

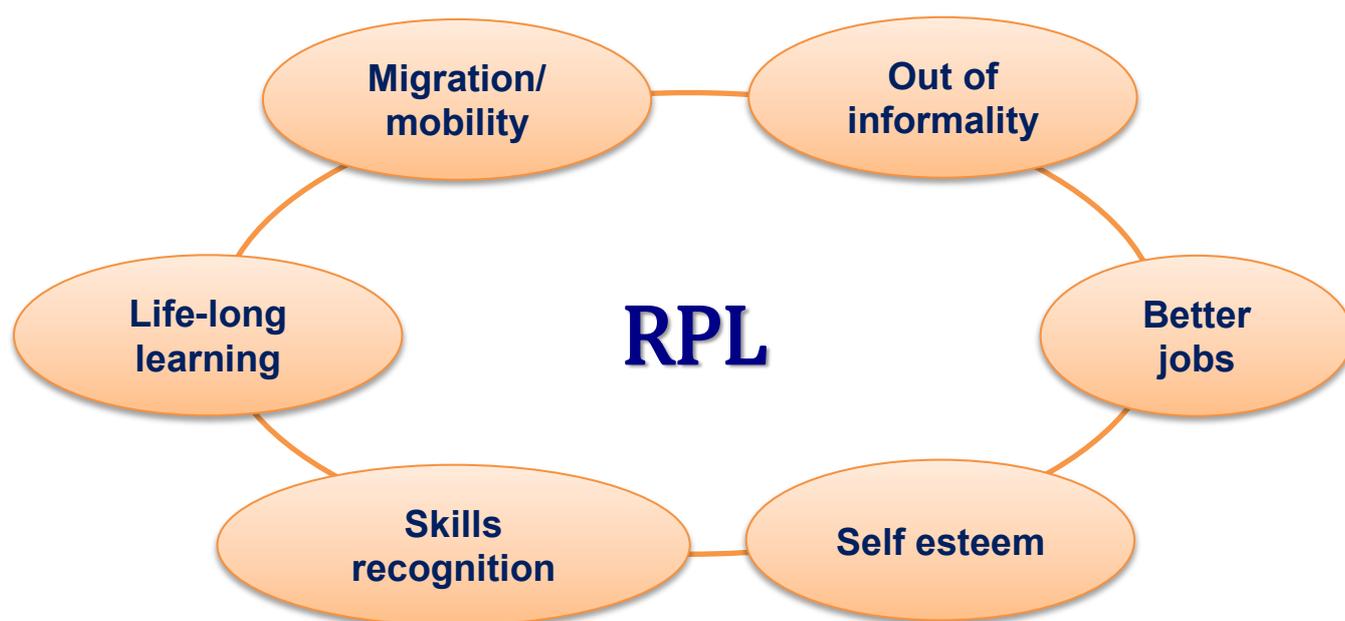


International
Labour
Organization

Recognition of prior learning:

Key success factors and the building blocks of an effective system

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Foreword

Due to a lack of appropriate qualifications, a large proportion of people face severe disadvantage in getting decent jobs, migrating to other regions and accessing further education, even though they might have the necessary knowledge and skills. The RPL process can help such persons acquire a formal qualification that matches their knowledge and skills, and thus contribute to improving employability, mobility, lifelong learning, social inclusion and self-esteem. International Labour Standards and International Labour Conferences (ILC) have emphasized the importance of RPL and recommended establishing the systems for RPL:

- The ILO Recommendation on Human Resources Development: Education, Training and Lifelong Learning (No. 195) calls on Member States to establish a framework for the recognition and certification of skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where these were acquired and whether formally or informally.
- The Committee for the Recurrent Discussion on Employment of ILC 2014 recommends that employment policies include sub-policies for systems of skills recognition.
- The ILO multilateral framework on labour migration (ILO, 2006) and the Director General report to the ILC 2014 on Fair Migration (ILO, 2014b) stress the importance of skills recognition.
- The ILC 2014 report ‘Transitioning from the informal to the formal economy’ states that ‘it is necessary to develop institutions and mechanisms that assess the skills and competencies acquired by workers so that they can be validated and recognized through certification.’

In view of the importance of RPL, most countries have initiated steps in establishing an RPL system, but many are facing challenges to successful implementation. Therefore, policy makers from many countries are seeking support of the ILO in developing and implementing an effective RPL systems. The Decent Work Programme of Southern African Development Community (SADC), a regional body of 15 countries, has recommended development of regional RPL guidelines, and likewise requested the support of the ILO. It is against this background that this paper has been produced, taking into account experiences of many countries around the world, with the aim of building the capacity of policy makers and social partners to establish an effective RPL system. This paper would be a part of the ILO strategy to stimulate debate and enable policy makers in developing effective, equitable policies and a system for RPL that is suitable to their national context.

We would like to thank Ashwani Aggarwal, ILO Senior Skills and Employment Specialist for Eastern and Southern Africa, for initiating, designing and leading the study and producing this paper.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

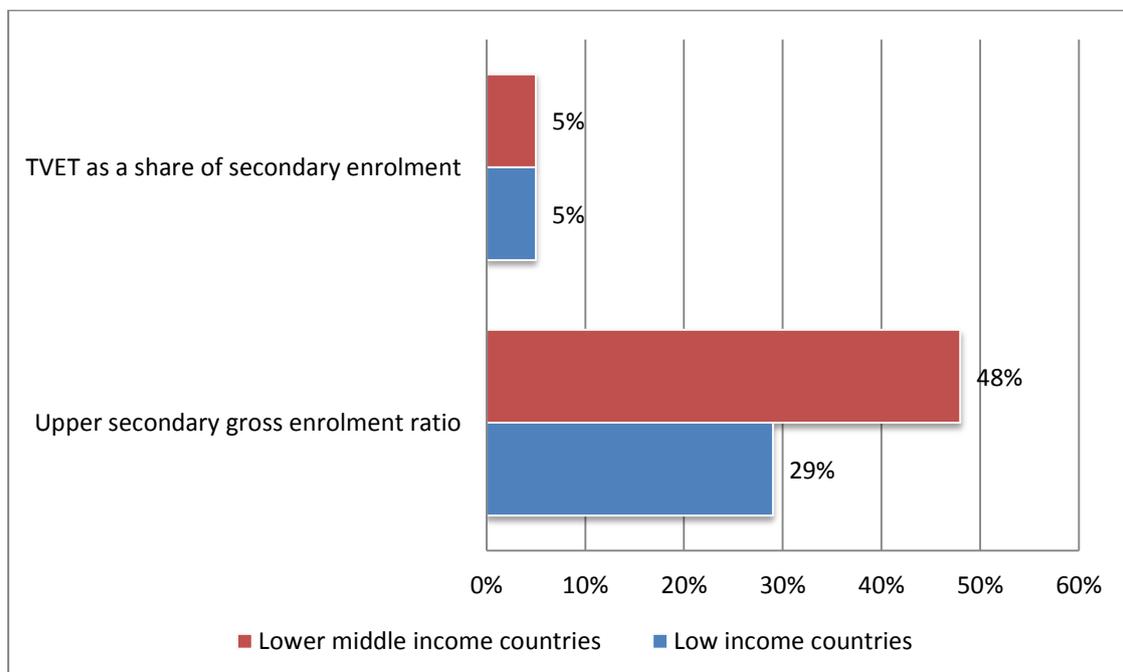
ACI	Area of critical importance
APEL	Assessment of prior experiential learning
APL	Assessment of prior learning
ARLAC	Africa Regional Labour Administration Centre
AU	African Union
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
DWT	Decent Work Technical Support Team
EU	The European Union
ICT	Information and communication technologies
ILC	International Labour Conference
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILS	International labour standards
LLL	Lifelong learning
LMI	Labour market information
LMIS	Labour market information system
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MIS	Management Information System
MQA	Mauritius Qualification Authority
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSDP	National Skills Development Policy
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDC	Portfolio Development Course
PLAR	Prior learning assessment and recognition
PWD	Persons with disabilities
RAC	Recognition of acquired competences
RAS	Recognition of acquired skills
RNFIL	Recognition of non-formal and informal learning
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
RVCC	Recognition, validation and certification of competences
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SD	Skills development
SDP	Skills development policy
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
TAP	Tests for access and placement
TEVET	Technical Entrepreneurship Vocational Education and Training
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNESCO	United Nations Education Scientific Cultural and Organisation
UNISA	University of South Africa
UWC	University of the Western Cape
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VETA	Vocational Education and Training Authority
VNFIL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning
VT	Vocational Training
WPL	Workplace Learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL): Key success factors and the building blocks of an effective system

1 Introduction

For any country, lifelong learning is a key to building human capital and being innovative and competitive in a globalized, fast-changing world. Most learning in an individual's life takes place through non-formal and informal means, whether at work, home, or elsewhere. In fact, in many developing countries with high school dropout rates, the majority of young people, especially informal apprentices, acquire workplace skills by informal means. For example, the gross enrolment ratio for upper secondary education in low-income countries is 29 per cent, of which only five per cent represents technical and vocational education (TVET) (Figure 1). In the absence of recognized qualifications, they face severe disadvantages as far as finding decent jobs, migrating to other regions and accessing further education. Unfortunately, most formal education systems are not geared to recognize non-formal and informal learning. This not only hinders the development of human capital, but is also a cause of its under-utilization. As a result, the recognition of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal means is becoming a highly aspirational, political and social issue, attracting the attention of policy makers.

Figure 1: The proportion of youth enrolled in secondary education and TVET



Source: UNESCO, 2012b.

Key international standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as well as EU and AU policy papers, have recommended that all countries should establish a recognition of prior learning (RPL) system (Box 1). Most national policies covered under the study on comparative analysis of national skills development policies likewise recommend setting up RPL systems (Aggarwal and Gasskov, 2013).

Box 1: Recommendation of International Organizations and Regional Bodies

International Labour Standards and International Labour Conferences (ILC) have emphasised the importance of recognition of prior learning (RPL), and recommended establishing systems for it.

- The ILO Recommendation on Human Resources Development: Education, Training and Lifelong Learning (No. 195) calls on Member States to establish a framework for the recognition and certification of skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether formally or informally (ILO, 2004).
- The ILO call for action on youth employment also recommends that governments give serious consideration to developing systems of RPL, non-formal education and skills acquired on the job (ILO, 2012).
- The Committee for the Recurrent Discussion on Employment of ILC 2014 recommends that the employment policy may include policies for system of skills recognition (ILO, 2014a).
- The ILO multilateral framework on labour migration (ILO, 2006) and the DG report to the ILC 2014 on Fair migration (ILO, 2014b) stress the importance of skills recognition.
- ILC 2014 report 'Transitioning from the informal to the formal economy' states that 'it is necessary to develop institutions and mechanisms that assess the skills and competencies acquired by workers so that they can be validated and recognized through certification' (ILO, 2014c).

UNESCO states that RPL is important for poverty reduction, job-creation and employment (UNESCO, 2012a). European guidelines on the validation of non-formal and informal learning lists key drivers for RPL as overcoming a qualifications deficit; addressing sectoral skills shortages; and achieving coherence between (EU) countries (CEDEFOP, 2009). A World Bank report on lifelong learning for global knowledge economy also emphasise the importance of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, particularly in developing countries, having limited provision of formal education and training (The World Bank, 2003).

In view of the importance of RPL, most countries in Africa have initiated steps towards establishing RPL systems, but the majority face challenges to their successful implementation. Therefore, policy makers from many countries are seeking support from the ILO and other institutions in this area. The Decent Work Programme developed by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) has recommended the development of regional RPL guidelines, and has requested ILO support in this area. It is against this background that this paper has been produced, taking into account the experiences of many countries, with the aim of building the capacity of policy makers and social partners in establishing an effective RPL system.

In developing this paper, International Labour Standards and literature from key international development institutions such as the ILO, UNESCO, the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), European Commission, and the World Bank, not to mention the experiences of countries from around the world were considered. Intensive consultations were held with key stakeholders who were implementing RPL in South Africa, Mauritius, Seychelles, Namibia, Botswana, Hong Kong, Canada and Bangladesh. The author has also directly advised and supervised the design and implementation of RPL programmes in India, Tanzania and Zimbabwe; those experiences were used in preparing the paper. Experts from the ILO and many countries reviewed the paper and the finding and recommendations were also presented and discussed at the regional Africa Regional Labour Administration Centre (ARLAC) tripartite workshop, the ILO Turin Skills Academy, the ILO Turin Academy on the Formalisation of Informal Economy and at other workshops.

1.1 What is RPL?

RPL is a process used to identify, assess and certify a person’s knowledge, skills and competencies – regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred – against prescribed standards for a part (modular) or full qualification (NSW DET, 2009; MQA, 2009; VETA, 2014).

The process emphasizes three key aspects. The first refers to the processes related to identifying non-formal and informal learning (including self-evaluation); the collection and presentation of evidence of learning; the assessment and validation of the evidence; and issuing a recognized qualification if claims are valid. The second concerns the independence of the learning method. The third specifies that only the learning that conforms to standards of a qualification (full or part) is to be certified by an authorized body. Although RPL is primarily an assessment process, it does need to be integrated with counselling¹, mediation and skills gap training to ensure a successful outcome.

There is no standard terminology for RPL; some of the terms and acronyms used are given in Box 2.

Box 2: Frequently used terminology	
APEL	Assessment of prior experiential learning
APL	Assessment of prior learning
PLAR	Prior learning assessment and recognition
RAC	Recognition of acquired competences
RAS	Recognition of acquired skills
RCC	Recognition of current competences
RNFIL	Recognition of non-formal and informal learning
RPL	Recognition of prior learning
RVCC	Recognition, validation, and certification of competences
VNFIL	Validation of non-formal and informal learning

This paper will use the term RPL throughout.

¹ In the context of RPL, the term Counselling refers to vocational guidance and counselling.

1.2 Key drivers and benefits

RPL has the potential to improve employability, mobility, lifelong learning, social inclusion and self-esteem. More and more countries are in the process of establishing RPL systems, for which the key drivers are:

- Promoting social inclusion and equity for disadvantaged groups – early school leavers, retrenched workers, ethnic minorities – by valuing experiential learning and providing them with opportunities to obtain qualifications
- Encouraging lifelong learning in order to create a competent and adaptable workforce that can meet the challenges of a fast-changing labour market, address skills shortages and gaps and allow holistic development
- Providing access to higher education
- Meeting regulatory requirements of some sectors in terms of employing qualified persons
- Improving efficiency and flexibility in education systems by allowing alternative learning pathways – workplace, non-formal, and informal learning – and fast-tracking the acquisition of qualifications
- Enhancing migrant workers' skills portability, and their mobility
- Fostering employability, and thus better, decent jobs
- Contributing to transition from the informal to the formal economy.

In Tanzania, for example, RPL is used as a way to identify skills gaps and hence workers' training needs. The OECD report on recognition of non-formal and informal learning states that while countries facing skills shortages often have unemployed workers with the required skills, such workers are invisible as they lack formal qualifications. Here, RPL contributes to reducing skills shortages by certifying and making visible such knowledge and skills (Werquin, 2010b).

The importance of RPL is perhaps most strongly felt in South Africa, where the majority of the population suffered educational discrimination during the apartheid regime. Therefore, South Africans are passionate about RPL, which has been initiated in 20 sectors and at all levels of qualifications (SAQA, 2014). Most higher education institutes in South Africa now accept RPL for admission to undergraduate studies, and the University of South Africa (UNISA) has developed an RPL tool to

Box 3: Example of the benefit of RPL in increasing productivity and compliance with regulatory requirements

Employers in South Africa's grain silo industry, where the RPL of more than 1,000 workers took place, confirmed that it:

- Improved workers' confidence, self-esteem and motivation to learn
- Increased the productivity and competitiveness
- Enabled compliance with Food Hygiene and Food Safety standards
- Facilitated successful candidates to enter higher learning programmes such as AgriSETA-registered learnerships.

Source: Bayman, Naude and Bolton (forthcoming.)

assess the suitability of candidates for Masters and Doctoral degrees (Smith, 2014). Two successful examples confirming benefits in terms of access to higher education and lifelong learning, increasing productivity, compliance with regulatory requirements and increase in self-esteem are discussed in Boxes 3 and 4.

Box 4: RPL for admission to University of the Western Cape (UWC), South Africa

In 2001, UWC started using RPL for those who lacked formal entry qualifications to an undergraduate degree. It used two methods: Portfolio Development Course (PDC) and standardized admission tests (tests for access and placement, or TAP). For the first method, mediation services were provided to candidates in preparing a portfolio to evidence their prior learning, while in the second one they were examined directly as to whether they had the required linguistic, thinking and learning abilities. The results indicated that:

- Candidates were able to register for undergraduate study using any of these two routes. The portfolio approach was the preferred method (800 applied for PDC against 250 for TAP)
- The popularity of the RPL programme increased rapidly, with the number of applications rising from just over 100 in 2001 to 1,050 by 2010
- The majority of candidates registered were women (in 2010, 67 per cent were female)
- Since inception, the average age of candidates has declined (It was 43.6 years of age in 2006 and 33.8 in 2010)
- A tracer study of three batches of students showed that 63.9 per cent completed the programme, with PDC students performing marginally better than TAP students.

Overall, the programme has been so successful that UWC has had to increase its capacity for RPL.

Source: Ralphs et al. (forthcoming).

For other countries using RPL as a means to access higher education, a report by the European Commission revealed that out of 47 higher education systems for which data was available, RPL could be used for access to higher education, or for progression in higher education, or both, for 24 (European Commission, 2013). In Australia, RPL commences at the start of a person's training, apprenticeship or traineeship, the purpose being to grant credit for the units in which the person is already competent, thus reducing the time needed to obtain the qualification (Queensland Government, 2014).

An ILO study on RPL states that its outcomes were generally positive for workers: they gained self-esteem, improved employability and, in most cases, it was either part of, or led to, further education and training. The study also mentions that it was sometimes undertaken to address specific challenges faced by various industries, for example, overall decline in business or quality related issues, with objectives being met in all cases (Dyson and Keating, 2005).

An example of RPL contributing to self-esteem and lifelong learning is given in Box 5.

Box 5: An example of RPL contributing to self-esteem and lifelong learning

In Bangladesh, Mr Delowar Hossain, an electrician who received a formal qualification through RPL, stated: 'I am the Chairperson of Electricians' Association of my district, working in the sector for more than 25 years without any certificate. I am so proud to receive my first certificate in life, and that the government has recognised my skills. This has motivated me to get higher qualification in future, and I will also encourage all the members of my association to obtain this certificate. This process would also help them to improve their knowledge and skills to meet the requirements of the qualification, and thus provide better services to customers'.

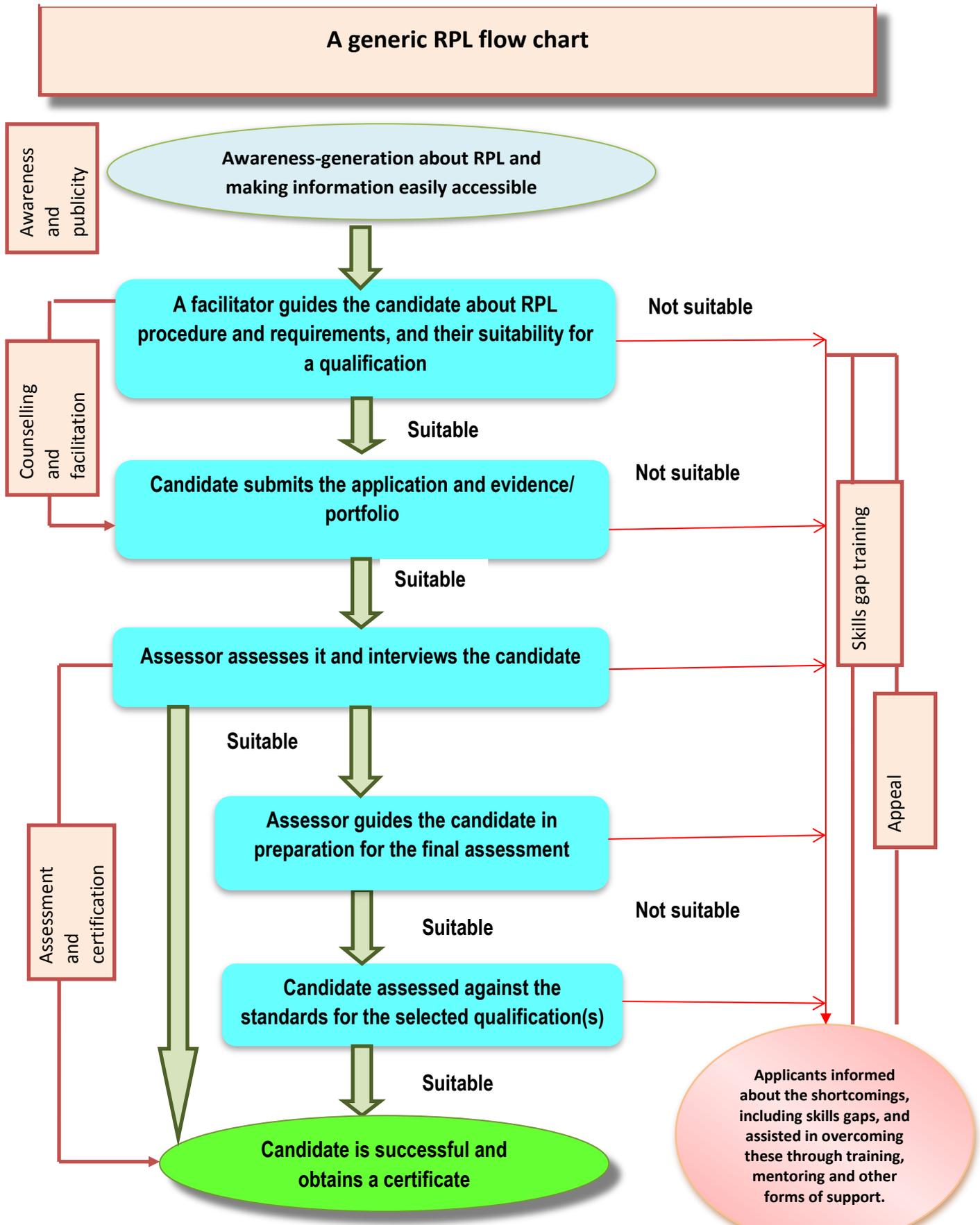
Source: Dass (forthcoming).

It is clear from various studies and country experiences that RPL has potential to benefit all stakeholders: workers, employers, community, government and education and training providers. However, the RPL process must be carried out in a credible and transparent manner if the labour market and educational institutions are to value the knowledge, skills and competences of certificate holders.

2 The RPL process

Although RPL processes and nomenclature vary among countries, the core of RPL involves two key processes: counselling and facilitation, and assessment and certification. These are supported by mechanisms such as awareness and publicity, quality assurance, appeals and skills gap training. A generic flow chart explaining RPL processes is shown in Figure 2, and the key processes are described below:

Figure 2: RPL flow chart



Note: RPL process used by various countries, including Australia, Mauritius, Tanzania, and the EU was considered while preparing this generic flow chart. While the purpose is to show how RPL takes place, adapting the model to suit the local context is important – one approach doesn't suit all.

2.1 Awareness and publicity

This process builds awareness and interest about RPL in potential candidates, employers, and other stakeholders. The RPL agency (the national institution responsible for RPL) and providers play a key role, publicizing what is RPL, what its benefits are, whom to contact, as well as the process, estimated costs, timeframe, eligibility requirements and assistance available. This publicity and awareness-building takes place on different platforms, including websites, social networking, information sessions at workplaces and education institutions, fairs, and the media.

2.2 Counselling and facilitation

During this process, candidates interested in the RPL obtain detailed information and orientation from facilitators appointed by an RPL provider. The facilitators assess candidates' suitability for a specific qualification (full or part), provide the necessary information about learning outcomes and competency standards required for the qualification and the nature of evidence required. The candidate also obtains an application form and documents detailing RPL process and its requirements. The RPL facilitator and the information should help a candidate in deciding whether to apply for RPL, and for which qualification and at what level.

2.3 Assessment and certification

This is a key RPL process and involves a number of steps: application screening, guidance to the candidate by an assessor in building evidences and portfolio, assessment, and award of certificate. First, the candidate's application is sent to an assessor, who screens the application and the evidence. Thereafter the assessor interviews the candidate and, if required, guides him or her on how to improve the evidence. Once the assessor is satisfied, the candidate will be advised as to the nature of final assessment (test). If the assessor is not satisfied, the candidate will be told of the shortcomings and advised as to how to overcome those (for example, collecting additional evidence or upgrading the knowledge and skills). As Paulet (2013) says, 'The objective of assessment is not only to award a qualification but also to steer candidates' personal and professional progress, and to provide them with the tools to do that.'

Vital difference exists between countries in the last stage of assessment: in some countries, such as Tanzania and South Africa (for artisans), final trade test is compulsory, but this is not the case in France, Australia and Mauritius. Where compulsory, the test/examination is the final step of the assessment. If not, the assessor(s) can declare a candidate successful based the evaluation and interview. The RPL agency then awards the certificate to the successful candidate. Some agencies carry out moderation of assessment results in line with their country practice before declaring results and awarding certificates.

The European guidelines for non-formal and informal learning have eight categories of assessment methods. These are given in Box 6.

Box 6: CEDEFOP assessment methods for RPL

Eight assessment methods as per CEDEFOP are:

1. **Debate** offers the candidate an opportunity to demonstrate their depth of knowledge as well as their communicative skills.
2. **Declarative methods** admit an individual's personal identification and recording of their competencies and are normally signed by a third party in order to verify the self-assessment.
3. **Interviews** can be used to clarify issues raised in documentary evidence presented and/or to review scope and depth of learning.
4. **Observation** enables the extraction of an individual's evidence of competence while they are performing everyday tasks at work.
5. **Portfolio method**, which uses a mix of methods and instruments employed in consecutive stages to produce a coherent set of documents or work samples that show an individual's skills and competencies in different ways.
6. **Presentation**, which can be formal or informal and can check the individual's ability to present information in a way that is appropriate to the subject and the audience.
7. **Simulation** and evidence extracted from work, i.e., where individuals are placed in a situation that fulfills all the criteria of the real-life scenario in order to assess their competences.
8. **Tests and examinations** to identify and validate informal and non-formal learning through, or with the help of, examinations in the formal system.

Source: CEDEFOP, 2009.

Not all countries use same assessment methods. France, for example, typically uses the declarative method (Paulet, 2013). The portfolio method is also widely used. A portfolio is a collection of evidence prepared by a candidate in support of their claim of meeting the requisite skills and competencies of a formal qualification. The nature of evidence recommended by various countries and development agencies includes certificates and awards; letters of recommendation; samples of work; videos and/or photographs of work activities; skills logbooks; details of formal training, records of seminars, conferences and workshops attended; resume and performance appraisals; testimonials from current or previous employers; and job descriptions.

The assessment tools and methods should be (NSW DET, 2009; UNESCO, 2012a; VETA, 2014):

- Valid (assess the desired competences)
- Reliable and consistent (various assessors use the same assessment tools and methods and obtain the same results)
- Transparent (candidates, assessors and moderators are aware of the assessment tools and methods and standards)
- Equitable and flexible (candidates' needs are taken into account – time, place and method)
- Manageable and achievable (the assessment should be possible within the time and resources available)
- Fair (allowing for appeal)

Moreover, evidence-gathering needs to comply with the rules of evidence, which require it to be:

- Valid (covers key competences of a qualification)
- Sufficient (allows assessors to make decisions on the level of competency)
- Current (contemporary)
- Authentic (examples of the candidate's own work)

2.4 Quality assurance of RPL

To ensure the credibility and consistency of RPL certification, countries specify quality assurance mechanisms. Those most frequently used are:

- Establishing common standards
- Ensuring the availability of competent RPL practitioners
- Collaborating with employers' and workers' organizations and other relevant stakeholders
- Developing assessment tools and methodologies
- Accrediting RPL centres
- Moderating assessments
- Monitoring and evaluation frameworks
- Independent auditing of the entire RPL process
- Disseminating results.

2.5 RPL appeal procedures

Countries also prescribe an appeal process so that candidates can ask for a review of the decision(s) made at any stage of the RPL process.

2.6 Skills gap training

Some countries make provision for skills upgrading programmes so that candidates can fill skills gaps and meet desired standards. In South Africa, for example, mediation tools are being used to assist learners in navigating from workplace learning to academic knowledge.

There are other prerequisites for establishing an RPL system, among them being the development of competency standards, qualifications and assessment tools; the accreditation of RPL providers and assessors; the development of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, including management information system (MIS); and the capacity building of institutions and staff. Some of these might be available in a country as part of education system (These issues will be discussed in the next section). The characteristics of RPL in Latin America and the Caribbean are given in Annex 1.

3 Key barriers to RPL, and the building blocks of establishing a successful RPL system

Despite high expectation from RPL, many countries are experiencing a slow implementation, and difficulty in upscaling from project-based implementation to establishing a sustainable national RPL system that is accessible to all. The key barriers as well as the strategies (building blocks) in successfully implementing RPL on a large scale are discussed below:

3.1 Awareness, Vocational Guidance and Counselling

RPL is an evolving concept, not only many different terminologies and definitions are used, but processes also vary in various countries. Confusing language and differing definitions of RPL hinder effective discussions and act as a barrier to its effective implementation (Bowmen et al., 2003). Like any new concept, it takes time for stakeholders to fully accept it. Moreover, the majority are unaware of RPL, its processes and methodologies, its acceptability by employers for employment and by higher educational institutions for admission to further education and training programmes. Christensen (2013) states that low awareness of RPL in Norway, particularly among those with low formal education, for example, is the biggest challenge to increasing its uptake and requires a targeted information strategy.

For many countries, the RPL methodology for assessing the knowledge and skills of persons – discussed in a subsequent section – is fairly complex, and the candidates applying for RPL require significant support and counselling during the various processes. In a successful RPL system, the nature of the relationship between the assessor and the candidate is quite different than seen in a traditional, formal education system. The assessors, while maintaining quality and accuracy in the assessment, must provide correct information about the process as a whole and guide candidates in collecting evidence. For example, while a candidate may have all the necessary credentials, he/she may not know how to present them. Hence, before beginning the formal application process, candidates must be presented with full information about the qualifications and competency standards, the costs and the time frame and the advantages of RPL.

In Tanzania, counselling is provided by both facilitators and assessors. Facilitators provide information about the RPL process and requirements, while assessors offer specific guidance and information related to the assessment procedure. The aim is to provide effective counselling right from the start, so that suitable candidates are identified and the rejections at the final assessment stage are minimized. This also helps to reduce costs and prevent the RPL system from being overloaded, particularly at the assessment stage. To this end, some countries now emphasize the use of ICT for improving the effectiveness and

efficiency of the vocational guidance and counselling system. For example, in Queensland, Australia, individuals first visit a Skilling Solutions Centre (often in a local shopping centre) and use a web-based self-evaluation tool to match their skills, knowledge and experience to a relevant qualification (full or part) (Box 7). This takes about 15 minutes. They are then provided with a list of preferred RPL providers where they can undergo the RPL process (IARC, n.d.). The Australian government's website² is very user-friendly and provides complete information as well as tips and hints.

Box 7: Self-evaluation for RPL using web-based computer software

The on-line self-evaluation checklist takes a user through following steps, building knowledge about the process and matching their skills and knowledge with a qualification (part or full).

1. Examining the list of government priorities and plans, the benefits of RPL, and the cost and time required.
2. Selecting the qualification that is most suited to one's area of expertise from a list of approved qualifications, such as the HLT32812 Certificate III in Health Support Services (FOOD SERVICES).
3. Identifying one's skills against a list of competency groups and units of competency. For example, the website lists 11 competency groups for the qualification chosen in the previous step.
4. Matching one's skills with those of the qualification. The website does this automatically and lists the qualifications for which one's skills are a potential match, and to what extent.
5. Identifying and collecting evidence: The website provides guidance on the nature of evidence to be gathered together as well which types are permissible.
6. Viewing RPL providers: Candidates can search for providers offering RPL for their chosen qualifications using specific websites (training.gov.au or myskills.gov.au) or the Yellow Pages. The report generated should be printed out and taken to the provider for discussion with an assessor, who will give more specific advice about the enrolment procedure and the evidence required.

Source: Queensland Government, 2014.

The New South Wales (2014) website not only provides detailed information about RPL, but also offers recognition guides for training providers, candidates, assessors and employers as well as an RPL Practice Models Catalogue (a list of valuable RPL resources from various sectors). To build awareness and consensus about RPL, some countries organize national conferences and stakeholders' workshops. In 2014, for example, the Vice-President of Tanzania, along with the Ministers of Education and Labour, inaugurated a national RPL conference and distributed certificates to successful candidates. The visual and print media publicized the event nationally, thereby furthering the positive effects of RPL.

A well-directed strategy can indeed help in creating awareness about RPL and its potential benefits, and in building positive attitudes.

² www.training.qld.gov.au/information/rpl.html. Accessed 5 January 2015.

Building block 1: Building awareness about RPL and providing effective vocational guidance and counselling services to RPL candidates.

3.2 Integrating RPL with policy, legal and regulatory frameworks for education and training systems

An RPL system should be an integral part of a country's education and training system. It should promote alternate pathways to acquiring qualifications, ensuring parity between RPL and formal education; facilitate lifelong learning; and ensure the allocation of sufficient resources so that stakeholders will take it seriously and prioritize its development and implementation. These objectives can be accomplished if national policies concerning employment, poverty reduction, development, migration, education and training emphasize the implementation of RPL. Singh and Duvekot (2013) state:

The country cases show that those countries with established [RPL] systems are also those that have made RVA³ a priority in their political agenda, and have adopted policies and legislation specifically related to RVA in their education systems.... In France, the strong legal base of RVA assures each person's right to have their formally, informally and non-formally acquired experiences assessed.

In Denmark, every 18 to 25-year-old has the right to RPL, as do those undertaking adult vocational training (Andersen and Aagaard, 2013). Dutch VET law ensures parity of skills acquired from formal learning with those gained from non-formal/informal learning; the skills are assessed through a system independent of learning pathways (Duvekot, 2013). In Finland, adults with more than five years of documented work experience are eligible for applying for a journeyman's or craft certificate through RPL. If their documents meet the requirements, they undertake the same final examination (theory and practical) as apprentices. If successful, they can then apply for admission to higher education (Christensen, 2013). In Australia, RPL is part of the Australian Quality Training Framework charter and the standards for Registered Training Organisations. Under these charters and standards it is mandatory for RPL to be offered to all applicants on enrolment (IARC, n.d.).

There is also a need to envisage RPL from a sub-regional perspective. National domestication is important, but, if dealt with in isolation, there is a risk of seeing RPL for migrant workers remaining unaddressed. RPL for non-nationals should also be streamlined in RPL policies, and institutions should be sensitized to the need to mainstream migration in their procedures and systems. The role of regional bodies in promoting RPL within regional

³ This is another term for RPL.

qualification frameworks is also very important, and synergies should be established between regional processes and mainstreaming migration in RPL processes at national level. For example, SADC member States asked the body to develop a regional RPL strategy and integrate RPL in the regional migration policy in order to bring coherence to their individual efforts.

Building block 2: Integrating RPL policy with policy, legal and regulatory frameworks for education and training system.

3.3 Stakeholder ownership and commitment

The effective participation of stakeholders, especially employers' and workers' organizations, in education and training systems is essential to ensuring that training matches the needs of the labour market. This presents a challenge for many countries, and all the more so in those with a large informal economy, as establishing collaboration with informal sector enterprises is in itself an obstacle. Accordingly, the involvement of social partners in RPL is also impacted by their overall involvement in the education and training system. However, low participation in RPL doesn't necessarily reflect apathy towards it.

While workers' organizations are generally supportive of RPL, employers' organizations give off mixed signals. Some have led the implementation of RPL, others are apprehensive. Key factors influencing the likelihood of employers encouraging their employees to pursue RPL are as follows:

Box 8: Main stakeholders in VPL [RPL] in the Netherlands

1. National authorities, which facilitate the development and implementation of VPL (law, finance).
2. Social partners, who encourage organizations to use VPL (through sectoral regulations and training funds).
3. Schools, which provide access to standards by using VPL procedures.
4. Companies and organizations, which guide their employees towards VPL.
5. Citizens who can, with or without support from VPL providers, build up their personal portfolio for VPL procedures.

Source: Duvekot, 2013.

- Is employing qualified workers a regulatory requirement or a condition for obtaining international quality assurance certification?
- Are importers concerned about employees' qualifications?
- What are its costs and the benefits?
- Will RPL decrease absenteeism or encourage demands for promotions and higher wages?
- Is there an established link between skills and productivity?
- Are they fully aware of RPL and do they trust the quality of RPL system?

This is a type of ‘chicken or egg?’ situation. Do employers need to have trust in the RPL system before deciding to participate, or vice versa? RPL is not the only training sub-system where employers’ views are divided; many won’t even offer apprenticeships.

Box 9: Examples of social partners’ involvement in RPL

- In South Africa, employers’ and workers’ organizations participate in the design and implementation of RPL through their respective sector education and training authorities; employers also directly promote RPL in many sectors, including insurance, banking, agriculture and the media.
- In Brazil, the SENAI certification [RPL] system aims to actively involve enterprises right from the design stage, and to promote human resources policies that favour the recognition of competencies for developing a career. The system considers occupational profiles, prepared jointly with representatives from enterprises and workers in the sectoral technical committees, as the reference for assessment (Vargas, 2004).
- PETROBRAS, Brazil’s largest corporation, has established a certification system for its employees, especially for those working in the areas of quality control function, in order to ensure competent personnel for safe installations and operational continuity (Vargas, 2004). One of its governance principles is: ‘We invest in our employees because we know it is impossible to achieve excellence without valuing people’. For more information, see www.petrobras.com/en/about-us/.
- In Iceland, RPL is a priority for employer and employee organization (Velciu, 2014) and in the United States, enterprises work with colleges and universities to determine how workers can gain access to, or credit within, college courses. In New Zealand, Industry Training Organizations, mostly funded by industry, have developed industry-based RPL models and carry out or supervise the assessments within the framework for quality assurance prescribed by the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (Dyson and Keating, 2005).
- A report for the European Trade Union Confederation notes that trade unions in some countries, for example, Great Britain and Romania, train some members to become ‘activists’, who then provide information and guidance to workers. The same report also recommends that collective bargaining take up the issue of RPL (Damesin, Fayolle and Fleury, 2012).

It is very important to ensure active participation of all stakeholders (Box 8 and 9), especially employers and workers, in the planning, implementation and evaluation of RPL, so that they not only ensure quality but also recognize the benefits of RPL.

Building block 3: Ensuring the active participation of all stakeholders, particularly social partners, in the development, implementation and evaluation of RPL.

3.4 Institutional frameworks and the capacity for RPL

Like any new system, RPL requires a clearly defined institutional framework for planning and management. Some countries decided to entrust responsibility for RPL to existing institutions without analysing their existing capacity constraints or awarding additional resources. RPL was thus viewed as a similar form of assessment that many institutions implement for formal education and training systems, and allocated the responsibility for RPL to them. As a result, public education and training institutions (and private ones also

became RPL providers, mistakenly believing that existing formal assessment systems would cover RPL. In addition, many of these institutions lacked the additional resources and incentives to promote RPL as well as the capacity to implement RPL. As a result, the implementation of RPL was ineffective. Even countries with a good recognition system expressed their inability to rapidly scale up RPL due to lack of competent staff and/or facilities (Werquin, 2008).

In planning an RPL system, then, a country should comprehensively analyze the capacity of the existing institutional framework(s) for education and training for RPL to be implemented effectively. Though setting up new institutions for RPL may not be essential, the capacity of existing institutions will need to be strengthened. This can be achieved by setting up exclusive RPL units within these institutes, employing additional professionals, and using ICT to implement and monitor RPL systems. As discussed in the previous section, the effective involvement of social partners in the institutions is also essential. Tanzania, for example, is empowering existing institutions to take up RPL, while in Costa Rica, the National Training Institute has established a specialized unit for RPL (Vargas, 2004). South Africa is planning to use a mixed approach, setting up a new, overarching national RPL institute in addition to using existing institutions. In Germany, universities are responsible for higher education, and Chambers of Crafts, Industry, Commerce and Farming manage VET (Velciu, 2014).

Resource institutions for developing tools and building the capacity of RPL providers and professionals are also required. Again, this can again be achieved by strengthening existing institutions or establishing new ones. For example, Denmark has established a RPL National Knowledge Centre for the management and dissemination of knowledge about RPL; it plays an important role for the development of quality standards and methods for assessing prior learning (Kippersluis, 2014).

Building block 4: Having an effective institutional framework for RPL.

3.5 The capacity of RPL professionals

In most countries, having an inadequate number of competent RPL professionals acts as a barrier to implementing and scaling up RPL. The system needs professionals to perform key functions⁴ including the development of assessment tools; counselling and facilitation; assessment and certification; quality assurance, audit and appeals; and RPL system and processes management.

⁴ This is based on the presumption that the country has clearly defined competency standards.

Box 10: Building the capacity of RPL professionals – country practices

A few countries have developed formal qualifications and training programmes for the assessors:

- Australia has developed a learning resource for assessors, namely 'Informal learning: Learning from experience', which includes assessment tools and case studies (Vickers, 2014). An RPL guide for assessors has also been developed (New South Wales Government, 2014).
- Norway organises annual courses and seminars for assessors and the mentoring of inexperienced assessors. Assessment centres register trained assessors (Christensen, 2013).
- The European Centre for Development of Vocational Training recommends networking and a community of practice as a component of a development programme for RPL professionals (CEDEFOP, 2009).
- In Slovenia, the National Assessment Centre trains RPL assessors, with funding from participants' registration fees (Werquin, 2010b).
- In Manitoba, Canada, Red River College offers two levels of training: a 40-hour introduction to the PLAR system and an advanced 40-hour course on PLAR (Ibid.).
- In South Africa, evaluators are required to be 'registered assessors' who are trained and also meet the minimum SAQA criteria to perform assessments in particular sectors. Moreover, the assessor must be qualified at a higher NQF level than the level at which the assessment takes place (Ibid.). RPL practitioners are also trained by public universities.

Most shortages are in areas of tools development and the assessment. As a solution, the RPL system should develop and implement training programmes to build professionals' capacity and develop tools, case studies and guides to assist them with carrying out their tasks effectively. Countries should also have a mechanism for accrediting and/or registering assessors. Some examples of capacity building in this area are given in Box 10.

Building block 5: Ensuring the availability of sufficient numbers of competent RPL professionals.

3.6 Matching occupational and qualification standards

Assessment under RPL is carried out against standards prescribed for a qualification. Since potential RPL candidates have acquired a significant portion of their learning at the workplace, there needs to be a close matching of occupational standards with qualification standards. However, this presents difficulties, chief of which is the distinct problem of mismatching. This occurs for many reasons. First, these two categories of standards are controlled and designed by different institutions, and if there is no strong partnership between the two, mismatching will often result. Second, each has different objectives.

Occupational standards, which are decided by labour market, define the standards of performance (competences) individuals must achieve when carrying out functions of an occupation (plumber, driver etc.), while qualification standards, designed by educational institutions, focus on how and what people need to learn as well as how it will be assessed (CEDEFOP, 2009). Whilst occupational standards influence the latter, the organization of learning in the education system is based on pedagogic principles, and on building a strong foundation for lifelong learning. A third difficulty in matching the two is that the competencies required for an occupation may vary in urban and rural areas, and also between the formal and the informal sector. In addition, these competencies frequently change due to a number of factors, such as technological advancements.

Therefore, occupational qualifications are generally broad-based, and in many countries TVET programmes provide multi-skill training. It would be difficult even for a highly skilled worker to acquire each and every competency for a full qualification through experiential learning and successfully acquire the full qualification through RPL alone.

For migrant workers, RPL is further complicated by the challenges associated with the recognition of foreign qualifications and experience. Here, coherence between national qualifications and mutual recognition can be promoted by aligning national and regional qualification frameworks.

Given the above, qualifications should be modular and competency based, with clearly defined standards or learning outcomes. The standards for full or modular-type (part) qualifications (against which candidates are assessed should closely match the occupational standards used in the labour market. If the full qualification covers a broad range of skills, the modules may be designed in such a manner to serve three distinct purposes:

1. A module (or a combination thereof) must match the standards of the associated occupation;
2. There must be horizontal and vertical linkages between modules
3. Overall, the modules should come together to cover the standards of the full qualification.

Sometimes it requires innovative thinking to achieve these three objectives. However, designing such qualification system allows workers to see their skills assessed and certified, at least against a module or part qualification and ensures parity with formal education and training. If desired, workers can take additional modules, furthering their knowledge and skills, spending less time and money, and thus fulfilling the objective of lifelong learning. This methodology has the potential to strengthen countries' National Qualification Frameworks (NQF). India has designed a new competency based training system called Modular Employable Skills, which has the aforementioned features. Tanzania is also restructuring its qualifications along these lines.

Assessing and certifying skills of individuals against part qualifications is gaining momentum, and countries including Mauritius, Australia and Tanzania now offer RPL for part qualifications as well.

Building block 6: Ensuring the close matching of occupational and qualification standards (this matching can take place at the level of part qualifications).

3.7 Assessment methodologies

A tried and tested assessment methodology is a critical factor in the successful implementation of any RPL system. Credibility and confidence in an RPL system, to a great extent, depends on the use of quality assured means of assessment. Ideally, to ensure parity of qualifications, the same assessment tools and methodologies should be used for formal as well as non-formal and informal learning, but the differences in learning contexts and learners' characteristics makes this difficult. While quality assurance in a formal system is carried out at all stages (input, the learning process and outcome) the RPL system cannot do this for the first two stages as the system has no control over them. To resolve this, a much more rigorous assessment methodology is used to ensure that only competent candidates are awarded certificates. However, this results in a complex, time-consuming methodology (see Section 2.3) that acts as a barrier for accessing RPL. The most widely used approach for RPL, namely the portfolio method, could be very demanding in relation to collecting evidence and completing documentation (Box 11), particularly for individuals in the informal sector or those having a limited formal education. Some candidates may lack the necessary writing skills for written examinations. Bowman et al. (2003) also lament the fact that the existing RPL evidence guides and processes remain too academic and jargon-ridden for many potential applicants.

Box 11: Nature of evidence for RPL as recommended by Queensland State, Australia		
Direct Evidence	Indirect Evidence	Historical Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workplace observation • Demonstration of skill • Samples of work • The materials or tools with which the candidate works • Referees' reports • Videos • Audio files • Photos • Published works, such as operational manuals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industry awards • Job specifications or position descriptions • Curriculum Vitae or Resume • Rosters or timesheets • Budgets • Visual presentations or written speeches • Letters or memos from the workplace • References/letters of support • Evidence of committee work • Reading lists • Workplace training records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written references from past employers • Log books and other records of performance • Certificates or qualifications • Letters of support • Assignments, reports and documentation from previous courses • Past competency based assessments • Record of academic results • Course attendance record • Scrapbooks • Magazine or newspaper articles.
Source: Queensland Government, 2014.		

In essence, the portfolio method presents the most challenges to RPL, especially in developing countries with large informal economy, as producing credible evidence and testimonials is difficult. Recognizing this, countries are adopting various means to ensure a fair assessment of knowledge and competency of persons without making the process too complex. These revised methods include (see also Box 12):

- Combining the portfolio method with a trade test. Here, the portfolio and other criteria are used to screen potential candidates undergoing a trade test or examination, thus reducing reliance exclusively on portfolio method. For example, VETA in Tanzania and NAMB in South Africa use this method for RPL for artisans. In Mauritius, a portfolio and a panel interview method is used, but stakeholders while reviewing the implementation of RPL recommended supplementing the existing methods with a practical trade test (MQA, 2014).
- The trade test method. India, where 90 per cent of the workforce is in the informal economy, uses the trade test method for RPL (DGET, 2014a). The assessment is, however, done by independent bodies, preferably with the involvement of the industry concerned.
- Developing and disseminating case studies and tools used in successful RPL programmes for the benefit of other assessors. For example:

Box 12: Assessment methodologies – country examples

The main assessment techniques that exist alongside use of the portfolio approach are interviews, context-based observations, 360-degree assessments, simulation and questionnaires.

- The Netherlands has chosen the first three techniques in addition to the portfolio, justifying the choice on the grounds of cost, desired quality and the number of candidates to be assessed. It is regarded as a pioneer from the point of view of its assessment technique, as candidates are entitled to have their learning outcomes recognized in whichever of the four possible ways they prefer.
- The United Kingdom makes use of learning portfolios, workplace observation and questionnaires. Here, the idea is to adapt the method to the candidate and their aims.
- In Slovenia, the learning portfolio is used to record the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired. Candidates receive assistance from a counsellor, which may be followed by an examination that tests skills and knowledge whose levels are not made clear by the portfolio. Practices vary widely depending on the institution concerned, and at its discretion, and the examination may be written or oral. If oral, it may comprise a discussion, an interview, reasoning with reference to a document, product evaluation, practical tests, a demonstration, simulation or role-playing.
- Tertiary education in Flemish Belgium uses is a two-stage procedure: an initial portfolio-based assessment and then a real-time assessment. Successful completion of the first stage is a precondition for proceeding to the second.
- In Canada, over half of the candidates (54 per cent) use the 'challenge' (examination), followed by the learning portfolio (23 per cent) and the demonstration (23 per cent).

There have been very mild attempts to organise *group assessment*, as reflected in one project in the Czech Republic. In Switzerland, Swiss Post (the postal services enterprise) already assesses groups of candidates in this manner.

Source: Werquin, 2010b.

- Australia has developed resources that help to streamline and simplify RPL processes as well as minimize the cost to applicants. These resources have been tested and can be used by RPL providers, enterprises and the candidates for the followings sectors: automotive; communications, IT, print and graphic arts; community services and health; construction; manufacturing, engineering and related services; utilities and electro-technology (New South Wales Government, 2014).
- In Colombia, the National Training Service (SENA) has developed test banks (a set of questions) for RPL assessors to use during assessment (Vargas, 2004).

Box 13: The e-RPL Initiative within the Grain Silo industry

In order that its workers might meet international food hygiene and food safety regulations, the grain silo industry in South Africa took an initiative to assess and certify their knowledge and skills (and train them, if necessary) so that they can handle and store grains and oilseeds safely and hygienically. Stakeholders decided that RPL was the best solution to meet the industry's skills development needs. The initiative – the Amabele e-RPL project – was managed and delivered by Deloitte Consulting in consultation with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). It was co-funded by the Agricultural Sector Education and Training Authority (AgriSETA) and employers within the grain silo industry. Deloitte South Africa designed a unique computer-based 'e-RPL' model to meet the challenges, namely:

- The vast geographical spread of grain silo owners' organizations (the project was delivered in eight of South Africa's nine provinces)
- Project sites that included rural areas without access to electricity
- The complication of there being illiterate and semi-literate workers in the industry
- The requirement of an integrated solution for the continuous recognition of skills, re-training and upgrading
- Non-existent competency standards and qualifications
- The lack of a suitable 'off-the-shelf' RPL solution for the industry
- Employers' concerns about the loss of productivity during training.

The Amabele e-RPL Competency Based Assessment (CBA) instrument included:

- Dynamic visuals (animation, photographs and videos)
- Sound and user interactivity
- Different 'test' options to meet the skills need of individual RPL candidates
- Near real-time assessment results and reporting.

Computer-based assessments were combined with on-the-job observation and written comprehension testing. A mobile computer laboratory was used to reach candidates in those remote areas without electricity.

The RPL candidates were assessed against qualifications registered on levels 1, 2 and 3 of South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF). A total of 1,188 employees qualified for the RPL process.

The advantages of this approach included its suitability for the illiterate and semi-literate; its scalability and portability; mass application possible countrywide, and at a lower unit cost and within shorter time frame; suitability for rural and informal economy; and combining assessment and training.

Feedback from employers confirmed that RPL visibly improved workers' confidence, self-esteem and motivation to learn and increased the productivity and competitiveness. It also enabled compliance with Food Hygiene and Food Safety Standards; and facilitated successful candidates to enter higher learning programmes such as AgriSETA-registered learnerships.

Source: Bayman, Naude and Bolton, forthcoming.

- In South Africa, the three sub-frameworks of NQF – the General and Further Education and Training sub-framework, the Higher Education sub-framework and the Occupational Qualifications sub-framework – guide the implementation of RPL and the methods used, which can differ between sub-frameworks.
- Some countries are concentrating on making the portfolio method more user-friendly, using ICT for e-RPL or e-portfolio and providing extensive support to candidates. The approach to assessment is also being transformed, with assessors facilitating and guiding applicants during the process, and using a combination of methods. For example:
 - Deloitte Consulting used an innovative methodology ‘e-portfolio’ (or e-RPL) as an alternative to a hard copy portfolio to certify the skills of workers with low levels of education in South Africa’s grain silo industry (Box 13).
 - European guidelines on RPL recommend organizing group sessions for candidates for preparing portfolios, the latter often being a major challenge for individual candidates. These group sessions may be complimented with individual tutorials (CEDEFOP, 2009).

While it is important to ensure that candidates are at the centre of the process (UNESCO, 2012a), this should not be at the expense of quality. So, there is still an ongoing need to continue the development of innovative assessment methods for RPL that:

- Are less time-consuming, more cost-effective and simple but credible
- Take into account the context in which each candidate’s learning has been acquired and their individual characteristics.

Building block 7: Developing effective and efficient assessment tools and methodologies appropriate to the context of target groups.

3.8 Costs and funding

Obtaining qualifications through RPL is economical compared to the costs of formal education and training. Even so, it is much more expensive than the assessment and certification of formal training, which has not only the economies of scale but the marginal cost also reduces significantly as more students enrol (OECD, 2010a). This is not the case with RPL, where intensive, personalized counselling and assessment is required. In some countries, for example Mauritius and Tanzania, a panel of assessors examines a candidate and may also conducts a site visit to observe the candidate at work (this occurs in the Seychelles). Such requirements increase the cost of assessment. Initial investment may also be needed in setting up the system, developing tools and building capacity. Thus, the cost of RPL depends on the methodology a country adopts, the level and type of qualification and the extent of the support needed by candidates (Box 14). It also depends on the availability

of pre-existing competency standards and assessment tools in the country, and what, if any, institutions are responsible for RPL. The costs will be lower if existing institutions share the responsibility of RPL. Most countries do follow this approach, but some have underestimated the cost implications and the complexity, and thus faced constraints in implementing and expanding RPL. Werquin (2010b) states that the issue

of costs is clearly identified as a challenge in all 22 countries in which the OECD carried out the RPL study.

Countries should have clear guidelines on cost-sharing of RPL between government, employers and candidates to ensure its sustainability and the upscaling. This issue was discussed during three key workshops organized during 2013-14: a tripartite workshop organized by ARLAC comprising stakeholders from 10 countries, the Skills Academy and the Formalisation of Informal Economy Academy at the ILO-ITC Turin. The opinions of participants were initially divided on cost-sharing between key stakeholders – the majority of participants recommended the government and employers to bear the major proportion of the cost (see Box 15, as an example of cost sharing). They opined that if candidates are asked to bear a higher proportion of the cost, it may act as disincentive, especially as the implementation of RPL in many countries is still in preliminary stages and its benefits have yet to be well known. In addition, candidates already have to bear opportunity costs as many of them might be employed and thus may put

Box 14: Key factors in RPL costs for candidates

The cost of RPL for a candidate may include registration fees, assessment fees, transport and preparing the portfolio. There may also be an opportunity cost.

The Queensland State government's RPL website states that the cost of RPL can be much lower and take up much less time than the training it replaces. Thus, RPL can reduce the cost of acquiring qualifications. Following factors influence the cost of RPL (Queensland Government, 2014):

- Cost depends on the qualification and the amount of RPL undertaken.
- The cost of 'gap training', if needed.
- Each registered training organisation (RTO) charges differently.
- Government contributions may be available in particular circumstances; the relevant RTO can provide details.

Box 15: The taximeter system for funding RPL in Denmark

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is financially supported by the Ministry of Education. The funding is delivered through what is called the 'taximeter system', which links one-off funding to institutions according to the number of RVA candidates completing competence assessments, personal study plans, training plans within specific institutions and courses of adult education and training.

Allowance schemes for 'lost' earnings during participation in education and training are based on a co-financed system through public and private sources. Private sources include funding by companies through a national fund set up by the social partners and through collective agreements. Co-financing is more or less a universal rule.

Source: Andersen and Aagaard, 2013.

off RPL if they have to bear most of the cost. So doing would work against a key objective of

RPL, i.e., promoting the social inclusion of disadvantaged groups, in particular those working in the informal economy.

Employers may feel similarly reluctant, unless RPL is linked to the company's human resource management strategy. Initially, then, costs need to be subsidized by government, as is the case for education and formal training systems. Such subsidies may vary from target group to target group, i.e. whether RPL is being delivered to those working in the formal or the informal economy, the employed or unemployed, the nature of qualification (elementary or higher education, TVET and/or the country policy). However, employers could bear the opportunity cost, for example, by giving paid leave, and also cost of skill gaps training and of collecting evidence (See Boxes 13 and 14).

Many countries have education or skills development levies, a part of which could be assigned to RPL. In many African countries, government/public training institutions bear the cost of RPL. This is true for Botswana, Mauritius, Namibia, and Tanzania. In South Africa, SETAs generally use skills development levy for meeting RPL costs, and in some cases employers also share the cost. India has started an RPL programme for construction workers, who largely work in the informal economy, with State Construction Welfare Boards paying the assessment fees (US\$16⁵ per person) and skills gap training fees, and providing a wage allowance (US\$0.60 per hour, per person) to offset wages lost during training (DGET, 2014a). In all these examples, no direct cost was charged to the candidates. More examples of RPL funding are given in Box 16.

Box 16: RPL funding and cost-sharing – examples from countries around the world

An OECD study on the RPL practices of 22 countries noted the use of different cost-sharing methods for RPL. This may reflect factors such as the level and type of qualifications, the candidate's employment status and country-specific policies. Candidates usually cover a small portion of the cost through registration or entrance fees, although this is not a prerequisite for all countries. Examples of costs and who covers them are given below:

- Ireland – The institution covers the fees.
 - Slovenia – The public employment service bears registration fees of the unemployed.
 - Czech Republic – The registration fees varies from EUR 30 to EUR 70.
 - Norway – EUR 120-300 in the academic field, EUR 300 for the vocational sector and EUR 1,800 for a vocational examination. For tertiary education, all costs are covered by the university budget.
 - Canada – Generally, assessment fees are borne by institutions; other costs (such as for counselling and information) are divided between institutions and learners.
 - Belgium – The registration fees are EUR 25 for the unemployed and EUR 100 for the employed. Funding also comes from the European Social Fund (ESF).
 - The Netherlands – Costs are shared between employers and the funds for education and development or the local authorities.
 - Switzerland – The canton of Geneva spends an average of EUR 2,200-3,400 per candidate. Swiss Post spent EUR 2.2 million on its entire recognition project for 1,500-2,000 persons.
 - Austria, Australia, Chile and Denmark are among those countries that offer tax relief in this area, with the result that funding is indirectly based on the state budget.
- Source: Werquin, 2010b.

To promote the use of RPL, governments may grant tax incentives to employers and individuals. The Netherlands, for example, provides tax benefits to RPL customers (individuals and employers) for performing RPL (Kippersluis, 2014).

Since funding is a critical issue for sustainability of RPL, the governments should ensure a policy environment that ensures sustainable and equitable funding for RPL.

Building block 8: Promoting cost-sharing and a sustainable, equitable funding mechanism for RPL.

3.9 Upgrading skills

In view of the skills gap between learning acquired on the job and qualification standards, most individuals require some form of additional knowledge and skills to pass RPL assessment and acquire qualifications. For candidates, this means upgrading their existing skills or acquiring new types of skills, or both, to meet prescribed standards. This presents a key challenge to RPL candidates, as education and training systems lack sufficient flexibility to deliver customized programmes to meet their training needs. In addition, the capacity of education institutions in developing countries is already stretched and generally unable to admit and provide education to all students seeking admission to formal, full-time education. Accordingly, they are not very keen to develop and deliver such customized short-term programmes.

The RPL system should promote skills upgrading opportunities for candidates that can be delivered with flexibility. Bottlenecks in training infrastructure can be overcome if training institutes offer RPL programmes at weekends and in the evenings, thereby optimizing the use of the existing infrastructure, which would reduce the cost of training. This type of arrangement would (and does) help the employed RPL candidates as well as the training institutes. For example, India has launched a massive programme – the Skills Development Initiative (SDI) – which comprises short-term

Box 17: Skills gap training: country practices

- Experiences in Latin American countries show that RPL goes beyond testing an individual's current competency. RPL helps with developing their existing skills in order for them to obtain the qualification sought. In Brazil, SENAI's national training services facilitates the preparation of training plans, while in Colombia, SENA provides complimentary courses to those who were unable to pass the tests due to a skills gap (Vargas, 2004).
- The Vocational Educational and Training Authority (VETA) in Tanzania is mandated to organize/facilitate short-term programmes for unsuccessful candidates to undergo skills upgrading, whether in-institution or workplace-based, as well as bridging courses for successful candidates aspiring to acquire further qualifications (VETA, 2014).
- Hong Kong has planned a training programme for upgrading the knowledge of RPL candidates in the banking sector. These will be delivered through flexible mechanisms such as distance learning, e-learning, portfolio presentations and case studies (Wai, 2014).

training programmes based on this training delivery principle. Between 2007 and 2012 it has trained more than one million individuals using this specific strategy approach.⁶

Building block 9: Providing skills upgrading opportunities for RPL candidates.

3.10 Quality assurance

Having a traditional mind set, some education providers and assessment bodies have little faith in an assessment-only approach for awarding qualifications. Some higher education institutes are also apprehensive about accepting RPL qualifications as the equivalent of formal education and training. Yet to be convinced as to the acceptability of RPL, many students prefer learning in a formal setting, interacting with their peers.

European guidelines for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning likewise observe that there is a high level of trust in formal learning and hostility towards non-traditional qualifications (CEDEFOP, 2009). Though the word ‘hostility’ may be too strong, some do consider RPL as inferior to the formal learning pathway. Such bias can be overcome, to a great extent, by emphasizing the stringent adherence to quality in the RPL process; creating awareness among stakeholders about its high quality processes ; ensuring stakeholders’ participation in the RPL process; and collecting and disseminating evidence about its impact, especially success stories of persons who have benefited from RPL.

Box 18: Quality assurance for RPL in the Netherlands and Tanzania

The Netherlands	Tanzania
<p>The Government of the Netherlands has prescribed a quality code for RPL providers to follow. Providers must register with an evaluating organization, which audits providers every three years.</p> <p>A Knowledge Centre has also been established to deal with issues related to quality assurance, and the development of RPL.</p> <p>Source: Kippersluis, 2014.</p>	<p>Tanzania has prescribed a comprehensive quality assurance system for RPL, which addresses issues related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policy, legal and regulatory frameworks • Institutional frameworks • The active engagement of employers and workers • Developing competency standards, assessment tools and methodology • Accrediting providers • Training and registering RPL practitioners • Guidance and counselling • Upgrading the skills of RPL candidates • Monitoring and evaluation. <p>Source: VETA, 2014.</p>

⁶ www.sdi.gov.in. Accessed 5 January 2015.

Quality assurance mechanisms should be comprehensive, covering issues such as using competency standards for assessment; ensuring the availability of competent RPL practitioners; collaborating with employers' and workers' organizations, and other relevant stakeholders; developing assessment tools and methodology as references for practitioners; accrediting RPL centres; moderating assessments; developing monitoring and evaluation frameworks; conducting independent auditing of the RPL process as a whole; and disseminating results of evaluation and audit to all stakeholders. In Portugal, for example, providers have to follow a Quality Charter (Gomes, 2013), the Netherlands has developed a quality code for providers (Box 18), and Tanzania has prescribed a comprehensive framework for quality assurance (Box 18).

Building block 10: Ensuring a quality assured RPL system and creating awareness about it.

3.11 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is important for tracking the implementation, outcomes and impacts of RPL programmes, and being able to take corrective measures for improving performance thereafter. Information about RPL outcomes and impacts can also contribute to enhancing the image of RPL, ensuring the effective participation of all stakeholders and thus the potential allocation of more resources by governments and employers. Unfortunately, few countries have systematically collected and analysed such information, although there are case studies on individuals who have benefitted. The OECD study on RPL practices in 22 countries confirms this general lack of quantitative data on the outcome of RPL, although local databases in assessment centres and enterprises does exist to some extent (Werquin, 2010b).

An M&E system should produce the following categories of information, disaggregated by gender, age, qualification type, full or part qualification, and whether the worker was employed in the informal or formal sector:

- Figures on the numbers of candidates who enrolled, dropped-out, appeared in the assessment and passed the RPL
- Candidates' views about RPL processes such as facilitation and counselling, the assessment methodology, and the provision and effectiveness of skills gap training
- Views of successful candidates about career progression, improvements in performance, self-esteem, and remunerations and ease of access to further education, and so on
- Employers' views as to improvements in performance at work

- Views from higher education institutions about the performance of students entering through the RPL route compared to those who took the formal pathway
- Those stakeholders who are interested or disinterested in RPL and why.

Portugal has designed an administrative management and information system for monitoring RPL – RVCC, which stands for recognition, validation and certification of competences – is used by all providers (Gomes, 2013). India has developed an online portal⁷ to track the progress of a candidate from enrolment to certification and is further improving the system by adding a module on the status of candidates after certification; each provider will have to track and enter employment status of candidates on the portal.

Building block 11: Establishing an effective monitoring and evaluation system, and collecting and disseminating information about the impact of RPL.

3.12 Knowledge management and sharing

Since RPL is, in most countries, in the development phase or the early stage of implementation, each need to learn from the others' experiences and share effective tools and practices. There is no need for each country to reinvent the wheel. Management and sharing requires the building of effective interactive partnerships as well as partnerships with international development agencies. The focus of collaboration should be on developing tools, building capacity, benchmarking and sharing those practices that did or didn't work. Examples of regional bodies and international organizations that have carried out studies on country practices on RPL include OECD, CEDEFOP, ILO, and UNESCO. SADC countries have decided to have regional guidelines on RPL. In South Africa, SAQA organized a national RPL conference in 2014 to which it invited six countries and the ILO to share international experiences. SAQA also provided technical support to Seychelles in developing an RPL policy. However, the knowledge management of RPL should be more structured, institutionalized and participatory, and go beyond one-off events.

Building block 12: Promoting knowledge management and sharing.

⁷ Ibid. Accessed 5 January, 2015.

4 Conclusion

Due to a lack of appropriate qualifications, a large proportion of people around the world face severe disadvantage in getting decent jobs, migrating to other regions and accessing further education, even though they might have the necessary knowledge and skills. The RPL process can help an individual acquire a formal qualification that matches their knowledge and skills, thereby improving their employability, mobility, lifelong learning, social inclusion and self-esteem. RPL has the potential to provide a cost-effective, alternative learning pathway to formal education and training and to facilitate multi entry–exit between the education system and the labour market. Therefore, RPL is becoming a highly aspirational political and social issue, and drawing the attention of policy makers. International Labour Standards, the conclusions of International Labour Conferences as well as policy papers from UNESCO, EU and the African Union have also recommended that countries establish RPL systems.

Given the above, most countries have initiated steps in establishing an RPL system, but often face challenges when it comes to implementation and scaling up. The key challenges for RPL include complex, time-consuming methodology, particularly for people working in the informal sector or with a low level of education; institutions and staff having inadequate capacity to plan and implement; the mismatch between occupational and qualification standards; limited awareness of the benefits of RPL; low participation of social partners and thus its acceptability by employers and higher education institutions; insufficient provision for upgrading knowledge and skills of RPL candidates to meet accepted standards; and inadequate funding.

This paper has mentioned some evidence of the benefits of RPL, as well as some good practices that improve its implementation. However, the idea that ‘one size fits all’ does not apply – situations and contexts vary from country to country and within a country in different sectors and qualifications. A guiding principle of RPL in Australia – is: ‘There is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations; in particular, different sectors give rise to different models’ (IARC, n.d.). For RPL to be locally effective, there must be policy learning and not policy borrowing.

A key question that should be asked before designing and implementing an RPL programmes is: Why we want to do this? As discussed, RPL can have many purposes so a clear answer to this basic question is important and will set the objectives, lay a solid foundation and identify the target groups, stakeholders and partners. Other questions – the How? Who? Where? and When? – are also important and should be asked when planning an RPL system. In addition, the following **12 key success factors (KSF) or the building blocks** analysed and recommended in this paper can guide stakeholders in any country when designing an effective, successful RPL system:

1. Building awareness about RPL and providing effective vocational guidance and counselling services to RPL candidates.

2. Integrating RPL policy with policy, legal and regulatory frameworks for education and training systems.
3. Ensuring the active participation of all stakeholders, particularly social partners in the development, implementation and evaluation of RPL.
4. Having an effective institutional framework for RPL.
5. Ensuring the availability of sufficient numbers of competent RPL professionals.
6. Ensuring close matching of occupational standards and qualification standards (the matching should at least take place at part level, if not that of a full qualification).
7. Developing effective and efficient assessment tools and methodologies appropriate to the context of target groups.
8. Promoting cost-sharing and a sustainable, equitable funding mechanism for RPL.
9. Providing skills upgrading opportunities to RPL candidates.
10. Ensuring a quality assured RPL system and creating awareness of it.
11. Establishing an effective monitoring and evaluation system, and collecting and disseminating information about the impact of RPL.
12. Promoting knowledge management and sharing.

5 Annex : Characteristics of RPL in Latin America and the Caribbean

Dimension	National initiatives	Sectoral initiatives	Corporate initiatives
Promoted by	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ministry of Labour • Ministry of Education • National Training Institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers' associations • National and international sectoral associations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multinational business corporations
Immediate Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of knowledge and skills • Promoting lifelong learning and progression to higher education • Improving employability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving productivity, performance and competitiveness • Human resources management • Connected to performance evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improving brand image, service and quality
Coverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National • Pilots at sectoral level before scaling up to national level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sectoral • Local or national 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global
Financial Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding from the national budget • Funding from training institutions • Donor funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private funds • Sometimes co-financed from public funds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private funds
Who pays?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Free in the pilot phase • Subsidized for disadvantaged groups • Concerned employers/employees pay a part of the cost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers • Employees • In some cases, subsidized using public funds in its pilot phase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concerned employer • Employees
Accessibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open • Not obligatory • Favours the inclusion of workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not obligatory • Closer to workers in the sector • Does not include the unemployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not obligatory • Proximity to partners and corporative collaborators
Strong points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public backing • Promotion of education • Lifelong learning • Portability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability • Use in personnel management • Explicit participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global representation • Brand-backing
Weak points	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability • Education-work co-ordination • Token participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little portability • Inter-sectoral occupational mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little portability
Source: Vargas, 2004			

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