

# Chapter 27

## Comparing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) across Countries

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### 27.1 Introduction

Recognition refers to the idea of (publicly) accepting, accrediting and somehow valuing learning results and/or previously received formal qualifications and certificates. In comparison, the term validation refers to the process of identifying, assessing and recognising knowledge, skills and competencies an individual has acquired in various learning contexts outside formal education and training systems. In 2001, the European Commission defined validation as the process of identifying, assessing and recognising a wider range of skills and competences (see Chap. 1 about the use of the concept competences in the EU policy-making context) that individuals develop through their lives and in different contexts, e.g. through education, work and leisure activities. Colardyn and Bjørnåvold (2004: 71) point out that validation is a crucial element to ensure the visibility and to indicate the appropriate value of the learning that took place anywhere and at any time in the life of the individual. Both recognition and validation are understood as ‘a process that identifies, verifies, and recognizes relevant learning (knowledge and skills) acquired through work and other life experience that cannot be fully recognized by the traditional means of credential assessment, credit transfer, articulation, or accreditation’ (Canadian Council on Learning 2009: 4).

Conceptually, recognising prior learning is not new. Allusions to the philosophies of Aristotle and Pestalozzi in their valuing of adults’ experience preceded the work of John Dewey, who is regarded as the father of experiential learning, and Conrad (2014: 315 f.) points out that RPL is a ‘respectably old practice, harking back to Socratic and Aristotelian endorsement of the value of experience in learning’.

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While the idea of valuing any kind of learning results has a long tradition, early *governmental* initiatives were implemented no earlier than in 1940s, when the United States developed its first state-based initiatives during World War II when veterans returning home were seeking opportunities to have their skills recognised for civil occupations (Heyns 2004; SAQA 2002). In Canada, the first initiatives started in the 1980s in Winnipeg/Manitoba to grant credit to learning acquired in noncollege settings in the area of nursing, dental assisting and early childhood education (Conrad 2008; Wihak 2006). In Norway, education for all has been a policy goal since the eighteenth century. Since the first version of the Vocational Training Act was passed in 1952, individuals have been allowed to take crafts examination provided they have sufficient practical work experiences (Ure 2007). With some minor changes, all three approaches are still in place and serve as role models for other countries.

Today, recognition and validation are gaining momentum in many countries inside and outside the EU, with varying drivers: national policy and legal environments, e.g. the Council of the European Union 2012. Recommendation on the validation of nonformal and informal learning requires all EU Member States to have RPL arrangements in place by 2018 including at least four elements (identification, documentation, assessment, certification) for the validation of nonformal and informal learning (Council of the EU 2012). In the same year, the UNESCO (2012) published the 'Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Nonformal and Informal Learning proposing minimum standards for implementing RPL such as ensuring equity in access to learning opportunities, fostering the equal value of learning outcomes independent of how, where and in which settings they were acquired and ensuring the central role of individuals.

In many countries, national qualifications and credit frameworks are linked with RPL policies (e.g. Australia, France, South Africa), and/or there are strong workforce development agendas to which RPL is linked as in Scotland, and professional body activity, as is the case in Nursing in the UK, for example (see Harris et al. 2011 or Anderson and Harris 2006 for international perspectives on RPL research).

The heterogeneity and complexity of approaches and RPL-related notions is immense as are the multiple motives that underpin it (for a current overview see Singh and Duvekot 2013). However, at the core of the discussion and across countries we find similar criteria for implementing validation systems which are

- To promote lifelong learning
- To foster individual employability and meet labour market demands
- To strengthen countries' competitiveness
- To improve social inclusion and social justice (mainly by improving labour market inclusion)
- To better link labour markets and education and training systems

Also, we can identify a convergence of ideas and challenges that are common to numerous countries around the world and that are present in political, social and educational debates. They focus on the development of procedures, methods, guidelines and strategies to identify, document, assess, recognise and validate learning

acquired throughout the whole lifespan and in various contexts. RPL has become part of the lifelong learning paradigm, a new mode of valuing learning accomplished by individuals throughout their professional, social and personal lives and far beyond traditional institutional boundaries. As a consequence:

where the boundaries among education, training, work and leisure are attenuated, the recognition of experiential learning, particularly those of adults, is an unavoidable challenge for the educational/training systems of the present day and age. (Pires 2005: 7)

The current restructuring of education and training systems is neither restricted to a terminological nor to an organisational change, though both aspects are key to the debate. Indeed, there are knowledge and learning types which function as reference models. Within Europe, one of the most often quoted ones is the terminology proposed by the European Commission (2001: 7) referring to the concepts of formal, nonformal and informal learning as developed by, e.g. Engeström (1984, 1991); Eraut (2000) and Scribner and Cole (1973):

- Formal learning consists of learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training), and that is designed as learning. It may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.
- Nonformal learning consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. Nonformal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.
- Informal learning is defined as learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning and can to a certain degree be understood as accidental learning. It is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time and/or learning support. Typically, it does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional, but in most cases, it is non-intentional (or 'incidental'/random).

In nonpolitical contexts (particularly outside the EU), we often find a more simple differentiation between formal and informal learning pointing at the fact that the Commission's tripartition is more an artificial and politically intended one than a research-based one (Becket and Hager 2002; Bohlinger 2008a; Engeström 1991). Moreover, differentiating between formal and informal learning provides the opportunity to place emphasis on respective learning settings (time, place, contents, target groups, etc.) and types of learning (incidental, explicit, procedural, etc.) (Colley et al. 2003; Gagné 1973). In terms of terminology, each country and institution has its own preference ranging from recognition of prior learning (RPL), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), accreditation of prior learning (APL), recognition of nonformal and informal learning outcomes (RNFILO), validation of prior learning (VPL) and validation of nonformal and informal learning (VNFIL) to recognition of prior and experiential learning and learning outcomes (RPELLO). No matter what type of recognition approach is used and how it is labelled, the process of identifying and then valuing in some way the past learning of individuals and its results is widely practised

around the world, and it clearly indicates that there is no one-size-fits-all model for the recognition and validation of prior learning.

The same is true for the notion of ‘learning outcomes’. With reference to the development of the European Qualifications Framework, the European Commission (European Parliament and the Council of the European Union 2008) declared knowledge, skills and competences’ key components of the EQF and later complemented this definition by the umbrella term ‘learning outcomes’ that subsumes knowledge, skills and competences according to the Commission’s definition. In comparison, academic discussions have mainly referred to models and theories on developing, evaluating and assessing knowledge, skills, abilities, competencies, capabilities or (work) experience rather than referring to the notion of learning outcomes – some of them reaching far beyond the political ideas of making learning visible (Bohlinger 2008a, 2008b; Colardyn 1996; Nussbaum 1995; de Terssac 1996; Sen 1999).

## 27.2 RPL Across Countries

Understanding the complexity and heterogeneity of approaches and terms can be reached by either describing the RPL situation from a national perspective (as provided by, e.g. the OECD country reports or the European Inventory on Validation) and thus subordinate comparative aspects *or* by approaching the topic thematically, i.e. by clustering and comparing, e.g. regulations, stakeholders, numbers, etc. across countries or by combining both approaches. Following the approaches to comparative education research developed by Theisen and Adams (1990) and Watson (1996), this section provides a brief insight into countries’ RPL structures and regulations in terms of vocational and professional education. It includes ten country examples (Austria, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Switzerland) chosen due to their diverse starting points, experience and traditions with RPL. While Canada, France and Norway have a long tradition in RPL, Italy has developed RPL only recently. In comparison, Ireland and Spain started an extensive process of restructuring existing regulations, and Austria and Germany both have specific regulations for particular professions but take much effort to link them with the overall education and training system. The findings are based on a 2-year project on RPL, credit point systems and mobility that was run between 2012 and 2014 (<http://euvetsupport.eu>) and included an investigation of

- National statistics, training regulations, policy documents and research papers
- Data from national/regional programme evaluations including interviews with national stakeholders
- Policy and research documents provided by international stakeholders such as the ILO, the OECD or the UNESCO

The focus is on vocational and professional education qualifications, respectively; however, higher education and general education (qualifications) are

mentioned in some cases, e.g. in terms of countries that have a national validation system covering all areas of education.

Given the complexity of this field and bearing in mind the growing number of evaluations on the current state of the art inside and outside the EU as provided in, e.g. the latest ‘European Inventory on Validation of Non-Formal and Informal Learning’ (<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/de/events-and-projects/projects/validation-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory>) or by the OECD’s reports on ‘Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning’ (<http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/recognitionofnon-formalandinformallearning-home.htm>), this contribution is intended to provide *additional* data on RPL focusing on procedures (‘methods’) and on assessment criteria against which competent bodies and agencies are judging applicants’ prior learning outcomes.

Though data are not harmonised and thus hardly comparable, they provide an insight into the variety and complexity of the national situations. Data in this chapter are based on interviews with national stakeholders (which were run during the above-mentioned study), national statistics and country reports by the OECD and the European Commission, Cedefop and ICF International 2014 (except for Canada); additional sources are:

Austria: Brandstetter and Luomi-Messerer (2010); Klimmer et al. (2009); reference years, 2008 and 2009

Canada: Canadian Council on Learning (2009), Prism Economics and Analysis (2004); Statistics Canada (2014, reference year 2012) data for Canada refer to Red Seal Trades only, i.e. a particular type of trade for which all the provinces and territories have agreed on standards for entry into the occupation allowing for the portability of qualifications across Canada (49 trades)

France: Charraud (2010); Méhaut and Lecourt (2007)

Germany: BIBB (2013); BMBF (2014)

Ireland: Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (2011); Coughlan (2010)

Italy: Pertrulli and di Francesco (2010)

The Netherlands: Duvekot (2010); Kenniscentrum EVC (2014)

Norway: VOX (2012)

Spain: Lafont and Pariat (2012); Souto-Otero (2009)

Switzerland: Salini et al. (2012); FSEA and SVEB (2014)

### 27.2.1 Applications and Costs to Individuals

The recently published *Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning* Van Kleef (2014: 356) states that ‘studies on what happens to PLAR learners after assessment are conspicuous by their absence in the literature. However, if one digs deep enough, research does appear, and a picture of the outcomes and impacts of PLAR on adults in education begins to emerge’.

**Table 27.1** Number of applications

Austria	No overall data available; external exams (VET): approx. 15 % of all exams (6982 in 2012); admission to university programmes without the <i>matura</i> ( <i>Reifeprüfung</i> ) < 1 %
Canada	In 2014, 27.4 % (15,429) of all Red Seal Certificates were awarded to candidates who took the exam without attending an apprenticeship programme
France	In 2012, the number of candidates considered eligible to RPL is 63,543; the number of candidates applying for RPL is 48,709; diplomas delivered by RPL are 28,677
Germany	The number of candidates who applied for RPL as access to final vocational qualification exams is 34,674 in 2011 (7 % of all exams; success rate 78 %); the number of qualified workers among first-year HE students (RPL for HE access) is 1.9 %; the number of applications for recognition of foreign formal qualifications at all levels in 2013 is 10,989
Ireland	No overall data available; RPL-based certificates issued by FÁS (Irish National Training and Employment Authority) are 16,000 in 2006 and 82,000 in 2008
Italy	No data available
Netherlands	The number of certificates awarded through RPL (Ervaringcertificaten) in 2011 is 17,700 including applications for MBO qualifications (VET schools, branch or sector qualifications), applications for HBO qualifications (universities of applied science), applications for sector-specific qualifications; approx. 80–90 % of all certificates were issues at MBO level
Norway	In 2013, 7 % of all students in postsecondary vocational colleges were admitted by RPL; in 2011, 12.5 % (2457) of adult learners in upper-secondary education and training had their prior learning assessed; 38 % of students in VET programmes had their prior learning assessed
Spain	No current reliable data available; according to Royal Decree 1224/2009, funding is available for 60,000 individuals to be validated
Switzerland	Upper-secondary 'Federal' Diplomas of VET in 2013 are 768 (approx. 1 % of all diplomas); higher VET (PET, Professional Education and Training), 191; PET certificates and diplomas for trainers in adult education of a total of approx. 3327 certificates and diplomas; 61 PET Diplomas for community interpreters; HE access for those without baccalaureate: approx. 1 %

Though Van Kleef actually finds and presents numerous data on the whereabouts of RPL candidates, it seems much more difficult to find reliable, regularly updated and comparable data on the number of applications. Compared to formal education and training, international statistics do not (yet) exist, and data mostly refer to national programme evaluations or academic studies. Comparing data presented by, e.g. the OECD or the European Inventory during the past decade, we can clearly see that countries are developing initiatives for data collection and improvement of data quality.

Against this background, the following overview represents Van Kleef's picture of the 'absence in the literature' rather than it can provide a complete picture of the scenery (Table 27.1).

The absence of data and discussion also refers to funding. Referring to countries' experience with RPL the European Commission, Cedefop and ICF International

**Table 27.2** Costs to individuals

Austria	External exams (general education): EUR 15; admission to external exams (VET): EUR 125–150; BRP ( <i>Berufsreifeprüfung</i> , a particular type of VET diploma that provides general access to HE. This exam can be taken without prior attendance from upper-secondary schools.): exam fee: approx. EUR 450; preparatory classes for BRP: EUR 2600–2800
Canada	Approx. EUR 72–236, depending on trade, examination and type of application
France	Depending on the type and level of qualification between EUR 0 and 1000. For VET qualifications, fees are approx. EUR 800
Germany	Approx. EUR 100–600, depending on Land, trade, time and effort
Ireland	Depending on institutions, discipline, NQF level and purpose; applications for the consideration of certified learning are usually cheaper than assessment of experiential learning; approx. EUR 600–2000 (in general); levels 4–7 of the Irish NQF: approx. EUR 1000–1250; levels 4–5 of the Irish NQF, VET only, approx. EUR 800–1350
Italy	No reliable data available; in Tuscany: approx. EUR 500–1200
Netherlands	HE: approx. EUR 1000–1250 (including costs of assessment and recognition of the results); on average, procedures carried out by MBO institutions (VET at upper-secondary level) are cheaper, since part of the costs is compensated for by the enrolment of the participant in regular training programmes; overall costs for RPL at VET levels: EUR 800–1300 (shared by employer and employee). If RPL is not funded by the government or the social partners, applicants can fiscally deduct all costs for RPL exceeding EUR 500
Norway	Free of charge for unemployed and disabled and those born before 1978; otherwise approx. EUR 100–1800
Spain	According to Royal Decree 1224/2009 approx. EUR 10–30 per candidate
Switzerland	Average costs per person for validation procedures EUR 5142

(2014: 43) summarise: ‘In this respect it is interesting to note little discussion in the country reports about funding mechanisms to make validation sustainable’.

Since data are hardly available, particularly with respect to the overall funding mechanisms including public funding and costs to companies, the following table refers to individual costs (in terms of application fees) only (Table 27.2).

Compared to previous data on costs to individuals (e.g. Bohlinger 2013; European Inventory 2010 Update), costs to individuals have increased in almost all countries, though there is a wide range of fees and exceptions are in place in some cases. However, given the quality of the data, they provide a snapshot and a starting point for future research rather than they reflect an overall picture of the situation.

### 27.2.2 Assessment Criteria and Recognition Procedures

In all countries, assessment criteria refer to formal professional, vocational or academic qualifications. They are based on particular types of national, professional or sectoral standards; some of them developed by (national) competent bodies, some

**Table 27.3** Assessment criteria

Austria	Candidates are tested against legally binding framework at national level (national standards)
Canada	Red Seal Endorsement standards
France	Candidates are tested against professional standards; the standard procedure of the RPL process (bilan de compétences) varies between 20 and 24 h (documentation + preparation, 12 h; assessment, 4 h; self-study, 8 h)
Germany	National professional standards
Ireland	Professional or educational or scientific standards
Italy	Sectoral/educational standards (envisaged)
Netherlands	National regulations and standards for VET and HE
Norway	National professional standards
Spain	Recognised qualifications listed in the National Catalogue of Professional Qualifications and described in terms of key skills and technical competencies
Switzerland	National professional standards

of them developed by educational institutions. In most cases, such standards are legally binding which again is particularly the case with those countries where the envisaged qualification is linked with qualifications frameworks (e.g. France, Ireland). In some countries, a national validation strategy is either in place (France, Spain, Norway and Switzerland) or under development (Austria, Germany) and provides (or is planned to provide) a legally outlined fundament for validation activities.

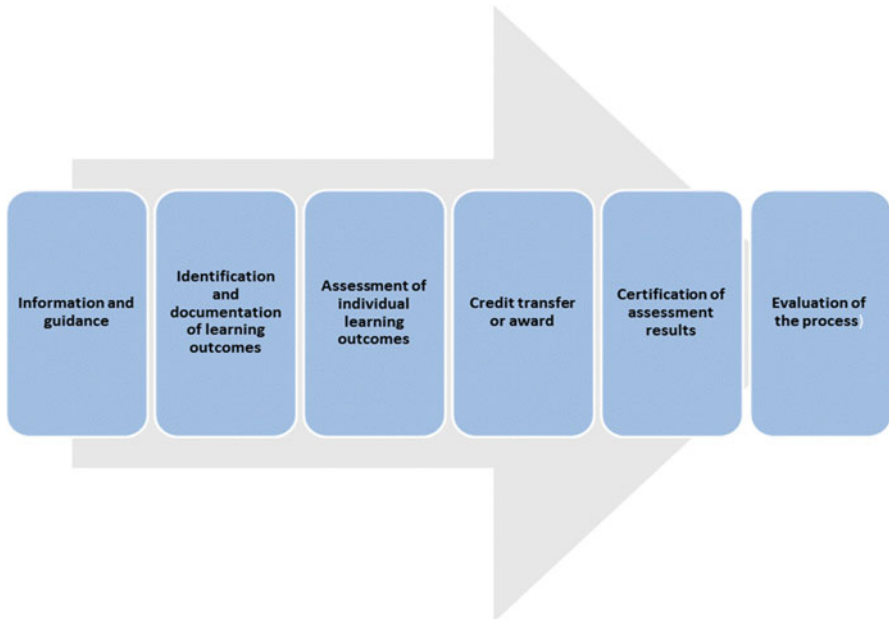
In some countries (Austria, Canada, Germany, Switzerland), the private sector plays a crucial role in developing professional standards which in turn are the basis for recognition and validation (Table 27.3).

However, such ‘assessment’ criteria do not refer to the RPL procedure. While national and or sectoral or institution-specific regulations on RPL referring to eligibility, awarding bodies, public funding, etc. are in place in all countries, procedural structures and methods of assessment vary between countries, regions, institutions and professions.

In general, RPL processes are run similarly across countries and cover several steps. However, the number of steps varies between institutions, countries and references. Whereas the Council of the EU (2012) proposes four steps (identification, documentation, assessment and certification), Werquin (2014: 101) refers to seven key technical steps:

1. Information, advice and guidance to the potential applicant and initial documentation
2. Eligibility and decision to allow the individual to apply
3. Further documentation
4. Assessment
5. Decision
6. Certification and awarding of a qualification
7. (Societal) recognition





**Fig. 27.1** Six steps of a RPL process

In our research, we found that institutions refer at least to four of the following five steps (Fig. 27.1).

Before individuals take the decision to seek validation, they need *information and guidance* to know what the added value (benefits) will be, what is to be expected, what preconditions and standards have to be met and what types of documents have to be provided and developed by themselves. During this first stage, individuals receive written or oral information on the overall RPL procedure (e.g. timelines for validation, costs, procedures, types of evidence of learning outcomes, etc.). The first step may be provided online, face-to-face, by phone, etc. In all countries where RPL procedures are in place, this step is free of charge and provided either before the overall process, during a single stage (mostly the first stage) or during the overall process. In some countries, it is provided by either the competent bodies that run the assessment procedure (e.g. Austria, Canada, Germany) or by independent institutions and information providers to avoid a mix-up of the various stages of the overall RPL process and conflicts of interest (e.g. France, Ireland).

The aim of *identifying and documenting learning outcomes* is to make individuals become *aware* of their learning outcomes that are relevant for the RPL process, and thus to make the learning outcomes visible and understandable. From a content point of view, this step is mostly linked with the formal qualification the procedure is aiming at, i.e. the dialogue and the portfolio are linked with particular knowledge, skills, and competences that are part of the envisaged qualification.

*Assessment of individual learning outcomes* is a general term that refers to all methods used to judge individual performance. It may either concern the student or the trainer (teacher, instructor), but also the training methods (evaluation). The related terms ‘test’ and ‘exam’ are mostly used to describe an assessment conducted in a formal learning setting and designed to ensure basic test criteria (high objectivity, reliability, validity, fairness, transparency, etc.).

All assessment is done against predefined criteria. Such criteria include national/sectoral standards (that are either the same as or equivalent to the standards for qualifications obtained through formal learning processes; see above), expectations, measurement of learning outcomes and the scope of assessment criteria. In general, assessment can focus on individual learners, groups of learners (class, workshop, training programme, etc.), an institution or an education and training system as a whole. In RPL contexts, assessment focuses on an individual and his/her learning outcomes.

Assessment is mostly conducted by competent bodies or national/regional authorities who have the legal right and the expertise to assess the learning and to award credit and qualifications. Assessors’ qualifications and competencies are crucial for RPL: they decide on what is worth being documented, assessed and accredited. However, few countries have clear regulations on what makes a professional a professional in the field of RPL, and our findings are coherent with those stated in the latest version of the European Inventory stating little progress during the past years: ‘The development of professional competences of staff is an area that requires strong development in most countries [...] In 26 countries development was reported not to be a right or it was reported that there was no provision for it. In this area there has been little progress since 2010’ (European Commission, Cedefop and ICF International 2014: 25; for an international discussion see Travers and Harris 2014). The following table provides an overview of qualifications required from assessors (Table 27.4).

*Credit transfer or award and certification of assessment results* are closely linked, since certification may be provided by those experts involved in the assessment itself. However, when credit is granted for prior (formal) learning as part of a validation process, this has not necessarily been done by the same experts. Particularly in terms of granting time credit proved by formal work contracts, letters of recommendation, etc., involvement of assessors is not necessarily necessary.

Certification can be obtained either in terms of a full qualification or in terms of a part qualification. If a full qualification is not awarded due to a lack of, e.g. work experience or due to a lack of conceptual knowledge, a candidate may be awarded a part qualification and receive complementary education and training (in terms of programmes, further experience or additional learning units to receive the specific full qualification).

*Evaluation* is one of the blind spots of RPL, and hardly any (national) competent body runs evaluations (e.g. on the quality of procedure or the whereabouts of candidates) on a regular basis. However, regularly run evaluation would improve quality and transparency of RPL procedures. Some countries like Canada, France, Germany and Norway have established databases and compile statistics on RPL which are a first step to run evaluations.

**Table 27.4** Assessors' qualifications

Austria	Members of exam committees are set up by apprenticeship offices; members are 'experienced professionals' or teachers
Canada	Professionals; no national regulations in terms of further requirements
France	No explicit requirements set in the national legislation; jury members must have relevant experience as professionals or teachers
Germany	Professionals; no mandatory qualification requirements for validation practitioners
Ireland	In HE, academic staff; in VET, qualified individuals
Italy	Professionals; no mandatory qualification requirements for RPL
Netherlands	Individuals have to prove their professional standards; however, there are no standards or certificates. A proposal for a standard was developed in 2000 but is not yet in place (2014)
Norway	Counsellors, assessors and validation process administrators; participation in continuing training is mandatory
Spain	Assessors and guidance practitioners must attend specific additional training <i>and</i> must be experienced professionals, i.e. have at least 4 years' work experience as secondary and/or VET teachers <i>or</i> as trainers <i>or</i> as professional experts specialised in the respective competence field
Switzerland	Two types of qualifications requirements for RPL practitioners in upper-secondary VET set in the 'Control List for the Skills Audit Centres' (2010): <i>validation guidance practitioners</i> are recommended to be trained for validation practices and are not to take part in the assessment and certification. <i>Assessors</i> need to be professionals in their field of expertise but need no additional qualifications

### 27.2.3 Assessment Methods

In terms of assessment, the most common 'method' is assessment of documents (certificates and forms) by competent bodies. However, candidates often feel that assessment of documents is an intransparent procedure, particularly if RPL is based on the assessment of formal documents only. Apart from document assessment, all countries apply numerous assessment methods for RPL, mostly written and/or oral examinations, documentations, portfolios, simulations, observations and evidence from real situations at work or in other contexts.

None of the countries has strict regulations on how and when to apply which method. In all ten countries, the results are assessed against 'standards' which may be national ones, sector-specific ones or standards developed by the assessing institutions. Assessment is run by experts, i.e. professionals who in some cases (e.g. Norway, France, Spain) have to acquire additional skills and qualifications for RPL. The envisaged outcome of assessment is to award a formal qualification (diploma/certificate) and to improve labour market and/or educational access. Also, some countries like Germany and Norway provide additional training plans and/or the validation of competence units without awarding the full formal qualification.

Basically, methods used for identifying, assessing and validating prior learning are the same ones used for assessing formal learning, and they are similar across

countries and purposes. The only exception is higher education where, in most countries, no common process is in place. The most common methods are:

- *Interviews*: In all countries, they are perceived particularly useful in areas where judgement and reduction of complexity is necessary and/or when candidates have to prove strong oral communication skills. In an interview, candidates confirm their ability to demonstrate their knowledge of a subject and – in case of group interviews or debates with peer candidates – their capacity to sustain a considered argument and to demonstrate communication and social skills.
- *Workplace observation and simulation of working tasks*: Though highly reliable and valid, workplace observations and simulations of working tasks are less common than interviews or written tests. Observations and simulations may be either conducted in a way that a) candidates demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competencies by executing a given task that is observed and assessed by assessors or that b) candidates observe other persons executing a given task and afterwards will be asked by the assessors to explain what they have observed.
- Whereas (a) is more convenient and less costly, (b) seems particularly helpful for candidates aiming at qualifications in very complex situations where judgement and observations skills are needed.
- *Oral/written (standards-based) tests*: Due to low costs, high levels of objectivity, validity, reliability and fairness, oral and written tests are the most widely accepted and applicable form of RPL methods. Whereas written tests require a minimum of writing skills but allow for reflecting on an answer before giving (writing) it, oral tests are used to demonstrate in-depth understanding of complex issues and the ability to explain them in simple terms. In some countries like Canada, multiple-choice tests are common in RPL, since they are considered more objective than other methods. However, multiple-choice tests are often criticised as too narrow to represent the complexity of learning outcomes.
- Another written test method are essays which are used to check the quality and standard of a required writing skill level, the ability to develop a coherent argument and to confirm extent, understanding and transferability of knowledge and critical evaluation of ideas.
- *Portfolios*: They are an organised collection of (written) materials (either on paper and/or digital) that presents and verifies learning outcomes acquired through experience. In many countries and sectors, it is used either as an integral part of the overall validation process and thus as part of the assessment or as an integral part of the overall validation process that has to be compiled by candidates but is not part of the assessment itself. Portfolios provide the opportunity to actively involve candidates in the RPL process and usually offer a mix of approaches strengthening the overall validity and reliability of the method. An individual portfolio might include letters of reference, testimonials, résumés, photographs of work samples, presentations, etc.
- Whereas portfolios are less common in formal education and training, they are a common method in RPL, since they can promote learners' awareness of the RPL process, focus learners' attention on quality assurance and increase candidates'

self-responsible integration in the RPL process. However, to guarantee that quality standards in developing portfolios are met and consistency is provided, we recommend that candidates receive support and feedback when preparing their portfolios.

- *Product-based methods*: Products can be, e.g. portfolios, written reports, videos, photos, work samples or exhibitions of work. Product-based methods can be used to have candidates demonstrate their knowledge, skills and competencies in a complex way that is closely linked with real workplace situations. Thus, the method needs to specify whether the product only will be assessed, or whether it will also include the production process. If the RPL procedure is product based only, then candidates need to be instructed on what to include in the product. The conditions for producing the product should be clearly specified in the beforehand and provided to candidates since it will directly influence the type of response to be produced by them. If the method also incorporates assessing the process of building the product, then the observations of the process would need to be also judged and recorded and thus needs a clear instruction how this judgement and recording should be provided by candidates. Product-based are more common in non-European countries than in European countries (e.g. Australia, New Zealand).

Additionally, credentials, i.e. evidence and assessment of prior professional achievements in terms of documents (CV, work contracts, letters of reference, etc.) and of written statements (press book, ICT production, etc.), are mandatory in most countries. Also, an interview with the assessing jury is not compulsory but is used in some countries (e.g. in France).

Similar to the findings provided by Souto-Otero (2010), most countries consider a combination of the above-described methods, an optimal method of assessment, allowing the verification of learning outcomes in various ways. Challenges that stem from the methods are particularly reported with respect to the use of portfolios, i.e. the amount of time that is necessary to prepare and to gather evidence.

Other methods like workplace observation or work samples are reported to provide high-quality results in terms of reliability, objectivity and validity. However, they need intensive resources in terms of time, staff and costs.

### 27.3 Conclusions

There are numerous studies on recognising and validating learning outcomes and prior learning (e.g. Bartram 2005; Bohlinger and Münchhausen 2011; Bowman et al. 2003; European Commission, Cedefop and ICF International 2014; Harris et al. 2014). While the majority of research studies and policy documents focuses on its role as a means of facilitating participation in, or returning to, formal education and training and/or the labour market at national/regional levels, there are few studies providing reliable and comparative data on the actual impact of RPL (Smith and Clayton 2011; Van Kleef 2014) However, there is an emerging linkage between

educational research on RPL on the one side and politically driven and/or demand-driven initiatives on the other side. For example, the work of the Prior learning International Research Centre (PLIRC) seems significant in this regard. Hosted by Thompson Rivers University in Canada, PLIRC is an international network of scholars aiming to stimulate innovative RPL research and to disseminate research findings to practitioners, policymakers and the research community via publications and a database offering open access to most international research articles and publications.

Whereas we can easily identify a number of policy documents praising the benefits of RPL, we find few (research-based) studies on why countries are not in favour of RPL. Surely, our study has some limitations that should be considered before generalising the results. However, earlier findings stated by Dyson and Keating (2005) or Singh (2005) were confirmed by our findings (see chapter 'RPL across countries') and refer to four types of obstacles for RPL, i.e. institutional, organisational, cultural and individual barriers:

*Institutional obstacles* include qualifications structures and rules, awarding and assessment criteria and financing mechanisms. Institutional obstacles very much depend on the degree of outcome orientation of an education and training programme. Moreover, awarding and assessment rules tend to be institutionally specific. They are mostly built around course participation and completion. Thus, RPL is often not readily accessible to nontraditional learners, and/or the financing of the RPL process is not separated from the course financing.

*Organisational obstacles* can be found with regard to the practices of competent bodies, education and training institutions and providers that prevent individuals from RPL and from fully benefiting from recognition schemes that are in place. Moreover, organisational obstacles are very much linked with financing mechanisms: RPL is time consuming and cost-intensive, since it is usually not part of providers' standard assessment procedures which in general are coupled with formal education and training programmes. Decoupling such programmes and its inherent assessment procedures demand for either more differentiated financing mechanisms or new modes of cost accounting or a different understanding of learning and its outcomes. Next to the issue of financing mechanisms is the one of who is assessing, recognising and validating prior learning. Most countries have established (national) competent bodies to offer and/or support recognition and validation procedures and thus are awarding bodies (e.g. Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands). However, in some countries (regions, sectors), these bodies have no awarding rights, as governments view this as a conflict of interests.

*Cultural obstacles* are based on a lack of trust in RPL or in the value of prior learning per se. Such a lack of trust may result in overly rigorous or overly lax RPL procedures and/or a lack of supporting infrastructures (lack of time, adequate procedures, staff). Thus, cultural obstacles are very much linked with the public image and acceptance of nontraditional types of learning and its certification and accreditation.

*Individual obstacles* are a bundle of complex and contradictory aspects. One of these aspects is how to attract learners who are not familiar with formal procedures in learning contexts: While most countries made high investments in encouraging

individuals' participation in continuing (vocational) education and training, little attention has been paid to encouraging learners' participation in RPL (with few exceptions like in France, the Netherlands or Norway). Moreover, individuals with high levels of education are more likely to participate and invest in formal education and training and RPL than low-qualified people. Thus, there is a high risk of leaving behind nontraditional learner groups. This is even more likely as regards to gaining information about recognition and validation systems: Gaining such information is generally a difficult procedure, and it is even more difficult for individuals with weak education biographies.

Another issue is the scope of RPL: In some countries (e.g. Norway, South Africa, Australia, Denmark), the presence of national validation systems (which partly include national qualifications frameworks) seems to foster participation in RPL, since it is based on national standards and linked with competent bodies awarding formal qualifications. This again is closely linked with the issue of qualifications frameworks. In countries in which they exist, national qualifications frameworks (NQFs) have a central role in validation contexts due to the standards and qualifications (even for assessors), recognition and quality assurance procedures they usually provide. In some countries such as France or Ireland (and, e.g. Australia, South Africa and New Zealand), RPL for VET does not differentiate between learning outcomes achieved inside or outside formal learning programmes. However, the actual impact of NQFs on improving validation systems and education and training systems in general is limited, and little is known about their long-term effects (Allais et al. 2009; Bohlinger 2008b). Moreover, it is unclear whether they are an enabling or an inhibiting factor in promoting RPL: While in some countries, implementing validation procedures follows a bottom-up approach driven by companies, unions and learning providers, other countries develop top-down approaches including NQFs and validation systems driven by supranational or international developments. Thus, NQFs can be a pushing factor in the practice of RPL, if they establish common benchmarks and standards which allow for the formal equivalence of qualifications recognised through recognition and validation. What they cannot be expected to do is act as generators and promoters of the acceptance of RPL. This needs a long-term strategy close to the workplace and provider levels as well as close to learners, teachers and trainers.

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