

Recognition of prior learning

A practical guide for
policy makers

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Fostering upskilling pathways through the recognition of prior learning

One in five adults across the OECD has not completed high school education. The labour market consequences of such low educational attainment are dramatic, as low-qualified individuals have, on average, fewer chances of being employed and poorer career prospects, since they lack the required formal qualifications as well as relevant skills. Upskilling and reskilling opportunities are therefore crucial for this group of the population, as they can serve as a lever to acquire crucial skills needed to succeed in the labour market. Unfortunately, participation in adult learning is still low. Less than 40% of adults in OECD countries, and only about 20% of low-skilled adults, participate in adult learning activities every year, according to the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC).

Among the most cited reasons for not participating in adult learning is the lack of time and the fact that the training the adult was interested in took place at an inconvenient location or time. To address these obstacles, countries are looking to increase the flexibility of their adult learning systems by increasing their modularity. In fact, by breaking up training programmes into “modules” or blocks, adult learning systems allow individuals to build their own upskilling pathways tailored to their needs.

The validation or recognition of prior learning (RPL) plays a key role in modular training programmes. It can further enhance reskilling and upskilling opportunities by granting access to education or training to adults without formal

qualifications and by shortening the duration of training. Including RPL as part of modular programmes allows adults to focus only on skill gaps and to benefit from personalised learning pathways. In addition, RPL is an essential instrument to improve the employability of adults. It makes all knowledge visible, including the diverse learning that takes place outside of formal education and training, and allows for a better match between jobs and workers' skills.

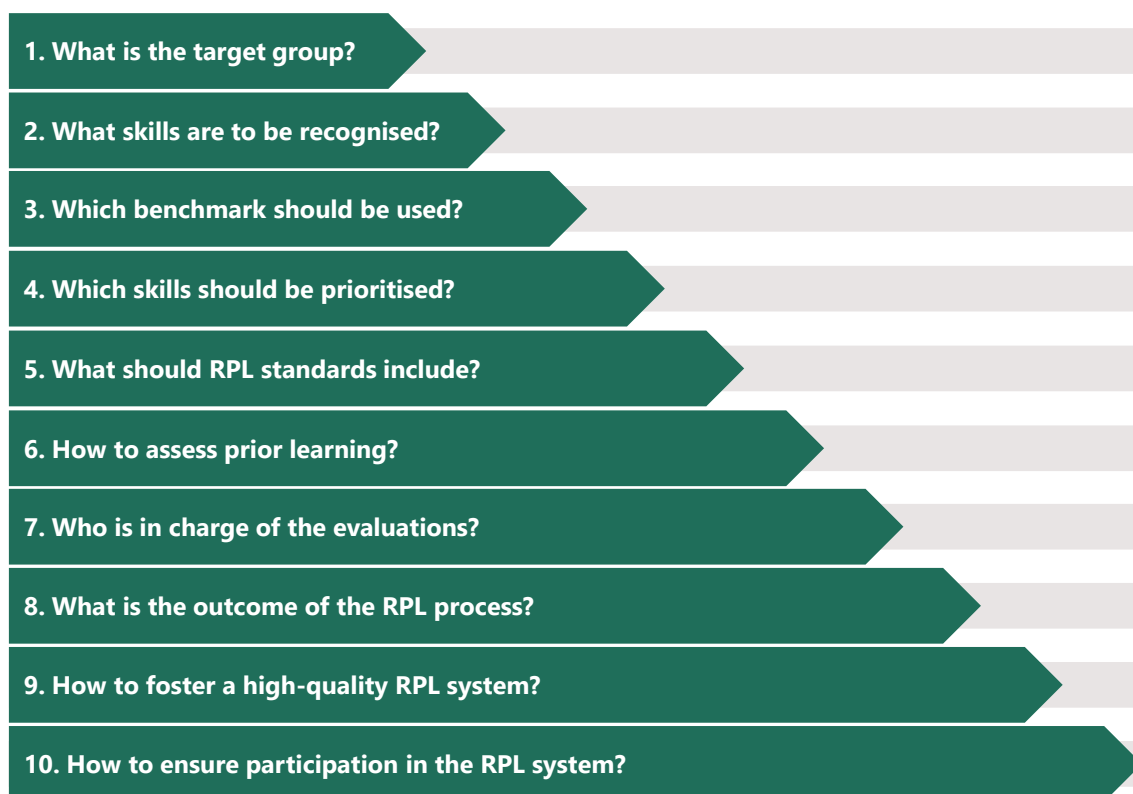
RPL systems can be developed to fulfil different objectives. Some validation systems have as a goal social justice. These systems aim at fostering emancipation and eliminating discriminatory barriers to education through recognising previously acquired knowledge and skills. Others intend to improve labour market matching, by making skills and knowledge acquired informally and non-formally visible, improving, in turn, competitiveness and economic development. Each RPL system, regardless of the objective, has its own characteristics, as specific features can vary significantly depending on the intended beneficiaries of the system, the type of competences that it aims at validating and its context.

To disentangle the complex web of choices when establishing a validation framework and facilitate decision makers' understanding of the main milestones involved, this policy brief intends to provide a step-by-step guide on the key decisions that institutions must make to develop an effective RPL system. It relies on evidence gathered throughout OECD countries using desk research, interviews with relevant stakeholders, peer-learning workshops and study visits.

While a broad literature exists on the importance of validation systems, this policy brief is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to provide a structured sequence of the decisions that institutions developing an RPL system must make. This hands-on guide can be used by any institution developing a validation system, either public or private, and takes as given some prerequisites of the system, such as the institutions governing and financing the system, the entities operationalising RPL, and the funding of the system.

The core of the policy brief is a decision tree, shown in Figure 1, which presents the sequence of decisions that institutions developing RPL systems must make. Each decision is then described in the subsequent sections, including commonly used options as well as OECD best practices for each of them.

Figure 1. A 10-step process to set up recognition of prior learning system



The first two decisions are the most relevant, as they have an impact on subsequent decisions, as well as on the institutions that should be involved in the governance of the validation system. First of all, institutions should decide on the potential beneficiaries of the system (Decision 1): should the system be open to everyone or should it target a subgroup of population? Secondly, in Decision 2, the type of skills that can be recognised through the system should be chosen. Validation systems can assess general skills, such as literacy or numeracy, or job-specific skills. Depending on this choice, the benchmark used to evaluate and validate skills will vary (Decision 3). Additionally, if the system does not rely on already defined frameworks, the occupations or qualifications to prioritise should be identified (Decision 4), and the information included in the RPL standards should be determined (Decision 5). Once the benchmark for the RPL process has been defined, the evaluation methods must be chosen in Decision 6, as well as the professionals in charge of conducting the assessment (Decision 7). In Decision

8, institutions must decide what type of certificate will be awarded at the conclusion of the RPL process, as well as any additional post-validation support provided. Finally, the last two Decisions ensure the high quality of the validation system (Decision 9) and the undertaking of information and awareness raising activities to boost the use of the system by potential beneficiaries (Decision 10).

Decision 1: What is the target group?

The first decision to make when setting up a system for the recognition of prior learning is choosing a target group. In other words, who should benefit from the RPL system? This decision is not trivial, as it affects the whole structure of the system and the subsequent decisions to take. For instance, the stakeholders included in the governance of the system depend on the target group, as does the system's implementation. Where and how validation procedures take place depend, once again, on the characteristics of the target group which also influences awareness raising initiatives.

Existing RPL systems are typically of two types: universal – aimed at the whole population – or targeted at a sub-group, such as women who have never participated in the labour market, students or informal workers. For example, in Germany, the Federal Employment Agency and the Bertelsmann Stiftung have recently joined forces to develop the MYSKILLS tool, which is an RPL procedure aimed at helping migrants prove their proficiency in vocational skills in 30 targeted occupations. The assessment is available in six languages and largely relies on videos and photos to ease migrants' understanding.

Restricting the user base of the RPL system to a specific target group has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it helps ensure that the skills at the core of the validation process and the evaluation methods are in line with the needs and circumstances of that specific population. This is particularly important, for example, when the goal of the RPL system is to facilitate the entry into the labour market of refugees and asylum seekers (such as in the case of MYSKILLS above). Developing targeted RPL systems in this case allows overcoming potential language concerns that could limit participation in a setting of universal validation procedures. Focusing on a specific population also avoids overcrowding the RPL

system to the point that it becomes financially and practically difficult to manage. On the other hand, defining too narrow a target group might lead decision makers to miss out on potential economies of scale. Indeed, putting in place a validation framework requires significant expertise, time investment and – ultimately – financing, and scaling it up to the whole population may be an efficient way to make the most of these fixed costs.

Decision 2: What skills are to be recognised?

A crucial distinction between RPL systems is the type of skills being validated. RPL can focus on two main categories of competences: general competences and job-specific competences. First, recognition systems can target general competences – i.e. cross-field competences that all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, including literacy, numeracy, language proficiency, and a series of more academic abilities and knowledge areas, such as geography, civic education and history. The recognition of previously acquired general competences is almost exclusively carried out in systems that foster the participation in formal adult education among adults without formal qualifications. In other words, adults without formal qualifications applying to general education programmes can have their prior learning assessed at entry to evaluate whether this is enough for admission or can give rise to credit exemptions in the programme. In extreme cases, adults can even receive a full qualification upon validation of their prior learning, without the need to attend the educational programme at all.

At the opposite side of the spectrum lay job-specific competences, the recognition of which is generally aimed at entering or progressing in the labour market. This type of professional skills is mostly of a practical nature, as they represent the know-how that an individual needs to master in order to work effectively in a given occupation. For example, the job-specific competences that a builder should display include knowing how to repair and renovate homes and other buildings.

Across the OECD, several countries have RPL systems focusing on facilitating access to adult education and training programmes. For example, since 2012 the

Provincial Centres for Adult Education (CPIA) in Italy are tasked with identifying and assessing the basic competences that individuals have accumulated outside formal education in order to draw up personalised learning pathways and offer tailored learning opportunities within primary and lower secondary education. Similarly, Spain's Centres for Adult Education (CEPA) need – by regulation – to devote time to evaluating adults' prior learning at entry, so that the duration of their programmes can be adapted based on their actual knowledge. Both CPIA and the CEPA offer learning within basic education courses. As a result, the focus of the two RPL systems is on general skills expected at the end of primary or secondary formal education (such as reading, mathematics, communication and geography).

Many OECD countries also have systems in place to validate previously acquired job-specific skills. These systems may award the same (or equivalent) qualifications to those obtained through formal education or training, which can additionally give access to new education and training opportunities, or other certificates recognised in the labour market. In France, for example, about 650 000 people have received a formal qualification through the French RPL system – the *validation des acquis de l'expérience* (VAE) – in the last 20 years. By contrast, in the Netherlands and in Sweden, RPL systems focusing on job-specific skills do not award formal (or formal-equivalent) qualifications. As industry organisations and social partners are highly involved in the development and functioning of these RPL systems, they are the ones ensuring that RPL certifications are recognised and accepted in the labour market.

Once again, the choice between focusing the validation framework on general or job-specific skills has important consequences on many of the subsequent decisions that policy makers need to make to design an effective RPL system. For instance, the governance of RPL may vary, with the Ministry of Education and formal education institutions typically being more present in the case of general skills and the Ministry of Labour and non-formal training providers often taking the lead in the case of job-specific skills. In the same vein, the most appropriate evaluation methods and criteria fundamentally depend on the nature of the skills being recognised: written tests and oral exams are prevalent for general competences, whereas practical assessments and simulations are more appropriate to evaluate job-specific skills.

Decision 3: Which benchmark should be used?

Once policy makers have decided whether their intended RPL system should cover general or technical skills (or both), the benchmarks against which the candidates' competences are assessed – typically called validation standards or profiles by the literature – must be selected or developed. These validation standards typically use qualifications in the National Qualification Framework (NQF), occupational standards or industry standards as a basis and adapt them to serve as a guide for the RPL process. Some countries also opt to use existing qualifications, occupational or industry standards directly, by including validation-related information, such as potential assessment methods, in the corresponding standard.

An NQF is a framework that classifies all formal qualifications in a country by levels. For each qualification, learning outcomes are the set of skills, abilities and knowledge that individuals who complete the qualification must have acquired. Adopted by numerous countries such as Denmark, France and Latvia, NQF are the most frequently used standards for RPL, either directly or through translating them into validation standards, regardless of whether the validation system is intended to facilitate admission in learning programmes or to increase the employability of the individual. In fact, qualifications in the NQF are well accepted by education and training institutions as well as by labour market actors. Aligning the outcome of the RPL process to the NQF levels provides transparency on the skill proficiency of individuals undertaking the validation and makes it comparable to individuals who have completed formal education or training.

For countries in the European Union, the NQF is generally linked to the European Qualifications Framework (EQF), so that the education and training levels used to classify national qualifications are comparable among member states. In countries that link their NQF to the EQF and use it for RPL, the RPL system has the additional advantage of facilitating worker international mobility. Finally, using the NQF as the benchmark may also facilitate upskilling, especially if the outcome of the RPL process is a formal qualification, as can be the case in Estonia, France or Portugal.

The biggest drawback of drawing on qualifications for validation is that they may not be appropriate to validate knowledge and competences acquired informally

or non-formally, as they were generally conceived to map qualifications in formal education. Consequently, this must be taken into account in the RPL assessment phase by not expecting a 100% correspondence between learning outcomes of the relevant qualification and the candidate's knowledge and competences. In addition, benchmarking RPL standards to the NQF may undervalue other job-specific skills that are not reflected as learning outcomes of formal education.

In the case of RPL systems focusing on job-specific skills, occupational standards are also frequently used. Occupational standards define the skills, abilities and attitudes that workers in an occupation must possess to effectively carry out their tasks. As such, they are better suited than qualifications in the NQF to be compared with knowledge acquired informally or non-formally. However, their use limits comparability with the competence level of individuals who acquired their competences in formal education.

In some countries, such as in the Netherlands or Sweden, RPL providers may use as benchmark industry standards developed by social partners or sectoral organisations. Industry standards describe how operations are typically carried out within an industry and are generally easier and faster to update (i.e., require less steps) than qualifications in the NQF or occupational standards, as they can be updated autonomously by the organisation who developed them. Thus, industry standards could be somewhat more responsive to changes in skills demands than using qualifications in the NQF or occupational standards as RPL standards. On the other hand, industry standards are not as widely accepted as qualifications in the NQF.

One exception to the standards described in this section is regulated occupations. These are occupations for which specific requirements established by law must be satisfied to be allowed to practise. In some countries, such as France, regulated occupations can only be accessed through formal education or training. In countries where regulated occupations are accessible through RPL, the standard used must be the same as the formal qualification and approved by the relevant institutions.

Decision 4: Which skills should be prioritised?

After deciding what standards are used for RPL (qualification, occupation or industry standards) and if validation standards are developed from them, policy makers need to determine the extent of the new initiative. In other words, should the focus be on all occupations/qualifications or only on a subset of them? Typically, countries using the National Qualification Framework or occupational standards as RPL standards aim at offering RPL for all qualifications or occupations included in the relevant framework. For example, by law, the VAE system in France covers all qualifications included in the National Directory of Professional Certifications (RNCP) – except those linked to a regulated profession and for which a formal qualification to practise is required.

By contrast, systems that rely on newly created validation standards (at least initially) only cover a subset of qualifications or occupations existing in a country. This is because setting up a new high-quality validation framework requires significant investments in terms of resources and time. In fact, it is better to develop a framework for the recognition of competences associated with a smaller number of occupations/qualifications (but with a high level of detail about evaluation methods, quality assurance, monitoring, and so forth) than to create a system covering hundreds of occupations/qualifications but only superficially. Indeed, a wide but shallow framework could lead to a distorted system where both evaluators and evaluated are confused about what and how needs to be recognised, potentially biasing the whole validation process.

To choose which occupations/qualifications should be at the core of this targeted RPL system, two approaches seem most prevalent. On the one hand, some countries select occupations in sectors in which there are many potential beneficiaries of RPL. This is the case, for instance, of Germany and its Valikom system, which prioritises occupations in which there are many professionals without a formal qualification. This also links to the targeting of RPL systems on specific population groups, as described in Decision 1. For instance, if the system is intended to be used by migrants only, those professions with many foreign-born workers should be prioritised. On the other hand, national observatories, employers, education and training professionals or social partners can also

contribute to determining the focus of the RPL system. For example, industry organisations in the Netherlands can submit – with the support of the sectoral social partners – proposals for professional standards (*Vakbekwaamheidsbewijs*) to the Knowledge Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (*Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC*) for its approval as nationally recognised industry standards.

Decision 5: What should RPL standards include?

Regardless of the benchmark used (qualification, occupational or industry standards), the content of the related RPL standards is generally similar. Table 1 presents a list of the information that may be included in RPL standards.

All RPL standards must include the “Basic information”. They must identify the qualification, occupation, block of competences or competence the standards refer to; describe the main activities linked to it; and break these into competences and knowledge, if the standards refer to, at a minimum, a block of competences. The competences and knowledge must then be linked to related learning outcomes, as in Denmark, France, Latvia and Spain, or to tasks, as in Wallonia (Belgium), the Netherlands or Portugal. Additionally, standards must include the level of the standard, if it is linked to the NQF, as in France, or place the standard within the labour market, by providing information on the sector and level of responsibility of the occupation that the standards refer to, as in Wallonia (Belgium).

Standards can also include complementary information, such as information on the RPL assessment method to be used, related training information and by information on other skills and competences that could be relevant to complement the competences the standards refer to.

Some standards include information on the RPL assessment phase. This may be information on the actual tasks that will be performed during the assessment phase, as in Wallonia (Belgium), performance criteria, information on the level of competence at which the candidate must be able to carry out a task, as in France and Spain, or information on the level of importance of a given task within the

standards, as in Portugal. In Portugal, for example, standards state which tasks are essential and must be successfully completed by the candidate to obtain the RPL certification.

Table 1. Information included in RPL standards

Basic information	RPL assessment information	Training information	Information about other skills
Name of the qualification, occupation, block of competences, or competence the standards refer to	Tasks to be performed during the RPL assessment / assessment methods	Targeted training programmes to develop additional competences related to the standards	Required language skills linked to the qualification or occupation (if the standards refer to a qualification or occupation)
Main activities	Performance criteria	Training programmes linked to the competences the standards refer to	Digital skills linked to the qualification or occupation (if the standards refer to a qualification or occupation)
Competences (if the standards refer to more than one competence) and knowledge	Level of importance of each task within the standards		Personal abilities and characteristics / transversal skills linked to the qualification or occupation (if the standards refer to a qualification or occupation)
Learning outcomes or tasks			
Level of the qualification or standard within the NQF (if applicable) or sectors of activity of professionals with reference to level of responsibility (if applicable)			

In the event of the candidate not being successful in proving that they have the competence or block of competences the standards refer to, some standards provide guidance on relevant training courses to develop the competences included in the standards. For example, this is the case in Portugal. Other standards even refer to training programmes that can be undertaken to develop competences listed in the additional competences section of the standards.

Finally, standards may also contain information on other skills that are relevant for the occupation/qualification the standards refer to. This is the case, for example, of Estonia, where standards include information on required language skills, digital skills and personal abilities and characteristics relevant to the specific occupation or qualification.

Decision 6: How to assess prior learning?

Institutions developing an RPL system must decide if they want to use the same assessment method for all RPL candidates or if they think a variety of methods should be adopted. In the latter case, the system could identify one evaluation method for all candidates being validated against the same qualification, occupation or industry standard, or it could allow for full flexibility and let RPL providers, assessors or candidates choose the appropriate assessment methods. Depending on this decision, assessment methods should be clearly defined in either the RPL regulation, in individual validation standards or regulation should establish that they can be decided at the time of implementing the process itself.

Using the same assessment method for all candidates, makes the validation process more transparent and fairer and makes quality assurance easier. By contrast, the lack of flexibility may create barriers for candidates who feel less comfortable with a given assessment method. For example, low-educated candidates or migrants who do not feel fully comfortable with the language of their host country may avoid RPL in systems that rely on traditional exams (e.g., written exams or multiple-choice questions). To address this concern, some countries that impose a common assessment method to all candidates provide support to the candidate. This is, for example, the case in France, where the RPL assessment is based on a written portfolio. Candidates with limited writing

abilities may use digital dictation programmes for support in preparing the documents in their portfolio. Another example is Portugal, where candidates must participate in a minimum of 50 hours of training as part of their RPL process. These hours could be partly used to provide candidates without formal education with the basic theoretical knowledge required to successfully demonstrate their skills and knowledge in the RPL process.

To select the RPL assessment method, all advantages and disadvantages of each assessment method must be weighted, choosing the most appropriate one. Table 2 lists the main assessment methods used in RPL as well as each method's advantages and disadvantages.

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of RPL assessment methods

Assessment method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Direct assessments		
Work simulation / practical test	<p>Allows to assess the relevant learning outcomes/tasks directly in a real-life environment.</p> <p>Assessors have full control over the test environment.</p> <p>Can feel more natural to low-educated workers, potentially increasing their participation in RPL.</p> <p>Adaptable to the performance of the candidate.</p>	<p>If carried out in a test centre, requires equipment and materials, which can be costly.</p> <p>Depth of knowledge is harder to evaluate, the outcome observed is only if the candidate successfully completed a task or not.</p>
Workplace observation	<p>Allows directly assessing relevant learning outcomes/tasks in a real-life environment.</p> <p>Lower cost compared with respect to work simulation as there is no need to buy or rent equipment.</p> <p>Can feel more natural to low-educated workers, potentially increasing their participation in RPL.</p> <p>Adaptable to the performance of the candidate.</p>	<p>Depending on the equipment and materials available, it is possible that not all relevant tasks or learning outcomes can be assessed.</p> <p>The assessors do not have full control over the test environment.</p> <p>The employer must agree to holding the RPL assessment in firm's premises.</p>

Assessment method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Written or oral exams	<p>Most suitable to evaluate theoretical knowledge.</p> <p>Low cost and, for written exams, many candidates can take the exam at the same time.</p> <p>If written, it is easy to review, easing quality assurance.</p>	<p>Not suitable for psychomotor competences.</p> <p>Requires a minimum level of language and communication skills. Could impose barriers on low-educated workers or some migrants.</p> <p>For written exams, not adaptable depending on the performance of the candidate.</p>
Technical interview	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>Adaptable to the performance of the candidate or the documentation previously submitted, if any.</p> <p>Allows to evaluate depth of knowledge of the candidate.</p>	<p>Not suitable for psychomotor competences.</p> <p>Even though it is more flexible than written exams, it still requires a minimum level of language and communication skills. Could impose barriers on low-educated workers or some migrants.</p>
Case study	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>Allows to measure knowledge in conjunction with other transversal skills.</p> <p>Allows to evaluate depth of knowledge of the candidate.</p> <p>If written, it is easy to review, easing quality assurance.</p>	<p>Not suitable for psychomotor competences.</p> <p>Requires a minimum level of language and communication skills. Could impose barriers on low-educated workers or some migrants.</p> <p>If written, not adaptable depending on the performance of the candidate.</p>
Indirect assessments		
Portfolio	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>Provides a full picture of the candidate's learning experiences.</p> <p>It is easy to review, easing quality assurance.</p>	<p>Must be supplemented by a second assessment method that allows direct assessment of the candidate's competences.</p> <p>Not adaptable depending on the performance of the candidate.</p> <p>Difficult to evaluate depth of knowledge.</p> <p>Time-consuming.</p>

Assessment method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Self-assessment	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>Allows the candidate to reflect on their professional career, which could be a first step to suggest upskilling pathways through career guidance.</p> <p>It is easy to review, easing quality assurance.</p>	<p>Requires guidance to ensure that the candidate makes the most of this assessment method.</p> <p>Must be supplemented by a second assessment method that allows direct assessment of the candidate's competences.</p> <p>Requires a minimum level of language and communication skills. Could impose barriers on low-educated workers or some migrants.</p> <p>Not adaptable depending on the performance of the candidate.</p> <p>Difficult to evaluate depth of knowledge.</p> <p>Time-consuming.</p>
Work samples	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>No additional time required, fast.</p> <p>Proves that the learning outcome has been achieved.</p> <p>It is easy to review, easing quality assurance.</p>	<p>Difficult to verify that the candidate produced the work sample.</p> <p>Must be supplemented by a second assessment method that allows direct assessment of the candidate's competences.</p> <p>Difficult to evaluate depth of knowledge.</p> <p>Not adaptable depending on the performance of the candidate.</p>
References / feedback from employers, peers or subordinates	<p>Low cost.</p> <p>Useful to evaluate affective competences and inter-personal skills.</p> <p>It is easy to review, easing quality assurance.</p>	<p>Difficult and potentially costly to verify.</p> <p>Must be supplemented by a second assessment method that allows direct assessment of the candidate's competences.</p> <p>Difficult to evaluate depth of knowledge.</p> <p>Not adaptable depending on the performance of the candidate.</p>

Despite its limitations, the most common RPL assessment method is the portfolio method. A portfolio usually includes a CV of the candidate, information about and evidence of prior education, formal and non-formal training, and of work and volunteer experiences, providing a full picture of the candidate's learning experiences. The portfolio may also include other indirect assessment methods, such as a self-assessment of the candidates' learning experiences, work samples and/or references. The portfolio method is used, for example, in Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France and Spain. It is a good first step to draw the candidate's profile. However, this method is time-consuming. For example, the whole RPL process in France, where the portfolio method including a self-assessment is used, takes between 6 and 12 months, compared to an RPL process of about 3 months in Germany or the Netherlands, where a portfolio is not used. Excluding the self-assessment may shorten the process, but obtaining proof of different learning experiences may also be time-consuming and possibly unnecessary. Given the portfolio's declarative nature, its importance in the RPL assessment phase and time invested in putting it together could be reduced.

In addition, the portfolio is already complemented by a direct (and demonstrative) assessment phase in some countries. This is the case in France and Estonia, where candidates undergo a technical interview after submitting their portfolio. The goal of the interview is to identify the depth of the knowledge, based on the experiences described in the candidate's portfolio. In Denmark, Finland and Spain, the additional assessment is only used if the evidence in the portfolio is deemed insufficient.

Practical assessments, such as work simulation or workplace observation, provide direct evidence of the ability of the candidate to carry out the tasks included in the RPL standards and require less preparation on the candidate's side, speeding up the process. Additionally, these assessments tend to feel more natural for low-educated workers, potentially increasing participation by the group most likely to benefit from RPL. Unfortunately, practical assessments, if carried out by the institution delivering RPL, can be very costly depending on the equipment and materials needed. This can be addressed by carrying out the assessment at the candidate's workplace, if they are employed, but this option requires employer approval, which can be a deterrent if the candidate intends to complete the RPL process to improve their employment prospects elsewhere.

Finally, even when using direct assessment methods, it is generally good practice to use two different assessment methods, as this allows to assess a broader range of knowledge and skills that are relevant for the standards. For example, in Germany and the Netherlands, where direct assessment methods are mostly used, the RPL the assessment phase includes two methods. These are chosen on a case-by-case basis. In Sweden, where two methods are also often used for the validation of job-specific skills, these include a digital written test and a professional simulation.

Decision 7: Who is in charge of the evaluations?

As a final step, institutions need to choose who is carrying out the assessment of prior learning. Selecting the correct profile of the evaluator is key to ensure the effectiveness, the transparency and the quality of the RPL process. Both the users of RPL and prospective employers need to trust the process. In RPL systems aimed at facilitating employment, the choice is generally one of either restricting participation in evaluation panels and juries to a single profile for evaluators (such as officially recognised trainers or individuals with recognised experience in the relevant occupation) or to mix both profiles. When RPL is intended to facilitate admission into educational courses, assessors are typically the teachers themselves, as they are the ones delivering the classes and the ones who know the training curricula best. By contrast, when the validation framework focuses on technical skills, experienced professionals usually take part in the assessment to ensure that the knowledge of the individual is in line with what is currently required in the workplace.

For example, in France, the profile of VAE jury members is widely heterogeneous: according to legislation, at least a fourth of assessors must be qualified professionals (half of them employers and half of them employees), while the rest of the jury are teachers or trainers. Similarly, in Wallonia (Belgium) the evaluation panel within the *Validation des Compétences* system is formed by three assessors: (1) the manager of the validation centre; (2) a professional experienced in the relevant occupation who acts as an observer; and (3) a trainer or a professional

with at least five years of experience, who received specific training to be an evaluator.

Capacity building activities for trainers or professionals undertaking the role of evaluator are common. This ensures that evaluators are correctly carrying out the procedure, ensuring comparability across the country. For instance, in the *Realkompetenceordningen* system in Denmark, educational institutions are responsible for ensuring that assessors appropriately evaluate the individual's competences and arrange regular staff training. Only in a few cases, evaluators need to hold an explicit diploma. For example, in Estonia, the skills requirements of an assessor are clearly stated in an occupational qualification specific to evaluators taking part in RPL processes.

Decision 8: What is the outcome of the RPL process?

Depending on the standards used and on the body in charge of RPL, the outcome of a successful RPL process will be either: a formal qualification or a certificate equivalent to a qualification, if the standards used are linked to the NQF; part of a qualification or of a certificate of equivalency, if the standards refer to a block of competences or a competence unit linked to the NQF; or a non-formal certification, if the standards are not linked to the NQF. This will have implications on access to further education and training and, potentially, on the labour market value of the RPL outcome. While formal qualifications are widely accepted and recognised in the labour market, non-formal certificates may not be as well accepted and rewarded by employers. In addition to the outcome of the validation process, in the case of RPL for regulated occupations, the result is that the individual is able to practise the relevant occupation.

Most RPL systems accompany the RPL outcome, either the qualification or certification, by career guidance and career pathway suggestions. This increases the value of RPL for candidates, as it can help candidates move to a new job or reengage in education or training. Upskilling suggestions based on the RPL certification obtained can be particularly useful if one of the goals of the RPL

system is to reengage adults in education or training. To this end, it is important that RPL certificates are stackable, and that adult learning is modular.

This is the case, for example, in Spain, where RPL certifications are linked to micro-certifications. As part of the RPL outcome, validation participants in Spain receive a list of the qualifications that contain the micro-certification obtained as well as guidance on the coursework that should be completed to obtain each qualification. In Portugal, RPL candidates who do not obtain the full RPL certificate receive information on the training they must complete to obtain the full certificate. In Denmark, RPL is used at the beginning of VET programmes for adults to build a personalised education plan based on the candidate's knowledge.

Additionally, upskilling pathways can also be developed through RPL. This is the case, for example, in the Swedish RPL system for the labour market. In this system multiple RPL standards at different levels of the NQF exist, which allows candidates to stack the certificates and obtain higher level qualifications through RPL.

Another important consideration relates to how the certificate will be shared with interested parties and stored. To minimise the risk of forgery and increase the credibility of RPL certifications, in some countries, such as Finland or the Netherlands, RPL certificates can be verified in a public registry of awarded RPL certificates. Digital badges are another alternative to increase the credibility of the outcome. Both allow both employers and education and training institutions to verify the validity and veracity of the RPL certificate. These certificates can also be stored using blockchain, which increases security and trust. Through blockchain the RPL certificate is stored in encrypted blocks in multiple servers, adding a strong security layer. This technology is used, for example, by CIMEA (*Centro di Informazione sulla Mobilità e le Equivalenze Accademiche*, Information Centre on Mobility and Academic Equivalence) to store and share the diplomas they award.

Finally, information on RPL certificates, for example as part of an RPL certification registry, can be used to improve the match of workers with jobs, as it provides information on workers' skills. In the Netherlands, the Dutch Centre for Validation of Prior Learning (*Nationaal Kenniscentrum EVC*) is currently working with the Dutch Public Employment Service to link the registry of RPL certificates with job

vacancies. This new database will be available for the Public Employment Service to use starting in January 2023.

Decision 9: How to foster a high-quality RPL system?

Once the RPL system is designed, the institutions in charge of it must ensure that it is of good quality. To do so, many countries rely on standardising the validation process and making sure that the candidates' performance during the assessment phase is objectively evaluated. Additionally, RPL providers are generally subject to national quality assurance frameworks, with some systems even including quality assurance mechanisms specific to the RPL process.

Standardising the RPL process ensures that most candidates go through an identical experience. This includes imposing minimum education, training and/or professional experience requirements to evaluators and/or advisors and training them, as described above, as well as preparing detailed guidelines for all actors participating in the validation process. For instance, in Spain, detailed guidelines on the RPL process are available for the candidate, the evaluator and the advisor. These guarantee that all individuals carrying out a particular task as part of the RPL process receive identical information. In Germany and Wallonia (Belgium), evaluators also receive detailed instructions on how to assess candidates.

To ensure that the evaluation of the candidate is objective, RPL systems generally rely on: (1) avoid involving RPL process advisors in the evaluation phase, as they might have developed a personal relationship with the candidates; or/and (2) using multiple evaluators, with the number of evaluators ranging from two in Germany and the Netherlands to five in Portugal and Spain.

Quality at the RPL provider level is generally checked through traditional quality assurance systems, which usually include provider accreditation and external audits or monitoring. Quality assurance for RPL can be carried out either through the same quality assurance system as the corresponding education or training system or through a standalone quality assurance framework. For instance, while in Denmark and Latvia quality assurance of RPL is embedded within the quality

assurance system of each education or training system, in the Netherlands and Portugal, RPL providers are subject to their own quality assurance framework. In the Netherlands, each accredited provider is audited by an independent organisation every 18 months for each standard for which it offers a validation. In Portugal, instead, providers must renew their authorisation to operate every three years. Some systems even include quality assurance mechanisms that are specific to the RPL process. This is the case in Wallonia (Belgium), where the RPL evaluation phase includes an actor, the observer, whose role is to make sure that the evaluation is objective. In Germany, the candidate's performance and the corresponding evaluators' assessment is reviewed by the RPL provider for each RPL process.

Decision 10: How to ensure participation in the RPL system?

Finally, the last crucial step is how to reach out to potential beneficiaries of the RPL system. This entails making them aware that the system exists, but also ensuring that they have the time, as well as the financial resources and the confidence to participate in the validation procedures. All these decisions are closely linked to Decision 1: i.e. the intended beneficiaries of the RPL system and their specific circumstances and needs.

Information about RPL is generally provided through online portals and accessible to any interested candidate. These online portals include in most cases information about the RPL process, requirements that RPL candidates must satisfy, where the RPL process can be carried out and the competences/occupations against which RPL can be performed. In addition, this information is usually also available in person at institutions that provide RPL, such as higher education institutions or RPL providers.


Yet, despite information on RPL being widely available, potential beneficiaries may not be aware that RPL exists. Career guidance counsellors generally play a key role in directing potential beneficiaries towards RPL, as part of their general guidance. Additionally, other strategies are used to raise awareness about RPL, such as targeted emails, information sessions, social media and media campaigns

and targeted activities. For instance, in Wallonia (Belgium), job seekers receive targeted emails about relevant validation opportunities. In Portugal, information sessions about RPL may be carried out in workplaces, in public buildings or at non-profit organisations, among other. Social media campaigns have been used in Germany, while targeted awareness raising activities for workers at risk of unemployment have been carried out in Wallonia (Belgium) and Sweden. These awareness raising efforts should be adapted to the relevant groups of the population. For instance, awareness raising campaigns targeting migrants as potential beneficiaries should include messages that are relevant to this group of population, potentially use their languages, and be distributed where potential beneficiaries may see it (either through appropriate media or social media channels or placed in relevant locations).

Some countries are also relying on employers to raise awareness of RPL opportunities. Awareness by employers is also crucial to ensure that RPL validation certificates are valued in the labour market. For instance, in France, since 2014, employers must inform their employees of the existence of the RPL system at least once every two years, during an interview in which the employee's professional development is discussed. Similarly, in the Netherlands, employers, their Human Resources departments and designated internal "RPL ambassadors" also raise awareness of RPL opportunities within firms. Finally, social partners, including trade unions, employer associations and Chambers, are generally also involved in informing potential beneficiaries about validation opportunities.

Once beneficiaries are aware of RPL opportunities and want to participate, other barriers may arise. The first barrier is the lack of time, particularly for employed candidates. RPL processes are generally time-consuming, they involve multiple phases and can take between 3 (in Germany and the Netherlands) and 12 (in France) months to complete. To minimise this burden for employed workers, a few countries offer the option of taking training leave to carry out RPL. For instance, in Wallonia (Belgium), employees have up to eight hours of training leave that they can use the day of the RPL assessment. In France, given that the validation process is longer, this training leave is up to 24 hours which they can use throughout the RPL process.

The second barrier is economic. While in many countries RPL is done at no cost to the candidate, in others, such as France or the Netherlands, there is a cost. In these cases, fees are generally covered by the institution that initiates the RPL



process, such as the employer or the Public Employment Service. In the event that the candidate initiates the RPL process, most countries with a not-for-free RPL system still provide financial benefits to minimise the cost. This is the case in France or the Netherlands, where candidates can use training funds or their Individual Learning Account to cover the costs of RPL.

Finally, a last set of barriers that potential beneficiaries may encounter are dispositional barriers, which include the feeling of insecurity related to embarking in an unknown and intimidating process, such as a validation procedure. This is especially a concern for low-qualified beneficiaries, for long-term unemployed and for all segments of population who previously had bad experiences in the schooling system. One potential solution is to make the validation process more transparent, by providing clear and complete information about the various steps and procedures. This could include, for example, providing examples of previous assessments, either through written documentation or videos, recommending reading materials or providing very detailed guidelines of how the process will take place. This is, for example, the case in Spain, where detailed guidelines are provided to RPL candidates, or in Wallonia (Belgium), where candidates can obtain information on the activities that may be carried out during the assessment.

FURTHER READING

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