

Report on RPL for Access to Higher Education in Europe

A publication by the [European RPL Network](#)

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Pre-ambble

This report was developed by members of a working group of the [European RPL Network](#), with contributions and support from network members across participating higher education systems and stakeholder organizations (Austria, European University Association (EUA), Ireland, Malta, Poland, Scotland, Sweden). The different national approaches to the implementation of Recognition of prior learning (RPL) across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) provided an important starting point for discussions on the value, potential, and practical implementation of RPL for access to higher education. The evidence and experiences relating to the implementation and use of RPL for access to higher education were compiled and discussed by members of the working group throughout 2025, in preparation for the *European RPL Network Virtual Conference* on 4 November 2025. The paper reflects the outcomes of these discussions and the conference, including current developments in member countries and selected national case examples.

Target Groups

This report addresses higher education stakeholders at three levels:

- **Institutional level:** To support higher education institutions in putting the topic on their internal agenda and building bottom-up implementation capacity, for example through internal assessment procedures, staff training, and piloting practice within the scope of national regulations.
- **National level:** To encourage discussion on RPL for access to higher education and support potential developments and changes at the system level.
- **European level:** To raise awareness of the potential impact and benefits of using RPL for access to higher education and to provide an inspirational perspective on its contribution to more inclusive and flexible higher education pathways.

Disclaimer

This report reflects the consolidated views and discussions of the members of the European RPL Network and does not necessarily represent the position of any individual member organisation or institution.

Use of AI: AI tools were used to assist with language editing and proofreading. The contents of this report remain the responsibility of the authors.

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Inhalt

Pre-amble	2
1 Introduction	4
2 Terminological Considerations.....	4
3 Impact: RPL as a Catalyst for Inclusive Higher Education	5
4 The Status Quo at the European Level	7
Austria	8
Ireland.....	8
Malta	9
Poland	9
Scotland.....	9
Sweden.....	10
5 Enabling Success in RPL for Access	10
6 Conclusion.....	11
7 References	13

1 Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has gained increasing attention in both international and national debates, particularly in the context of lifelong learning. In this paper, RPL refers to the "validation of learning outcomes, namely knowledge, skills and competences acquired through non-formal and informal learning" (Council of the European Union, 2012, p. 1). In other words, nobody should be required to study something they already know. Prior learning may be recognised both during studies at higher education institutions and for access to higher education.

RPL has been integrated into policy documents at both European and national levels for decades, to enhance lifelong learning and enable flexible education pathways. It has taken on new significance since the renewed European political focus on skills development and lifelong learning, and is increasingly seen as a tool to improve access and progression in higher education for a diverse student population, including refugees and internally displaced people.

The European RPL Network is the association of national networks working on the topic of RPL. It was founded in 2023 in the context of the Erasmus+ project *INterconnection/INnovation/INclusion: Austrian contributions to the EHEA 2030 (3-IN-AT-PLUS)*, building on previous projects that had already begun connecting national initiatives on RPL so they could learn from and support one another. The network currently connects 15 countries and their national networks, European organisations and independent experts working on RPL, bringing together actors at the policy and practice levels. The network's core purpose is to enhance the use of RPL by supporting members in establishing, maintaining and fostering sustainable national networks and by generating added value for their members and participating institutions. Through this, it aims to contribute to European and national policy dialogue and strategy development, share RPL-related information, experience, and practice, and provide a common voice on RPL in higher education. This is particularly important as RPL remains a challenge in many countries despite existing policy support.

A common understanding of RPL and its benefits for society, individuals and higher education institutions (HEIs) is a key prerequisite for what the network aims to achieve: with RPL, an HEI recognises what a person already knows, understands and can do. To strengthen this common understanding, a working group of the European RPL Network focused from 2024 to 2025 on RPL for access to higher education. This report sets out to examine how RPL is applied for access to higher education across European countries, what it is useful for, and why it should be promoted. Following a definition of RPL for access and a discussion of its impact and challenges, the report presents case examples from Austria, Ireland, Malta, Poland, Scotland and Sweden and reflects on the results of discussions held during the virtual conference in November 2025.

2 Terminological Considerations

The European RPL Network understands RPL for access as an alternative route into higher education, based on an individual, case-by-case assessment of what an applicant already knows, understands and can do, distinct from standardised procedures with fixed entry requirements. Prior skills and knowledge gained through a combination of formal, non-formal

and informal learning can make up an applicant's eligibility for access to higher education, offering a flexible alternative to standard entry routes.

In this context, the distinction between *access* and *admission* should be noted as well, in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which distinguishes these two concepts as follows:

- *Access* (to higher education): The right of qualified candidates to apply and to be considered for admission to higher education (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997a, p. 2).
- *Admission* (to higher education institutions and programmes): The act of, or system for, allowing qualified applicants to pursue studies in higher education at a given institution and/or a given programme (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997a, p. 3).

RPL may thus increase the general eligibility of an applicant for a specific higher education institution (e.g. a university of applied sciences, due to prior work experience) or a specific study programme or course, while admission may nonetheless be competitive and the applicant ultimately denied because they do not fulfil specific admission criteria (e.g. a required minimum grade average) (Council of Europe & UNESCO, 1997b, pp. 5-6). This paper specifically covers RPL for access, which is different from RPL for progression (also called "RPL for credits"), by which RPL awards credits based on prior knowledge and skills, and thus provides exemption from specific courses and modules.

3 Impact: RPL as a Catalyst for Inclusive Higher Education

The integration of RPL as a means of accessing higher education holds transformative potential both for individuals and for the systems in which they study. RPL promotes equity and inclusivity by acknowledging that valuable learning takes place not only within formal education but also in workplaces, community settings, and everyday life. It challenges traditional entry barriers and opens pathways for a broader, more diverse population to participate in higher education.

Impact on Individuals

At the individual level, RPL provides recognition and validation to learners who have acquired substantial knowledge and skills through non-traditional routes. This can be particularly beneficial for:

- Adult learners seeking to re-enter or advance in education (National RPL Project, 2025; Uranis & Davis, 2020)
- Practitioners and workers with substantial vocational or industry experience but few or no formal credentials (National RPL Project, 2025)
- Migrants and refugees with informal qualifications or disrupted education (Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022)
- Learners from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022)

RPL can reduce duplication of learning, shorten the time needed to complete a qualification, and strengthen learners' motivation and self-worth (e.g. Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022). It also supports lifelong learning by enabling individuals to change direction, advance their careers,

or remain adaptable in a rapidly changing economy (National RPL Project, 2025; Uranis & Davis, 2020; Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022).

Beyond these practical benefits, RPL has an important psychological dimension. By validating existing competences, it can enhance confidence and self-belief and help learners feel recognised as capable rather than defined by what they lack in formal credentials (National RPL Project, 2025). This, in turn, is closely connected to well-being and social inclusion (De LaGarza & Staunton, 2025).

Systemic and Institutional Benefits

At the institutional level, RPL encourages universities to recognise knowledge as something that can be assessed and valued rather than only produced within formal education. At the system level, this can:

- Help achieve national goals for increasing participation in higher education and reducing educational inequalities (National RPL Project, 2025; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024b).
- Enhance institutional diversity, enriching classrooms with a wider range of perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences (National RPL Project, 2025).
- Better align education with labour market needs, especially by validating experiential and sector-specific learning (National RPL Project, 2025; Uranis & Davis, 2020).
- Foster innovation in admissions practices, encouraging institutions to develop more holistic and learner-centred frameworks (National RPL Project, 2025; Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022; Uranis & Davis, 2020).
- Bridge the gap between credentials acquired in the workplace and traditional postsecondary degrees (Uranis & Davis, 2020).

Societal and Economic Value

At a broader level, RPL helps societies make better use of existing human capital by reducing duplication in education and enabling faster upskilling in response to labour market change (Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022; Uranis & Davis, 2020; European Commission & Cedefop, 2024). In the context of digitalisation, automation, artificial intelligence, and climate change, it can support transitions toward greener and more digitally oriented economies, while also contributing to economic resilience (European Commission & Cedefop, 2024; National RPL Project, 2025).

RPL also has a clear equity dimension. Because learners from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are often channelled into educational pathways that do not lead directly to higher education, RPL can provide an important corrective to structural inequality (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024b). The same principle extends beyond Europe: by creating pathways for learners with informal qualifications or disrupted education, including migrants, refugees, and learners from the Global South, RPL can contribute to broader commitments associated with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (Meghnagi & Tuccio, 2022; National RPL Project, 2025).

4 The Status Quo at the European Level

Despite the well-documented benefits of RPL as an alternative route into higher education, its implementation for access remains relatively limited across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). While RPL has long been recognised within the Bologna Process as an important instrument for widening participation, promoting lifelong learning, and improving social inclusion, evidence suggests that its practical use for gaining access to higher education continues to be the exception rather than the norm.

The [2024 Bologna with Student Eyes report](#), which summarises survey responses from 37 national unions of students representing 33 EHEA countries, illustrates this implementation gap. According to the survey, only 17 higher education systems permit the use of RPL for enrolling in higher education, compared with 22 systems that allow RPL for progression within higher education once students have already been admitted (European Students' Union [ESU], 2024, pp. 101–106). Although these figures demonstrate some progress compared with previous years, they nevertheless indicate that RPL continues to be used more frequently as a mechanism for recognising prior learning within study programmes than as a means of opening access to higher education itself.

Interestingly, the figures reported by national unions of students are lower than those presented by ministries in the [2024 Bologna Process Implementation Report](#), according to which 21 higher education systems allow RPL for access to higher education (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024a, p. 126). The *Bologna with Student Eyes* report offers one possible explanation for this discrepancy, suggesting that student unions may have reported negatively in cases where RPL exists formally in legislation but is not genuinely accessible in practice (ESU, 2024, p. 102). In such cases, inadequate guidance, limited institutional awareness, or poorly developed procedures may render legal provisions largely ineffective for prospective applicants.

A further explanation may lie in the distinction between *access* and *admission*. As discussed above, RPL may provide individuals with the legal right to be considered for access to higher education without automatically leading to admission into a specific programme. Programme-specific admission requirements, institutional selection procedures, or capacity constraints may continue to restrict actual entry even where RPL is legally recognised as an access route (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2024b). The Swedish system exemplifies this distinction: while prior learning may establish an applicant's eligibility for higher education, admission to oversubscribed programmes remains subject to separate selection procedures. Evidence from the European University Association's *Trends 2024 report* supports this interpretation. Based on survey responses from 489 higher education institutions across the EHEA, the report found that only 21% of institutions use RPL as part of their admissions procedures, despite describing RPL as "a longstanding Bologna Process commitment" (Gaebel et al., 2024, p. 66). Importantly, the *Trends* survey focused on institutional practice rather than national legislation. Consequently, its findings demonstrate that legal frameworks alone are insufficient to guarantee implementation. Even where legislation permits RPL for access, these provisions may not be operationalised in institutional practice, resulting in limited opportunities for prospective learners. This distinction between legal possibility and institutional practice highlights one of the central challenges for the effective implementation of RPL for access across Europe.

To illustrate the diversity of existing national approaches to implementing RPL for access to higher education, a selection of examples from network members is provided below.

Austria

In Austria, access to higher education without a traditional school-leaving certificate (*Matura*) has long been institutionally established through fixed requirements and standardised examinations. The *Studienberechtigungsprüfung* grants access to a group of related fields of study, the *Berufsreifeprüfung* provides the general higher education entrance qualification, and applicants to Universities of Applied Sciences may also qualify through a relevant vocational qualification combined with supplementary examinations, as outlined in [§ 4 of the University of Applied Sciences Act](#). However, Austria has no general national route that grants access on the basis of an individual assessment of competences. The only exception to date is a single university of applied sciences, which offers a competence-based alternative to the vocational qualification requirement: applicants' competences are assessed against a predefined entry competence profile of the bachelor programme. A positive outcome does not secure a study place but merely opens the way to the selection procedure. Austria's [Strategy for the Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning](#) provides the policy framework for validation more broadly. Despite the absence of a legal framework for RPL for access for public and private universities as well as teacher education institutions, higher education law includes provisions for RPL for progression for all higher education sectors. The implementation of RPL in higher education is supported by the [RPL Network Austria](#) which is coordinated by the [Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria \(AQ Austria\)](#).

Ireland

In Ireland, the statutory basis for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is principally found in the [Qualifications and Quality Assurance \(Education and Training\) Act 2012](#). In particular, section 56 requires providers' access, transfer and progression procedures to include procedures for the identification and formal assessment of learners' previously acquired knowledge, skills and competence. The Act also gives [Quality and Qualifications Ireland \(QQI\)](#) responsibility for establishing policies and criteria for [access, transfer and progression](#) and for monitoring their implementation. QQI's policy framework consequently provides for the recognition of prior learning, including formal, non-formal and informal learning, while the [National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\)](#) provides the overarching outcomes-based framework within which qualifications and progression are understood.

RPL has also been embedded in national higher-education policy. The [National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030](#) identified RPL as particularly important to flexible and workplace learning and called for the development of a national RPL framework. More recently, the [National Access Plan 2022–2028](#) identifies the development of a national approach to RPL and other prior-learning outcomes as an action for which the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) has responsibility. The Plan's 2026 mid-term review notes the implementation of the HCI-funded National RPL in Higher Education Project and the continued development and rollout of a National RPL Framework, alongside QQI's work to scope a national approach to RPL in tertiary education.

Since 2020, this policy context has been supported by the [National RPL in Higher Education Project](#), a five-year project funded through the Higher Education Authority's Human Capital Initiative (HCI) Pillar 3 and delivered through 14 partner higher education institutions, in

collaboration with the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and the Technological Universities Association (TUA). The project has sought to embed and streamline RPL, strengthen staff capacity, and develop more consistent approaches to RPL across higher education. By early 2025, the project reported that approximately 12,000 learners had benefited from RPL across the partner institutions, while its work had also produced a Pilot Framework for RPL in Higher Education and significant staff-development activity through the Digital Badge in RPL, which is offered through the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (NFETL) Open Courses. As of August 2026, 489 staff across the sector had been issued with a badge.

Malta

In Malta, RPL provides an alternative route into higher education for individuals who have acquired knowledge and skills through non-formal and informal learning. RPL is grounded in the Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning Regulations ([S.L. 607.04](#)), which task the [Malta Further and Higher Education Authority](#) (MFHEA) with assessing and recognizing prior learning against occupational and qualification standards. MFHEA expects institutions to take an open and inclusive approach to these alternative forms of learning: candidates submit evidence of prior learning, typically in portfolio form, which is then assessed against the learning outcomes of the programme they wish to enter. This approach broadens access to higher education, giving non-traditional students an established route into academic study.

Poland

In Polish higher education, RPL is regulated as *potwierdzenie efektów uczenia się* ("confirmation of learning outcomes"). Under Article 71 of the [Act of 20 July 2018, Law on Higher Education and Science](#) institutions may assess learning acquired outside higher education against the learning outcomes of a specific study programme, level and profile. Eligible applicants can use the result in a dedicated admission route and, once admitted, to have corresponding parts of the programme recognised. The route does not replace the general legal requirements for access to higher education, may not cover more than 50% of a programme's ECTS credits, and students admitted this way may make up no more than 20% of those on the relevant programme, level and profile. Programmes preparing for professions covered by national education standards under the Act are excluded. Universities set the detailed procedures, so visibility and accessibility vary considerably. The route should be distinguished from validation in the Integrated Qualifications System (ZSK), which leads to a qualification certificate, not to university admission or ECTS credits. Consistent national data on actual use are lacking, so existing regulations demonstrate formal capacity rather than actual reach.

Scotland

No single organisation directs RPL in Scotland, and there is no national strategy or learner entitlement to it; each institution sets its own policies, resulting in considerable variation across the sector. [QAA Scotland](#) has developed a [Framework for RPL](#) for the tertiary sector, and the SCQF Partnership (SCQFP), custodian of the [Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework](#) (SCQF), sets out RPL principles in the [SCQF Handbook](#), which is used by institutions with the authority to allocate SCQF levels and credit. RPL for access is nonetheless well established as a principle, including in sector-specific projects for refugees and military service leavers, and recent government reviews have highlighted its use to avoid repetition of learning already undertaken. In 2025, the Scottish Government began work with SCQFP's support to explore a national RPL strategy. One established route is Higher National

Certificates and Diplomas (vocational qualifications studied at college), which give access to university degree programmes, usually at the second or third year, referred to in Scotland as "articulation".

Sweden

The [Swedish Higher Education Ordinance](#) entitles learners to be considered for a course or programme even if they do not meet the formal entry requirements, most of which are based on specific upper-secondary subjects (e.g. English, mathematics). Where these requirements are not met, learners can instead apply by referring to other documented prior learning, experience and accumulated competence; the responsible university then assesses this against the entry requirements and decides whether the applicant qualifies. Sweden has a centralised system for admission to almost all HE courses and programmes. However, there is no nationally defined application process for RPL, so practice differs across universities and even within the same institution: some make an overall assessment based on documentation alone, while others include interviews or tests. For many courses, however, there are more applicants than places, so a merit rating is typically used to allocate them competitively; a prior-learning assessment does not generate such a rating, so applicants are recommended to also take the Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test (Högskoleprovet).

5 Enabling Success in RPL for Access

Factors supporting the implementation of RPL mirror many of the barriers identified above, suggesting that successful systems are characterised by coherence across policy, institutional practice, and stakeholder engagement. These factors, outlined below, help to foster RPL for access specifically, as well as RPL more generally.

- Clear **national frameworks** provide an important foundation. National guidance that establishes transparent principles, procedures, and quality assurance mechanisms gives institutions greater confidence in implementing RPL while promoting greater consistency across the higher education system. For example, Malta's national guidelines for the recognition of prior learning illustrate how a structured framework can support institutional practice, while broader policy commitments to lifelong learning further reinforce the legitimacy of alternative learning pathways.
- However, policy frameworks alone are insufficient. Effective implementation also requires sustained **institutional support, capacity building, and the active promotion of RPL**. Scotland provides an example of this broader ecosystem approach through the work of the SCQFP, which has combined national guidance with professional development activities, dissemination of good practice, practical resources, and dedicated information for learners, educators, and employers. Initiatives such as the SCQF Recognition of Prior Learning Hub demonstrate how continuous support can strengthen institutional confidence while improving transparency and accessibility for prospective applicants.
- **Collaboration** between higher education institutions, vocational education and training providers, employers, and quality assurance bodies also emerges as an important enabling factor, as seen in Ireland through the Irish RPL Practitioner

Network, which was established in 2015. More recently, collaboration through the National RPL in HE Project (2020–2026) has seen the adoption of a Pilot Framework for RPL and an agreed Technical Data Definition of RPL among the 14 partner HEIs involved in the project. Such cooperation contributes to greater trust in assessment processes, improves the comparability of learning outcomes across sectors, and helps ensure that RPL remains responsive to evolving educational and labour market needs. Equally important is sustained investment in assessor training and institutional expertise, allowing staff to evaluate non-formal and experiential learning in a consistent, credible, and transparent manner.

These enabling conditions describe what emerging good practice suggests works well, but they also expose how little hard data there is. Despite growing policy attention, relatively little systematic evidence exists regarding the implementation and impact of RPL for access across the EHEA. Discussions within the European RPL Network identified several **priorities for future evidence collection**:

- There is a need for more comprehensive and comparable **data on the use of RPL for access**. Existing international reports provide valuable information on legislative frameworks and institutional policies, but relatively little is known about the number of applicants, admission rates, learner progression, or longer-term outcomes.
- Greater attention should be paid to **communication and promotion**. Future research should examine how actively RPL opportunities are communicated at national and institutional levels, whether information provided to prospective learners is consistent and accessible, and how communication strategies influence participation.
- **Systematic evaluation of RPL initiatives** remains underdeveloped. More evidence is needed on how institutions assess the effectiveness, quality, and fairness of RPL procedures, as well as how evaluation findings inform continuous improvement.
- Finally, research should move beyond implementation to consider broader **societal impact**. While RPL is frequently discussed in terms of widening participation and supporting individual learners, it may also contribute to workforce development, improved utilisation of existing skills, greater institutional diversity, and enhanced economic competitiveness. Understanding these wider impacts will be essential for demonstrating the long-term value of RPL as a strategic component of lifelong learning policy.

6 Conclusion

This report set out to examine how RPL is applied for access to higher education across European countries and why it matters. The underlying principle is a simple one: nobody should be required to learn what they already know. Translating that principle into practice, however, is still under development.

The impact of RPL for access reaches across different levels. For learners, it offers recognition, reduces duplication of learning, and can increase confidence and motivation, particularly for adult learners, migrants and refugees, and those without formal credentials. For institutions, it encourages a broader understanding of where valuable learning takes place and can increase diversity within higher education. For societies, it offers a way to make better use of existing human capital in the face of demographic, economic and labour-market changes.

The country cases illustrate how differently RPL is put into practice. Some countries ground RPL for access in dedicated statutory frameworks and track its use in detail, as in Ireland; others rely on institutional policy within a national quality framework, as in Malta and Poland; others leave implementation more to individual institutions, as in Scotland and Sweden. In Austria, genuine RPL-based access remains far narrower than long-established standardised alternatives, a reminder that RPL for access should not be assumed just from the presence of non-traditional entry routes.

As has been shown, legal frameworks provide the essential foundation for RPL for access but are insufficient on their own. Effective implementation depends equally on institutional commitment, good operational guidance, robust quality assurance, trained assessors, stakeholder collaboration and accessible information, as well as a solid base of evidence for understanding what works, at what scale and for whom. This evidence base, however, remains thin. Addressing these interconnected dimensions, and closing the evidence gaps identified above, will be essential if RPL is to fulfil its potential as a meaningful and equitable pathway into higher education across the European Higher Education Area.

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