

Building Lifelong Learning Participation with the Higher Education 4.0 Project at the Atlantic Technological University in Ireland: Recognizing Prior Learning (RPL) and Providing Career and Learning Pathways with MyCareerPath.ie

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Abstract

Higher Education 4.0 (HE 4.0) is an ambitious, innovative, and collaborative project from the Atlantic Technological University (ATU), Ireland. A €12.3 million project supported by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland under the HCI, Human Capital Initiative. It is a vision for future agility in higher education and provides for opportunities into and through higher education.

The Careers and RPL Learning Pathways platform under HE 4.0 incorporates a regional service from the ATU for the assessment of Recognized Prior Learning (RPL) and the development of personalized career and learning pathways. This new university service is delivered through an online platform at www.mycareerpath.ie and an RPL information site for the ATU at www.myexperience.ie

The online MyCareerPath.ie platform involves engagement with employers and potential students to the Atlantic Technological University. The service involves advising candidates on the learning pathways available and appropriate to them, and how to achieve their career objectives or improve their employability.

This paper will explore the ATU Career and RPL learning pathways project development journey to date and how the findings emerging from the research and evaluation activities are informing the establishment of a regional careers and RPL service, supporting lifelong learning participation and upskilling in the workforce. In addition, the process is informing enhancements to the university's RPL assessment process, policy development, and access to higher education initiatives. To conclude, an industry pilot case exemplar will be discussed, particularly their engagement with MyCareerPath.ie assessment services, an RPL assessment portfolio, and a variety of micro-courses supporting the transition to higher education.

Keywords: Learning Pathways, Recognized Prior Learning (RPL), RPL Assessment, Career Guidance, Digital Education, Online Learning.

Introduction to the Atlantic Technical University (ATU)

Atlantic Technological University (ATU) is one of the largest multi-campus universities in Ireland, serving a diverse group of learners, staff, communities, and organizations from the west and northwest regions and further afield. ATU includes eight campuses in the west and north-west of Ireland with 22,000+ students including 40+ nationalities. The university offers a rich combination of academic and research excellence, quality of life, and opportunity – all of which can be experienced in the most beautiful part of Ireland.

ATU (www.atu.ie) has the critical mass and academic depth to attract, educate, nurture, and retain talent in the west, north-west, and cross-border region. The university's collaborative approach ensures that ATU delivers practice-orientated study and research that seeks to address the major challenges facing society and the world. ATU is dedicated to enabling sustainable economic, social, and cultural development; connected to the region and with a mindset that reaches far beyond it.

The Term RPL Explained

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the generic term for learning assessment mechanisms and is used within Higher Education Institutions to describe the awarding of credit/exemptions to applicants on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission.

RPL is defined as a process whereby prior learning is given value and this provides opportunities for advanced entry to a further or higher education program and/or awarding credits for elements within programs. In some cases, RPL can result in a full award from a higher education institute. Furthermore, the European Inventory on validation of non-formal and informal learning, country report Ireland 2014, explains, "RPL incorporates prior, formal, informal and non-formal learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the national framework of qualifications" (European Commission, CEDEFOP, & ICF International, 2014, p. 3).

The National Strategy for Higher Education (2011, p. 55) states that "RPL is particularly important as flexible and workplace learning opportunities expand. A national framework for RPL must be developed, based on the expertise and experience already built up in the higher education institutions. Progress in this regard will help to shift the emphasis from educational inputs toward learning outcomes. This student-centered philosophy lies at the heart of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)."

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is therefore a key foundation for lifelong learning policies, and it is critical to the development of an accessible, further, and higher education system. RPL encourages people of all ages to participate in learning and attributes value to all their work and life experiences.

Background to the My Experience RPL Project

In 2012, the My Experience project was initiated to inform, support, and facilitate Irish or international applicants in applying for RPL to gain entry into a program or seek exemptions from parts of a program at ATU. The project outputs to date include: the development of an information website at www.myexperience.ie; an RPL online ePortfolio assessment tool at www.rplportfolio.ie; the development of an open online educational course for staff working in higher education available to access at www.cpdlearnonline.ie; and in 2016 and 2017 a My Experience RPL roadshow and a series of webinars took place, delivered by ATU staff to other universities across the country.

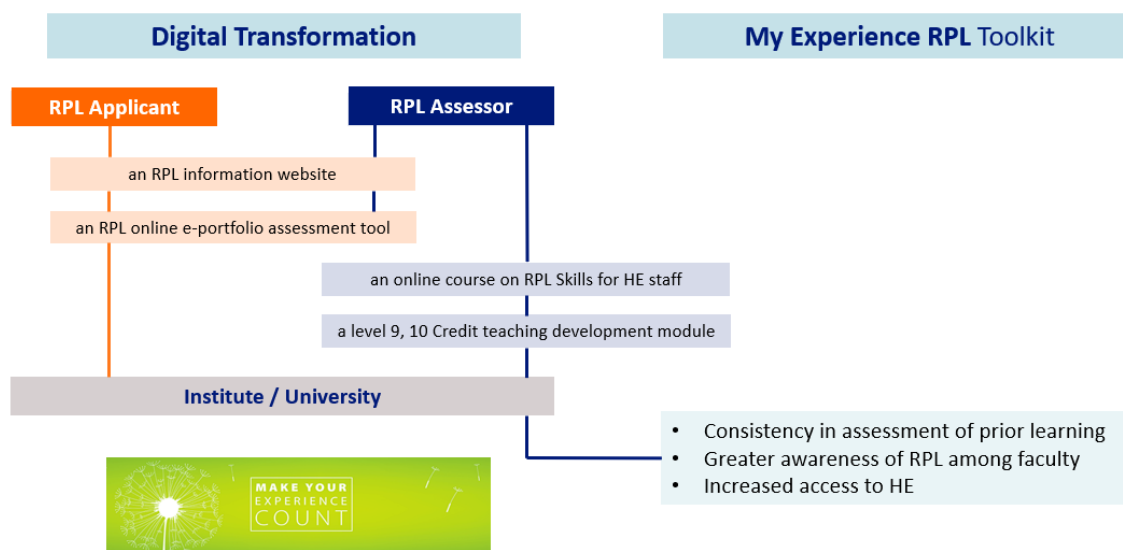
About the My Experience RPL Toolkit

A dedicated information website at www.myexperience.ie was created to provide relevant information on RPL through short videos and text. The website defines the different mechanisms of RPL assessment, provides details on the process, and links to the RPL ePortfolio assessment tool. The ePortfolio application tool was created in Moodle as this provided for assessment of learning. It can be accessed directly at www.rplportfolio.ie. As a paperless tool, it provides an electronic submission of evidence and allows the learner to submit their portfolio in a sequence of stages resulting in the creation of a professional RPL portfolio. The ePortfolio of evidence includes certified learning, experiential learning, references, work experience outputs, and motivational statements. The RPL ePortfolio tool has been used successfully at the ATU with over 300 applicants to date (see Figure 1, outlining the process candidates experience at ATU).

In addition, an accredited RPL module for higher education staff (Level 9, worth 10 ECTS) was developed. This module provides participants with a deep understanding of the policies and procedures associated with the process of RPL. It provides participants with an appreciation of the complexities associated with the management of RPL at a Higher Education Institution. This module, which is practically based and interactive, is aimed at developing mentors and assessors with the knowledge and competencies to enable them to become effective assessors of RPL candidates.

Figure 1:

RPL candidate experience at ATU



Student Experience with the RPL Toolkit

Since the introduction of the RPL My Experience Toolkit, several RPL candidates have shared their experiences of their RPL journey. Alan Lowe (Engineering graduate) said, “while I did not meet the standard entry criteria for an online program at ATU, I was made aware of the www.myexperience.ie website and experiential learning could form part of a successful application. I reflected on my membership of numerous professional and trade association committees and regular attendance at conferences and seminars, and I realised I had developed knowledge and skills associated with a Level 8 Civil Engineering degree. This enabled me to gain advanced entry to the Level 9, Certificate in Road Maintenance Engineering and Network Management programme at ATU.” Another former student, Lucy Bracken, shared “I read about the Certificate in Food Innovation and Entrepreneurship course available at ATU and made inquiries, knowing it would be something that may help me embark on my business idea. My only concern was that although I had a vast amount of relevant experience, I had no formal third level qualification and I felt I would not be eligible to apply for the Level 9 certificate. On meeting with the RPL mentors and assessors in ATU, it was confirmed that I did not meet the formal entry requirements, but that RPL was an access route, and my 25 years of relevant experiential learning would be recognised when making my application. Using the myexperience.ie website, I submitted my RPL ePortfolio including all supporting evidence required for the application. I found the tool very user-friendly and felt that I gained a lot from creating the ePortfolio realizing the importance of my experience and skill set, I sometimes took for granted.”

Background and Growth of Online Learning at ATU

ATU delivered its first online program, BSc (Hons) in Quality Management, in 2002 to 5 students. By 2011, the number of online learners had grown to 850 and the University established the Centre for Online Learning with the remit to develop

online learning, grow student numbers, and support both staff and students. Since 2011, online development has grown to over 140 online programs across all disciplines, at levels 6, 7, 8, and 9 on the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (see <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications>) with 5000+ online students enrolled for the 2019/2020 academic year. Over the years ATU has won several awards for online education and digital education design and development services.

Online learning from ATU has been very successful with high examination marks and good feedback from students. Many of ATU's online programs are bespoke and have been created specifically for large multinational and SME companies such as Intel, Coca-Cola, Boston Scientific, Abbott, Masonite, Eli Lilly, Janssen Biologics, Pfizer, Stiefel, GSK and Merck, Sharp, and Dohme (MSD). The University also collaborates with NIBRT (National Institute for Bioprocessing Research and Training) in the delivery of biopharma programs. Another collaborative program is the B.Eng. in Data Centres Facilities Engineering which was developed in partnership with industry providers including Google, Facebook, and Microsoft in order to meet the growing need for upskilling of service personnel in the industry. This course has been structured in order to serve the pan-European Data Centre services community.

Development Journey of MyCareerPath.ie

In 2022, Atlantic Technological University (ATU) and Higher Education 4.0 MyCareerPath.ie project established an online career and learning pathways service for people in the workplace wishing to upskill, re-skill, or retrain as well as incorporating the assessment of Recognized Prior Learning (RPL). This new innovative mentored online service and platform assists learners to look at their skills, strengths, abilities, and overall self-confidence and acknowledges their significant experiential learning using the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in order to improve their employability, career prospects, and engagement in Higher Education.

The overall aim of the project is to enhance employee satisfaction in the workplace, encourage the development of career progression pathways, increased engagement in Higher Education, and improved regional output (see Figure 2).

Figure 2:

Student Pathways with MyCareerPath.ie

STUDENT PATHWAYS



The new ATU career and RPL assessment platform is designed to cater to five student personas, each with their own learning pathway. These student profiles and pathways are:

- **Pathway 1: New Beginnings (youth)**
- **Pathway 2: Career Accelerator (early-career)**
- **Pathway 3: Mastery Programme (mid-career)**
- **Pathway 4: Dream Builder (fulfillment)**
- **Pathway 5: Entrepreneur (innovator)**

Online and customized resources have been carefully coordinated and tailored to address the needs of employees at different career stages (see Figure 3).

Figure 3:

Customizing the needs of employees at each stage of career development

	Who I am?	What I bring?	What I need?	Mycareerpath.ie supports
New Beginnings	Beginner/career starter/first job/first course/returning to education/workplace	Excitement, enthusiasm, energy. Also, confusion and insecurity	Support in understanding myself and my career needs. Confidence and assurance in my career decisions	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), CVs, applications, work-based learning
Career Accelerator	Graduate (recent or completed degree some time ago), employee with significant experience (needs qualification to progress).	Experience, knowledge and skills. Sense of fulfilment and achievement. Confident, energised and engaged in career activities.	Support in gaining employment or promotion, exploring career directions, finding a postgraduate course.	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), CVs, applications, work-based learning.
Career Mastery	Seeking promotion or career advancement, job changer, looking for a new challenge	Substantial experience, knowledge and skills. Looking forward to a new challenge.	Specialised training and development, support in gaining promotion or changing job, redefine career direction. Consolidate experience, knowledge and skills.	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), CVs, applications, work-based learning.
Dream Builder	Considerable achievements in my life and/or career. Now looking to pursue my passions.	Significant experience, knowledge and skills. Self-understanding and self-efficacy, passion for subject knowledge.	Acknowledge achievements, strengths and passions. Redefine personal and career needs. Change of scene. Consolidate experience, knowledge and skills.	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), CVs, applications, work-based learning.
Entrepreneur	An ideas person, innovator, dynamic, creative, interested in business, problem-solver.	Passionate, energetic, visionary, risk-taker, creative and innovative.	Understand self-employment and business needs. Access to information on training and development requirements, relevant networks and supports	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), CVs, applications, work-based learning.

We measure the learners' employability both at the beginning and at the end of their learning pathway and incorporate actions on how to enhance the 5 key areas of employability. The employability model that underpins the MyCareerPath.ie AI (artificial intelligence) assessment is based on the *CareerEDGE* model, developed by Darce, Pool, & Sewell (2007) from the University of Central Lancashire. They believe that learners in possession of heightened self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem are more likely to adopt active and independent learning strategies, to be confident in their career and life decision-making, and to develop skills and attributes that employers seek. Five critical elements are identified (see Figure 4) that need to be addressed for employees to be both satisfied and successful in their occupations.

Career Development Learning (Self-awareness, Decision-making)

Experience (Work and Life)

Degree Subject Knowledge, Understanding & Skills

Generic Skills

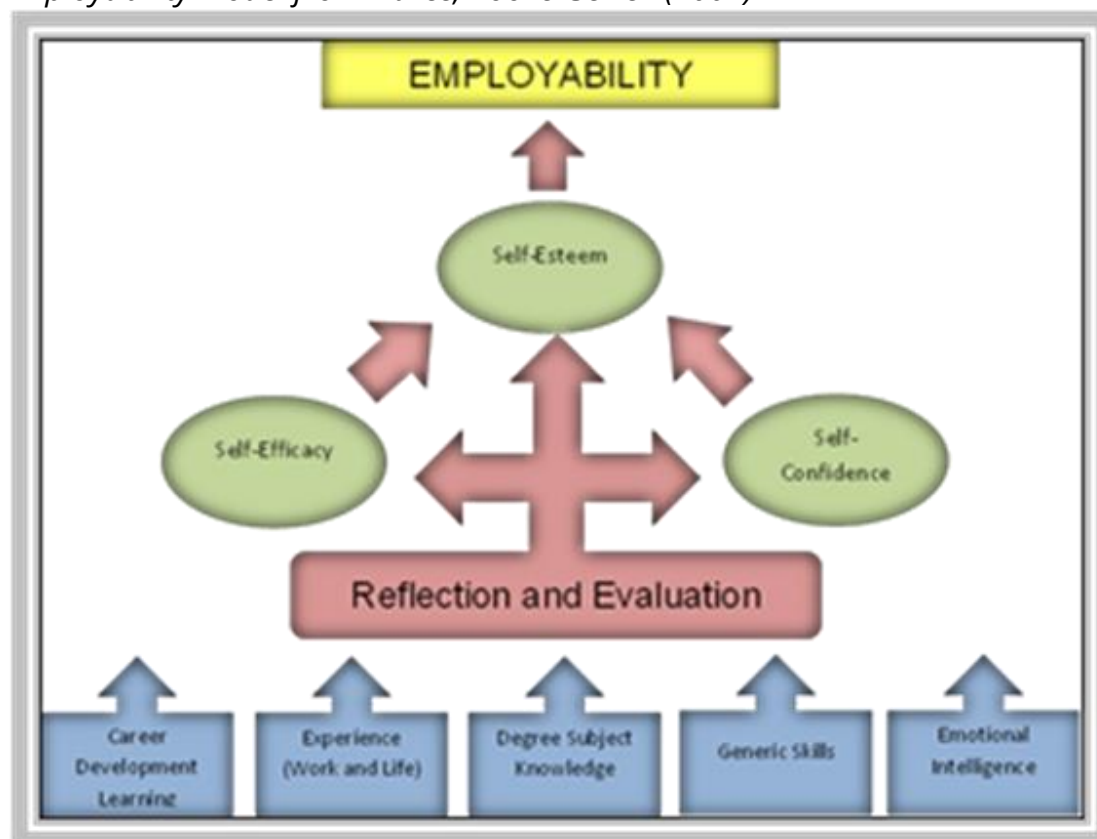
Emotional and Cultural Intelligence (Self-Confidence, Self-Esteem)

Each component in the model is essential and if one is missing this greatly reduces the learner's employability. The model of development for a learner's employability skills has a long-standing impact on people's careers as it ensures lifelong and sustainable employability. The learners engaging with MyCareerPath.ie platform have support in reflecting on and evaluating their

development in the five key areas, which leads to enhanced self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence, and greater prospects for employability.

Figure 4:

Employability Model from Darce, Pool & Sewell (2007)



All learners are brought through a 4-stage developmental program with the help of the most up-to-date e-learning tools and assessments as well as support from Careers and Learning Pathways Advisers (CLPAs) and RPL Co-Ordinators (see Figure 5). Each Learning Pathway incorporates a process of self-discovery leading to the development of successful career plans as learners reflect and focus on their career goals as they proceed through the programs.

The materials provided offer access to an innovative platform with customized eLearning content, psychometric assessment tools, a relevant structure, and support for navigation of the current RPL process, which will help in the identification of suitable courses. An RPL portfolio of evidence pathway was developed by the CLPA's and RPL Co-Ordinators using the AI online tools on the platform, including a skills extractor feature, which looks at matching skills from the workplace to the curriculum learning outcome.

Figure 5:

Careers and Learning Pathways 4 Stage Developmental Programme



Developing Recognition of Prior Learning in Ireland

A national RPL project is underway in collaboration with THEA (Technological University Higher Education Association in Ireland) and the IUA (Irish Universities Association), also funded by the HEA in Ireland under HCI funding, and this project is developing in parallel to the HE 4.0 My Career and Learning Pathway and RPL Assessment Portfolio Tool. Outputs from the RPL national project are feeding into the ATU RPL and career and learning pathway plans. This includes an ATU RPL experience survey, focus groups, and an RPL action plan that involves consultations with all stakeholders across the university.

This project strategically aligns at regional, national, and international levels where career and learning pathways development and RPL are important elements of EU policy for widening access to further and higher education and supporting lifelong learning. Results from the European Union (EU) labor force survey (Eurostat, 2021) show that since 2010, the participation rate of adults in lifelong learning rose gradually until 2019, from 7.8 % to 10.8 %. However, in 2020, it dropped by 1.6 percentage points reaching 9.2 % (Eurostat, 2021). Latest EU reports indicate it is on the rise again.

Challenges with RPL and Life-Long Learning Participation

There are several challenges associated with the development of recognition of prior learning practices in the higher education sector. To begin, historically there is an emphasis on the school leaver (high school) cohort pathway to higher education through the traditional leaving certificate state exam. There is a lack of awareness among the general population on RPL pathways and opportunities. In addition, some universities in Ireland are not as active in promoting RPL pathways, and there can be little knowledge among educators on how to manage and assess RPL candidates. As a result, there is a fear factor around assessing

experiential learning. On the learner challenges, many are unsure how to build a portfolio and structure evidence of recognized learning. Most of all, RPL candidates need guidance on mapping experiential learning experiences to learning outcomes on the national qualifications award standards.

Adult participation in learning was one of the benchmarks of the strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training up to 2020, called “Education and Training 2020” (ET 2020). This benchmark aimed to attain an average of at least 15% of adults participating in lifelong learning in the EU. The participation rates in nearly all Member States increased steadily between 2010 and 2019. This trend reversed between 2019 and 2020 as only three Member States showed a small increase in this period: Spain (+0.4 percentage point), Greece, and Lithuania (+0.2 percentage point for both). In Ireland, lifelong learning participation currently lags behind the European average with a participation rate of approximately 6% to 7%. The EU set a target of 15% of adults in Lifelong Learning by 2020. Ireland plans to reach 15% by 2025 (Aontas, 2019).

This HCI-funded project output MyCareerPath.ie learning pathway and RPL assessment platform aims to address the RPL challenges in the sector and to increase participation in lifelong learning in the west and north-west regions of Ireland. Engagement with the MyCareerPath.ie learning pathways, staff training digital badges on Understanding RPL and Assessing RPL, learner RPL portfolio training, and a competency-based RPL assessment framework that is aligned with the NFQ in Ireland, will help address the challenges in the sector.

MyCareerPath.ie Impact Case-Study: MEDTRONIC

In 2022, Medtronic in Galway engaged with a pilot program with ATU MyCareerPath.ie team. The pilot involved mapping a suite of Learning Pathways including Career Guidance & Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) with Medtronic employees in Galway. The following section of this paper (see Figure 6) will present a summary of the pilot process and the impact on the pilot participants.

Case Study Keywords: Upskilling, Assessment, Career Learning Pathways, eLearning Hub, RPL Toolkit, Career Guidance, Employability, ATU Courses, Career Learning Development Plan, CPD, Skills Development, Mentoring.

Figure 6:

Medtronic Pilot Experience (what we did and the output from the process)

CASE STUDY SUMMARY

Medtronic Multinational organisation with **4,000 employees in Ireland** - MyCareerPath worked with employees of all levels

Medtronic



WHAT WE DID



OUTPUT FROM THE PROCESS

Employees career development plan

- Employees receive guidance from a qualified Career Advisor
- Employees have clearly defined pathways and skills gaps analysis
- Employees now have the right mix of skills for their future business needs
- Employees are more engaged
- Access to resources to support learning goals
- Guided support throughout process
- RPL information
- Ultimately you have the skills and confidence to pursue a rewarding career within your organisation

Conclusion: Why RPL Needs Multiple Voices

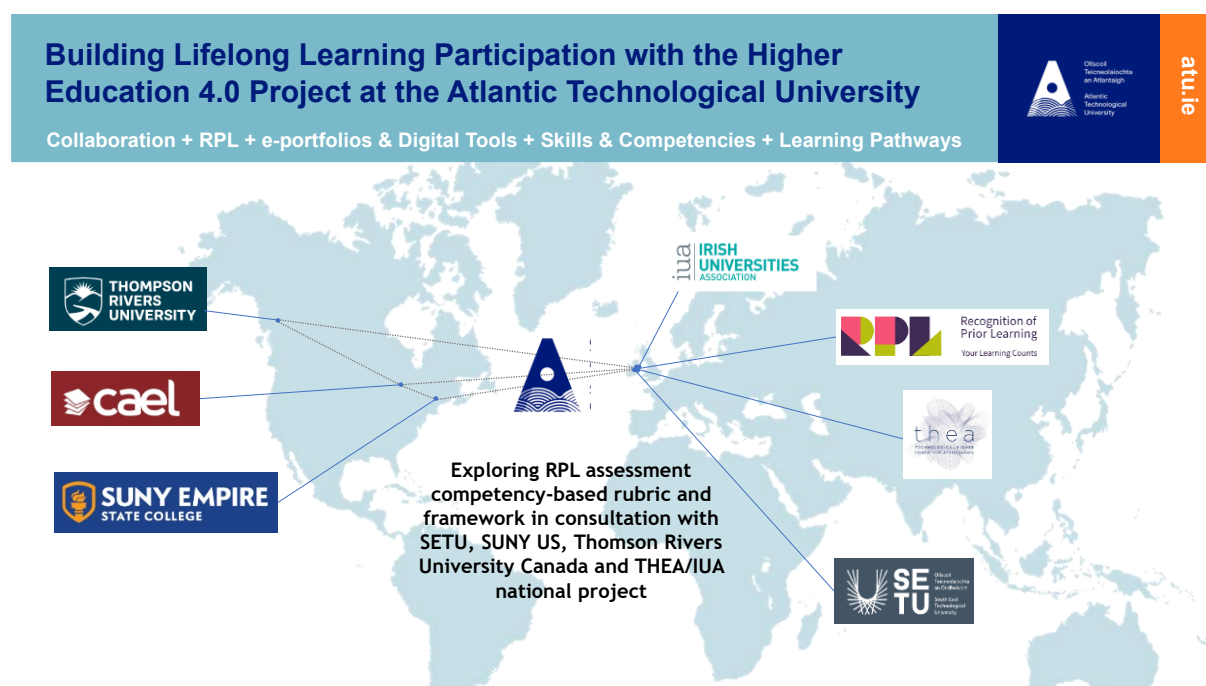
Working in collaboration with higher education partners in Ireland and internationally has enabled change and transformation in how we manage RPL (see Figure 7). Change agent partners in Ireland including ATU and SETU (South-East Technological University), in the US, the State University of New York (SUNY) and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), and in Canada, Thomson Rivers University (TRU), have delivered multiple opportunities and benefits to all involved. In addition, national higher education development organizations such as THEA and the IUA, and the RPL national funded project (see www.priorlearning.ie) are influencing policy development in RPL, a shared RPL framework, and a need to create accessible pathways into higher education.

Since establishing the MyExperience.ie RPL project back in 2012, change and enhancements have been driven through partnership, collaboration, and the need to involve multiple voices in building access opportunities into Higher Education through RPL. In particular, ATU has learned from SUNY and TRU, how the assessment process can be structured and made inclusive to all learners. Examining the value of competency-based assessment rubrics and competency-based portfolios of evidence is challenging ATU to develop new modes of assessing RPL and ensuring alignment with the National Framework of Qualifications award standards in Ireland.

Furthermore, there is a need to expand the range of learning and training resources to support RPL candidates. In response to this, ATU launched the MyCareerPath.ie platform in April 2022, and more than 254 industry learners have completed their career and learning pathway on www.mycareerpath.ie (as of November 2022). From May to November 2022, the learners logged in to the learning platform a total of 5,335 times and completed 26,368 activities as part of their career and learning pathway. A further, five specific industries, ranging from MedTech, ICT, Business, and Tourism within the region, are also engaging with the new ATU platform.

Overall, the feedback from RPL candidates engaging with the platform has been very positive with learners expressing that it has given them the confidence to take the next step in their careers, and they have learned a lot about themselves during this process. What's striking is how learners have all mentioned how much the pathways have helped their self-confidence and how they are now considering educational opportunities they would never have considered before. In addition, the process and case studies are informing enhancements to ATU's RPL assessment process, policies, and access to higher education initiatives.

**Figure 7:
ATU & Partners Driving Enhancement in RPL Experiences**



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Useful links

<https://atu.ie>

<https://www.myexperience.ie/>

<https://MyCareerPath.ie>

[Glossary:Lifelong learning \(LLL\) - Statistics Explained \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Lifelong_learning_(LLL)) and

[https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Lifelong learning \(LLL\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Lifelong_learning_(LLL))

<https://www.tru.ca/distance/plar-ol/plar-sample/plar-sample-1.html>

<https://www.cael.org/what-we-do/credit-predictor-pro>

The MyCareerPath platform can be accessed at www.mycareerpath.ie

An ATU RPL information site can be accessed at www.myexperience.ie

Information on the HigherEd 4.0 HCI themes is available at www.highered4.ie

About the Authors



Dr Carina Ginty is the Atlantic Technological University (ATU) lead for N-TUTORR Transforming Learning and Teaching and the N-TUTORR TU sector co-lead for student empowerment in higher education in Ireland. Funded by *NextGenerationEU* (value 38 million euro), the aim of this ambitious project is to transform teaching, learning and assessment through student

empowerment, building staff capabilities and developing the digital ecosystem in technological universities in Ireland. Working in HE since 2004, Carina has led the teaching and learning function across several campuses in ATU and initiated various national and local innovation projects in teaching, learning and assessment enhancement, digital transformation, digital pedagogies, student engagement and leadership. From 2019-2022 Carina led the development of DigitalEd.ie, a knowledge platform to build digital teaching and learning capabilities across all campuses of the ATU under iNOTE funded by the HEA innovation fund (value 2.9 million). Carina is also co-leading in the HigherEd 4.0 project (Human Capital Initiative Ireland, a higher education funded project valued at 12m euro 2021-2025) on the development of a career and learning pathway platform called MyCareerPath.ie and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessment for ATU, that is transforming access pathways to higher education.

Carina is a member of the EU Green Alliance Education Commission (funded by the EU Commission 2023-2026) and is leading a team tasked with the development of digital badges and micro-credentials for staff and students, across 9 European universities.

In 2022, Carina was awarded the President's Award for Outstanding Institutional Citizenship.



Gavin Clinch. After graduating from the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, Gavin practiced as an architect in the UK and Germany for 15 years. He joined ATU in 2001 as a lecturer in architecture and was centrally involved in the development and professional accreditation of a number of Degree and Master's Architecture programmes.

Gavin is Head of Online Learning Innovation at ATU. He leads the 'Higher Education 4.0' projects' Innovation Theme and is co-lead for the Career & Learning Pathways Service. His current work focuses on micro-credentials, assessment of learning, recognition of prior learning (RPL), and making HE more flexible and accessible.

Gavin is President of the Irish Learning Technology Association (ILTA).



Bridie Killoran is an ATU Career and Learning Pathways Manager (HCI HigherEd 4.0 Project) managing the establishment of a Regional Service for Careers and Learning Pathways, including Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for people in the workplace. She has over 18 years' experience of managing, developing, and delivering excellent outcomes for the careers advisory and guidance services in higher education and holds an MSc in Careers Guidance:

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