

# **The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practice in Munster Technological University (MTU) – collaboration with employers**

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper outlines the approach adopted by Munster Technological University in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and its collaboration with industry. It presents the approach in the broader developments within and across higher education in Ireland and Europe. It introduces Munster Technological University (MTU) and its approach to RPL across the university with particular attention to the approach adopted with industry. The article then explores the broader industry engagement model adopted within MTU as facilitated through the Extended Campus. Finally, the article outlines how collaboration with industry with a particular focus on prior learning operates within the university and what have been the reasons for success.

## **2. Developments in Irish higher education**

In Ireland, the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which is commonly used in higher education, incorporates prior formal, non-formal, and informal learning which is to be validated in the context of a particular destination award on the National Framework of Qualifications. *HETAC Assessment and Standards* outlined the considerations which have informed the local institutional policy development for RPL in terms of equity, fairness and maintaining quality assurance across programme design, development and assessment for all learners and learning (HETAC, 2009).

While the Qualifications Act 1999 established the legal basis for the development of RPL in Ireland, the NQAI principles and operational guidelines published in 2005 were the foundation of much of the development of practice (National Qualifications Authority Ireland, 2005). Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) consulted in 2013 broadly with stakeholders in order to achieve a more cohesive approach to delivering RPL nationally (Quality & Qualifications Ireland, 2013). This welcome initiative provided new impetus to support alignment with the European Council 2012 recommendation and in looking at future opportunities within education, training, the workplace and society in general (Council of the European Union, 2012).

RPL is regularly noted as a key element within labour market activation initiatives by the government (European Commission, Cedefop & ICF International, 2014). In 2011, the Expert Group on Future Skill Needs (EGFSN) was invited to report on RPL and its potential for up-skilling and reskilling of the labour force by the Department of Education and Skills. This report signified RPL as a critical element in labour market activation programmes; for efficient use of resources within education and training; for lifelong learning; for flexible provision and to contribute to government targets on social inclusion and equity of access (EGFSN, 2011).

The 2011 report of the EGFSN recommended a cohesive national approach for RPL to optimise provision. Significantly, the report notes the work done by providers and by the QQI. However, it stresses the importance of commitment from the Department of Education and Skills to drive change at a national level. The report also states that while it is “very difficult to estimate the demand for RPL” (EGFSN, 2011, p. 30) arrangements for its provision and subsequent capture of resulting data should be in place. The report cites evidence arising from the Strategic Innovation Funded projects, showing activity varying considerably across higher education institutions, stating it is probable that “practice is localised within particular institutions and is specific to certain groups of learners” (EGFSN, 2011, p. 30). Noteworthy also were the comments calling for specific funding for RPL provision, the implications for managing workflow for large numbers of RPL cases, the lack of systematic gathering of data on RPL cases across higher education institutions and uncertainty as to responsibility for providing RPL for specific roles in the workplace. It can be concluded that RPL delivery suffers from a lack of cohesion and consistency and would benefit from the adoption of a national strategy to support and inform local provision.

The QQI consultation on RPL of 2013 provided an important opportunity for stakeholders to have input to the national framework supporting RPL. This document provided a comprehensive picture of the policy and legislative framework (national and European) and invited consultations on six issues from various stakeholders across the education spectrum. The issues addressed were RPL and Access Transfer and Progression, national strategy on RPL, direct application to QQI for awards, RPL for access to FETAC awards, data on RPL & RPL and credit.

This consultative approach to capture the viewpoint of the range of stakeholders involved in RPL allowed for inclusion of all voices while also providing some signposts for enhanced practice. The views outlined in Irish national commentaries align well with the Berlin Declaration on Validation of Prior Learning and more specifically around organisational arrangements, support structures and legal foundations.

### **3. Higher education landscape**

Reflecting on the past ten years, higher education has undergone a period of rapid change reflective of the broader general socio-economic changes in Ireland and Europe. Underpinning the changing higher education landscape and signposting the opportunities for development is the *Irish National Skills Strategy* report published

in 2015. Action 4.3 of this National Skills Strategy 2025 calls for greater recognition of workplace learning and the development of capacity for RPL. The achievement of this is through the promotion of a common understanding of RPL and supporting the dissemination of good practice across VET and higher education.

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* of 2011 already emphasised the key role that Ireland's higher education system has to play in building an innovative knowledge-age economy. The report calls for the sector to "innovate and develop if it is to provide flexible opportunities for larger and more diverse student cohorts" (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 10). Significantly, the report calls for clear pathways for progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes. This National Strategy called for a national framework for RPL to be developed and pointed to the opportunity to leverage input from existing expertise within its higher education institutions to contribute to the development of this RPL National Framework.

Within the Higher Education Authorities (HEA) national systems performance framework, the development of institutional performance compacts is a novel undertaking, wherein each higher education institution, through a strategic high-level dialogue process, agrees a compact which is publicly available. Significantly, performance against agreed targets has funding implications for institutions. There is a requirement that compacts must include an element detailing provision for 'Increased participation, equality of access and lifelong learning' and make specific reference to arrangements for clear access pathways for access transfer and progression.

In relation to education quality and awards QQI is a state agency established by the Quality Assurance and Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 2012, with a board appointed by the Minister for Education and Skills. The functions of QQI include responsibility for maintaining the ten-level NFQ (National Framework of Qualifications). QQI also provides advice on recognition of foreign qualifications in Ireland and on the recognition of Irish qualifications abroad. The 2012 Act and subsequent 2019 amendment refers to RPL in the context of meeting standards established by QQI and in terms of access, transfer and progression.

#### **4. Munster Technological University (MTU)**

Munster Technological University is a higher education institution in Ireland, which offers national qualification programmes on levels 6–10 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, which is levels 5–8 on the EQF. It was established on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021 following the merger of Cork Institute of Technology and Institute of Technology Tralee. The practice as outlined in the case study emerged from Cork Institute of Technology but has continued under the auspices of the university. The institution offers programmes in the areas of business, nursing, humanities, science, engineering, music, art and maritime studies. It has a total student population of eighteen thousand students which comprise of approximately one-third part-time and two-thirds full-time students. The programmes that are offered in MTU include major academic awards from a higher certificate, which is a short cycle qualification within the first

cycle of the Bologna Framework through to a PhD, as well as minor and special purpose awards which can vary in value from ten to sixty ECTS credits and at all levels of the national framework. Programmes in MTU are academically focused with the tradition of being informed by the needs of industry.

## 5. Recognition of Prior Learning in MTU

Recognition of Prior Learning in MTU began in 1996 as part of a three-year European funded project with an employer organisation who required upskilling and reskilling for their employees. This coincided with the 1996 lifelong learning European initiative.

Recognition of Prior Learning was identified at that time as a possible avenue to build on the existing learning of employees to identify potential opportunities. Initially it was part of an education development department as practice evolved nationally and internationally in teaching and learning. A strategic commitment was given by the institution in 1999 and validation was resourced as part of the central functions of the institution.

A strategic decision was made from the outset that RPL was a central and relevant part of all disciplines, all programmes and at all levels of the framework within the institution. This was a unique position in higher education institutions in Ireland at a time when many were considering the merit of validation and the recognition of learning which was acquired external to the academic institution. This commitment was also reflected in the resourcing put in place, which was further expanded in 2003.

In the initial stages, RPL was primarily used for access to programmes, for non-standard entry or advanced entry beyond year one of a programme. As validation has evolved within MTU, the practice expanded into module exemptions and the attainment of full academic taught awards via RPL on all levels of the national framework of qualifications.

Reflection on the evolution of practice over the past twenty years has shown in excess of 6,500 positive applications for validation, 112 successful applications for advanced entry to a programme, 696 module exemptions in 151 programmes; there have been 37 full academic awards acquired through validation and 505 assessors have supported the assessment of RPL applications in MTU.

## 6. Industry collaboration and RPL

The sustainability and development of RPL is ensured through a multifaceted approach which is depicted in Figure 1. Support for internal staff and students in terms of mentoring and familiarity with validation and associated assessment are considered. As previously outlined, validation has been further expanded within MTU through purposeful interactions with industry and employer organisations who are

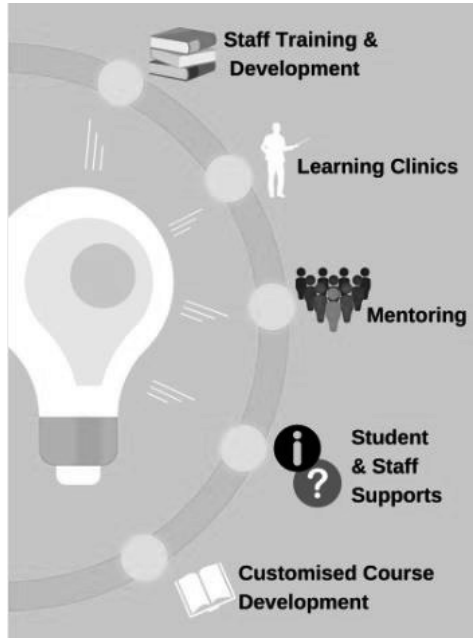


Fig. 1:  
Recognition of Prior Learning activities in  
Munster Technological University  
(Source: <https://extendedcampus.MTU.ie>)

committed to the upskilling and reskilling of employees, retaining their competitiveness within global markets.

The following further details the types of supports and approaches available within the university.

### 6.1 University staff training and development

In MTU, staff training and development for validation is delivered in multiple ways. It can take the form of informal discussion sessions which aim to increase familiarity with validation and the benefit it can be to learners but also the institution. Workshops on policy, practice and assessment are regularly carried out with existing staff but also new academic staff of the institution. Validation or RPL is also a key element of the institution's *Master of Arts in teaching and learning*, which focuses on the development of staff in the integration and implementation of validation within modules and programmes in line with good practice.

### 6.2 Learning clinics

Learning clinics is a service coordinated by the RPL unit within MTU and offered in conjunction with other academic departments to regional industry partners to familiarise their staff with upskilling and reskilling opportunities available to them, incorporating RPL. This is increasingly run as part of organisations' learning and development activities.

### **6.3 Mentoring**

Mentoring is available to all prospective and registered students who are seeking validation. The mentoring is centrally provided through the MTU Extended Campus on a workshop and one to one basis. Mentoring is available to staff who are unfamiliar with validation and the validity of an application by a student within an academic programme. Mentoring is also available to staff who themselves are seeking validation for professional development and job promotion opportunities.

### **6.4 Student and staff support**

Staff and student guidelines and templates have been created by MTU to support the assessor and applicant in reviewing or developing applications for validation. A dedicated website with additional support is also openly available to any individual or group interested in finding out more about validation and RPL. Staff and student testimonials provide guidance and encouragement to those who are new to the process of validation.

### **6.5 Curriculum development and moderation**

All curriculum within the university is created through programme and module development teams, expressed as learning outcomes and moderated centrally to ensure it is articulated to the appropriate level of the framework. In addition to ensuring it is positioned at the appropriate level, the role of the Module Moderator within the university has the responsibility to ensure the development team has considered the possibility of the achievement of the learning outcomes through validation. This requires consideration of the language of learning outcomes to ensure they are not overly prescriptive to the achievement and demonstration of learning. Examples of this include specifying software packages or assessment methods within learning outcomes which is limiting for those who can demonstrate the learning using alternative methods.

### **6.6 Customised course development incorporating validation**

Customised courses which acknowledge the prior learning of the participants that respond to a particular need of an industry or employer are becoming increasingly popular. Validation is a cornerstone of these interactions with external organisations which present a unique opportunity for all stakeholders.

The model of validation and associated structures in MTU are unique within higher education in Ireland. By recognising the workplace and indeed other life experiences as valid opportunities for learning, MTU has sought to encourage adult education and lifelong learning through a multifaceted approach. Validation has been incorporated into the broader engagement agenda of MTU through the MTU Extended Campus.

## 7. RPL and MTU Extended Campus

While there is strong awareness of the potential for and of collaboration between higher education, enterprises and communities to contribute to economic renewal and social innovation, collaboration is often difficult to achieve as the higher education institution can present a fragmented interface for the external organisation. Worse, the interface often comprises a confusing array of academic disciplines and acronyms representing research units and centres. From an external perspective it may appear that one's problem or opportunity statement needs to fit neatly into a particular academic discipline or field in order to interact with higher education.

There is a recognition that 'higher education institutions could be more dynamic and coherent in their approach to collaboration'. This view is echoed by (Healy, Perkman, Goddard, & Kempton, 2014), who assert that "despite the resurgence in business-university collaboration, research reports consistently find that cooperation practices are highly fragmented and uncoordinated, particularly when it comes to the educational offer" (pg. 6). This fragmentation can result in lack of consistency and coherence in developing relationships and interactions with enterprise.

Working closely with community and enterprise partners has always been an important part of Munster Technology University's mission. This has included ensuring that the curriculum is relevant and current for local, regional and national employers, working in partnership with industry experts to develop applied research solutions and supporting new, and exploring and responding to emerging workforce reskilling and upskilling needs. Despite having longstanding relationships with external organisations and employers, many of the interactions were conducted as separate, distinct activities with little overview of the totality of engagement interactions across the institution. Anecdotally, this situation led to Heads of Academic Departments passing each other in the car park of local multinational companies neither knowing what the other one was doing there. This disconnected nature of the activity also meant that when one academic department or unit of the institution had a successful interaction with an enterprise organization, the knowledge was often lost to the organisation as a whole and not used to build a broader strategic relationship or contribute to organisational learning or structures to stimulate or support more engagement through existing synergies.

## 8. The Extended Campus model

In determining how collaboration, with a particular focus on validation and RPL, has been so successful within Munster Technological University it is necessary to look at the model and infrastructure adopted within the university.

The model adopted by the university is that of an engaged institution which has put formal structures in place to facilitate engagement with the university and those external. A department was established in 2011 to enable a coordinated and considered response to requests and opportunities that arose with those external. Respond-

ing to this reality and seeking to enhance practice and potential of external engagement interactions by changing the way we interact with, and are viewed by, enterprise partners, internal changes have been implemented in MTU to seek to join up and maximize the benefits of an already actively engaged institution. Ensuring that the institution does not just teach entrepreneurship or support entrepreneurs but collects and uses business intelligence for itself to act entrepreneurially. This objective of the restructuring was to:

- Make it easier for external organizations to engage in mutually beneficial interactions with MTU academics and researchers.
- Develop a clear view of the extent and depth of existing and desirable engagement interactions to feed into institutional strategy and decision-making.
- Stimulate more interactions and measurably support regional economic development.
- Ensure that the variety of interactions with companies are collated and built on to develop broader supportive long-term mutually beneficial partnerships.
- Support enhanced practice development by exploration of processes and sharing of good practices.

MTU Extended Campus model built directly on the strategic importance of engagement for the university, the knowledge, experiences and expertise gained through the leadership of many collaborative projects and an exploration of practice internationally. The role of the Extended Campus is to facilitate initial needs analyses and consultation sessions for external organisations with a view to matching them with appropriate internal units and individuals. Following this initial phase, the external organisation is introduced to the appropriate internal unit(s). At all stages in the interactions a customer relationship management system supports the collation of appropriate information and the compilation of information on queries and interactions which provides a rich source of business intelligence for the strategic management of the institution.

The MTU Extended Campus seeks to stimulate the demand for interaction with higher education through publication of case studies or vignettes illustrating previous interactions, including some exploration of the need or problem statement and the process involved in partnering with higher education, to address the need. In each case a brief synopsis of the difficulty or opportunity and the enabling factors is presented. These case studies are chosen from a range of interaction types and across a range of external organisation sectors and sizes. Having stimulated the interactions and generated the queries, consideration must then be given to the process which will support these interactions through to resolution.



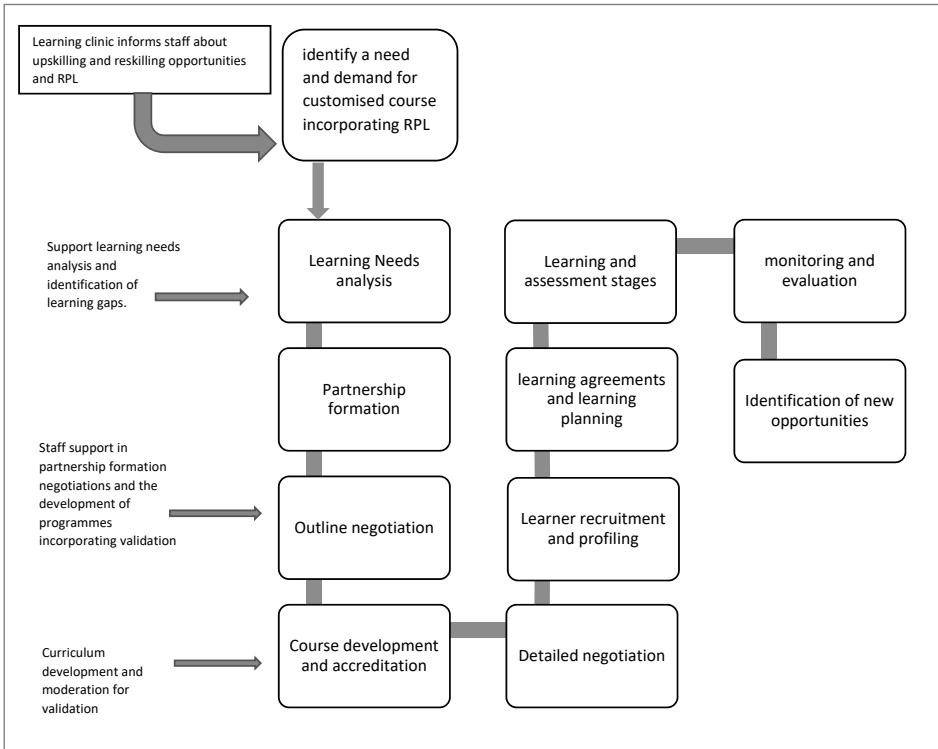


Fig 2: Supports provided in the process of customised course developments incorporating RPL

## 9. Collaborations for RPL

The approach developed within the Extended Campus to facilitate engagement for upskilling, reskilling, or up-qualifying in collaboration with employers has evolved over the years. The initial stages involve raising awareness of the opportunities available to employers and employees through engagement with MTU. This is achieved through running a learning clinic within the enterprise which informs them of the opportunities which may be available to them. Staff can discuss their own individual learning needs and opportunities with university representatives which may be satisfied through existing programmes and modules. In the event the employer identifies a need for further development in a particular area, a skill gap analysis is recommended which is conducted by the employer as supported through the MTU Extended Campus.

The skill gap analysis is designed to ascertain the base level knowledge, skill and competence of employees to determine the common start point for all seeking further education opportunities. The additional benefit of conducting the analysis is to determine if the perceived skill gap is a real need and if there are additional or alternative needs. The analysis also assists in determining if needs are individual or cohort based.

This informs the potential opportunities and solutions presented to the employer by the university. The university can review the existing curriculum modules and programmes to determine if a solution already exists or if a tailor-made solution is required. Consideration is also given at this stage to the prior learning of the employees and how it can be utilized within the proposed solution in terms of access, exemptions or academic awards.

The university as a public higher education institution has to determine their ability to respond to the needs of an employer following the employers needs analysis. In addition to determining if the university can respond to the identified need, there are other considerations such as the sustainability of the engagement. This includes determining if the need is unique and cannot be satisfied through existing curriculum and if there is sufficient return on investment for the university in the engagement. Another determining factor is the longevity of the relationship and the number of iterations of the programme to determine if it merits investment by the university. The university is an education rather than a training provider so the lead time for programme or module development is longer due to quality assurance and other institutional processes.

## **10. Key to success**

Recognition of Prior Learning and industry engagement are valued by the university and are part of the strategy of the university. Access, transfer and progression and lifelong learning are incorporated into the ethos of the university which has been embedded into the universities approach to curriculum development.

Quality assurance is an integral part of higher education and the awards made by institutions. Munster Technological University is mindful of the importance of maintaining standards and the integrity of awards through ensuring that all assessment is subject to the same rigorous standards.

Engaging with industry has always featured strongly within Cork Institute of Technology and has continued within Munster Technological University for general programme development with a focus on graduate attributes and skills. Lifelong learning and access, transfer and progression withing higher education has been integral to the mission and vision of the university.

A fundamental key to success has been the resourcing of RPL and engagement with employers within the university. Beyond the physical presence of staff to respond to queries it also delivers a powerful message as to the strategic importance of RPL and industry to those within the university and external.

## **11. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the approach to validation and RPL within MTU is an all-encompassing focus of the university. In addition to facilitating learners with prior learning re-

turning to education, it is also regarded as part of the engagement strategy of the university. RPL and validation are much part of the ethos and culture which have been embedded successfully into the infrastructure of the university.

In developing curriculum, university staff are mindful of those with existing prior learning who may seek formal recognition and ensure module and programme content allow for the attainment of learning outcomes through a variety of contexts and in a number of ways. Quality assurance standards are common and retained across all aspects of the university through the use of learning outcomes and the National Framework of Qualifications academic standards which are the foundation of the university's programmes and modules.

Recognition of Prior Learning is resourced within the university which enables greater visibility of validation internally amongst staff and students and those external to the institution. The approach to RPL is one of flexibility to enable accessibility for those external to the university. It is considered as an opportunity beyond enrolments on modules and programmes by senior management.

The range of supports available for RPL is considerable within the university and is intended to provide assistance to staff, students and industry in their engagement for RPL. These have been consciously developed over an extended period of time within the university in response to broader changes within and across higher education.

The MTU Extended Campus model of engagement which incorporates RPL demonstrates, how the university enables engagement between those internal with those external to the institution. This enables the university to respond cohesively to external requests and opportunities from industry and the community.

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