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# **Recognising Prior Learning (RPL) in New Zealand's Food & Fibre Industry: Current State & Good Practices**

## **Milestone Report**

20 May 2025

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# Executive Summary

## Purpose of the Report

This report investigates the current state of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) across New Zealand's Food and Fibre sector. It aims to identify existing good practices and inform future improvements in how RPL is supported and implemented.

## Background

To understand how RPL is currently used and perceived, insights were gathered through interviews with 30 individuals across the sector, including education providers, employers, iwi operated trusts, and others with strategic or operational roles. While the findings may not represent the entire national picture, strong patterns emerged that aligned with each other, with recent findings based on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Delivery and Assessment Report (Food & Fibre CoVE, 2024),<sup>1</sup> and with several international studies on RPL. As well as exploring the current status of RPL in New Zealand in the Food & Fibre sector, international studies and good practices were reviewed against the Vocational Excellence RPL Rubric developed in Phase 2 of this study to determine potential next steps for this project.

## Key findings

The report identifies the following key findings.

1. Most employers and iwi operated trusts have little or no knowledge of RPL.
2. Although all providers interviewed understand the RPL process, less than half use it often and almost all take a compliance-based approach as required
3. The most common constraint given by providers is the time involved to carry out RPL and the lack of funding.
4. Barriers exist around initiating the RPL process. Learners and employers believe the process is challenging, and some providers believe the process carries risk.
5. Gathering documentation for RPL is often considered to be unwieldy and challenging for both learners and providers.
6. There is a commonly held belief that RPL is not relevant to the Food and Fibre sector.
7. Internationally, advocacy for and promotion of RPL is prioritised and Centres of RPL Excellence are common.
8. Internationally there is often a purpose-driven approach to RPL led by government and industry.
9. Digital tools are available that have the potential to speed up the RPL process.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://foodandfibrecove.nz/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/21st-Century-Delivery-and-Assessment-Full-Report.pdf>

## **Suggested Next Steps**

Three key opportunities were identified to enhance RPL in the Food and Fibre sector.

1. Improved RPL funding, guidance and RPL-capable assessors.
2. Enhanced tools for gathering documentation and assessment.
3. Purpose driven RPL projects to embed tried and proven RPL practices across the sector.

## What is RPL (Recognised Prior Learning)?

In New Zealand learners have an opportunity to have their prior skills and experience recognised towards gaining a qualification or credential. This process, known as Recognised Prior Learning (RPL), is intended to help learners avoid repeating what they already know, allowing them to complete qualifications more efficiently.

NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Authority) describes RPL as a learner's existing skills and knowledge recognised as equivalent to those taught in a formal education setting. The learner's existing skills and knowledge may be gained through work (paid or voluntary), independent study or informal learning and life experience. RPL is used to award credits toward a qualification.

There is another method for recognising learning for credit defined by NZQA as CRT (Credit Recognition and Transfer). CRT generally describes gaining credit from formal learning that has been provided and credentialed by another tertiary provider. For example: an overseas student seeking recognition of formal learning from their home country.

This distinction between RPL (informal learning) and CRT (formal learning) is consistent with international practice. This report focuses mainly on RPL or gaining credit for informal learning.

## Project Aims & Methodology

The original aim of this research project was to explore whether providing clearer RPL guidance for both assessors and learners along with the use of digital tools such as pre-screening tools for learners and AI assistance for assessors, could:

- enhance the consistency of RPL assessments,
- increase the competency of assessors, and
- reduce the time required for both assessors and learners in the RPL application process.

This milestone report summarises the first two phases of the project below.

### **Phase 1: Understanding the current status of RPL in the Food & Fibre sector**

This phase focused on exploring the current use of RPL across the Food and Fibre industry and tertiary education organisations (TEOs), by:

- establishing current demand and use of RPL
- identifying industries, sectors or qualifications where RPL is most used or needed
- identifying common enablers and constraints for implementing RPL

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with:

- education providers – 9 organisations (13 individuals), including work-based and provider-based delivery models across New Zealand (ITPs, Wananga, PTEs and ITOs). Māori perspectives were represented.
- employers – 9 businesses (11 individuals) from across New Zealand, including viticulture and winemaking (1), forestry (3), sheep and beef (3), apiculture (1), and aquaculture (1).
- iwi representatives – 2 groups (4 individuals), based in the North Island.
- other stakeholders – 3 individuals in strategic roles, including an independent assessor and two others with experience of RPL at a provider level.

### **Phase 2: Identifying RPL good practices**

This phase involved:

- based on Food and Fibre CoVE's existing suite of Vocational Excellence rubrics<sup>2</sup>, developing a draft rubric outlining what 'acceptable', 'good' and 'excellent' RPL practice could look like in the future
- a literature review of national and international RPL models

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<sup>2</sup> <https://foodandfibrecove.nz/vocational-excellence-rubrics/>

- identifying digital tools to support quality and efficiency in RPL and refining the rubric as appropriate.

## **The Six Conditions of Systems Change**

Although the aim of this research project focuses primarily on RPL practices, this milestone report explores all six conditions of systems change: policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models as defined by Kania, Kramer and Senge (2018).<sup>3</sup> The intent is to identify any underlying interconnected conditions that may promote the implementation of RPL in the Food and Fibre sector in New Zealand.

The table below describes the six conditions of systems change and how they apply to the context of RPL.

### **Six Conditions of Systems Change and RPL**

Policies	The formal and informal rules, funding settings, and priorities that influence how RPL is recognised, valued, and supported across the education and employment sectors.
Practices	The approaches, processes, and tools used for the process of RPL.
Resource flows	How funding, time, expertise, and information are directed to support RPL processes.
Relationships & connections	The quality of collaboration, communication, and trust between learners, providers, employers, industry bodies, and regulatory agencies involved in RPL.
Power dynamics	Who has the authority to approve, influence, or block the use of RPL.

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<sup>3</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The six conditions of systems change: Policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 16(1), 36-45. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_six\\_conditions\\_of\\_systems\\_change](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_six_conditions_of_systems_change)

Mental models	The underlying beliefs and assumptions people hold about RPL.
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## The Vocational Excellence RPL Rubric

As part of **Phase 2: Identifying RPL good practices**, and before starting the literature review, it was important that there was an understanding of what good practice could or should look like. The Food and Fibre CoVE has created several Vocation Excellence Rubrics as part of previous research projects, so this provided both a framework and approved examples to build from.

By analysing these existing rubrics and identifying the most relevant indicators for RPL, a draft Rubric was created (see Appendix 1). This draft was then used to guide the international literature review about RPL and was subsequently refined as insights emerged during that process.

The rubric outlines key components of effective RPL practice, reflecting the perspectives and needs of learners, employers, and providers. A brief description of the four components of the rubric, associated key words and examples are provided below.

**Participation:** Informed learners, employers, and providers are more likely to engage with RPL.

Key words: *informed, tools and support*

Example: A regional horticulture provider includes a short RPL explainer video in its enrolment process which helps employers and learners identify when RPL might be relevant. This leads to an increase in RPL applications from seasonal workers with years of experience but no formal qualification.

**Access:** Equity of access is supported by flexible, adaptable processes that reduce common barriers.

Key words: *flexible, adaptable, barriers mitigated*

Example: A forestry provider allows learners to submit video evidence of their skills from the job site, rather than requiring written portfolios. This approach helps workers with lower literacy levels demonstrate competence more confidently.

**System:** Consistent, transparent assessment practices ensure RPL responds to both learner's needs and industry requirements.

Key words: *transparent, culturally responsive, reviewed, meets industry needs*

Example: A provider develops a clear set of RPL assessment criteria aligned with industry standards, which are reviewed annually with input from both Māori and non-Māori industry representatives. This helps ensure assessments are both robust and culturally responsive.

**Funding:** Funding is stable and not a barrier to learners, providers and employers.

Key words: *self-sustaining, recognised value*

Example: The provider sets an affordable RPL fee as it can cover costs due to a centralised funding model. An aquaculture employer covers the remaining cost of RPL assessments as part of an internal career progression pathway, recognising that this investment helps retain experienced staff.

# Current RPL Landscape

## Limited Stakeholder Awareness and Data Availability

### Do they know what RPL is?

Although representatives from all nine providers said they understood the RPL process, only those from the ITPs said they use it routinely. ITPs representatives said they mainly use RPL alongside CRT to grant advanced standing toward degrees (typically in management-related programmes). These ITP representatives reported supporting hundreds of learners through the RPL process. This is in contrast with three other non-ITP providers reporting that they had only used RPL for one learner or less in the past year.

Most employers and iwi operated trusts had little or no knowledge of RPL, and several employers commented along the lines of ‘RPL is something we used to do.’ In one case, an employer reported being told by a non-Food and Fibre sector provider that ‘we don’t do RPL anymore’.

When RPL was explained to employers during interviews, six out of nine employers said they use a similar process or could see the potential of using the RPL process for their own internal recruitment, benchmarking, and succession planning. This highlights the value of RPL beyond formal qualifications, where verifying competencies is often more critical than obtaining a credential itself.

Only one employer from the forestry sector knew about the RPL process. The employer explained that ten years ago he had wanted his staff to be qualified to support tender applications. He also wanted them to have a recognised qualification they could take with them anywhere in New Zealand. At the time, he knew his employees didn't have the literacy to do the whole programme and were therefore unlikely to be motivated to complete it themselves.

He reported that while it took time to gather evidence to fulfill the requirements for a Level 4 Civil Works programme, the RPL process was still better for his employees than doing the whole programme from scratch.

*“I thought this was going to be an easier way for guys to learn, a great way for them to get on board and get it done, rather than have to go through what I did...you know studying for three weeks instead of two years is nothing.”*

(Employer 1)

The table below summarises RPL awareness and use among different stakeholder groups based on interview findings.

### Stakeholder Awareness and Use of RPL (Based on Interview Data)

	Providers	Employers	Iwi operated Trusts	Other*
Familiar – use it often	4			
Knowledge of – may have used	5	1		3
Some knowledge – never used		2	1	
No knowledge		6	1	
Want to learn more – or uses a version of RPL for recruitment, benchmarking or succession planning		6		

\* ‘Other’ includes strategic stakeholders, an independent assessor, and individuals with previous provider experience.

### Limited data availability

There is no centralised collection of RPL usage data in New Zealand.

Internationally it is a similar story around collection of RPL data. Neatly packaged, comparable data on RPL completion is not readily available. However, below are three countries where some form of RPL implementation has been measured.

- A USA-based study of 232,000 adult students, across 69 institutes from 2020 suggested 4% of entering adult students earn RPL credit. This figure rises to 11% when students with Military training are included.<sup>4</sup>
- In 2024 a centrally led initiative in Ireland to increase RPL use across 14 institutions resulted in a 18.7% increase from the previous year (over 4500 learners). This project is ongoing.<sup>5</sup>
- In Australia the national aggregate figure for successful ‘at enrolment’ RPL is around 4%. However, two sources suggest the true figure is likely to be greater

<sup>4</sup> [CAEL | About Us | What We Do](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Home | Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\)](#)

than this, as accelerated learning or progression across the full range of providers, is not captured.<sup>6 7</sup>

The literature review indicated several countries where RPL found to be active. These include: Australia, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and South Africa. However, studies suggest that the use of RPL is not always consistent over longer periods of time. In Switzerland RPL is believed to offer several benefits, however its implementation has not fully met educational policy expectations, with far fewer individuals gaining qualifications through RPL than initially anticipated.<sup>8</sup>

## Demand for RPL within the Food and Fibre Sector

### Previous or current demand

Providers who were interviewed reported that there had been a small number of requests for advanced entry or RPL for NZQA Level 2-4 (mainly work based or work integrated) programmes, however in most cases, this was 10 years ago or more.

Of those providers familiar with RPL or using it often, most requests for RPL were from learners for advanced entry into higher level degrees, for example the Bachelor of Applied Management, or other employer-related online or on-campus programmes offered by providers. Only one provider mentioned learners applying for advanced standing for a food and fibre related degree – the Bachelor of Viticulture & Winemaking.

Despite not using RPL regularly, one provider representative could see the value of it.

*I'm teaching a Quality Management paper (for another provider). I'm teaching that to people who have got international certification in the Japanese quality system (...) and it's just ridiculous. I learn more in that class than (...) they do I think, but they have to (do it) to get their qualification."*

(Provider 6)

In the dairy sector, there had been a demand previously by an industry body for farmers to gain agribusiness diplomas. Research had shown that farmers with this qualification were more likely to improve sustainability and employer practices. However, the huge burden on the learner to collect a vast amount of evidence for the RPL process was challenging, and farmers did not fully understand the value proposition of gaining the diploma. There was also a belief that it was important for the provider to have a strong

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<sup>6</sup> Wendy C, Australian RPL expert, personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>7</sup> Bowman, K., Clayton, B., Bateman, A., Knight, B., Thomson, P., Hargreaves, J., Blom, K., & Enders, M. (2003). *Recognition of prior learning in the vocational education and training sector*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research

<sup>8</sup> Maurer, M. (2019). The challenges of expanding recognition of prior learning (RPL) in a collectively organised skill formation system: The case of Switzerland. *Journal of Education and Work*, 32(8), 665–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2019.1694141>

relationship with employers and be on the same page in terms of carrying out RPL effectively and efficiently.

### **Potential demand?**

Although there was limited demand for RPL in the Food and Fibre sector in general, some employers spoke about the potential of RPL for career mobility, compliance and social investment.

Career mobility as a potential driver for RPL was spoken about the most by those interviewed. Types of career mobility in the food and fibre industries that were spoken about include:

- forestry workers who may seek to transition into roles such as arborists or move into civil construction
- workers returning from Australia, potentially seeking RPL to enter the food and fibre industries in New Zealand based on their experience and prior learning (e.g., miners, chainsaw operators, agricultural machinery operators)
- international students may also look to RPL to gain advanced standing in food and fibre degree programmes.

Compliance and competency-related motivations, such as workers holding necessary certifications to meet safety and legal requirements was discussed as another potential driver by one employer. An example given was forestry workers requiring a certificate to confirm they were competent, safe workers. For this employer, there was a belief that fast tracking compliance or competencies could improve productivity because it would reduce the necessity for supervisors to provide direct supervision of non-compliant or non-competent co-workers. Competent and compliant workers would also protect the employer against court cases if there were accidents and incidents, and well-trained workers could enable the employer to get other contracts.

Social investment was discussed by some employers and iwi, seeing RPL to recognise individuals' existing skills as well as contributing to workforce development.

### **RPL Guidelines or Policies**

In New Zealand, NZQA provides national-level guidance for the implementation of RPL. The Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) may reference RPL in funding conditions or expectations for providers, particularly where RPL contributes to learner progression or workforce development. However, while this high-level guidance sets the overall direction, individual providers are responsible for developing and applying their own RPL processes.

The first table summarises key aspects of national RPL guidelines or policies from New Zealand, the European Union, and Australia and how they are actioned by providers. At this national guidance/policy level, there are many similarities between countries.

## Comparison of National RPL Guidelines or Policies

	NZ <sup>9</sup>	EU <sup>10</sup>	Australia <sup>11</sup>
Policy Date	2017	2023	2015
Format	NZQA developed National guidelines for recognition and award of credit	Guidelines written for those initiating, developing and implementing validation of RPL	Guidelines for institutes to establish their own processes
Policy into action	Providers develop and manage their own regulations, policies and processes	Guidelines across EU. Countries manage and implement	ASQA set broad guidelines. RTOs administer. Private companies support assessment processes

This second table summarises key information contained in the national RPL guidelines or policies from New Zealand, the European Union, and Australia. Again, at this higher-level policy level, there are similarities.

## Information Covered in the RPL Guidelines/Policies

Information covered	NZ	EU	Australia
Inform Learners about RPL	Yes	Yes	Mandatory to inform learners about the RPL process
Link RPL to Qualification Framework	Yes	Yes - recommended	Yes
Quality Assurance	Yes	Yes	
Assessor skills	Yes	Yes – outline roles	Yes – general requirements

<sup>9</sup> <https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/assets/Tertiary/NZQAs-QA-system/Recognition-of-prior-learning/Guidelines-for-the-recognition-and-award-of-learning-for-credit.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Cedefop (2023). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/389827>

<sup>11</sup> [Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\) | Australian Skills Quality Authority \(ASQA\)](#)

Assessment expectations	Fair, valid, reliable, consistent, authentic	Yes - 7 characteristics	Yes- examples of requirements and FAQs
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The final table maps the four key components from the Vocational Excellence RPL Rubric to recommendations, barriers, and options from policies or guidelines across different countries. This demonstrates how well each national guideline/policy supports effective RPL practice for learners, employers, and providers.

Notably, New Zealand's guidelines are largely silent on the four key components on the Vocational Excellence RPL Rubric. The assumption is that providers will address these individually within their own procedures.

### Vocational Excellence RPL Rubric

Components	NZ	EU	Australia
Participation	No recommendations	Key recommendation	Yes
Equitable Access	No recommendations	Recommendations and outlines of barriers	Rights for learner based on Standards 2015
System – consistent, responsive	No recommendations	Recommendations and outline of assessment types	Specifies assessment types
Funding	No recommendations	Recommended as requirement. Options outlined.	Wide variety depending on qualification, subsidy, provider and priority areas

One key difference emerges when comparing New Zealand with Australia. Under the Australian Quality Training Framework, vocational education and training (VET) providers are required to offer RPL at the point of enrolment. In contrast, NZQA guidance encourages providers to “promote” and be “proactive” in offering RPL but does not mandate this step.

As stated earlier, in New Zealand individual providers are responsible for developing and applying their own practices to implement RPL.

## RPL Practices

This section details the practices used by providers that were interviewed during this research project. Although there were different approaches to the practice of carrying out RPL, most providers believed RPL was important because it:



- reduces time for the learner
- recognises skills people already have
- helps people improve their lives
- can increase enrolments.

The table below summarises the interview findings by broadly identifying the different approaches providers currently take to apply RPL. Most providers take a compliance type approach, and some providers take a learner or industry-driven approach.

### Provider Approaches to RPL in Practice

	Meeting compliance	Learner or industry-driven
Motivation	The motivation to offer RPL may be influenced by funding mechanisms or qualification enrolment processes.  (Providers x 8)	Having integrated RPL into their business model, providers see value in recognising prior learning for learners and employers alike.  (Provider x1)
Funding	Funding is tied to TEC guidelines. Additional costs for RPL may apply, depending on the complexity of the process and resources required.  (Providers x 8)	RPL assessment for advanced standing is not funded by TEC. To complete the programme however, learners undertake a learning component which involves: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- constructing a final portfolio of evidence</li> <li>- working 1-1 with a facilitator</li> <li>- undertaking significant personalised learning.</li> </ul> (Provider x 1)
Focus	Provider focuses on learners demonstrating competency using existing assessments and processes, aligned with TEC and NZQA guidelines. Provider may believe it is easier for all parties if the learner completes the programme as is rather than use RPL.  (Providers x 7)	Bespoke RPL solutions compliant with NZQA guidelines, meeting learner's or employer's needs. Provider believes RPL validates learner's skills, knowledge and experience and saves learners time and money.  (Providers x 2)

Programme design and delivery	<p>Provider uses a consistent programme design with standardised content, format, and pace. This generally follows a set structure with the same content, format, and pace for all learners. (e.g. completion of a set number of Unit Standards or modules). Provider may find it challenging to have learners working at their own pace through the programme.</p> <p>(Providers x7)</p>	<p>Provider uses a flexible, personalised programme design that is adaptable for different learner's needs and preferences, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Programmes at levels 3-5 are standalone at each level but also stackable.</li> <li>- Embed a reflective, project-based methodology.</li> <li>- Targeted, individual learning as required if there are gaps.</li> <li>- Feedback from pilot programmes is integrated into new programme design.</li> </ul> <p>(Providers x 2)</p>
Assessment approach	<p>Learners request RPL and provide evidence to assessors. The process often focuses on matching evidence to specific outcomes. In some cases, learners may be encouraged to complete the relevant assessment only.</p> <p>(Providers x 7)</p>	<p>The assessor interviews the learner at enrolment. When RPL is carried out, the approach is holistic, and the learner's prior experience is recognised as a valuable starting point. Note: The provider may support learners or employers build portfolios of evidence for the purpose of RPL.</p> <p>(Providers x 2)</p>
Outcome for learner	<p>The primary focus is on supporting learners to achieve a qualification or credential.</p> <p>(Providers x 7)</p>	<p>Personalised, deep reflective practice is as important as achieving a qualification or credential.</p> <p>(Providers x 2)</p>

## The RPL Process

The RPL process is similar across nations. It can be broadly broken down into the following five stages:

- **Information** – User-friendly RPL information is made available to learners and/or employers.
- **Identification** – A screening process explores prior learning in relation to learning outcomes.
- **Documentation** – Documentation is gathered and submitted as RPL evidence.
- **Assessment** – The application is assessed and verified.
- **Certification** – Recognition is granted if the assessment is successful.

During our interviews, providers were asked for detailed information about the process they used to carry out RPL. We then mapped their answers to the five stages above.

## **Information**

None of the providers interviewed specifically spoke about providing user-friendly information to learners at the initial stage of the RPL process. Out of the nine providers interviewed, only four have information about RPL on their websites. Of these four, only one had detailed information, two others had application forms only, and another had information published in 2018 about RPL for the Applied Business course.

## **Identification**

Interview feedback indicated that RPL is most often initiated by the learner (8 respondents) at enrolment. Only one example was given of RPL being initiated by an employer, and one by an industry organisation. Although some providers said they engaged in face-to-face discussions with learners about RPL at enrolment or at the start of a programme, most providers said they direct learners to complete an application form.

## **Documentation**

For those providers who regularly carry out RPL, the types of evidence required during the documentation stage can vary widely. As expected, formal qualifications and certificates are commonly sought. When assessing informal learning, evidence may also include challenge tests, practical demonstrations, structured interviews, job descriptions, and portfolios.

For example, one provider with a well-established RPL process described their internal approach in more detail. Their process begins with pre-screening, during which documents such as job descriptions, contact details for referees, and employer attestations are requested. Initial documentation is submitted to a programme coordinator, who may then consult with an on-site RPL specialist.

In this case, the RPL process typically takes around two weeks from first contact to completion of assessment, provided there are no complications. Delays usually relate to difficulties collecting or verifying evidence—particularly in cases involving overseas qualifications or experience. In such situations, the process can extend to up to three months.

Another provider specialising in RPL based programmes, supports learners to develop a portfolio as part of their Bachelor of Applied Management programme requirements. Alongside 30 hours of support from a facilitator, learners spend 10 months full-time, or 18-20 months part-time completing in depth case studies to critically analyse previous learning experiences and consider how these meet the requirements of the programme. Once enrolled, each learner receives a certain number of hours of facilitator time, and learners are expected to work 20 hours a week on developing their portfolios, The RPL

process involves deep reflective practice, with tasks like learning reflecting on influences, career timelines, and gap analysis.

## Assessment

At the assessment stage, having a skilled and credible assessor is consistently identified as critical to the integrity and success of the process. Assessors are expected to be knowledgeable, experienced, and capable of making sound judgements. At one provider specialising in RPL based programmes, quality assessors, training and mentoring were considered key to successful RPL outcomes. Despite this, many providers admitted that their assessors are not experienced at carrying out RPL, or that they rely on the expertise of one or more assessors.

In New Zealand, assessors are generally expected to hold NZQA Unit Standard 4098: Use standards to assess candidate performance. However, this Unit Standard focuses on assessment of structured, standardised learning and does not specifically address RPL practice. Internationally, assessor qualifications vary. For example, Singapore offers a dedicated six-month RPL training programme, while Ireland provides general RPL badging for any staff involved in RPL processes.<sup>12 13</sup>

## Certification

For those providers who regularly carry out RPL, the certification process appears to be robust. If the evidence appears sufficient, it is passed to a neutral verifier or Subject Matter Expert. If the verifier agrees, the application proceeds to the next Assessment Committee meeting for approval.

## Funding for RPL

Funding for RPL is not built into New Zealand's national Funding model. As a result, fees for carrying out RPL are requested from learners. For example, one provider charges a set \$100 application fee, and another provider charges:

- \$50 admin fee per application
- \$50 per hour to assess the application, up to a maximum of \$1000.

Consistent feedback from all providers interviewed was that these fees did not cover the true cost of carrying out RPL.

Internationally, different funding models are used to support RPL.

- **Australia:** Where government funding falls short, the gap is often covered by the registered training organisation (RTO) or the client. National data shows that 80%

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<sup>12</sup><https://www.suss.edu.sg/courses/detail/wbl399-5>

<sup>13</sup> [RPL in 2025: Event Publication | Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\)](#)

of RPL occurs within mainstream, government-funded vocational education and training (VET), with a further 15–18% through fee-for-service arrangements.<sup>14</sup>

- **Europe:** Funding is diverse and often combines public and private sources. According to a European inventory report, the main trend in the education and training sector is the use of national public funding, including tax rebates, combined with funding from individuals. The use of European public funding, regional or local public funding, or funding from private organisations is also common.<sup>15</sup>

In Finland, for example, performance-based funding in higher education has encouraged institutions to engage in validation (RPL-related) practices.

- **South Africa:** Costs for RPL in the artisan system are more transparent and appear to be centrally guided. Learners are given clear information on fees, which may include:
  - ARPL Toolkit Assessment: R2,400 (approx. NZ\$240)
  - Gap Training: R850–1,000 per day (NZ\$85–100)
  - Trade Test: R5,000 (NZ\$500)
  - A full package (including preparation, ARPL exam, and trade test) costs around R19,000 (NZ\$1,900)
  - For learners requiring only the assessment and trade test, the cost is around R6,600 (NZ\$660)<sup>16</sup>

## Summary of Current RPL Landscape

The table below captures how different groups — policymakers, providers, and employers/learners — tend to see and experience RPL. These comments reflect common ways of thinking, acting, and responding across the system based on interviews and the review of literature, and are linked to the Six Conditions of System Change. (Kania, Kramer and Senge, 2018).

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<sup>14</sup> Bowman, K., Clayton, B., Bateman, A., Knight, B., Thomson, P., Hargreaves, J., Blom, K., & Enders, M. (2003). *Recognition of Prior Learning: Policy and Practice in Australia*. National Centre for Vocational Education Research.

<sup>15</sup> Cedefop. (2020). *Financing apprenticeships in the EU*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2801/36563>

<sup>16</sup> [Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning](#)

Conditions	Policymakers	Providers	Employers/Learners
Policies	We (NZQA) have created Guidelines for the recognition of prior learning.	As a TEO, we have developed a policy for RPL. This provides high-level guidance for us to follow.	We may use an internal competency framework and system to recruit or promote our staff.
Practices	We (NZQA) have created case studies for CRT and RPL based on the culinary arts within the NZQA Guidelines.	We have a process for assessors and tools to carry out RPL, but we may not have used them recently. Many assessors are not experienced at applying RPL.	We may use supervisors to verify competency against our internal framework.
Resource flows	We (TEC) do not provide separate funding streams for RPL.	We charge learners a small fee to carry out RPL, however it is insufficient.	We may pay a recruiter or internal team members to recruit new staff.
Relationships & Connections	We (NZQA) expect TEOs to moderate each other's RPL decisions or send them to us for moderation.	It is up to the learner or employer to approach us if they want RPL. We rely on the goodwill and RPL expertise of individuals on staff. We collaborate in-house, but not externally.	A good relationship with our provider is important. Providers should understand our business and our learners and explain the RPL process.
Power Dynamics	We (NZQA) may review TEOs' CRT and RPL practice as part of External Evaluation and Review or programme monitoring.	Bring your evidence to us and we will decide if we will award learning for credit.	We don't really understand RPL from a provider perspective. It may be a burden on us to gather the evidence you require.
Mental Models	It's up to the individual provider to decide when and how to carry out RPL.	It's easier and less time for the learner to just do the programme.	Provider programmes are not always the best for our industry. We don't see the relevance of RPL.

## What is Helping and Hindering RPL?

In the last section, we found RPL use within the Food and Fibre sector to be very limited. There were several reasons identified for this. In this section we explore the barriers hindering RPL use and ask what might help in removing each barrier. Then, for each barrier, links are made to examples of how these are being addressed internationally.

The most common barriers hindering RPL use that were identified by those interviewed are:

- cost and time for providers
- initiating the RPL process
- documentation and assessment stages
- relevance of RPL to the Food & Fibre sector

## Costs and Time

### Hinderances

Although many of those interviewed believed that for learners, RPL can reduce the time, effort and money involved to gain credentials, the most common constraint given by providers is the time involved to carry out RPL and the lack of funding to provide those services.

Cost and time pressures were considered especially challenging when recognising non-formal learning and work experience. At present, providers explained that TEC funding only covers the cost of training, however RPL is considered a “huge amount of work” (Provider 6). One provider reported it used to take 1-2 days’ work for an experienced tutor to visit a farm to RPL a module as the process involved travel, speaking with the farmer and learner and accessing appropriate evidence. However, many of those interviewed believed that this face-to-face contact, using naturally occurring evidence and a strong relationship between the provider and the employer made it easier to do the mapping of learner skills and knowledge against learning outcomes.

Another provider noted there is only a small window of time between enrolment and courses starting in which the RPL process might occur. This creates the need to complete RPL quickly so the learner can commence coursework. Within this window, the volume of applicants and assessor availability must be considered.

A different provider spoke about the challenge of working through the RPL process with learners who are also full-time employees. Their time and availability can be a barrier. They suggested in these cases there must be strong motivation from the learner due to competing priorities.

There was plenty of discussion around a lack of funding to carry out RPL or how funding was currently used. One employer expressed a belief that reduced government funding for employers to take on an apprentice (e.g. through the Apprenticeship Boost fund) would likely reduce apprenticeship enrolments and any need for RPL anyway. There was concern from one provider that learners may experience financial repercussions through reduced access to loans and allowances if part of their programme was credited as part of the RPL process.

## What might help?

Although most providers in New Zealand said they charged a fee for carrying out RPL, other providers were considering ideas to monetise the RPL process, or to use RPL as part of their business model. Some said they were exploring whether they could use RPL for marketing purposes to encourage more enrolments, or whether employer levies might help fund the RPL process. If they were already using RPL as part of their business model, finding viable programmes with a decent volume of learners requiring RPL was seen as important.

Another option mentioned by some providers was an 'assessment only' option. In Australia, there is a tendency for some RTOs (Registered Training Organisations) to offer 'assessment only' rather than RPL so that the RTO still receives funding. This sentiment is matched here in New Zealand with some providers deciding it is easier for learners to complete the assessment task early. One gave an example of “spending more time doing the RPL and collecting all the documentation than it would take a learner to complete the assessment in an hour” (Provider 9).

## International practices

In Canada and Ireland, RPL organisations or associations receive funding to support the RPL process across a nation. Their roles include advocating for and promotion of RPL. By providing webinars, conferences and resources, these organisations support the visibility of RPL and create a common space where barriers can be discussed, best practice shared and potentially advocated for. Examples include: 1. CAPLA (Canada), 2. National RPL in Higher Education Project (Ireland).

1. [CAPLA | Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment \(CAPLA\)](#)
2. [Home | Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\)](#)

The 'European Guidelines for Validating non-formal and informal learning' provides strong guidance materials to assist institutions in building best practice. They have a wealth of recommendations and considerations that align well to the rubric 'excellence' statements. For example, **Appendix 2** highlights the elements to be considered in the RPL system.

## Initiating the RPL Process

### Hinderances

Another common barrier occurs in the initial stages of the RPL process.

From a provider's perspective a hindrance to initiating RPL is anxiety around making the wrong RPL judgement and the subsequent consequences. RPL is viewed as a complex process, often with some subjectivity baked in, therefore from their perspective, it carries risk. Alongside this is a belief that NZQA are tightening rules. The outcome is a reluctance to begin the RPL process and instead channel learners towards doing the full programme.

A common example of this is the perceived challenge providers face when recognising overseas qualifications or work experience. It is considered difficult to accurately verify or even source the documentation and evidence needed. If a series of incorrect



decisions were made, providers believe they would be carrying risk and then their wider assessment practices could be called into question.

One provider and another interviewee with previous provider experience added that current programme design may not facilitate the RPL process. If it is not baked in, or considered from the outset, the programmes themselves may add to the challenge of implementing RPL. All of this can result in a mental model – ‘RPL is too hard, you’re better off doing the course’.

From the learner’s perspective an immediate barrier is an expectation they must initiate the RPL process themselves. They may not be comfortable nor have the technical skills to either initiate RPL or ‘sell themselves’ during the pre-screening stages. If the terminology is too academic, or they can’t find the right words to describe what they have achieved, they may be disadvantaged. One employer noted learners need skills to operate successfully in the initial identification stage.

A study from Switzerland notes the out-sized impact of persons at the administrative or ‘first-contact’ point at a provider when RPL is first initiated. This individual’s attitudes and knowledge can act as a significant facilitator or as a significant inhibitor. As an example, they note, if there is a lack of trust that quality learning outcomes can occur in an informal working environment, this creates an initial inhibitor. Add to this the time required to RPL, inadequate funding, pressure to prioritise enrolments, and it is easy to see how RPL opportunities can be closed off at the initial engagement. According to this Swiss study, a lack of funding encourages a negative attitude towards RPL among those responsible for implementing it from the beginning.<sup>17</sup>

### **What might help?**

Several enablers to improve the initial stages of the RPL process were brought up during the interviews.

One idea was to consider RPL when first designing provider programmes. A reflective, project-based approach is simpler to RPL, could provide opportunities for learners to reflect on their experiences in relation to the programme (particularly at Level 2 and Level 6), and could better accommodate any gaps in prior learning. To achieve this requires a focused relationship between the provider and employer, or industry and other stakeholders, to do the required mapping when the programme is being designed. This relationship requires influential people within employer/industry who understand and value RPL.

The most common idea discussed by interviewees was for ‘RPL experts’ or ‘centres of expertise’ within the system. This was described in varying forms. It could be an advisory organisation sitting external to any provider or industry, or it could take the form of RPL gurus sitting within key institutions. As well as providing consistent advice, potentially alleviating the feeling of risk for the provider, these RPL experts could also play a role in advocating for the process.

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<sup>17</sup> Maurer, M. (2019). The challenges of expanding recognition of prior learning (RPL) in a collectively organised skill formation system: The case of Switzerland. *Journal of Education and Work*, 32(8), 665–677. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2019.1694141>

Collegial support was also mentioned as an enabler by providers. This could involve RPL assessor training, collaborative RPL decision making or administration support for mapping evidence against learning outcomes.

Others recommended a grace period for providers to learn how to do RPL and make mistakes. This idea could sit alongside a pilot programme, aimed at addressing those specific RPL challenges providers have highlighted.

Finally, there was an acknowledgement that effective provider leadership was required to first value and promote RPL and then work comfortably within any risks the process may carry.

## **International practices**

International efforts to revitalise RPL are present. For example, Ireland's multi-institution RPL project seeks to address long-standing barriers and inconsistencies. As Patrick Logue, RPL Lead at Dundalk Institute of Technology, explains:

*“Historically, RPL practice has been uneven, fragmented and often very difficult to navigate, both for learners and for higher education staff. In response, the RPL Project has two overarching goals: to bring RPL from the margins to the mainstream, and to substantially grow RPL opportunities<sup>18</sup>.”*

Dundalk Institute of Technology (n.d.)

This initiative embeds and streamlines RPL across 14 Irish Higher Education Institutes. Support includes Toolkits, RPL badging, case studies, templates and on-site RPL experts.

[Access the RPL Toolkit for Staff in Higher Education Institutions | Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\)](#)

The Swedish central agency for RPL takes a similar approach. Its website has a section for employers and industry bodies. These include personal examples, videos and resources to support the entire RPL process, including mapping.

[För dig som arbetar med modeller inom validering - Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan](#)

A good example of early support for learners can be found at Häme University of Applied Sciences in Finland. It has a series of videos explaining the specifics of the RPL process. These include both RPL and CRT and walks through the online application steps to assist with technology literacy.

[Pakki Student Instructions: Work Experience to Credits \(RPL\) - HAMK Kultura](#)

Taking a different perspective is a sector-based approach in Canada. The Professional Fish Harvesters Certification Board has a Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) programme aligned to education credits. In the link below they advertise the opportunity for learners in their industry to RPL their work experience and provide transparency over the pathways.

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<sup>18</sup> [From the Margins to the Mainstream: RPL at DkIT](#)

## Gathering Documentation and Assessment

### Hinderances

Gathering documentation is often considered to be unwieldy and challenging for both learners and providers. Assessing the learner's skills, knowledge and experience against learning outcomes requires a range of human and technical skills and can be difficult to navigate for untrained or unsupported assessors. Internationally, the constraints around documentation and assessment are common also. This seems to be consistent despite the fact RPL operates within different national contexts, and with different framework conditions.

Employers also report that a significant hindrance is the amount of evidence that must be collected. This is a burden that may fall to both the employee and employer resulting in the application being abandoned early. However, for the one employer who had helped his team complete the RPL evidence collection process in the past, there was a belief that despite the time, it was a much better solution than doing the full programme.

The role of the assessor was viewed as critical for a successful RPL process, and much is expected of them. It is important they understand quality assurance and the full breadth of options for RPL. Additionally, they must be skilled in relationship-building. Finally, assessors should be equipped to take a holistic approach – rather than box-ticking. For example, employees may be nervous about engagement with the assessor, particularly if they are more hands-on individuals or are not used to promoting themselves or speaking about their skills and knowledge. A skilled approach is required to illicit a fair outcome.

Where this is not the case, trust in the process can be quickly eroded. One employer indicated that a breakdown in trust with an assessor led to RPL being phased out in their context. Even though skilled, credible assessors were integral to a successful RPL process, providers report they may rely on the 'good will' of RPL experts within their teams.

Internationally there is a similar recognition that assessors play a pivotal role in RPL.

*‘With regards to the assessors, this study revealed that their ability and routine to assess their prior learning is imperative. It was interesting to see how students expressed their view on the importance of qualified assessors unanimously, whether they experienced it positively or negatively (...) This implies that not only the assessment methods but the assessor’s ability to apply the most suitable practice(s) into the RPL process has a great impact on the outcome of the RPL process.’<sup>19</sup>*

Feedback during the interviews highlighted that Unit Standards are a hindrance. They are seen as prescriptive and overly detailed. Feedback suggests the way in which a Unit

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<sup>19</sup> Merikallio, R. (2019). *Recognition of prior learning (RPL) among international higher education students in Finland* (Master's thesis). Page 63. University of Jyväskylä

Standard may be constructed with multiple performance criteria and range statements, make it challenging for 100% competency alignment for RPL.

### **What might help?**

Advice from an Australian international RPL expert interviewed as part of this project, along with providers who take a learner-centred approach, emphasised the value of prioritising face-to-face interviews over requiring large amounts of writing. This approach requires capable, experienced assessors who may be asked to operate in ways not currently familiar to them. To achieve this, comprehensive training and mentoring of assessors would be required.

Having access to a bank of practical tasks that learners could complete to demonstrate their prior knowledge and skills was also discussed by some providers. These practical tasks offer an alternative to written explanations and helps ensure that learners can show what they know in action. These tasks could be done individually or in groups, and provide assessors with tangible, observable evidence.

One employer familiar with the RPL process said that being given a clear and comprehensive list of the evidence required for an RPL portfolio supported the RPL process. Another employer unfamiliar with the RPL process wondered whether knowing more about the evidence required would allow them to support their staff in gathering the right information upfront and, in some cases, use the completed portfolio to inform internal promotion decisions.

### **International practices**

New Zealand's training for assessors based on Unit Standard 4098, does not specifically cover RPL. Internationally, there are examples where training is specific to RPL. Examples include: 1. The National Agency for Higher Vocational Education Website (Sweden) which offers a six module online training course. 2. Skills Education (Australia) offer RPL Assessor Micro-credentials programmes to develop assessor expertise.

1. [Validering i praktiken – en webbutbildning - Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan](#)
2. [Advanced RPL Assessor - Microcredentials](#)

Within New Zealand opportunities are being explored to incorporate AI to support assessment of structured and standardised learning, and there may be opportunities to learn from this to incorporate into a more bespoke assessment solutions required for RPL also. In the Cogniti example below, educators can build custom chatbot agents that can be given specific instructions, and specific resources, to assist student learning in context-sensitive ways. Another project of interest to this study is the work of Scarlatti in creating an AI solution to evolve the way educational assessments take place within New Zealand. They provide regular updates on their learning journey as they explore features and uses. Examples include: 1. Cogniti - AI agents that can be designed by educators (University of Sydney) and 2. Scarlatti research.

1. [Cogniti – AI agents designed by teachers](#)
2. [Assessment possibilities: Different types of AI for assessment - Scarlatti](#)

An example of how AI is already being used in an education context is by FutureMakers (below). As part of a training support for school leaders a virtual conversation has been

created. The AI agent has been trained to listen to the feedback, the questions asked, even the tone of participant's voice etc. and provide responses based on what is heard. It has been designed to be close to a 'real life' scenario. There is no pre-determined design to the process the participant follows. This AI design may have useful applications to this RPL project, overcoming learner literacy issues at the pre-screening stage.

<https://nimodemo.com/futuremakers>

Other nations seem to be moving forward in embracing the opportunities AI can provide in streamlining the RPL process. The RPL organisation CAPLA held webinars in late 2024 to share practice. In Australia, Skills Aware is currently developing an AI tool that can map qualifications and certificates. It is anticipated this can be used to assist assessors and providers to quickly align experience and industry-related study to the Australian framework. This work is ongoing.

<https://skillsaware.com/#:~:text=SkillsAware%20is%20a%20skills%20recognition,includ%20other%20frameworks%20by%20negotiation.>

Australia has commercially available packages to assist assessment of RPL based on a wide range of technical areas, however these require a great deal of contextualisation to be appropriate for different learners and businesses. The target audience is assessors and there are several private companies in the market.

One example: [RPL Kits | RPL Assessment Kits | VET Resources](#)

## Relevance of RPL to the Food & Fibre Sector

### Hinderances

The final constraint to the implementation of RPL is the belief that it is simply not relevant to the Food and Fibre sector. When employers were asked about the relevance of RPL to their workplaces, almost all were unaware of the RPL process. Their initial responses can be summarised in the following examples.

- Workers are not interested in RPL. There is no increase in wages, so no 'what is in it for me'.
- We mainly hire people with no prior experience. We have no need for RPL as these staff will start any training from the beginning.
- Having everyone do the same programme/training at the same time helps with common understandings and training as an employer - therefore no need for RPL.
- We believe recruitment is more about the person than their skills. Therefore, RPL is not an important factor in boosting qualifications to win a job.

It is unclear whether the statements above reflect a genuine lack of relevance for RPL within the Food and Fibre sector or are a consequence of RPL not being active and therefore alternative narratives fill the vacuum. It is worth noting that as the interviews progressed and employers became aware of what RPL was, three employers showed more interest in potential opportunities.

## What might help?

While there were no direct solutions provided for changing mindsets about the relevance of RPL in the Food and Fibre sector, international practice suggests that RPL gains traction when it is clearly tied to a specific purpose or outcome. For example, RPL can be used to meet an industry skill shortage, address social outcomes, or support transitions into leadership roles. This purpose-based approach could be used locally to target groups such as immigrants, Recognised Seasonal Employees (RSEs), or older workers moving into supervisory or management positions. Additionally, RPL could serve to assess and recognise sector-based skills or to identify transferable knowledge and skills across different primary industries.

For employers, RPL offers practical benefits. Some employers see value in having staff gain formal qualifications to demonstrate competence quickly. This is useful to them in cases of workplace incidents or legal scrutiny. Others value the increased productivity and reduced need for supervision once employees are certified.

For learners, RPL can be a powerful tool to support engagement and progression. Reflective processes involved in RPL can help individuals begin to see themselves as learners, which is especially important for developing future leaders in the industry. Learner-centred RPL approaches—which view individuals as experienced, not blank slates—can foster this identity shift. Additionally, using RPL to recognise early achievement may help hook people into further learning and contribute to overall programme completions. Documenting and making visible the future success of learners who have been through RPL can reinforce its value to others in the sector.

## International practices

Evidence from international practice indicates that RPL gains momentum when aligned with targeted outcomes or strategic purposes. Examples where a purpose drives its use include:

- prioritising fluid immigration into appropriate employment (Sweden)<sup>20</sup>
- mitigating a rapidly changing sector where re-training is essential (Singapore)<sup>21</sup>
- facilitating ease of movement across sectors (ie) military into ongoing learning (US)<sup>22</sup>
- solving immediate employment issues on a large scale. For example, a major car factory closes and unqualified but skilled labour face unemployment. (Australia)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> [Linköping University Postprint](#)

<sup>21</sup> [SIT to recognise work experience in new initiative emphasising skills mastery | The Straits Times](#)

<sup>22</sup> [CAEL | About Us | What We Do](#)

<sup>23</sup> Wendy C, Australian RPL expert, personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2025

## Summary of What is Hindering and Helping RPL

The table below summarises common themes from the findings above linked to the six conditions of systems change as defined by Kania, Kramer and Senge (2018).<sup>24</sup>. Note that some themes/enablers may be repeated if they fit into multiple conditions.

Conditions	Hinderances	What might help?
Policies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>No specific mention of policies as a hindrance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TEC funding settings support effective RPL</li> <li>Advocacy and promotion of RPL</li> <li>Availability of RPL experts</li> </ul>
Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Barriers to learner or employer initiation of the RPL process</li> <li>Challenges around recognising overseas qualifications and work experience</li> <li>Programme design restricts streamlined RPL</li> <li>Burden of collecting RPL evidence</li> <li>Lack of skilled RPL assessors</li> <li>Unit Standards restrict easy RPL</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership advocates for RPL</li> <li>Learner and employer support tools for initiating RPL and building a portfolio</li> <li>RPL assessor training and collegial support</li> <li>Learner-centric approach to RPL</li> <li>RPL embedded programme design</li> <li>RPL resources and case studies</li> <li>Tools (e.g. AI agents) to speed up evidence collection</li> </ul>
Resource flows	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Costs associated with the time and expertise required to recognise RPL</li> <li>Time and resource constraints at enrolment</li> <li>Funding constraints for providers and learners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>TEC funding settings supports effective RPL</li> <li>Providers monetise the RPL process</li> <li>RPL embedded programme design</li> <li>Learners sit assessment tasks only</li> <li>Tools (e.g. AI agents) to speed up evidence collection</li> </ul>
Relationships & Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Difference in consistency between providers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocacy for and promotion of RPL</li> <li>Leadership advocates for RPL</li> <li>RPL assessor training and collegial support</li> <li>Purpose driven value propositions for RPL – for learners and businesses at an industry/sector/regional and/or national level</li> <li>Learner-centric approach to RPL</li> </ul>
Power Dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provider anxiety about making mistakes</li> <li>Learner anxiety about the RPL process</li> <li>Businesses unaware that RPL is an option</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocacy for and promotion of RPL</li> <li>Grace period for providers to get the RPL process right</li> <li>Purpose driven value propositions for RPL – for learners and businesses at an</li> </ul>

<sup>24</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, M., & Senge, P. (2018). The six conditions of systems change: Policies, practices, resource flows, relationships and connections, power dynamics, and mental models. Stanford Social Innovation Review, 16(1), 36-45. [https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the\\_six\\_conditions\\_of\\_systems\\_change](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_six_conditions_of_systems_change)

		industry/sector/regional and/or national level
Mental Models	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relevance of RPL to the sector</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose driven value propositions for RPL – for learners and businesses at an industry/sector/regional and/or national level</li> </ul>

In summary, there are common themes linked to one or more of the six conditions of systems change. These themes/enablers might be grouped as follows:

**1. Improved RPL funding, guidance and capable assessors**

- ✓ TEC funding settings support effective RPL
- ✓ Advocacy for and promotion of RPL
- ✓ RPL assessor training and collegial support

**2. Enhanced tools for gathering documentation and assessment**

- ✓ Digital tools (e.g. AI) to speed up evidence collection

**3. Purpose driven RPL projects**

- ✓ Purpose driven value propositions for RPL – for learners and businesses at an industry/sector/regional and/or national level
- ✓ RPL embedded programme design



# Summary of RPL Process Driven Good Practices and Tools

## A word of caution

This research project focuses on reviewing good practices in terms of RPL guidance material and digital tools. Although examples were found where digital tools were being piloted, it is important to note that the use of digital tools and AI technology is new and evolving. Consequently, research is not yet available on the impact these digital tools may be having in an education context, and on the RPL process, assessors and learners specifically.

During the interview process, participants did not raise digital solutions as a likely aid for implementing RPL. When specifically asked about the potential role of digital tools, many showed interest, however two interviewees expressed caution. They felt that a digital RPL system could risk undermining whanaungatanga — the relationships and trust-building that are essential for nurturing learners. A learner-centred approach was also emphasised by an RPL expert from Australia, who highlighted the importance of maintaining strong personal connections throughout the process.

While technology may help streamline parts of the RPL process, interviewees noted that learners are likely to need help to access these tools and would still require wrap-around support even if they were awarded RPL credits.

Using the five stages of the RPL process, combined with good practices from the literature review, the tables below describe possible examples of digital tools for RPL in contrast with face-to-face processes or tools.

## RPL Process Driven Good Practices and Tools

RPL Process:	<b>Information:</b> User-friendly RPL information is made available to learners and/or employers
What this looks like:	The learner understands there are options for RPL
Good practice:	Information is presented in a way that clarifies purpose and allows individuals to choose the form best suited to their needs <sup>25</sup>
Possible examples:	
Face to face practice:	Work-based – Enrolment team member speaks with learner at enrolment.  Provider-based – Enrolment team member speaks with learner at enrolment.
Digital support:	Website holds clear, user-friendly information

<sup>25</sup> Cedefop (2023). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/389827>

	Videos explain the RPL process An AI agent is available for FAQ
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RPL Process:	<b>Identification:</b> A screening process explores prior learning in relation to learning outcomes.
What this looks like:	The learner is asked questions about their prior experience, knowledge and skills matched to learning outcomes.
Good practice:	Take a learner-centred approach Cluster/integrate the Learning Outcomes, ask the right questions, have a conversation with the learner, avoid online screening due to authenticity issues and shy/unconfident learners <sup>26</sup> Use interviews and dialogue-based approaches to provide greatest value to the candidate. IT-based approaches can support scalability and reduce cost <sup>27</sup>
Possible examples:	
Face to face practice:	Work-based – Assessor visits workplace to speak to learner and employer. Provider-based – Assessor speaks with learner at enrolment about prior learning and aspirations.
Digital support:	Online questionnaire AI agent supports Assessors/Facilitators with set questions and scenarios (e.g. Scarlatti oral assessment tool, <a href="#">Cogniti tool</a> , Chat GPT, <a href="#">FutureMakers simulations</a> )

RPL Process:	<b>Documentation:</b> Documentation is gathered and submitted as RPL evidence.
What this looks like:	If the learner meets requirements, evidence is gathered and mapped against learning outcomes (e.g. CV, employer attestations, self-reflections, courses attended etc)
Good practice:	Build relationship and trust with the learner, a verbal approach is best, ask for demonstrations where possible, (if work-based), get out and on the job to form a relationship with employer also,

<sup>26</sup> Wendy C, Australian RPL expert, personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>27</sup> Cedefop (2023). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/389827>

	<p>encourage HR and L&amp;D to create individual portfolios for future RPL <sup>28</sup></p> <p>Use a combination of tools and methodologies to capture the complex range of learning involved <sup>29</sup></p>
Possible examples:	
Face to face practice:	<p>Work-based – Assessor visits workplace to collect evidence OR Assessor asks learner/employer to submit a list of evidence.</p> <p>Provider based – Assessor works with learner to collect evidence OR Assessor asks learner to submit a list of evidence.</p>
Digital support:	<p>AI to capture oral speech in written form ie <a href="#">Otter AI</a></p> <p>AI skills recognition or mapping tool (e.g. <a href="#">SkillsAware AI engine</a>, Chat GPT)</p> <p>Digital portfolios</p>

RPL Process:	<b>Assessment and Certification:</b> The application is assessed and verified. Recognition is granted if the assessment is successful.
What this looks like:	<p>A SME works alongside an assessor to check the quality of evidence against the learning outcomes.</p> <p>Moderation processes ensure consistency, reliability and authenticity etc (e.g. sent to a programme committee, WDC moderation)</p>
Good practice:	<p>Specific training for RPL Assessors <sup>30 31</sup></p> <p>An RPL co-ordinating organisation should be identified and appointed <sup>32</sup></p>
Possible examples:	
Face to face practice:	<p>Both work-based and provider-based:</p> <p>SME collaborates with Assessor to verify quality and quantity of evidence.</p>

<sup>28</sup> Wendy C, Australian RPL expert, personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>29</sup> Cedefop (2023). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/389827>

<sup>30</sup> Wendy C, Australian RPL expert, personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2025

<sup>31</sup> Cedefop (2023). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/389827>

<sup>32</sup> Cedefop (2023). *European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning*. Luxembourg: Publications Office. Cedefop reference series; No 124. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2801/389827>

	<p>Work-based – Provider follows internal moderation procedures and may be required to submit RPL decisions to relevant WDC for external moderation or as part of an NZQA EER review.</p> <p>Provider-based – Provider follows internal moderation procedures and must submit RPL decisions to relevant internal committee for approval. May be required to submit RPL decisions to other providers for external moderation purposes in an EER review.</p>
Digital support:	<p>E-mail</p> <p>Online portals</p>

## Next steps

Following the research conducted thus far, several promising opportunities have been identified to enhance RPL within the Food and Fibre sector. The following three options build on successful models internationally or leverage emerging technologies to create a more streamlined and accessible RPL process for learners, employers, and industry stakeholders.

Three key opportunities have been identified to enhance RPL in the Food and Fibre sector, based on the enablers identified earlier in this report, the literature review and the Vocational Excellence RPL Rubric.

### **1. Improved RPL funding, guidance and RPL capable assessors**

- ✓ TEC funding settings support effective RPL
- ✓ Advocacy for and promotion of RPL
- ✓ RPL assessor training and collegial support

One of the key challenges throughout the RPL process is providing clear and accessible guidance about RPL, including tools, materials, resources and professional development opportunities.

To address this, it could be beneficial to establish a project to enhance the Food & Fibre sector's capacity to operate RPL, similar to the Irish Recognition of Prior Learning Project (<https://www.priorlearning.ie/about>). In Ireland, 14 higher education institutions have received funding to work together to develop policies, toolkits, case studies, RPL 'badging', and on-site expert support. The purpose is to assist institutions, learners and employers to understand the RPL process and the value of recognising prior learning.

This would result in a more consistent understanding and application of RPL across providers. It would also build capability among assessors, trainers, and support staff through shared learning and targeted training. Clear messaging, case studies, and possibly RPL 'badging' would raise awareness and trust in RPL as a valid and valuable pathway.

Overall, a benefit of implementing an RPL project of this nature, is to create energy across key players. This energy can lead to positive engagements on policy and removing any structural barriers that exist.

### **2. Enhanced tools for gathering documentation and assessment**

- ✓ Digital tools (e.g. AI) to speed up evidence collection

Another key challenge is the cost and time it takes for providers, employers and learners to gather documentation for RPL and assess the quality of the evidence against programme learning outcomes.

To ease the cost and time associated with the RPL process, digital tools could be designed and piloted for a selected number of learning outcomes across providers. Australia's [Skills Aware](#) initiative is an example of how AI can be leveraged to improve the RPL process. Skills Aware is a skills recognition service that uses AI to capture and

validate an individual's skills-evidence and map it to units of competency. This tool has the potential to make the RPL process more transparent and efficient.

Another AI option is to develop a platform where AI can assist in initial conversations with learners. The AI tool could be conversation-based, enhancing the learner's ability to navigate the initial stages of the RPL process independently. By automating the initial stages of mapping and providing real-time assistance, the AI tool could provide personalised recommendations. This could be used to inform the first contact with the provider.

Digital solutions like these could automate the time-consuming parts of the RPL process, like gathering and mapping evidence, saving time for both learners and assessors. For learners, they would receive tailored recommendations based on their background and goals, helping them feel more confident about the process. For assessors, with the first parts of the RPL process handled digitally, the focus could be more on mentoring, judgement, and support. AI tools could also standardise how evidence is evaluated across providers, increasing fairness and trust in the process.

### **3. Purpose driven RPL projects to embed tried and proven RPL practices across the sector**

- ✓ Purpose driven value propositions for RPL – for learners and businesses at an industry/sector/regional and/or national level
- ✓ RPL embedded programme design

A third opportunity lies in designing a purpose-driven, one-off RPL embedded programme within a specific time frame and budget but driven by a relevant, clear objective. This programme could be tailored to a specific industry sector or focused on specific occupations.

This purpose-driven RPL programme could be designed collaboratively with input from a variety of stakeholders, for example: industry bodies, employers, iwi operated trusts, learners, providers, WDCs, NZQA. RPL could then be 'baked in' as part of the programme design.

The advantage of a purpose-driven RPL project is that it offers a more tailored and flexible approach with engagement and buy-in from a range of stakeholders. Focusing on a specific sector would ensure relevance to current workforce challenges. By embedding RPL from the start, it would become part of how learning is recognised and supported, rather than an afterthought. It would also provide an exemplar that could be used within the guidance information for providers.

## **Conclusion**

Improving access to and trust in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) requires system-level shifts supported by practical, coordinated action. The three opportunities outlined above are examples of possible next steps for implementing effective RPL processes.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Vocational Excellence RPL Rubric

Attribute	Acceptable	Good	Excellent
<b>Participation</b> Informed learners, employers and institutions motivate greater participation.	<p>Tools and actions have been put in place to address barriers to RPL for all stakeholders.</p> <p>Support is given to learners navigating the RPL assessment requirements.</p>	<p><i>As for Acceptable, plus</i></p> <p>RPL is operating effectively across a range of credentials within the industry.</p>	<p><i>As for Good, plus</i></p> <p>Learners have on-demand access to pre-screening tools for transparency of RPL processes</p> <p>Formal (i.e. partial or expired), informal and non-formal learning has potential to be recognised.</p> <p>International credentials and experience are appropriately recognised.</p>
<b>Access</b> There is equity of access to RPL.	<p>Learners can give evidence of skills via professional conversation, direct demonstration, e-portfolio, etc.</p> <p>Learners are aware at each stage of the process, what is required, when it is required, what the assessment criteria is, and what the status of their application is.</p>	<p><i>As for Acceptable, plus</i></p> <p>There is appropriate and consistent recognition of transferable skills and credentials between institutions.</p> <p>RPL processes adapt to the changing nature of work and requirements of differing workplaces.</p> <p>Barriers to RPL assessment are proactively and appropriately mitigated.</p>	<p><i>As for Good, plus</i></p> <p>RPL is a transparent, efficient and effective system. Processes are seamlessly flexible to adjust to different learners' circumstances.</p> <p>Fully flexible interventions are in place to promote equity in the RPL assessment process for all learners</p>

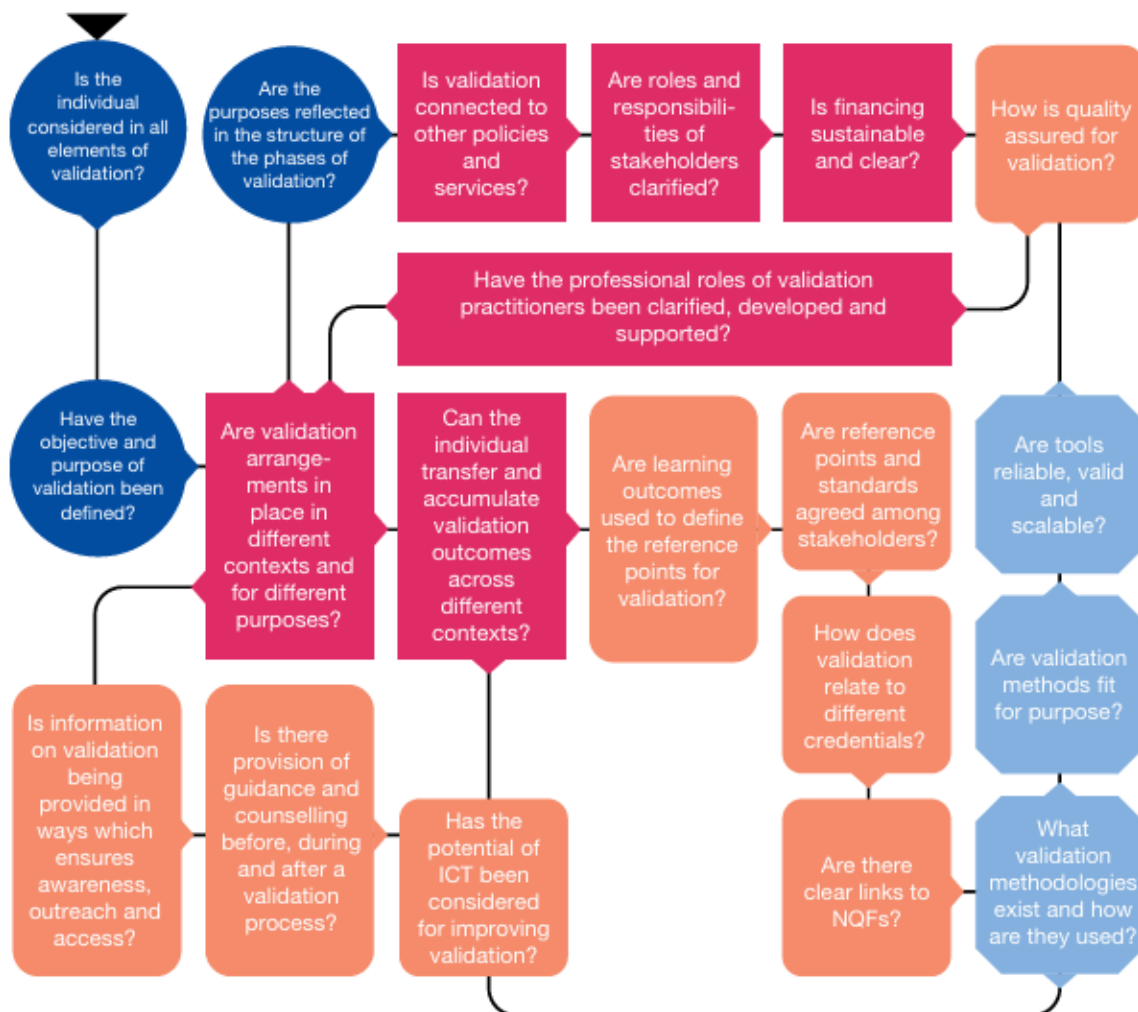
<p><b>System</b></p> <p>Consistent assessment practices ensure the system is responsive to the needs of learners, providers, and industry</p>	<p>Assessment methods are reliable</p> <p>Assessors are equipped and capable to assess for all learners' needs.</p> <p>Key agencies (NZQA, <i>Muku Tangata</i>) reinforce practical application of RPL.</p> <p>Previous learning experience is considered when developing individual learner pathways.</p> <p>Methods are repeatable, and regularly moderated (all discrete assessments are auditable) to ensure fit for purpose.</p>	<p><i>As for Acceptable, plus</i></p> <p>Outcomes are fair to learners (assures they can cope with the learning to follow). Methods and frameworks are transparent.</p> <p>Mātauranga Māori is appropriately embedded, applied and protected to meet learning needs of Māori.</p> <p>RPL meets the needs of the sector and requirements of differing workplaces</p>	<p><i>As for Good, plus</i></p> <p>RPL assessment processes are regularly reviewed and improved.</p> <p>RPL assessment systems seamlessly integrate adaptive technological advances</p> <p>Assessors are highly skilled at flexible assessment, pulling together different forms of evidence to inform RPL assessment</p> <p>RPL assessment methods are culturally responsive.</p>
<p><b>Funding</b></p> <p>Funding is stable and not a barrier to learners, providers and employers.</p>	<p>Establishment costs are partially funded for a fixed period to seed initial adoption (Govt)</p> <p>There is limited recognition of value or understanding of outcomes.</p> <p>The table of assessment fees for the employer/learner for each type of RPL assessment is the same country wide.</p>	<p><i>As for Acceptable, plus</i></p> <p>Costs are fully funded (mixed model)</p> <p>There is increased recognition of value and outcomes.</p> <p>Funding is stable enough to provide long-term certainty to support workforce development.</p>	<p><i>As for Good, plus</i></p> <p>Costs are self-sustaining and can be targeted to address immediate shortfalls or requirements.</p> <p>There is full recognition of value and outcomes across a range of industries.</p>



## Appendix 2 Example Flow Chart Guidance on RPL

A potential source of policy and guidance models can be found in the ‘European Guidelines for Validating non-formal and informal learning’. This has a wealth of recommendations and considerations. It aligns well to the rubric “excellence” statements. For example, the figure below highlights the elements to be considered in the RPL system.

**Figure 2. Main aspects of validation**



Source: Cedefop.