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## BUILDING LIFELONG LEARNING PARTICIPATION WITH THE HIGHER EDUCATION 4.0 PROJECT AT THE ATLANTIC TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY IN IRELAND: RECOGNISING 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 Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) and the development of personalised career and learning pathways. This new university service is delivered through an online platform at [www.mycareerpath.ie](http://www.mycareerpath.ie) and an RPL information site for the ATU at [www.myexperience.ie](http://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, industry pilot case exemplars will be discussed and 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, Recognised Prior Learning (RPL), RPL Assessment, Career Guidance, Digital Education, Online Learning.

### Introduction to ATU

Atlantic Technological University (ATU) is one of the largest multi-campus universities in Ireland, serving a diverse group of learners, staff, communities and organisations from the west and north-west region 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](http://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 collaborative approach ensures that ATU deliver practice-orientated study, and research that seeks to address the major challenges facing society and the world. ATU are 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 a value and this provides opportunities for advanced entry to a further or higher education programme and/or awarding credits for elements within programmes and 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 towards learning outcomes. This student-centred 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 onto a programme or seek exemptions from parts of a programme at ATU. The project outputs to date include: the development of an information website at [www.myexperience.ie](http://www.myexperience.ie); a RPL online ePortfolio assessment tool at [www.rplportfolio.ie](http://www.rplportfolio.ie); the development of an open online educational course for staff working in higher education available to access at [www.cpdlearnonline.ie](http://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.

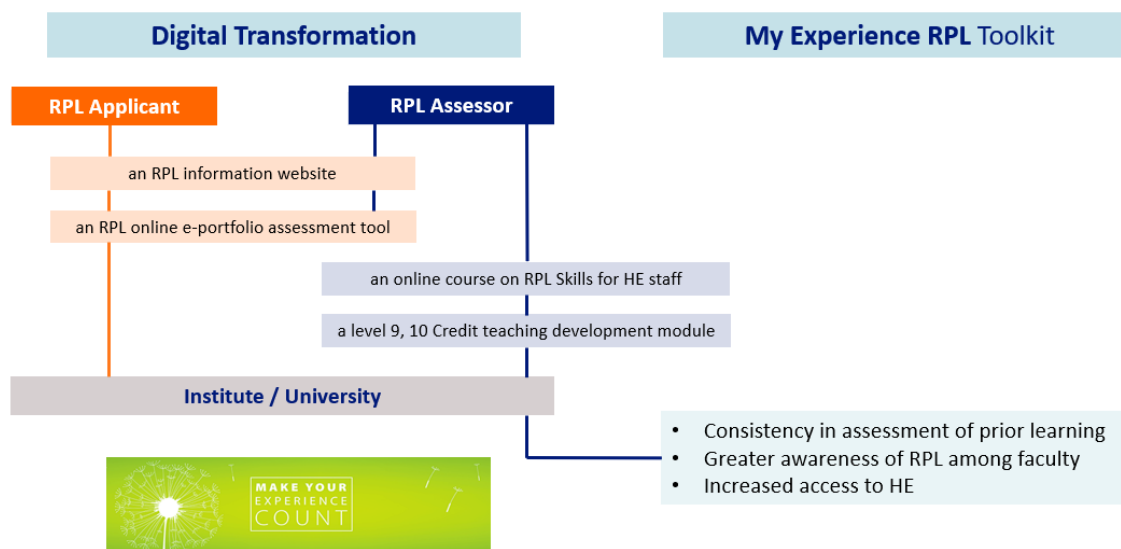
### **About the My Experience RPL Toolkit**

A dedicated information website at [www.myexperience.ie](http://www.myexperience.ie) was created to provide relevant information on RPL through short videos and text. The website defines the different mechanism 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](http://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 of 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 programme at ATU, I was made aware of the [www.myexperience.ie](http://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](http://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 realising the importance of my experience and skillset, I sometimes took for granted”.

## Background and Growth of Online Learning at ATU

ATU delivered its first online programme, 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 programmes 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 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 programmes 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 programmes. Another collaborative programme 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 Recognised 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 for 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 (fulfilment)
- Pathway 5: Entrepreneur (innovator)

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

Figure 3: Customising the needs of employees at each stage of career development

	Who I am?	What I bring?	What I need?	Mycareerpath.ie supports
<b>New Beginnings</b>	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
<b>Career Accelerator</b>	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.
<b>Career Mastery</b>	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.
<b>Dream Builder</b>	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.
<b>Entrepreneur</b>	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.

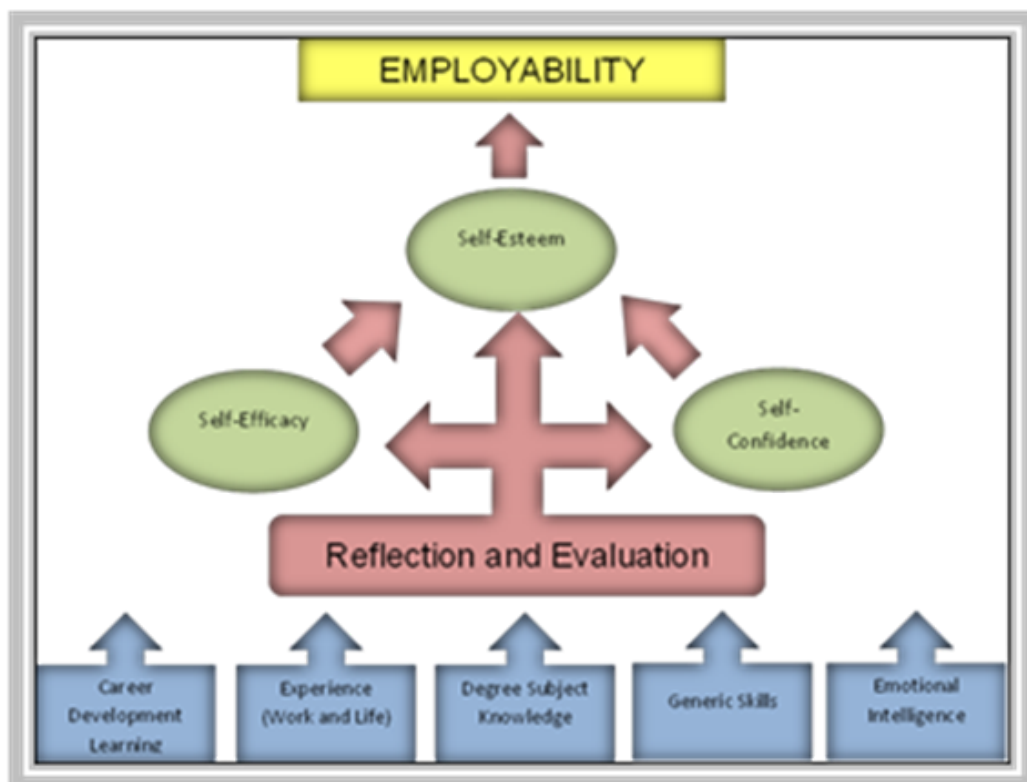
We measure the learners' employability both at the beginning and at the end of their learning pathway and incorporate actions on how to enhance the 5 key areas of employability. The employability model that underpins the MyCareerPath.ie AI (artificial intelligence) assessment is based on the CareerEDGE model, developed by Darce, Pool and 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)



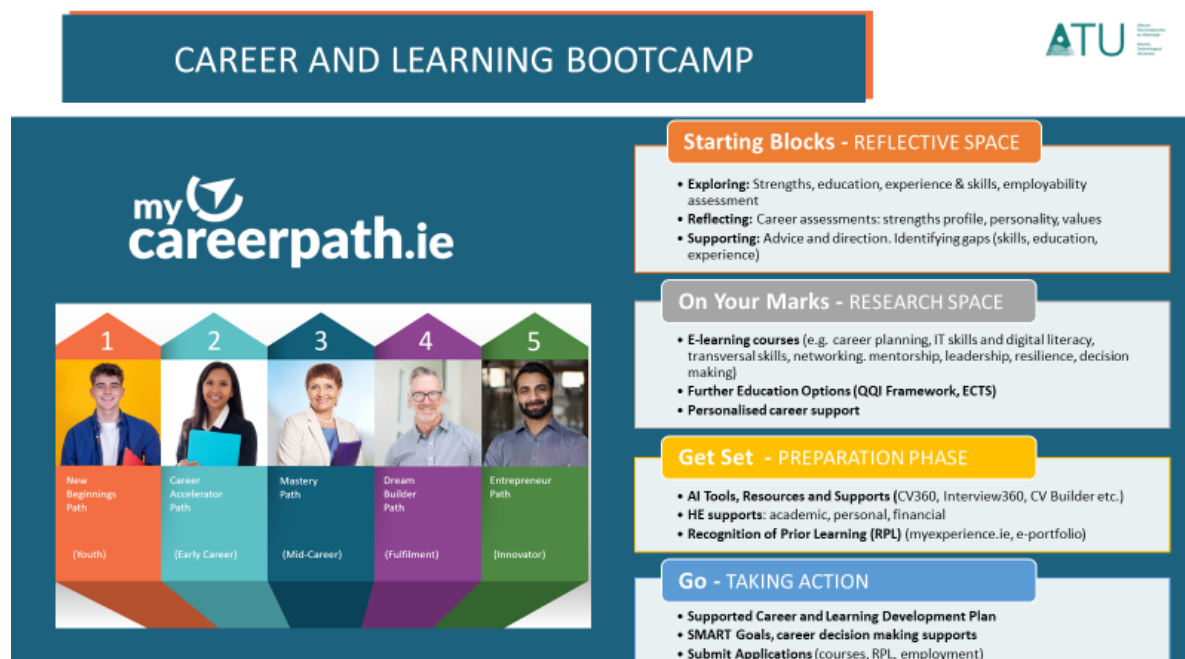


All Learners are brought through a 4-stage developmental programme with the help of the most up to-date e-learning tools and assessments as well as support from Careers and Learning Pathways Advisers (CLPAs) and RPL Co-Ordinators (see Figure 5). Each Learning Pathway incorporates a process of self-discovery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

The materials provided offer access to an innovative platform with customised 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) labour 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 point 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 recognised learning. Most of all, RPL candidates need guidance on mapping experiential learning experiences to learning outcomes on the national qualifications award standards.

The 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 region of Ireland. Through 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 programme 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. This 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)

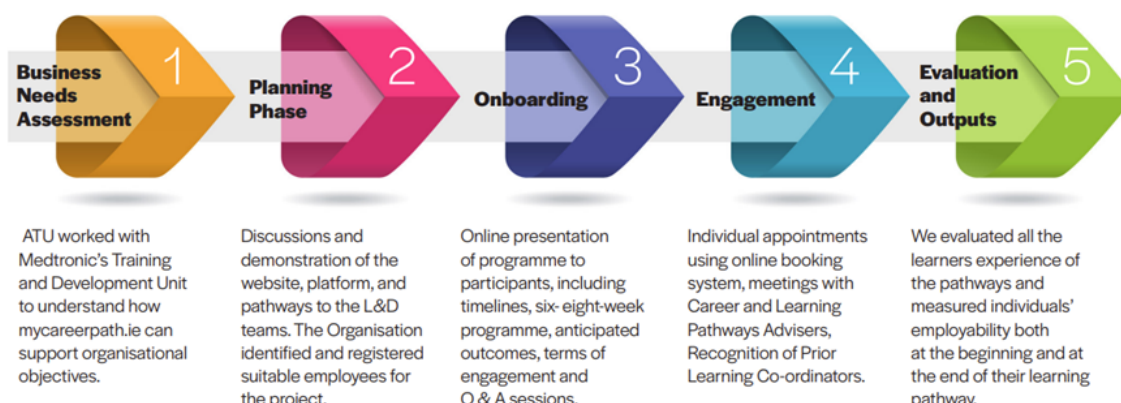
## CASE STUDY SUMMARY

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

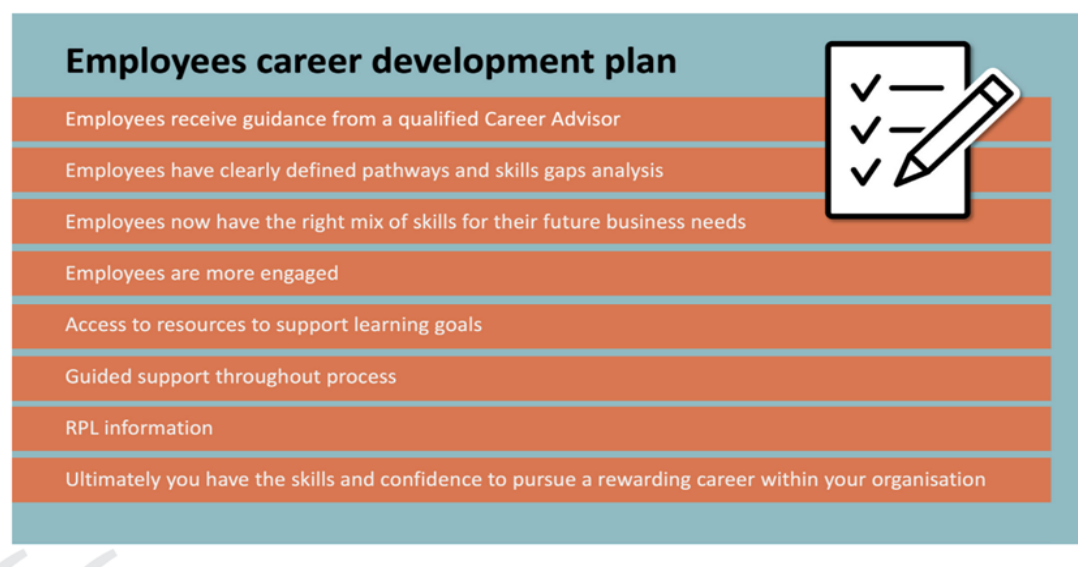
**Medtronic**



## WHAT WE DID



## OUTPUT FROM THE PROCESS



### 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 CAEL, and in Canada Thomson Rivers University (TRU), have delivered multiple opportunities and benefits to all involved. In addition, national higher education development organisations such as THEA and the IUA and the RPL national funded project (see [www.priorlearning.ie](http://www.priorlearning.ie)) is influencing policy development in RPL, a shared RPL framework and a need to create accessible pathways into higher education.

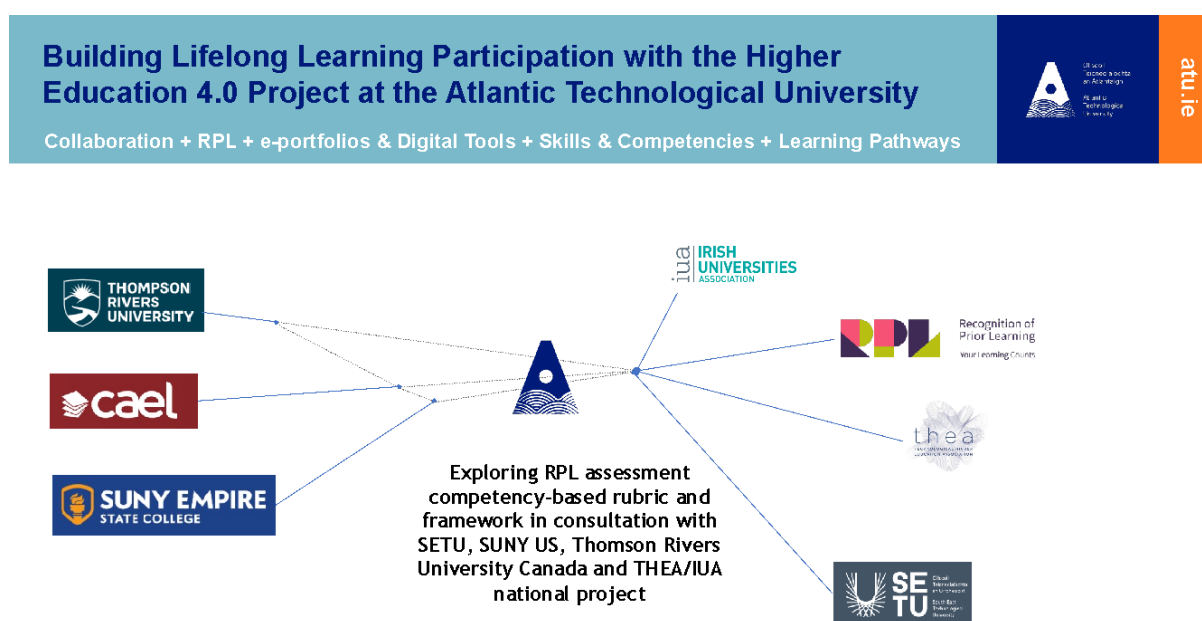
Since establishing the MyExperience.ie RPL project back in 2012, change and enhancements have been driven through partnership, collaboration and the need to involve multiple voices in building access opportunities into Higher Education through RPL. In particular, ATU has learned from SUNY and TRU, on how the assessment process can be structured and made inclusive to all learners. Through examining the value of competency based assessment rubrics and competency based portfolios of evidence, this 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](http://www.mycareerpath.ie) (as at November 2022). From May to November 2022, the learners have logged in to the learning platform a total of 5,335 times and have 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 career and they have learnt 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 the 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 \(europa.eu\)](#) 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](http://www.mycareerpath.ie)  
 An ATU RPL information site can be accessed at [www.myexperience.ie](http://www.myexperience.ie)  
 Information on the HigherEd 4.0 HCI themes is available at [www.highered4.ie](http://www.highered4.ie)