at their own pace.

Box 3.   International examples of flexible forms of learning (continued)

Besides academic programmes, students can choose from nearly 300 modular courses. This modular course system implies that students can enrol either for full-length degree programmes or choose to study one or more courses. Open Universiteit Nederland offers fully accredited Bachelor or Master degree programmes in Law, Management, Computer Sciences, Environmental Sciences, Cultural Sciences, Active Learning and Psychology. In participation with partners, two MBA programmes are offered: Global Distance MBA and Euro MBA.

Students can also follow short programmes. These include short vocational training courses, postgraduate courses and short undergraduate programmes, which are developed in co-operation with universities of professional education (HBO), academic universities, professional bodies or commercial companies. On a commercial basis the institution offers open enrolment programmes and in-company and customized training programmes. They also we provide short courses via the Internet at no cost.

Students are free to study where and when they choose. Instruction is based on guided individual study. Generally, there are no compulsory classroom or tutoring sessions. Different methods of studying are available. A much used method is:
- student receives the course in written material;
- a teacher is available, who will answer questions via telephone or e-mail;
- an electronic learning room is available, where students can participate in discussion groups and can exchange information with the teacher and other students;
- in study centres and provincial centres tutoring sessions are organised, where students can obtain personal guidance. Participation in these sessions is advised, but is not obligatory.

Students may enrol at any time, are free to study at their own pace and can generally decide for themselves when they are ready to take an examination. The modular system of instruction means that students can enrol either for full-length degree programmes or for individual courses. Students can combine their course credits to obtain a diploma or degree if they so choose.

Each of the courses ends with an examination. This may take one of several forms: a final project or paper, a multiple choice test, an open essay test, or an oral examination. Many of the course examinations are administered three times a year. However, a computerised examination system has also been implemented for a growing number of courses. Students enrolled in these courses can take their exams virtually 'on demand'.

RPL at the Open Universiteit Nederland
The Open Universiteit Nederland also offers access through RPL. The RPL procedure exists of:
- Self assessment. Applicant fills out a form, which will indicate whether it is useful to apply for RPL;
- Advice. The Open University gives an advice on applying for RPL;
- Application. The student applies.
- Portfolio. The student makes a portfolio. Making a portfolio generally takes 12 weeks;
- Assessment. The portfolio is judged and the applicant may be invited for a personal assessment meeting. In exceptional cases the applicant may be asked to take a test;
- Accreditation and exemptions.

Box 3.   International examples of flexible forms of learning (continued)
Costs of RPL at the Open Universiteit Nederland

Result   Costs for the candidate
0   € 144,- (administration costs)
1 module exemption   € 311,-
2 modules exemption   € 622,-
3 modules exemption   € 933,-
4 modules exemption   €1244,-
5 modules exemption   €1555,-
6 modules exemption   €1866,-
More than 6 modules exemption €1866,-

Another system which offers potential for flexible access and also progression is the use of learning outcomes in the development and delivery of assessment. Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to do, or is able to demonstrate, after completion of any learning process or at the end of a period of learning.. It is therefore possible for learners to be assessed on their informal and non-formal learning against particular learning outcomes. Assessment may also be across a number of modules or be holistic and focus on the learning outcomes from several modules (or indeed all the modules) that lead to an award. A learning outcomes approach is in place in Ireland and is the basis for the development of RPL. There is still some work to be done on the alignment of assessment in all sectors of education and training with learning outcomes. A National Framework of Qualifications Network comprising universities and recognised colleges has recently been established which has identified several projects to implement the framework amongst its constituents. One of its projects focuses on learning outcomes and assessment.

Articulation and progression
There were some excellent examples from FETAC, HETAC, DIT and Universities where RPL is used for credit towards qualifications. There were also a few examples of where non-formal learning has been recognised towards most of or an entire qualification. Each sector presented many examples of advanced entry from accredited courses and also from experiential learning. An example was discussed of five students who were granted RPL for a full award. Some of these developments have been on a project or pilot basis. Full potential can be realised if these developments can be mainstreamed.

As well as adapting entry routes, links between programmes and awards and accessing full awards via RPL, another dimension that can promote flexibility is the locus of delivery. A considerable amount of non-formal learning and indeed informal learning takes place in the workplace. This has the potential to support formal learning taking place in formal education settings, in the workplace or a combination of both. FETAC presented several examples of RPL within workplace learning. This is an area where RPL assessment arrangements could be developed further and mainstreamed.

In general, there are clear progression routes through awards. Within the FETAC system, all awards are built up from minor awards. Illustrative examples were presented of minor awards being built upon and leading to major awards.

In general,, there are clear progression routes from many FETAC to programmes at institutions within the HETAC sector, to DIT and to universities. The qualifications framework by presenting all awards in terms of clearly understood levels makes such progression not only possible but theoretically straightforward. DIT and Cork IT cited several examples where links were made to support the transition from FE to HE at

level 6. However, student places were limited. DIT gave an excellent example in the area of hospitality where they had developed a module to support this transition.

Challenge: barriers to progression
There were however several frequently cited barriers to progression. There have been difficulties traditionally in mobility between what is now level 6 further education and training and higher education and training. Within education in many countries there has traditionally been a commonly held view, that vocational learning is of lesser value than academic learning. A qualifications framework such as the NFQ which clearly sets out the standards of knowledge, skills and competence for each level can promote the equity of learning in different sectors. This level is an area where there were potential barriers to progression. It is also the area offering huge potential for opening up the framework.

The transition from FE to HE at level 6 or from level 6 to 7 was cited by several sources as an area of challenge and potential blockage. Many excellent examples of transition routes from FE to HE were also presented. This included transition for access to higher education and for access with credit or advanced entry. However these on the whole were located in localised agreements or were project based or centred around particular subject areas. This area of transition was not seamless across the education and training spectrum. Failte Ireland gave as examples bar and catering areas at craft and advanced levels. They had developed an RPL process and related guidelines. Over 100 candidates per year go through this process.

Some of the obstacles concern education and training structures, funding, attitudes or absence of higher level programmes in the cognate areas. A key barrier is also the lack of information for learners of available progression routes. This issue is currently being addressed by FETAC. FAS is also developing new progression routes, and higher education institutes are working within a Strategic Innovation Fund project to develop and promote progression for holders of craft awards.

Box 4. Options for improving progression
Bridging is one way of enabling learners to move from one level to another. The bridging structures are in place in the NFQ. But there is potential to develop systems to support this bridging at level 6. Through such systems, learners can be given the support to develop the skills and knowledge to enable them to undertake learning at the next level. This might be study skills, core skills such as literacy, numeracy or IT, the facility to think reflectively or act as part of a team or it might be knowledge or skills specific to a particular subject. Clearly this can be offered through formal programmes. However, non formal and informal learning can be recognised and used to support bridging.

Quality assurance
Quality assurance seems to be working well, within education and training providers. Institutional level policies emphasise quality assurance – the need for quality assurance of RPL is also the driver for institution-wide policies on RPL. The practices of RPL in general stemmed from individual departments or centres in response to meeting student needs, attracting diverse groups of students, meeting regulatory requirements for certification and/or participation in research projects in the area of RPL.

In contrast with some European countries, the RPL arrangements in Ireland that lead to qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications are fully integrated with the existing arrangements for qualifications e.g. they operate within the overarching funding arrangements, rules and regulations on provision, quality assurance and assessment. The policy approach is to integrate RPL with the existing qualifications system rather than develop a separate system of regulation for RPL.

Access points for RPL

During the working visit, the review team tried to get a picture of the extent to which RPL can be obtained by individuals or companies who approach providers with needs that require RPL. The first item in the process of obtaining RPL, is knowing where to go with questions about education and training. We have the impression, that most providers are known to employers and individuals (although the team was not sure about private providers).

The next question is whether professionals answering questions would be able to identify the need for RPL and direct the client to colleagues who could further inform and help them. For most providers, this is not the case, at least, that is our impression. Only within Institutes of Technology and with the large sector oriented providers (FAS, Failte Ireland, Teagasc et cetera), a substantial part of the staff can be expected to be aware of RPL. Discussions are underway to develop awareness and use of RPL in the VECs.

The next question is, whether the institution has policies and structures in place, to further inform and help the client. Only the ITs and the sector oriented providers, but probably not all of them, will have such facilities in place.

Finally RPL has to be delivered. For the ITs and the sector oriented providers the team was reasonably confident, that they can deliver RPL, although RPL is probably not available for all qualifications that a client might want to attain.

The scheme below depicts the extent to which aspects of access and provision of RPL are in place within various groups of providers in Ireland. These are findings of the OECD review team, gathered during the working visit.

Table 3.3 Aspects of access and provision of RPL for groups of publicly funded providers in Ireland

	Is institution known to employers?	Is institution known to individuals?	Do all relevant professionals know about RPL?	Structural facilities to inform and help with RPL?	*Able to deliver RPL?*
Universities	Y	Y	N	N/?	*?**
Institutes of Technology	Y	Y	Y/?	Y	*Y*
Sector oriented providers	Y	Y	Y/?	Y/?	*Y*
Schools, colleges, training centres, VECs	Y	Y	N	?	*?*

* A question mark indicates that the review team is not sure about the state of affairs for the aspects and providers in question. Note that the review team was unable to assess the situation in respect of private providers.
Source: OECD review team, Feb. 2008.

Other items

During the working visit, RPL practice in the institutions produced the following issues, which need to be addressed.

- There was an emphasis on the need to develop and build capacity for mentors to develop mentoring skills and to be familiar with the learning outcomes.
- There needs to be very clear documentation to support RPL.
- There is a need for internal and external monitoring.
- There is a need for working models of the costs
- Quality assurance systems for RPL could be built into already existing quality assurance systems
- Capacity for supporting RPL needs to be built.
- There is considerable demand from educational institutions for funding to support part time and other flexible learning including RPL.

Conclusion

Access and transparency of the educational system has been improved in past years, with modularisation and semesterisation of educational programs. Nevertheless, in light of the economic and labour market challenges, further development seems necessary to attain more flexibility. In particular individual scheduling and more flexible forms of education need to be developed, especially for part time learners.

As for the provision of RPL: a substantial part of the Institutes of Technology and the sector oriented providers of Further Education and Training (such as FAS, Failte Ireland and Teagasc) are effectively able to inform clients about RPL and deliver RPL (all be it on a small scale). For the other providers, guarantees of provision of RPL seems to be less certain.

4. Human capital: knowledge and motivation to develop and implement RPL

Knowledge
The major sector oriented providers of Further Education and Training (Failte Ireland, FAS, Teagasc et cetera) have professionals available with sufficient knowledge and experience to develop and carry out RPL. The amount of knowledge in VECs, schools and colleges for Further Education is not clear to the review team, but our general impression is that it is limited and that further staff training in the area is needed.

In Higher Education and Training, at least half of the Institutes of Technology have RPL policies in place. The actual number of persons participating in RPL is limited. Cork Institute of Technology has dedicated professionals who promote the use of RPL within the organisation and offer support to colleagues concerning RPL. Within the departments, champions are present, who are the RPL experts for their departments. Universities seem to be struggling. The attitude towards RPL is in some cases hesitative, and there appears to be reluctance in some departments to offer RPL. Under the Strategic Innovation Fund, a number of ITs and Universities share knowledge and experiences.

Sharing of knowledge and experience of RPL among professionals and providing organisations seems to be sufficient, considering the limited amount of existing knowledge and experience. FETAC has put considerable effort into starting and completing a pilot project with a broad array of participating organisations, and into evaluating and sharing results and experiences.

Challenge: increasing knowledge among providers
Nevertheless, RPL is certainly not a mainstream phenomenon in education in Ireland, and substantial knowledge of and experience with RPL is limited to a small number of professionals. The majority of professionals working in Further and Higher Education and Training are not familiar with RPL.

On one hand, this is a logical consequence of the fact that RPL is a relatively new phenomenon, in the first stage of the product life cycle. However, RPL can play an essential role in the opening up of opportunities for education and training, which is needed to meet the country's future skills needs. If RPL is to fulfil this task, knowledge and awareness among education professionals needs to increase.

Another explanation for limited knowledge and awareness among education professionals is the absence of dedicated funding for RPL. Up until now, funding has either been project based or has come from providers' regular budget. There is also a reliance on voluntary work by teachers, coaches and others.

In view of the absence of large scale provision and of structural funding, knowledge and awareness might even be considered to be surprisingly high.

Box 5. Options for spreading knowledge of RPL

Options
International examples show, that spreading knowledge about RPL amongst professionals in education and training, can be improved in a number of ways.

Establishing a knowledge centre
Such a knowledge centre can support education business professionals in (among other things) development, organisation and administration. In the Netherlands such a knowledge centre has been established, financed by the Ministries of Education, Culture and Science and of Social Affairs and Employment (www.kenniscentrumevc.nl).

The Knowledge Centre APL aims to collect and share knowledge and good practices on validation of prior learning in the Netherlands. It aims to stimulate the use of APL practices by developing a sustainable infrastructure for the application of APL in education and the labour market, in regions and in sectors. The Knowledge Centre APL developed a quality framework which aims to enhance the quality of the APL procedures. This framework is based on the 'Common European Principles for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal learning' and can be used to assess procedures, create more transparency and set a minimum standard for APL procedures.

Furthermore, the centre brings together APL specialists to develop new practices and bring APL forward in national and international perspective.

The Knowledge Centre APL maintains close contacts with the important stakeholders in APL, including government (interdepartmental project unit for learning and working, ministries), social partners (trade unions and employer organisations), employers (large companies and small & medium-sized companies and its national representative bodies), citizens (employed, job-seekers), educators (publicly and privately funded), local governments, branch and sector organisations, regional intermediary organisations, centre for work and income and reintegration companies.

In international perspective, the centre aims to share good practices from the Netherlands and learn from other countries. Furthermore, it aims to contribute to the discussion on the development of APL and non-formal and informal learning in international context.

The Knowledge Centre has a broad array of instruments and products, to support professionals, such as:
- platforms and seminars for knowledge sharing;
- toolkits for educators and people in companies;
- competence profiles for assessors and mentors;
- evaluation forms for RPL participants;
- checklists for RPL-procedures for organisations;
- explanatory wordlists.

Dedicated funding of RPL
In some cases this is done by the Government. Some examples form Australia: The Northern Territory in connection with the Australian Government have made grants of AUD 40,000 (EUR 24,078) available for RTOs and industry advisory bodies to conduct RPL projects. These projects are to assist RTOs and assessment centres to offer 'streamlined and readily available skills assessment and recognition and assist individuals and employers to be better informed about RPL' (NT Department of Employment, Education and Training 2006). The Australian Capital Territory fully funds RPL with Technical and Further Education providers (provides 100 per cent of cost of RPL measured in nominal hours). User Choice programmes have AUD 200 (EUR 120) for qualification for RPL. For other programmes, 50 per cent of the cost is funded.

Box 5. Options for spreading knowledge of RPL (continued)

Stimulating knowledge sharing by professionals
In Ireland, the RPL project funded by the Strategic Innovation Fund has this as one of its objectives.

Giving businesses a role in RPL
Another relevant option is to expand part of the provision of RPL to the business sector. Many examples show, that companies and public organisations can play a major role in for instance mentoring and assessing - important parts of the RPL procedure. In the Netherlands, for example, workers in the Food and Drink industry and Electrical Engineering are trained and used as assessors and mentors. Obviously, this is only feasible, when there is commitment to RPL in the company or work organisation in question.

Motivation
On several occasions during the working visit, the review team was struck by the motivation of education professionals to provide opportunities to workers and disadvantaged groups. Also notable was the fact that institutions, especially the ITs, finance RPL from their regular budgets. In addition the voluntary work put in by teachers, assessors and mentors shows a passion for education and training. Internationally, this is not a common phenomenon, and it is something to be treasured.

Conclusions
Knowledge of RPL and experience with RPL among education and training professionals is generally low, although in a number of institutions RPL policies are in place and RPL practice is up and running. Good examples exist, but do not represent the common situation in the majority of institutions. International models to support this are:
- *establishing a knowledge centre;*
- *providing dedicated RPL funding;*
- *stimulate knowledge sharing by professionals;*
- *letting professionals from businesses perform tasks in RPL.*

Motivation within education and training institutions to take up RPL is high. Most professionals see the potential of RPL as an instrument to facilitate access.

3.2.3.2 Funding of RPL in Ireland

RPL is funded in two ways:
- seed- and project based funding by the government or EU;
- education and training providers pay for RPL activities from their regular budgets.

Institutions invest in informing teachers, training assessors and mentors and developing procedures, establishing structures within the institution, exemption policies, et cetera. During the working visit, some examples of investment requirements were given by providers: the estimated cost of operating RPL for each individual varies from €600 to €2,000. The team found it difficult to obtain details of costs. Costs will differ according to the type of procedures that are followed, focus of the RPL activity, overall scale of RPL activity and maturity of RPL systems. However, the team found it difficult to acquire details of costs and costing models used by providers and awarding bodies. The amount of time necessary for mentoring and assessing RPL participants may vary from 10 to 40 hours. Also in many cases voluntary work by teachers, mentors and assessors is involved. Further work needs to be carried out on the real costs of providing different forms of RPL (for access, for credit/exemptions and for full awards).

Challenge: funding further development and mainstreaming
Further developing RPL and implementing RPL in more institutions and on a larger scale within institutions will require additional seed- or development money.

Costs and return on investment of RPL
Both in Ireland and in international publications, no accurate information is available on the full costs of RPL. Some concrete figures from the Netherlands were found.
- According to the Country Background Report for the Netherlands, the average costs of an RPL-procedure for (translated to the Irish system) levels 4 through 7 of the National Framework of Qualifications range from €1,000 to €1,250 per participant, including the costs of assessment and recognition of the results.
- Eight case studies in the Dutch higher education sector show a cost range from €750 to €2,000 per participant.
- OTIB, the schooling fund for electrical engineering, plumbing and climate technology, keeps a register of providers of RPL for this sector. The information in the register is updated twice a year. An analysis of the price levels here shows that:
    o the cost of one RPL procedure, at levels roughly equivalent to levels 4,5, and 6 of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, range from €800 to €1.350. Generally this concerns formative RPL. The participants competencies are measured, and possibilities for further education are made transparent. Methods involve portfolio and practical assessments (performing professional tasks). The results are mostly used to award employees certificates for the competencies measured and to give the employee access to education and training;
    o in higher education for electrical engineering, the costs of RPL range from €750 to €1,900 per participant. Here the use of RPL is mostly summative: the participant's competencies are measured, so that the participant can enter higher education programmes. Methods used are mainly portfolio and "taking tests".

The Dutch figures are more or less in line with the information found during the working visit (€600 to € 2,000 per participant). Based on these findings, the average cost of an RPL procedure seems to centre around €1,000 to €1,500 per participant.

If a considerable effort were made by all partners involved (government, providers, employers organisations and labour unions), the number of participants in RPL could amount to 5,000 to 6,000 a year[5], after 3 or 4 years. Multiplied by an average cost level of some €1,250 per participant, this would demand an investment of approximately 6.875 million Euro. Important points need to be made about the investment needed:

- The amount of money involved in funding RPL will depend on the approach taken and on the focus of RPL activity. Given the variation in costs of RPL in Ireland, cited above, it is suggested that further work be undertaken to determine costs of different kinds of RPL interventions e.g. RPL for access to education and training programmes, professional practice, or for accessing the labour market. Paragraph 4.3 goes into this. If an approach is taken where RPL is introduced gradually, sector by sector, or region by region, the costs will develop accordingly (slowly and in a controlled manner);
- Development costs will decrease over time;
- At present, it appears that several hundred persons go through RPL-procedures each year (exact statistics are not available). These are either funded on a project basis, or funded by the educational institutions from their regular budgets;
- Greater transparency about the costs of providing RPL is needed.

To date, Irish providers have been able to cover the costs of RPL, partly because numbers of participants have been relatively small. If the number of participants were to increase considerably, providers would not be able to cope because of a lack of personnel and resources.

For other parties, like employers organisations and labour unions, dedicated funding of RPL is not a priority. Moreover, they are concerned that increase in funding of RPL will be at the expense of investment in more important goals, like provision of flexible education and raising participation of workers and businesses in education and training.

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[5] This figure was arrived at by comparing the Irish situation with the situation in the Netherlands. The development stage of RPL in Ireland is similar to the situation in the Netherlands around 2000. Through dedicated funding of RPL, linked to regional and sectoral programs and promotion of RPL, a level of 22,000 participants a year has now been reached. Translated to the Irish situation, this would be 5,000 to 6,000.

Evidence of return on investment for RPL is not available in the Irish context. Information on return on investment of RPL in the Netherlands is gathered in the box below.

Box 6. Examples of return on investment of RPL

A short pathway to the teaching profession
To address the shortage of teachers, the government attempted to provide incentives to those working professionals with other occupations to switch to a teaching profession by allowing them to gain the relevant qualification through an individualised bachelor-level study program. To this end, RPL is made a legal obligation as a gateway to a personalised learning route. Using this legal framework, the OUNL plays an important role in producing qualified teachers by offering alternative routes - shorter and less costly - to the profession. Although there was no information on the average time it takes for a candidate to prepare a portfolio, the average time taken by assessors is estimated at 12 hours per candidate. Costs of 2,000 Euro are covered by the employer. This kind of legislative arrangement does not yet exist outside the teaching profession; however discussions have started about applying this framework to the health care and engineering sectors.

Reducing costs of up skilling workers
Corus, a steel manufacturing company in the Netherlands, developed an RPL-procedure and a training course "Practical craftsmanship" for low skilled employees. Costs and returns of RPL to Corus are depicted in the scheme below.

Workers at a level comparable to NFQ level 5/6, costs in €1000		
	Without RPL	With RPL
Leave of absence	12	2
Study costs	10	1.4
RPL costs	-	4.6
Total	22	8

Average of valued competences = 82%
Source: Corus, Nov. 2004

The estimates are based on a working professional who takes a leave to study. Whether he/she goes through RPL or not makes a difference in total costs. If the person does not participate in an RPL procedure, the cost will be 2.75 times as high. This is due to the high opportunity cost and the high costs of the study programme (€12,000 and 10,000 respectively). Therefore, the investment in RPL (€4,600) proves to be a good cost-saver, and thus can be expected to yield higher returns on investment.

The example shows, that developing RPL in a company setting, on a considerable scale, can reduce costs of up skilling workers.

Although not much information is available on the returns on investment specifically for RPL, it is clear, that the returns on RPL could be seen as part of the return on investment for work related training.

By whom should RPL be funded?
From the international context a variety of options can be drawn.

Box 7. Options for funding: international examples
In various countries, RPL is seen as an education/training service.

Financing by individuals
Those individuals who are given personal incentives to participate in RPL and who are well off, may
themselves partially or fully cover the costs of RPL:
-    Fully covered by individuals (Korea);
-    Co-financing (Belgium, Chile, Denmark, Greece, Mexico, Netherlands).

No fees for certain groups
Financial incentives for individuals and employers aimed at stimulating participation in education and
training apply to RPL as well: condition-dependent allowances for learners (no fees for certain groups).
Target groups for no fee policies include: low educated adults, the unemployed and the vulnerable, low-
skilled workers, and adult learners at higher education institutions. In Norway, no fees are charged to
those born before 1978 and who have no general or vocational certification from the upper secondary
education level; disabled (paid by social security office); and the unemployed, the costs of which are
financed by a government. It is often the case that costs for the unemployed are covered by a ministry
responsible for employment or social policies (e.g. Belgium-Flanders, Norway, and Slovenia). In
Belgium-Flanders, the costs of transport to and from a test centre are fully refunded. In Denmark, no fees
are charged for RNFIL at the basic adult educational and upper secondary levels. In these cases, fees are
financed by taximeter (a comprehensive financing system based on per capita grants - cash-per-student -
to institutions). Individual competence assessment (*IKV*) is charged by user fees at the tertiary education
level. In Norway, a RPL procedure to enter a university is also free for an individual applicant. The costs
must be covered by the budget of each university. This arrangement is institutionalised by the Act relating
to Universities and University Colleges (Act numbers: 3-5, 3-6, and 3-7) for applicants who are 25 years
of age or older.

Tax deductions for citizens
Tax deductions for citizens, for their investments in education (the Netherlands: citizens can deduct
expenses of education and training from their income before tax);

Tax deductions for employers
Tax deductions for employers, for their investment in education and training of employees (the
Netherlands: companies can deduct expenses on personnel training from their gross income before tax).

Training funds by the state
Funding from a state governed training fund, based on levees to employers and/or employees. Such a
measure is in place in Ireland: the National Training Fund.

Mutual funding by employers and employees: sectoral schooling funds
In some countries employers' organisations and labour unions make arrangements, within Collective
Labour Agreements, for a small part of gross wages, to be put in a fund for the development of training
for employers and employees and for improving vocational training ("schooling and development funds").
Training for employees, RPL and other educational goals for the sector are partly financed from these
funds. Such funds are governed and operated only by employers' organisations and unions. The state is
not involved, other than in making the Collective Labour Agreements compulsory for all businesses in the
sectors in question.

Box 7. Options for funding: international examples (continued)

An example of such a fund is OTIB, the training and development fund for the electrical and civil engineering in the Netherlands. The collective labour agreement for this sector, states that 1.1% of the gross income of every employee in the sector is to be transferred to the fund. In return, OTIB makes an effort to stimulate the influx of new employees (young people, unemployed persons) into the sector, improve vocational education, stimulate provision of training for workers, and to stimulate career development. The collective labour agreement also states that every employee has the right to have RPL, at least once every five years. OTIB finances 80% of the execution costs of RPL, up to a maximum of 1,000 Euro per person. In practice, RPL is used in trajectories for training workers and attracting new workers (e.g. unemployed individuals) into the sector.

Many similar funds exist in the Netherlands and Germany.

Dedicated programme and project based funding
State funding for programmes focused at RPL (amongst other things) do occur in several countries. In the Irish context several examples exist of project based funding for project of which RPL forms an element. In the Netherlands, several ministries have established the Project Directorate for Learning and Working. The Directorate has a budget of 10 million Euro for projects aimed at organising regional service points (offices) for learning and working, attracting participants in RPL projects and organising the provision of RPL. Regional and sectoral organisations can apply for the subsidies. This program will bear a maximum of 75 percent of the costs. The maximum subsidy for one project is 100,000 Euro, for a minimum of 200 participants, and 500 Euro for every participant above 200, to a maximum of 500,000 Euro.

Conclusions
- *For up skilling and enlarging the workforce and for facilitating life long learning, flexible forms of learning are needed. RPL can be an important instrument to reach these goals. Also, RPL can reduce costs.*
- *If the potential of RPL is to be used on a substantial scale, extra funding is needed.*
- *The amount of funding needed will depend on the scale and approach to be used for further developing RPL.*
- *From the international context a variety of funding mechanisms for RPL are available, ranging from government funding directly to educational institutions, to project- and programme based funding by employers and employees.*

3.2.4   Awareness and demand

Awareness of RPL among employers, workers and the general public is low. Until now, awareness of RPL has been limited to a small number of policy makers, education professionals and people taking part in RPL.

During the visit, several organisations pointed out, that there is no point in raising awareness, as long as RPL is not available on any significant scale. On the other hand, availability of RPL is limited, due to absence of demand and funding.

Challenge: forming demand

Demand for RPL has yet to be formed. As awareness of RPL is low, demand is small as well. In many cases, experiencing RPL generates demand for more. Once employers and workers have seen RPL in action, they consider it to be a big step forward. The Lionra project, described in paragraph 3.1.2, is illustrative in this respect. 30 companies were contacted, informed and invited to information sessions. 20 companies attended the information sessions, and 17 actually participated in RPL activities.

Box 8. Options for forming demand

Demand for RPL is latent in Ireland. Once employers and workers are well informed about RPL, interest is generally high. Internationally, effective ways to raise demand in situations resembling the Irish context mostly involve:
- supporting employers in the area of analysing the future skills needs of the organisation;
- formulating training policies for the organisation;
- or taking care of employee training.

In such processes, RPL often turns out to be one of the instruments necessary to help the organisation prepare for future skills needs.

Employers organisations and labour unions can play a role in raising awareness as well. In some countries Union members act as "training advisors" for their colleagues. Informing workers about RPL is one of their tasks.

Some drivers may now be different from those in the recent past. There is now an increased demand from business for education providers to customise programmes for employees. There are a large number of small and medium size enterprises in Ireland. Accessing education for people in employment is expensive. A discussion with employer and trade union representatives considered the advantages and disadvantages of traditional learning in education institutions versus the workplace. The advantage of the former is the high regard in which such learning is held. Employees also benefit from learning away from the work setting. However there are also advantages from learning within the workplace and in maximising informal and non-formal learning in a way that employees do not need to leave the workplace for large chunks of time.

Challenge: more responsibility for employers and workers?

In the Country Background report the Irish model is described as a "shared responsibility" model. The specific responsibilities of government, agencies, awarding bodies and providers for RPL are shared in the context of their overall roles in education and training (e.g. funding, provision, quality assurance) and underpinning legislation.

Box 9. Options for raising activities of employers and workers

In view of the challenges facing the Irish economy, and the obvious interest of individual businesses and employees, the unions and employers' organisations might want to consider a more active approach.

In various countries employers' organisations and labour unions are actively involved in raising awareness among their members, in the area of training and development. Examples from the Netherlands:

- Forming Schooling Funds (as described in Box 7) paid by a levy on the gross wages of workers. From these funds activities are financed aimed at raising awareness, improving company development policies, improving and innovating education and training and developing instruments to be used within companies and by individual workers. Also, structural subsidies for training of workers are paid from these funds. Occasionally individual schooling vouchers are provided to employees.
- Activities by employers' organisations aimed at raising the awareness of entrepreneurs in the area of making company development plans and making personal development plans for workers. This is done by a variety of means: developing formats and instruments, organising information and discussion sessions for employers, organising discussion sessions for employees and offering temporary support by professionals.
- Activities by labour unions, aimed at raising awareness of workers in the area of career development and training. Workers follow workshops to make personal career plans and training plans. Workers are offered personal support and advice. These activities are accessible for both workers and apprentices.

Section 4
Collaborative Policy Analysis

4. 1   Focus of the CPA: Transparency
Ireland opted for a Thematic Review of its recognition system and Collaborative Policy Analysis on the theme "Transparency of the system".

Transparency of the system concerns how to communicate to stakeholders (target users, educational institutional managers, education and training practitioners, policy makers and/or the general public et cetera) that such a system exists in the country.

4.2   Evidence of current practices
The scheme on the next page depicts the current practice of communication between key stakeholders concerning RPL and related subjects, such as the NFQ and provision of education and training, as gathered by the review team during its visit.

National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
Communication by NQAI is directed to Awards Councils, providers of education and the general public. Subjects are:
-    the NFQ and related subjects (access, transfer, progression and credit)
-    existence of Awarding Bodies and related subjects (tasks, fees);
-    RPL policies, principles and guidelines are communicated.
Methods used are: internet, printed information (brochures). For reaching the general public, a variety of media are used (radio, advertising).

Awarding Bodies
-    Awarding Bodies use formal reports and personal contacts, to communicate the state of affairs and experiences gained to the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.
-    To providers of education and RPL, responsibilities concerning awards, quality assurance and RPL are communicated structurally. Occasionally, opportunities to take part in specific projects are communicated, such as the FETAC pilot project (described in paragraph 3.1.3). Methods used are the internet, printed information and various forms of personal contact. Consultation with providers has been a key factor in the development of FETAC policy.
-    To the general public (businesses, workers, others), tasks and responsibilities of Awarding Bodies are communicated, as well as the tasks and responsibilities of providers of education and training. This is done by the internet and printed information. Methods used are printed information and the internet.

Providers of education, training and RPL
-    Providers communicate their needs and experiences concerning development and implementation of awards to the Awards Councils.
-    Providers occasionally share amongst each other their experiences of the development and implementation of education and training and of RPL. This is mostly done by reports and personal contacts.
-    To the public (employers, workers, others) providers communicate information about the education and training available in the institution, and related subjects, such as entry, credits et cetera.
-    *Specifically on RPL, most providers do not actively communicate the availability of RPL.* Some providers can answer questions about RPL and can help individuals in businesses obtain RPL.
Methods used are printed information, the internet and personal delivery.

Table 4.1 What is communicated about RPL and related subjects by key stakeholders

TO	FROM				
	NQAI	**Awarding Bodies**	**Providers of education and RPL**	**Employers organisations**	**Labour Unions**
NQAI		- Experiences, feedback on NFQ. - Experiences, feedback on RPL.		General interests of employers concerning NFQ.	General interests of workers concerning NFQ.
Awarding Bodies	- NFQ, Access, transfer and progression, credit. - RPL policy, principles and guidelines.	- NFQ, access, transfer and progression, credit - RPL policy and procedures (national and awarding body)	- Needs of providers concerning awards. - Experiences with RPL.	Ad hoc: needs of businesses concerning education and training	Ad hoc: needs of workers concerning education and training.
Providers of education and RPL	- NFQ, Access, transfer and progression, credit. - Role of Awarding Bodies. - RPL policy, principles and guidelines.	- Responsibilities, tasks of providers concerning awards, quality assurance and RPL. - Ad hoc: offering opportunities to take part in RPL pilots.	Ad hoc: sharing experiences with RPL, cooperation in RPL pilots.	Ad hoc: cooperation within projects concerning training (e.g. Skillnets)	Ad hoc: cooperation within projects concerning training (e.g. Skillnets).
Businesses	Same as above.	Responsibilities, tasks of providers concerning awards, quality assurance and RPL.	- Structurally: Educational facilities. RPL is not actively communicated. - Ad hoc: availability of RPL in projects.	Some training available to members.	?*
Workers	Same as above.	Same as above.	Same as above.	?*	Some training available for Union's staff and members.
Non-workers	Same as above.	Same as above.	Same as above.	-	?*

* A question mark means, that the author has insufficient information.

Source: K. Hagens, Feb. 2008

Employers' organisations
- Employers' organisations have contact with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and Awards Councils, to express their interests in education, training and related subjects, such as RPL.
- On occasion, employers' organisations initiate and cooperate with Awards Councils and providers in projects for education and training. RPL may be an element of such projects.
- To their members, employers' organisations offer courses. In general, no specific information on RPL is given.

Labour Unions
- Like employers organisations, Labour Unions communicate with National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Awards Councils on matters of education, training and RPL.
- They are occasionally involved in specific projects initiated by Awards Councils and providers on subjects like education, training and RPL.
- Labour Unions offer courses to their staff and their members.
- Personal contact is made with institutions. For Union Members, information is available on the internet, on print and through personal advice.

Conclusion
Communication and awareness concerning RPL and relevant related subjects is generally limited to providers of education and training and the social partners. Occasionally and on a restricted scale or in specific sectors, businesses, workers and non-working individuals are informed. Awareness of RPL outside the education and training sector is close to zero.

4.3 Issues at stake and options from the international context

Issues at stake in the area of transparency (communicating RPL to stakeholders) concern the following:
- when to communicate;
- approaches (structural, sectoral, regional);
- concepts to communicate;
- messages and target groups;
- means.

4.3.1 When to communicate

The question "Is Ireland ready for mainstreaming RPL" emerged as a central issue during the review team's visit. Discussion on this is sliding into a deadlock situation. Viewpoints are:
- With the NFQ in place, quality assurance underway, experiences and knowledge developed, parts of the education and training system are technically and motivationally ready to upscale RPL activities.
- In the area of resources, there are problems to be solved. For up-scaling, RPL has to be developed in relation to more qualifications/awards. Also, more capacity will be needed for mentoring and assessing. In short: in order to mainstream RPL, more staff capacity is needed for development and execution. Without extra funding, this is not going to happen.
- Before communicating RPL to the general public (businesses, workers, other individuals), capacity has to be in place. Not being able to deliver will be detrimental to the introduction of the product.
- Education and training institutions are not inclined to develop RPL procedures and train staff, as long as there is no demand from businesses, workers or other individuals.

Box 10. Suggestions concerning communication

Experience in countries such as Australia and the Netherlands show that generally RPL is only communicated to target groups, when at a minimum agreements have been made about provision (development of procedures and training of staff). In many projects, attracting potential users and the development of procedures and staff start at more or less the same time. Development of procedures and staff training generally progress quickly, once started.

Funding tends to be crucial. Without tangible demand or funding, education and training institutions generally do not start the development of RPL.

Even when funding is taken care of, actual demand (businesses and individuals expressing specific needs and goals) is necessary for developing appropriate RPL procedures. This allows for RPL that is well tuned to the situations and goals of users, and proves to be an effective element of flexible education and training.

Preparing RPL procedures and training staff, only to put the product on the shelf, waiting for future use, does not often occur. In cases where this does happen, procedures often have to be adjusted and staff retrained, when confronted with actual demand.

Conclusion
Communication should obviously be in line with provision. Simultaneous execution of communication and development of RPL and staff training seems to be a logical way to start.

4.3.2 Approaches

When introducing RPL to potential users, a number of approaches can be used. Current practice is, that some of the education and training institutions offer RPL as part of their on-going or regular provision. It is regularly used as an instrument for access (albeit only for a limited number of courses or for mature students). Besides structural provision to students, a project-based approach is used, (as was described in paragraph 3.1.2 and 3.1.3). Project-based approaches mostly target specific sectors, in specific regions. The reason for this is that projects are often initiated by regional actors (schools and employers).

Box 11. International examples of target group oriented RPL activities

Internationally, both structural, regional and sectoral practices occur in large numbers. Another form that should be mentioned is "target group oriented", such as projects for prisoners, unemployed persons, immigrants, people doing volunteer work et cetera. Five examples of this approach are given below.

Life Experience Counts initiative in Australia

Life Experience Counts is a 17-hour flexible delivery course based around recognition of prior learning (RPL). It acts as a pre-access course and builds personal confidence in learning which is especially positive for people who have limited formal schooling and/or are not engaged in formal education, training or employment.

Life Experience Counts involves structured sessions, as well as participants converting their life experiences into a story to be shared with peers. It enables participants to: gain a basic understanding of the RPL concept; identify the skills and expertise they have learned from life experience; produce a simple portfolio that demonstrates their skills; and progress on to further formal or informal learning, training and/or employment.

Neighbourhood Centres and adult and community education (ACE) providers work collaboratively to deliver Life Experience Counts programmes. The initiative is funded by the NSW Board of Adult and Community Education, and managed by the Local Community Services Association (LCSA).

Cheryl, a mother of three, left school at the end of Year 11 and got married when she was nineteen. She hadn't worked before, devoting her time to the raising of her children, and now would like to obtain work but in her view lacks the necessary experience, knowledge, skills and confidence. In relation to the Life Experience Counts programme, Cheryl says: "Before I did the programme, I didn't think I could get a job. I didn't even know I had skills. I thought to get skills, you have to be working, or you have to go to a TAFE course, or be an apprentice or something to get those skills. And then when I did this course, they asked you: "What do you do every day?". Like: "You know, I help out at the canteen". And they'd say: "Okay, you deal with money, so that's cash handling. And then you'll write receipts, so that's book-keeping". You know, they just bring out these skills and you think" "Okay, I do that all day, I can at least attempt to look for a job".

Cheryl, a mother of three, is now working as a platform attendant at City Rail. (Extract from Your Life Experience Counts DVD, LCSA, 2006)

Rosemary, who became a volunteer teacher after completing the programme, comments: "I recognised what I could do. I was doing things but there was no recognition inside of me. I was just doing them …. But then I started to recognise, 'Hey look at this! I've got all this going for me!' ".

Box 11. International examples of target group oriented RPL activities (continued)

Foundation Tele Assistance Limburg 'Recognising the volunteers' work' in the Netherlands
The foundation offers people help, anonymously, 7 days a week and 24 hours a day, by clarifying their problems, in structuring of their thoughts or in making choices. Its clients can be referred to other professional institutions more fit to handle the problems. A great number of volunteers is working for the foundation. Professional employees take care of the training and supervising of these volunteers. Since 2001 the foundation tries to get an official recognition of the basic training programme and the monthly expert training of the volunteers. The project has been closed in 2006; it is now a structural part of the supervising and evaluation procedures of the volunteers organisation.

The organisation for addiction care North-Netherlands
This organisation offers information, assistance and prevention to addicts. A part of the personnel of the centre is made up of experts who have themselves experienced treatment. Former addicts are trained in a tailor-made programme for the job of counsellor. Sometimes the training programmes can be shortened because of the work experience the former clients have obtained. The organisation stimulates its (formerly addicted) employees to develop further and to get qualifications, even if that means that they will get a job in other organisations. The aim of the EVC program 'From Dependence to Independence' is: to create (trainee) jobs for previously addicted people who have lived at least 1 year independent of addiction care.

Volunteers' Central Council Utrecht and Re-integration organisation Centrum BOA in the Netherlands
The aim: to supply a traineeship in volunteers' work to 70 non- or low skilled women who have not had a paid job for a long time. Working in a volunteers' job (care, kindergarten, administration, hotel and catering environment) the women discover their abilities and what kind of job they are interested in. Women discovered that the experiences they have obtained somewhere else (in their home country or in housekeeping) can be used and defined. The work of the women has been evaluated by EVC procedures (at least 6 competencies out of 17 competencies). The evaluation resulted in a certificate.

Work-Ready Skills Passport in Manitoba, Canada
This project researched the necessary essential, employability and core technical skills required in the construction sector in Manitoba. A skills passport was created specific to construction ensuring workers can be hired into entry-level positions.
This project resulted in:
1. a profile of the essential, employability and core technical skills needed to work in entry-level construction occupations that can be used as the basis for pre-employment, employment, training or Apprenticeship programs
2. generic, flexible assessment methods for determining the work-readiness of individuals applying for entry-level construction jobs
3. a piloted prototype of a tool that job-seekers can use to provide evidence of their skills and knowledge and employers can use to make informed selection decisions
4. a model suggesting a process for providing "Work-Ready" workers for large projects and supporting hiring of Northern residents for Northern project
5. a practical software tool for tracking the skills development of seasonal workers and facilitating their labour force attachment

Box 11. International examples of target group oriented RPL activities (continued)

In Ireland we encountered few examples of this kind of approach. The underlying explanation for this could be that RPL, is not generally known, and where it is, it is primarily seen as an instrument to improve the workforce and applied in the summative manner. In social policies, RPL does not seem to be "in the picture".

Which ever approach is chosen, some relevant approaches can be learned from international examples.

Reaching *employers* is done in various ways. Structural provision of RPL at education and training institutions or at sector oriented knowledge centres or sector oriented providers is an effective way of selling RPL, in settings where businesses have a high-level culture of employee-development, and/or have close contacts with providers. In Ireland these circumstances will probably mainly be found in large, internationally oriented firms. Another effective approach, especially for smaller companies and organisations without a "development culture", is the intensive personal approach. In Ireland, the Lionra project is an example. Well informed professionals approach companies, offer information and keep in touch through phone calls, personal meetings, information sessions, workshops et cetera. Involvement of employers' organisations often helps to gain access to individual companies or to regional business groupings.

Reaching *workers* seems to be most effective, when it is done through the employer. Once the employer is convinced of the benefits of RPL to the enterprise, he will urge his employees to take part. Similarly, gaining support of middle and lower management officials is crucial for reaching workers. In many good practices, activities within working organisations started with "RPL-ing" the managers. A top-down approach proves to work well.

The bottom up approach can be applied as well: approaching workers without the intervention of the employer. Experiences suggest that this is less effective than top-down approaches. The percentage of workers that can be actively involved in this way is generally small. Furthermore, effects of RPL and training will benefit workers more when they are well fitted to present or future functional possibilities and plans within the workplace.

Reaching *volunteers* is often done through the organisations they work for. In many cases organisations for voluntary work offer RPL to volunteers as a way to reward people for their voluntary contributions and to make volunteers work more attractive.

Approaching *the unemployed* is often done either through structural provision of RPL and educational services or through project based, regional activities. Involving employers at an early stage (for instance through offering the prospect of jobs) will motivate participants to complete the RPL project. If RPL is done by portfolio assessment, this demands a considerable amount of time and various basic skills from the participant. As failure might further demotivate persons who are already in a bad position, screening of potential participants on eligibility for RPL is important. The formative approach is used in a number of cases, often leading to qualifications outside the formal qualifications framework of the country in question.

Conclusion
As for the approach to take, structural, regional and sectoral approaches all are relevant, depending on the group that is targeted. The scheme above sums up the most relevant approaches per targeted group.

4.3.3   Concepts to communicate

In Ireland, RPL is generally communicated/used within the context of :
-    "access to education";
-    "up-skilling the workforce".

A third possible concept, "personal development", does occur in many countries, but not in Ireland (as far as the review team could see).

Box 12. Notions concerning concepts to communicate

Looking at international examples, RPL is mostly communicated within the same two contexts. The "personal development" concept does occur (see the examples in box 11), but less than the other two.

It is important to stress that RPL is always part of a concept, of an idea that has to be sold/communicated. It is seldom presented as a goal in itself. Cases where providers try to sell or communicate RPL as a product in its own right, are mostly limited to the formative approach ("personal development").

Themes that appeal to employers and workers are:
-    "improving the companies performance, by enhancing the professional level of employees";
-    "meeting external regulatory obligations, by certifying employees";
-    "redirecting careers of employees or unemployed persons";
-    "securing or improving a workers position on the labour market".

These are the most important concepts to trigger employers' and employees' interest in education and training. They constitute the goals that the targeted groups have in mind. RPL is one of the instruments that can be used in such activities. To effectively support these groups other instruments can also be offered , such as formats and instruments for analysing the company's skills needs (present and future), making development plans for the company and making personal development plans for employees.

Conclusion
To potential users, RPL is not a goal in itself, but a means to an end. Communication of RPL should take place within concepts and projects aimed at ultimate goals, like "improving the company's performance by enhancing the professional level of employees". In such projects RPL will play its role, along with other instruments and facilities. The wider context (comprehensive projects) requires policy making and efforts of various sorts of organisations: education and training bodies, sectoral and regional employers organisations, labour unions and (possibly) social services.

4.3.4   *Messages and target groups*

As mentioned in paragraph 4.3.3, international evidence suggests, that the most effective way to "sell" RPL, is to make it part of regular or project-based training activities (RPL as an element of more comprehensive projects). Nevertheless, potential users will have to be specifically informed about RPL. Besides the technical and organisational details, a number of arguments can be used to promote RPL among employers and employees. The following points were gathered from international sources (note that some of these findings concur with evidence from Ireland (country background report).

Box 13. Arguments for RPL and threats of RPL for employers

Employers

Arguments for uptake of RPL to be communicated to employers
- access to formal awards for employees;
- access to courses for employees, thereby enabling up-skilling of workers;
- enhancing the company's performance by up-skilling workers;
- benchmarking existing and planned skills and competences at the company level;
- benchmarking learning and competence levels of individual employees;
- using benchmark results as promotional information for the company;
- measuring skills of employees, to obtain obligatory certificates (e.g. in the area of health and safety, or professional/sectoral standards);
- it is a start for employees to take up learning (once workers discover that learning is beneficial some of them will want to keep following courses);
- employees may appreciate RPL and training opportunities as a form of positive attention and recognition by the employer.
- enhancing motivation of employees;
- enhancing loyalty of employees to the company;
- reducing out flux of workers;
- improving the reputation of the company, as "a good employer";
- making it easier to find new employees.

RPL is considered to have the following potential threats to employers:
- the fear that a well trained employee will move to another employer (paradox);
- the fear for extra costs for the training;
- the organisation of the workplace as a training facility demands quite a lot from managers;
- the fear that the knowledge component will not be sufficiently tested; ("if an employee is able to carry out specific tasks, it is not clear that he or she possesses sufficient knowledge");
- uncertainty about the ability of educational institutes to provide RPL and the training programmes that will prove necessary once the "RPL-train" is set in action.

Arguments and measures to diminish these threats:
- to conduct a better HRM policy in order to improve the attractiveness of the enterprise;
- to inform employers in a systematic way about the profits they obtain by RPL procedures (a win-win-situation);
- cooperation between employers and educational institutions, to clarify the needs of employers so that appropriate training and RPL procedures can be developed;
- better information concerning objectives, developments and execution of RPL procedures.

Box 14.   Arguments for RPL and threats of RPL for RPL candidates (workers, the unemployed, students)
RPL candidates

Arguments that could be communicated to candidates:
- Getting experience, knowledge and skills formally recognised;
- Getting access to education and training;
- Appreciation by the employer;
- Appreciation by colleagues;
- Self appreciation;
- Access to other tasks/assignments at work;
- Enhancement of job opportunities and career chances within the company;
- A stronger position on the external labour market.

RPL can be considered by candidates to have the following potential threats/hindrances:
- The fear for a lot of time, effort and money to be spent;
- RPL is often associated with earlier (unpleasant) experiences of learning ("I never liked school", "It has been too long ago for me");
- The fear of not meeting the standards that other people (for instance the employer) expect them to attain by the RPL procedure;
- The idea that everything is going well, "I am doing a good job at work, why should I do courses or RPL?"

Arguments and measures to diminish these threats:
- better information about objectives, developments and execution of RPL- spell out procedures;
- tailored made training programmes, directly connected with the demands and specific problems in the work place;
- organising training programmes in such a way that these can be taken in the shortest possible time;
- develop didactic procedures that are practical, directly applicable in the workplace and related to working experiences: learning and working on the spot;
- start as soon as possible with the programmes in order to keep the initial enthusiasm alive.

4.3.5 Other useful examples

From the international context, the following examples of items that could be helpful in communicating RPL to stakeholders and creating transparency were selected.

Box 15. Other relevant international examples

Making RPL-methods (portfolio, task assessments) regular parts of education and training

In various countries, pupils in secondary and tertiary education are familiarised with portfolio methods, interview situations and task assessments. The idea behind this is that making portfolios and doing interviews (what skills does the person have, what has he learned, what experiences has he obtained, what tasks can he perform), are skills which people will need throughout their careers. Pupils may start practising these skills from an early age (starting at 15 or 16). This is also the case with respect to certain elements of the education and training system in Ireland.

A knowledge centre for RPL

The Knowledge Centre for RPL in the Netherlands (www.kenniscentrumevc.nl) has already been described in box 4. The knowledge centre performs following tasks:
- Informing the general public about RPL (What is it? Where do you get it? What does it cost?);
- Sharing knowledge and expertise, for instance by facilitating platforms: meetings in which expertise is shared in which there is a place for deepening attunement and where the participants act as promoters for the diffusion of RPL experiences. Platforms can be created for various education levels, (e.g. secondary vocational education, senior secondary vocational education, Higher Education and Training);
- Help or advice for providers on matters of quality assurance;
- Innovation of knowledge and expertise among providers;
- offering a register of "accredited" providers of RPL to the public.

Other activities and products of the Knowledge Centre are mentioned below.

Creating ambassadors
- Creating ambassadors for RPL in companies. Workers with some affinity with training and development who advise and help their colleagues in matters of education and RPL.
- Involving companies in carrying out tasks in RPL, such as mentoring and assessing.

Training professionals

"RPL Academy" (this is one of the activities of the Knowledge Centre for RPL in the Netherlands). Offering workshops and training in RPL-matters for professionals from education and training, companies, employers' organisations, labour unions, et cetera.

Information for professionals and the general public
- Digital information for RPL-professionals, such as:
  - Digital and printed information for RPL-professionals in companies on RPL (What is RPL? What can it do for your organisation? How does it work? Who pays for it? Where to get support).
  - Digital and printed information for workers on RPL (What is RPL? For whom is it? What are the steps in an RPL procedure? Who pays for it? Where to get support).
  - DVD's and internet films that inform the general public about RPL and show good practices.
  - Publishing good practices on printed media and on the internet.

Box 15. Other relevant international examples (continued)

Instruments
- Toolboxes on printed media and the internet. Information and instruments for RPL professionals, like:
  o competence profiles for assessors and mentors;
  o quality guidelines;
  o questionnaires to be used for evaluation by participants;
  o checklists for professionals and work organisations to check their RPL practices against quality rules.
- Online screening of potential applicants for RPL. The potential applicant can do an online test, which points out whether the applicant is eligible for RPL.
- Digital instruments to help participants arrange material for portfolios. These instruments contribute to quicker and less labour intensive RPL procedures.
- Digital instruments to help participants prepare for portfolio procedures, by making a CV. A CV is used as a simple form of portfolio, a first step. This is done amongst others for unemployed persons, when they register with social services institutions. Besides being a first step towards a portfolio, the CV information is also used for high quality job matching.

Section 5.
Recommendations

In summary, from the socio-economic perspective and from that the future skills needs of Ireland, important key policy objectives are found to be:
- Raising educational attainment levels at all levels;
- Up-skilling the workforce in general but with special support for the low-skilled and low-educated;
- Improving participation rates in the labour market or in education/training by target groups (i.e. immigrants, women and old persons); and
- Redirecting the workforce towards areas with greater employment opportunities.

Policy makers can re-think the current use and explore the potential use of RPL with these objectives in mind. They may reflect on policy alignment, which may help facilitate their strategic thinking for the future direction of the use of RPL.

Strategic thinking 1: Discrete RPL policy or Mainstreaming into key national policies?

The first question for consideration may be to examine if it is desirable and feasible to push for establishing a national, comprehensive RPL policy, which would capture all the objectives and the target beneficiaries, have substantial support (e.g. budget) and drive (e.g. top-down implementation) from central government. This would require first demonstrating the benefits of RPL relevant to the above objectives and the implications for funding, and also establishing a solid foundation for policy by researching the social and economic returns on RPL.

If setting up a comprehensive policy for RPL per se is not appropriate or feasible - at least in the short term, the next question is: how can RPL can be mainstreamed into existing education policies? Education policies may aim at:
- Valuing having a higher qualification level;
- Valuing experience (informal learning);
- Valuing learning outcomes (formal, non-formal and informal learning);
- Valuing learning itself (lifelong learning, lifewide learning).

It would be ideal and most appropriate to embed RPL into all the existing education policies, wherever relevant. A consideration of which policy(ies) can RPL can best fit and which socio-economic objectives can best match with the policy(ies) may help establish priorities in mainstreaming under the current economic, cultural and political climate. This may also help self-determine the assessment methods of RPL.

For instance, if the prioritised socio-economic policy objective is to 'promote participation rates in training by the target groups', they may have a certain stock of work experience, be that acquired inside or outside the country (for immigrants), or include work at home (for certain women). Then, 'valuing experience' would be an appropriate education and training policy objective to associate RPL with. Also, since the objective is to promote 'participation rates', an indicator of impact would be the number of hours of training or the enrolment numbers for training institutions, for example. In this case, obtaining a qualification would be less relevant than that of 'valuing learning itself'. This naturally implies that the use of RPL would be to motivate individuals to engage in further learning. The valid method of assessment for this purpose would be formative (i.e. focused on identifying and documenting learning or experience acquired) rather than summative (i.e. focused on certification/qualifications).

On the other hand, if the objective is to raise education attainment levels of the population or to upskill the workforce most efficiently in line with national targets (e.g. National Skills Strategy, Table 3.2, FAS, 2007), the indicators of this would include: the number of persons who obtained a higher level of qualification and the levels at which qualifications are achieved. Then, the appropriate assessment methodology would be summative (i.e., leading to a formally recognised qualification). The appropriate purpose of RPL would be to allow workers to get their experience accredited in order to gain a qualification without going through any unnecessary or duplicated learning. This could create an incentive to achieving qualifications to workers by reducing the volume and duration of learning required and, therefore, reduce the direct cost of learning to the individual.

Policy-makers could address the question of choice between a discrete RPL policy or mainstreaming RPL by mapping stakeholder roles   to: national socio-economic objectives as a whole, education and training policies, target beneficiaries, appropriate assessment methods, and the possible cost implications of each.

Strategic thinking 2: RPL that is targeted or multifunctional?

- From a lifelong learning perspective, broad provision of RPL would be logical, so that a wide array of citizens can use RPL as an instrument to access education; to measure their existing skills, knowledge and competences; and to make personals plans for further development.

- From both social and economic perspectives, RPL can target sectors, workers and social groups.
  - o In the case of workers, evidence shows that such an approach will only work out if it is backed up by   employers. This calls for policies and action plans for specific sectors. Such sectoral plans already exist in Ireland and could be further expanded to incorporate RPL.
  - o Relevant target groups from an economic perspective would be older workers in construction industries, female workers in care service sectors, working professionals in engineering and ICT-service industries, and low-skilled workers from all sectors.
  - o Relevant target groups from a social perspective are low skilled individuals, unemployed persons, immigrants and older people. Many of the learners here are likely to have family responsibilities, which make it difficult whether for financial reasons or because of shortage of time to pursue full-time education. RPL could facilitate their participation in further learning by reducing the volume and duration of participation in learning and therefore reduce direct costs to individuals.

Strategic thinking 3: Funding

Up-scaling and increasing the availability of RPL would require extra funds to support the necessary extra work to develop RPL, develop staff in education and training providers, communicate with potential users and to operate RPL. Some basic choices could be made.

Priorities:
Target groups
Although from a policy perspective both economic and social target groups can be considered to be equally important, when it comes to funding, priorities could be set.
- It would seem logical to firstly direct funds for RPL to targeted social groups: low-skilled individuals, the unemployed, immigrants and older people. As (risk of) poverty among these groups is highest, these groups are least likely to possess the means to finance RPL.
- Funding of RPL for working individuals would seem to be of less priority, as they generally have better access to funds; including through employer support.

It is clear that three groups are generally better able to pay for RPL : government, employers and workers. Up until now, the majority of funding in Ireland has been made available by the government, through providers and awarding bodies. Given the lacking of structured finance for RPL, providers have until now financed RPL mainly from their regular budgets and, in some cases, from project financing (government and/or EU).

Funding model
As extra funding is needed, it would seem logical to explore the possibilities for additional financing by employers, employees and learners. Funding mechanisms would need to take into account the specific costs associated with different kinds of RPL, e.g., RPL for access to programmes/qualifications; RPL for personal development (see Section 3.2.3.2). Possibly, a model is feasible in which all parties with an interest in RPL would contribute, for example:
- Government pays providers an extra amount, on top of their regular budgets, to develop RPL;
- Providers charge a fee per RPL procedure to RPL users, equal to the operational costs of RPL .
- Learners using RPL pay the fee to the provider, either from their own income or through an employer subsidy/fund. Paragraph 3.2.3.2 above suggests alternative options, such as joint schooling funds of employers and employees.
- Participants from target groups (unemployed, low skilled persons with low income) use RPL for free. The provider charges the fee to the government.

Strategic thinking 4: Stimulating demand and supply in a sustainable way through mainstreaming

Mainstreaming RPL is understood as: making RPL a regular service in education and training. This would require stimulating demand and supply in a sustainable way

Stimulating supply
It seems sensible to develop RPL simultaneous with the design/development of projects and programmes aimed at creating flexible learning opportunities for workers and other target groups. Such programmes could be carried out at either a sectoral or regional level. In this way efforts will be most effective and efficient, both in terms of quality, access gained and development costs. Also, the deadlock of creating RPL without actual demand and creating demand without having RPL available, will be avoided.

To facilitate such an approach,, building and sharing among professionals could be stimulated and guided, for instance by creating a knowledge centre for RPL (as in the case of the Netherlands, Box 5 above).

This development phase should lead to RPL policies being in place among most providers and RPL procedures being available for most programmes/courses. The operation of RPL will require additional development funding. Logically, funding would be project or programme based. This would be made available in line with clear criteria, for instance, cooperation with sectoral or regional employer organisations, cooperation with businesses, quality, monitoring requirements and evaluation of effectiveness of methods and approaches used).

Stimulating demand
Once RPL is developed and available on a larger scale, demand for and participation in RPL can be raised on a larger scale as well. Also in this phase, RPL activities could be part of programmes and activities that have a more comprehensive reach: e.g. raising awareness and demand for learning. In view of the economic-, social- and lifelong learning challenges, there is a need for more provision of part-time education and training and for more flexible forms of education and training.

Although part-time provision, flexible learning, modularisation and semesterisation are important steps towards flexible and accessible education and training are increasingly available in Ireland, the challenges posed by the economy, social issues and the lifelong learning agenda demand even greater flexibility in terms of access, delivery and forms of education and training. A number of highly flexible forms of learning could be expanded upon, including:
- e-learning;
- distance learning;
- coaching in the workplace;
- training in the workplace;
- individually tailored learning paths (the participant can start a course at any moment and complete it at his/her own pace).

Relevant recommendations to stimulating demand are:
- support for employers and workers to introduce individual staff development plans and to participate in training;
- stimulate employers organisations and labour unions to actively take up responsibilities in this area;
- create transparency, by:
  o coordinating the communication and provision of RPL and flexible learning routes;
  o using appropriate approaches for different groups:
    ▪ for employers:
      • structured provision of RPL by education and training providers;
      • intensive personal approaches, within regional or sectoral projects;
    ▪ for workers:
      • personal approach, within the company, top down
      • direct personal approach.
    ▪ for volunteers:
      • through volunteers organisations, top down or direct personal approach;
    ▪ for the unemployed:
      • structured provision of RPL by education and training providers;
      • project based regional activities, involving employers at an early stage;

- o selling RPL and education and training within concepts/approaches that are relevant to employers, workers and other individuals, such as:
  - ▪ "improving the companies performance, by enhancing the professional level of employees";
  - ▪ "meeting external regulatory obligations, by certifying employees";
  - ▪ "redirecting careers of employees or unemployed persons";
  - ▪ "securing or improving a workers position on the labour market".
- o using the right arguments and messages for target groups (see 4.3.4);
- o making use of good examples from other countries, such as:
  - ▪ making RPL-methods (portfolio, task assessments) regular parts of education and training provision
  - ▪ creating an knowledge centre for RPL;
  - ▪ creating ambassadors within sectors, companies and education;
  - ▪ providing training for RPL professionals;
  - ▪ providing information for RPL professionals and the general public;
  - ▪ providing useful instruments for RPL professionals and RPL-providing-organisations.

Risks involved in mainstreaming:
International experience shows that mainstreaming RPL into education and training activities takes time. It requires a structural, long-term and labour intensive approach and appropriate levels of funding. Tenacity on the part of the government, providers, employers organisations and labour unions is crucial. Demand and participation will not immediately take off in large volumes. It is to be expected, that larger businesses, sectors with high rates of innovation and sectors who are short on qualified workers, will be the first to adopt flexible forms of learning and engage in RPL on a substantial scale. Small businesses and businesses with a slow pace of innovation will be harder to reach. Obtaining substantial results may take 5 to 10 years.

ANNEX 1.   ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Figure 1: Expected hours in non-formal job-related education and training, distributed by level of education attainment.
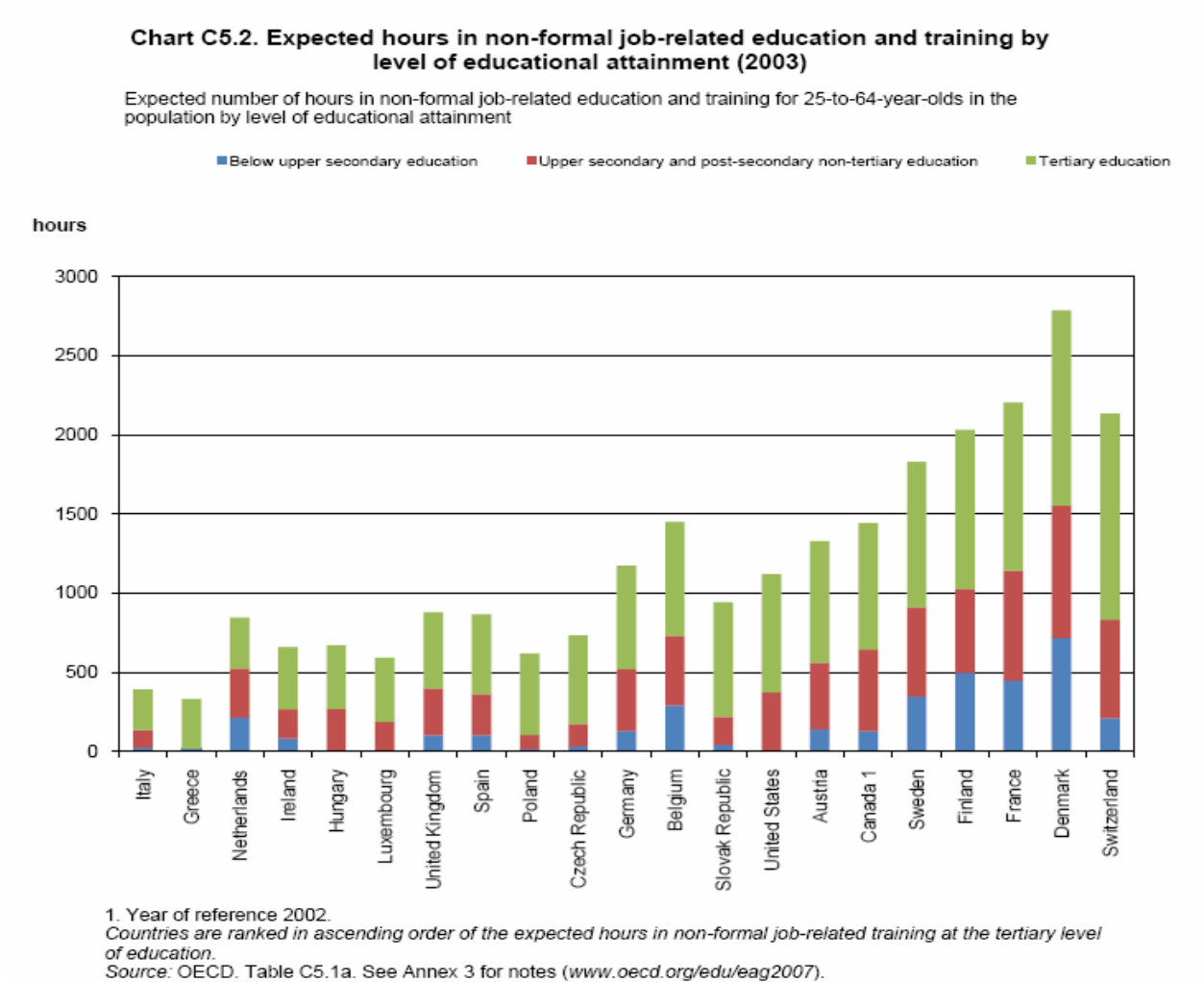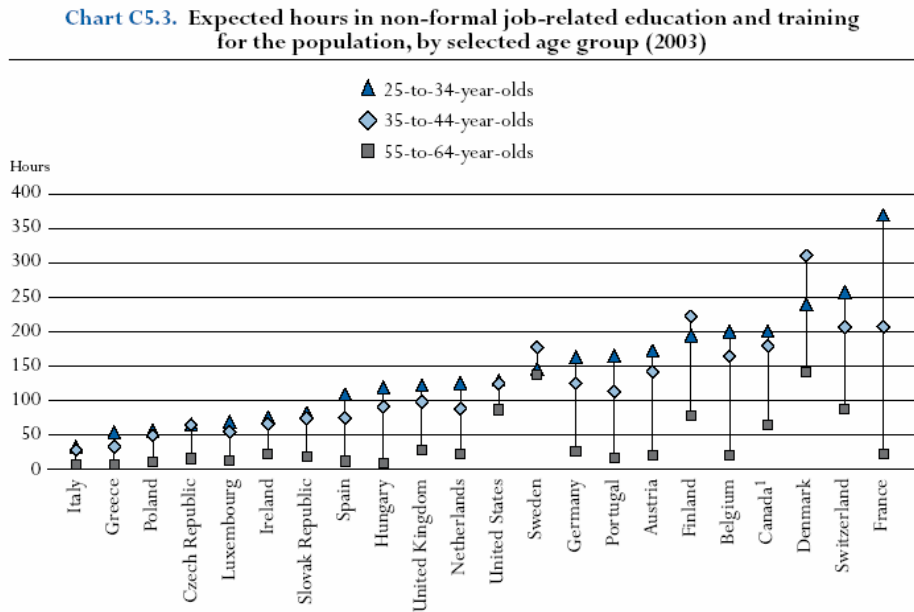

Chart C5.2. Expected hours in non-formal job-related education and training by level of educational attainment (2003)

Expected number of hours in non-formal job-related education and training for 25-to-64-year-olds in the population by level of educational attainment

1. Year of reference 2002.
Countries are ranked in ascending order of the expected hours in non-formal job-related training at the tertiary level of education.
Source: OECD. Table C5.1a. See Annex 3 for notes (*www.oecd.org/edu/eag2007*).

Figure 2: Expected hours in non-formal job-related education and training, distributed by age.

Chart C5.3. Expected hours in non-formal job-related education and training for the population, by selected age group (2003)

1. Year of reference 2002.
Countries are ranked in ascending order of the expected hours in non-formal job-related education and training of the 25-34 age
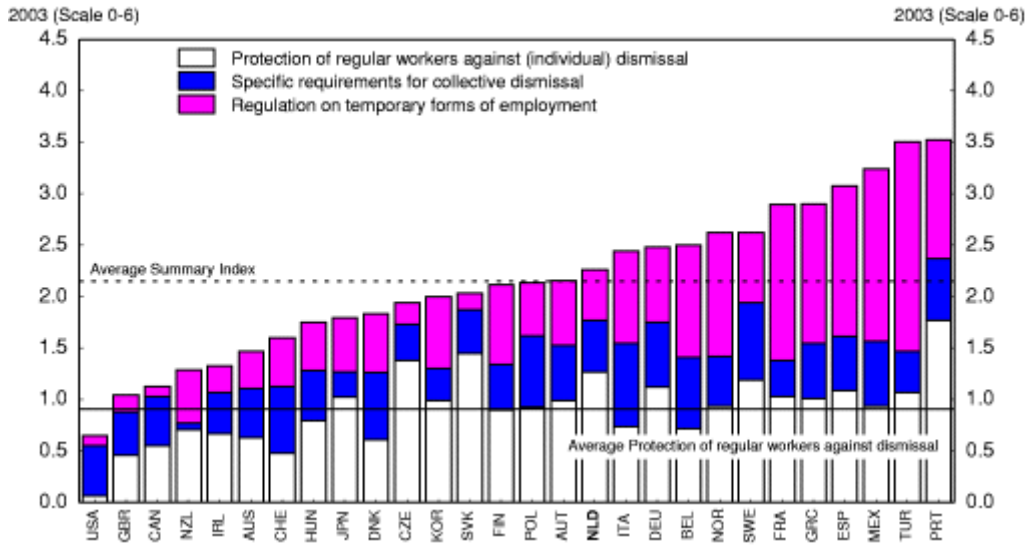
Source OECD Education at a Glance 2006

**Figure 3. Annual hours worked per person employed, 2005**
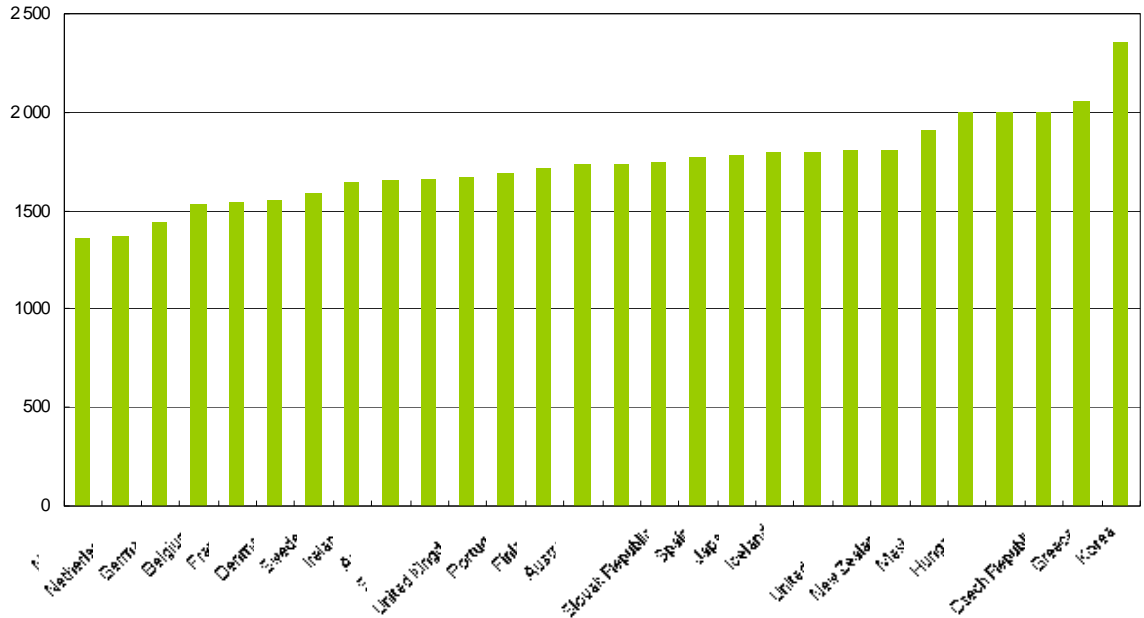
Source: OECD Employment Outlook (2006) - StatLink http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/075816831582

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Figure 4: EPL on regular contracts is loose by international comparison
Overall strictness of EPL in 2003

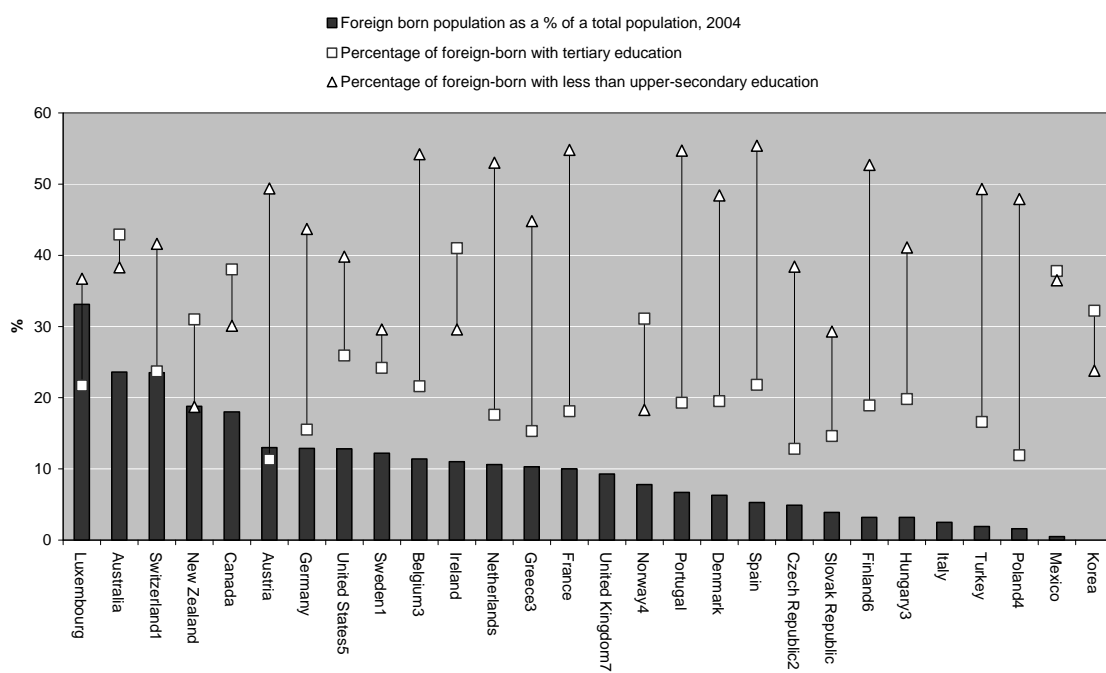*Source*: OECD Employment Outlook (2004)

Figure 5: Foreign-born employment rate relative to native-born employment rate, percentage 2004
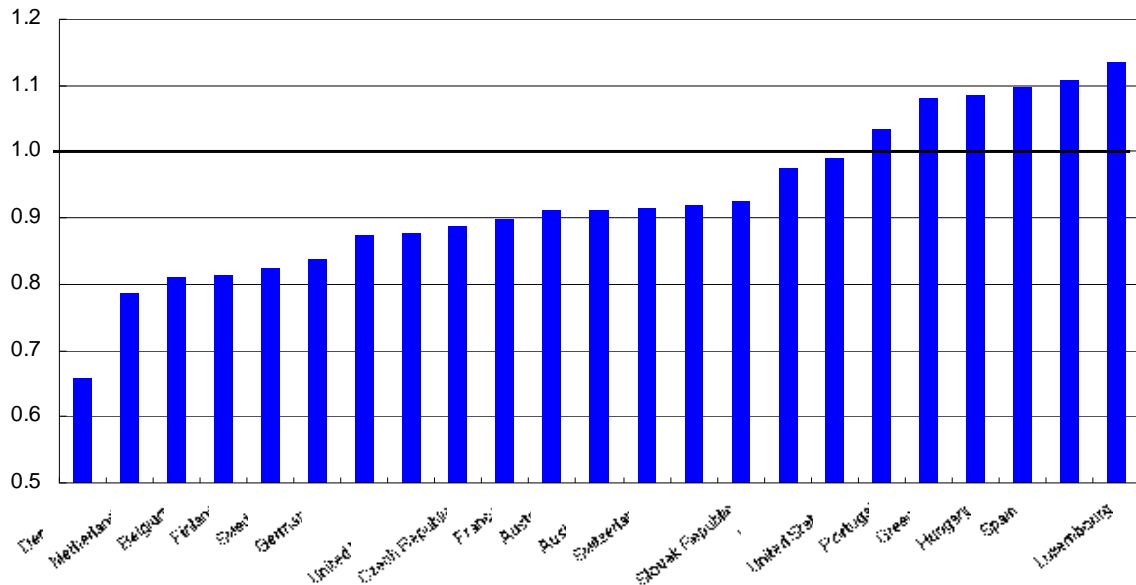
Source: OECD (2007A).

Figure 6: Immigrant populations and their educational attainment (2002, 2004)

All those over 15

- ■ Foreign born population as a % of a total population, 2004
- □ Percentage of foreign-born with tertiary education
- △ Percentage of foreign-born with less than upper-secondary education

Source: OECD (2007c)

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Angela Lambkin, Further Education and Training Awards Council
Bryan Maguire, Higher Education and Training Awards Council
Karena Maguire, Higher Education and Training Awards Council
Anna Murphy, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland
Anne Murphy, Dublin Institute of Technology
Lewis Purser, Irish University Association
Prof. Anne Ryan, National University of Ireland Maynooth
Mary-Liz Trant, Higher Education Authority, National Office for Equity of Access to Higher Education*****

*	Representing the Strategic Innovation Fund Project strand on RPL (Education in Employment)
**	Substitutes - Deirdre O'Higgins, Niall Egan
***	Substitute - Trudy Duffy
****	Substitute – Des O' Loughlin, Seamus Hempenstall
*****	Substitutes - Orla Christle and Muiris O'Connor

Background Report
Anna Murphy, National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

APPENDIX 3: PROGRAMME OF THE VISIT

Day 1 - Monday 4 February 2008

Theme: Discussion on Country Background Report and overview of legislative and policy framework for RNFIL in Ireland

**Venue: a.m. NQAI, 5th Floor, Jervis House, Jervis Street, Dublin 1
p.m. HETAC, 26 – 27 Denzille Lane, Dublin 2**

Session 1: The purpose of this session is to provide an overview of the visit and to discuss issues raised in the Country Background Report (CBR)

9:00 – 11:00   Introduction and overview of Irish context
        Overview of programme for the country visit
        Presentation of the main findings of the CBR by key authors, Q&A
        Development of National Action Plan for RNFIL in Ireland

With:
NQAI   – Anna Murphy, Director of Research and Strategic Development
        Carmel Kelly, Project Officer
FETAC – Angela Lambkin, Development Officer

Session 2: The objective of this session is to provide an overview of the context within which RNFIL currently operates in Ireland.

11:30 – 13:00   Meet with RNFIL Advisory Group

With:
Meet with representatives of IUA, HETAC, FETAC, DES, DETE, DIT and NQAI

13:30 – 15:00   Lunch

With:
Seán Ó Foghlú, Chief Executive, NQAI
Anna Murphy, Director of Research and Strategic Development, NQAI
Séamus Puirséil, Chief Executive, HETAC
Stan McHugh, Chief Executive, FETAC

Session 2 (contd):

15:15 - 16:00   Meet with main bodies responsible for overall policy and funding of education and training (DES, DETE, HEA)

With:
DES –   Margaret Kelly, Principal Officer, Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Policy Unit
DETE – Pat Hayden, Principal Officer, Employment and Training
HEA –   Catriona Ryan, Head of Policy and Planning

Session 1 (contd):

16:00 – 17:00   Meet with HETAC

With:
Bryan Maguire, Director of Academic Affairs
Karena Maguire, Head of Lifelong Learning

Day 2 - Tuesday 5 February 2008

Theme: RNFIL in the further education and training sector

Venue: a.m. FETAC, East Point Plaza, East Point Business Park, Dublin 3
p.m. Failte Ireland, Amiens Street, Dublin 1

Session 3: The objective of this session is to provide an understanding of the initiatives, projects and procedures that have been put in place in the further education and training sector to date. FETAC will provide an overview of its RNFIL policy and the pilot study it conducted regarding RNFIL in 2006. A number of RNFIL initiatives and projects in the further education and training sector will be presented for discussion.

9:30 – 10:30   Meet with FETAC to discuss policy and pilot study

With:
FETAC – Barbara Kelly, Director of Awards and Standards
          Angela Lambkin, Development Officer
          Roisin Sweeney, Development Officer

10:30 – 12:30   Presentation of RNFIL case studies/projects and discussions

With:
IVEA – Pat O'Mahony, Education Research Officer
FÁS – Tara O'Brien, Assistant Manager, Curriculum and Quality Assurance
Teagasc – Liam Myles, Education Programmes Manager
CIF – Lynda Bradshaw

Session 3 (contd): Case study

13:00 – 13:30   Introduction to RNFIL at Failte Ireland
Failte Ireland is the National Tourism Development Authority in Ireland.

With:
Sean O'Malley, Manager, Education Operations
Alex Keys, Professional Development Advisor

13:30 – 14:15   Lunch

14:15 – 15:15   RNFIL practice at Failte Ireland

Session 4:
The primary role of Engineers Ireland is to be the representative voice of the engineering profession in Ireland. Engineers Ireland had RNFIL policy and practice in place as a route to obtaining a grade or title

15:30 – 16:30   Meet with Engineers Ireland
With:
Engineers Ireland – Denis McGrath, Registrar
            Deborah O'Sullivan, Membership Executive
            Assessors, Mentors and RNFIL clients

Day 3 - Wednesday 6 February 2008

Theme: RNFIL in the higher education and training sector

Venue: Cork Institute of Technology

Session 5: *The objective of this session is to provide an overview of institutional approaches to RNFIL and various policies, procedures and initiatives that have been put in place at institutes of technology and universities.**

10:15 – 11:30 Meet with representatives of Cork Institute of Technology

With:
Brendan Murphy, President
Brendan Goggin, Registrar
Eamonn Cashell, Working Party on RPL
Ray Coughlan, Head of School of Humanities
Deirdre Goggin, RPL and Work-based Learning Researcher
Phil O'Leary, RPL Mentor

11:45 – 12:45 Meet with representatives of University College Cork

With:
Con O'Brien, Vice President for the Student Experience
Denis Staunton, Access Officer (Registrar's office)
Anne Mills, Admissions Officer
Carmel Quinlan, Mature Students Officer

13:00 – 14:00 Lunch

14:00 – 15:00 Meet with representatives of IT Tralee

With:
Noel Mulligan, on behalf of Registrar's Office

* an alternative session is provided for representatives of higher education institutions on Thursday morning at the NQAI for those who are unable to make the session at CIT

Day 4 - Thursday 7 February 2008

Theme: RNFIL in the workplace and links with further and higher education institutions

Venue: a.m. NQAI, 5th Floor, Jervis House, Jervis Street, Dublin 1
p.m. Dublin Institute of Technology, Aungier Street, Dublin 8

Session 6: There is increased interest in work-based learning and how RNFIL can assist in fulfilling national objectives such as increasing the participation in education and training and up-skilling the labour force. The objective of session 6 is to focus on the workplace perspective with a view to understanding the extent to which RNFIL initiatives are utilised in the workplace

9:30 – 10:15   Meet with representative bodies or employers/trade unions, key agencies and boards

With:
ICTU – Peter Rigney, Industrial Officer
IBEC – Tony Donogue, Head of Education, Social and Innovation Policy
Skillnets – Tracey Donnery, Programme Manager

10:15 – 11:00   Meet with representatives of Lionra project

Lionra is a higher education network for the Border, Midlands and Western (BMW) region of Ireland, comprising seven institutions. Its aim was to provide a collaborative response to the education and development challenges facing the BMW region. The APL project seeks the development and application of a standard model to recognise and accredit prior learning in Information Technology for companies operating in the BMW region.

With:
LYIT – Oran Doherty, APL facilitator

Session 5 (contd):
11:15 – 13:30   Meet with representatives of higher education institutions to discuss RNFIL policy and practice (NUIM, UL, DCU, UCD, IT Sligo)

With:
NUIM – Anne Ryan, Head of Department of Adult and Community Education
UL – Dermot Coughlan, Director, Lifelong Learning and Outreach
DCU – Maria Slowey, Vice President for Learning Innovation and Registrar; Jean Hughes, Head of Learning Innovation Unit; Carmel Mulcahy, Head of School of Education Studies; Joe O'Hara, Senior Lecturer, School of Education Studies
UCD – Elizabeth Noonan, Director of Academic Policy and Programme Development
IT Sligo – Jennifer Van Aswegen, Open Learning Facilitator for Business and Humanities
IT Tallaght – Terry Maguire, Head of Lifelong Learning

(with working lunch from 12:30 – 13:30)

Session 7: The objective is to explore the extent to which higher education institutions are facilitating the recognition of work-based learning.

14:00 – 15:30   Meet with Strategic Innovation Fund Recognition of Prior Learning Strand

The Strategic Innovation Fund is a five year fund established by government to stimulate innovation in higher education institutions. Seven Institutes of Technology and two universities are participating in the RPL strand of the SIF project on education in the workplace. The objectives of the RPL work involve standardising RPL policies and procedures in the collaborating institutions, developing a scalable approach to RPL and embedding RPL as a mainstream activity.

With:
Team members from AIT, CIT, DIT, DKIT, GMIT, IT Sligo, LYIT, NUIG and UCC

Session 5 (contd):
15:30 – 16:45   Meet with representatives of Dublin Institute of Technology to discuss RNFIL policy and practice

With:
Frank McMahon, Director of Academic Affairs
Anne Murphy, RPL Policy Development Officer
Noirin Hayes, School of Social Sciences and Law
Ann McWilliams, Lecturer/Professional Practice and Placement Advisor
John Jameson, School of Retail and Services Management
Peter Griffin, School of Hospitality Management and Tourism
Aodán Ó Cearbaill, School of Culinary Arts and Food Technology

Day 5 - Friday 8 February 2008

Conclusion and presentation of initial findings by OECD team

Venue: NQAI, 5th Floor, Jervis House, Jervis Street, Dublin 1

Session 8:
9:00 – 12:30   Private meeting of OECD Team

Session 9:
13:00 – 14:30   Presentation of initial findings by OECD team to RNFIL Advisory Group

With:
RNFIL Advisory Group members