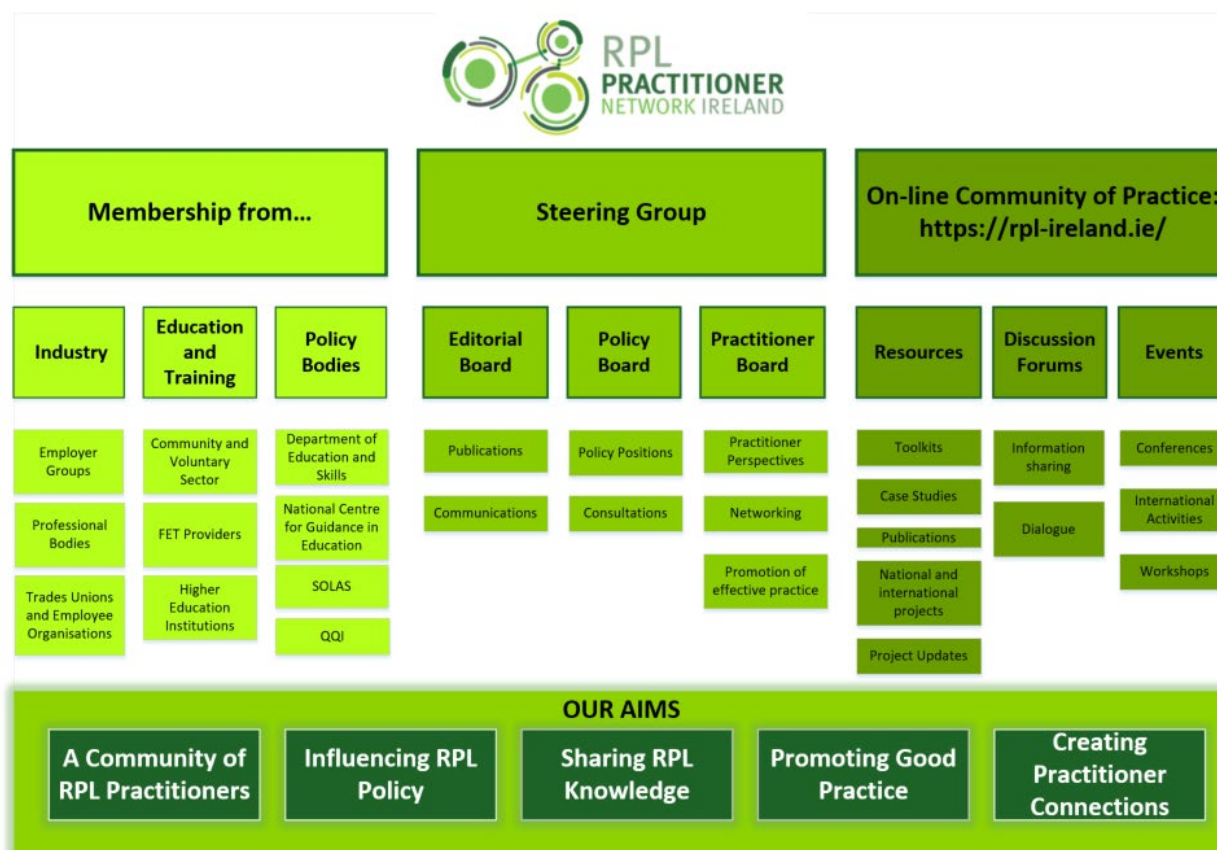# RPL Practitioner Network Ireland
submission to National Plan for Equity of Access to HE (2022-26) consultation

The RPL Practitioner Network Ireland (https://rpl-ireland.ie/; Twitter: @rpl_network) is a voluntary network of practitioners across all sectors of education and training, employment and voluntary services. It includes members who work in different roles including directly in the field with learners and employees, in quality assurance, guidance, management and in policy making.

This submission to the National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2022-2026) consultation is prepared on behalf of the Network by the Steering Group, and is informed by our ongoing collaboration in particular with practice in higher, further and community education and training, and with policy including in relation to the provision of impartial guidance across the tertiary system.

The RPL Practitioner Network is a natural partner for the National Access Plan in drawing together precisely a diversity of representatives and channels for reaching under-represented groups who will have skills, knowledge and competences at a variety of levels and may have for varied reasons missed opportunities to realise potential within higher education.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process which seeks to acknowledge all forms of learning regardless of where it has occurred (e.g. in formal educational settings, the workplace or everyday life), and to give it value in the context of a destination award on the National Framework of Qualifications (European Commission, 2008; National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005; OECD, 2004). A fundamental

principle of RPL is that a learner should not be asked to relearn something they already know. This means that applicants who can show that they have achieved sufficient prior learning may be granted access, advanced entry, credit, module exemptions and awards as appropriate, according to Institutional policy. RPL is sometimes described as a bridging mechanism for learners to access and/ or advance their learning in formal education and upskill/ reskill.

As the National Framework of Qualifications diversifies and becomes more inclusive, e.g. of international awards and an increasing number of micro-credentials, RPL skills for practitioners in evaluating learning outcomes associated with awards will become more valuable and vital. Continued investment in professional development supporting practice in RPL is important.

RPL is also a bridge for HEIs, offering HEIs the opportunity to engage in new and innovative ways with individuals and groups of learners from diverse learning and workplace settings.

RPL has considerable and well-documented benefits for learners, all Institutions, the economy and society (OECD, 2010). This is reflected in the announcement within the Programme for Government 'Our Shared Future' to "develop and implement a standardised system of accreditation of prior learning", while the 'Future FET, Transforming Learning 2020–2024' strategy from SOLAS calls for RPL to play a more prominent role in FET, signifying the growing emphasis on RPL in practice, and echoing European Recommendations, evaluations and analyses. For HEIs in particular, RPL can be harnessed as a resource to accelerate progress toward a wide range of strategic objectives in areas including teaching and learning, the student experience, graduate employability, enterprise engagement and regional development.

In the context of the National Access Plan, it is important to emphasise the critical role of RPL in the development of an accessible and flexible higher education system (NFETL, 2015; HEA, 2021). It is widely acknowledged as an enabler for access and lifelong learning which encourages people of all ages and backgrounds to participate in learning pathways.

The next National Access Plan provides a timely opportunity to affirm the critical role of RPL in contributing to access and lifelong learning and to call upon HEIs (i) to embed RPL as a mainstream, flexible pathway to and through higher education for access, advanced entry, credit, module exemptions and awards as appropriate, according to Institutional policy and (ii) to increase RPL opportunities for all learners, including in time in collaboration with other sectors, and in particular underrepresented learners, who may otherwise be unable to access or progress through higher education. From a higher education perspective, the 'National RPL in Higher Education Project' will help to support the 19 publicly-funded HEIs in achieving these, including in collaboration with enterprise.

While RPL has been extant for several decades nationally, practices have not been coordinated systematically nor integrated or connected across pathways and sectors. For all learners to achieve optimally and efficiently, greater co-ordination would be helpful.

Ambitious targets within the National Access Plan explicitly referencing RPL in relation to the development of integrated data systems and infrastructure across sectors would greatly assist in this greater co-ordination. This could optimise the investment of public funds in projects such as the HCI Pillar 3 'National RPL in Higher Education Project' across the 19 publicly funded HEIs, the Innovation funding for RPL in ETBs which connect with HEIs, the EEAL initiative in RPL supported by Aontas in Community Education, and the

strength of initiatives such as Skills to Advance, Springboard+ and RPL provision within new Apprenticeship programmes which meets skills needs.

Making RPL visible through common definitions across all sectors is something that the National Access Plan could lead cross sectorally, supporting cultural change and assisting with the realization of lifelong learning targets where more of our population see engagement in learning as something that is genuinely attainable for them, because they are already achieving. The HCI Pillar 3 'National RPL in Higher Education Project' across the 19 publicly funded HEIs is looking to achieve common understandings of RPL, with agreed language, principles and reference points, across the higher education sector, and in collaboration with enterprise, with the development and roll-out of a National RPL Framework in higher education contexts which may both inform and be informed by the work of other sectors. In time, this can help to support common understandings and definitions across sectors.

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act (Amended) emphasises the centrality of institutions/ providers in the provision of services for RPL. Clearly this requires appropriate investment and the establishment of/ development of existing support systems including networks, as well as the provision of well-resourced information and impartial guidance services for adult learners and enquirers.

Institutions and providers can meet RPL needs from within their own awards/ programmatic capacity/ provision. Citizens, guidance and public employment services need better access to information about learning outcomes in order to be able to direct an enquirer to the relevant provider(s) who may be able to provide RPL for their particular skill set. The National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE) is an agency of the Department of Education and SOLAS with responsibility to support and develop guidance practice in all areas of education and to inform the policy of the Department in the field of guidance. NCGE also represents Ireland in all guidance related developments in the EU: https://www.ncge.ie/ncge/open-public-consultation-validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning. In the context of the National Access Plan and the effective and efficient provision of RPL, the role of impartial guidance is an important pillar.

The recent report on Mature Student Participation in Higher Education (2021) underlined the importance of outreach and flexible participation for adults, along with FET and community education pathways. FET practitioners experience suggests that learners will participate in permeable ways if given the opportunity and appropriate recognition, which may include RPL. It underscores the contribution of community and further education and training programme participation and of RPL in expediting successful and efficient HE programme participation and completion, for a range of learners including specific cohorts targeted for supports within National Access Plans. It also notes the impacts of unemployment and full employment on the likelihood of adult participation in higher education opportunities and the relevance of RPL in this context is well noted. Increased permeability in pathways, including in the integration of opportunities for mixed provision of workplace, FET, Community and HE where RPL is ordinary and routine in assessment is a ready means of expanding opportunities and enabling lifelong learning in which the RPL Practitioners Network can engage.

Finally, we must note the importance of RPL for access for those participating in the Further Education (FET) sector (providers and learners working at NFQ levels 1-6). The diversity of the FET sector, with regards to target population, range of awards and NFQ level, means that many opportunities for RPL may arise, both for the learner and the provider.

RPL thinking and practice reflects the 'Future FET, Transforming Learning 2020–2024' strategy from SOLAS, which states: 'FET will provide pathways for everyone. It will empower learners to participate fully in society and to become active citizens and drive vibrant and diverse communities'. RPL processes endorse FET core values of lifelong learning, social justice, active citizenship and economic prosperity. FET prioritises equity of access, rooted in principles of equality and social inclusion and RPL plays a powerful role in empowering under-represented groups, to access wider FET pathways, develop skills and facilitate entry into work or progression to higher education. RPL is essential in realizing coherent pathways within FET, and between FET and HE. Furthermore, FET values learner's life experiences, achievements and informal learning. RPL is a means of validating a holistic range of personal and social learner outcomes in addition to formal learning and accredited outcomes.