

Recognition of Prior Learning in India: A Pathway to Realizing Lifelong Learning

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Abstract

This study analyses the execution and effects of Recognition of Prior Learning efforts in India as a means to enhance lifelong learning possibilities. The report examines the progression of RPL inside India's skills development framework, assesses its practical execution through significant initiatives such as Skill India and Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), and finds both accomplishments and ongoing obstacles. This paper contends that, despite notable advancements in formalising informal learning in India through the analysis of policy documents, programme outcomes, and comparative practices, considerable reforms in assessment methodologies, industry engagement, and institutional capacity are essential to fully harness its potential as a catalyst for lifelong learning.

Keywords: *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), lifelong learning, skill development, stakeholders, assessment methodologies.*

Introduction

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has emerged as a crucial instrument in global education and skills development systems, facilitating the validation of knowledge acquired outside formal educational settings (Singh, 2015). The theoretical foundation of RPL may be linked to Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning, which serves as an ideological and theoretical basis for extensive research on RPL (Andersson, 2016). In industrialised nations, John Dewey's influence is frequently acknowledged in the discourse around the history of prior learning identification and

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validation. Dewey asserted, “Instruction should commence with the experiences that learners already possess.” This experience and the skills acquired throughout it serve as the foundation for all subsequent learning (Dewey, 1938). The concept of “recognition of prior learning” is a process executed by qualified experts to identify, document, evaluate, and certify an individual’s competencies acquired through formal, non-formal, or informal education, in alignment with established qualification criteria (ILO, 2023).

A significant portion of India’s labour population is employed in the informal sector, acquiring skills through traditional apprenticeships or experiential learning settings. Recognition of RPL serves as a crucial connection between formal recognition systems and informally learnt skills. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasises the significance of RPL and designates it as an essential element in India’s progression towards a knowledge economy characterised by continuous, accessible, and recognised learning (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Despite the high regard for RPL in India’s skills development plan and its considerable potential to facilitate lifelong learning, a substantial knowledge gap persists about the optimal implementation of RPL to establish meaningful learning trajectories and enhance socioeconomic results. Rothboeck et al. (2018) emphasise that empirical evidence about the success of India’s four-sector RPL pilot project, particularly in relation to labour market outcomes and advancement to higher education, is still scarce despite the significant expansion of RPL programmes.

As India undergoes economic transformation amidst rapid technological advancements and globalisation, lifelong learning has emerged as a critical focal point in Indian policy discourse. Approximately 93% of India’s labour force is engaged in informal employment, rendering conventional education and training programmes inadequate to fulfil the skill development needs of this vast demographic (International Labour Organisation, 2022). By validating acquired skills via experience, RPL offers a pragmatic solution that establishes a foundation for continuous professional growth and education. Sharma and Choudhary (2021) see RPL as both an entry point and a sustaining mechanism for lifelong learning, especially for poor populations whose educational trajectories may have been disrupted or constrained by socioeconomic factors.

This study examines the disparity between the theoretical potential of RPL as a facilitator of lifelong learning and its practical use within India’s diverse socioeconomic landscape. The study systematically analyses the operational mechanisms and

efficiency of RPL initiatives across India in promoting lifelong learning objectives. This study aims to elucidate the benefits and limitations of India's RPL system by an exhaustive examination of academic literature, policy instruments, and documented practices. The methodological approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of stakeholder perspectives through critical study of official policy documents, scientific research publications, and recorded implementation tactics. The analytical results inform the study to formulate evidence-based recommendations for enhancing this fundamental aspect of the infrastructure that underpins national skill development.

Evolution of RPL in India's Policy Framework

The official acknowledgement of RPL within India's statutory framework is recent, although the notion of acknowledging informally acquired skills has historical roots in traditional apprenticeship systems. The National Skills Development Policy of 2009 marked the first significant emphasis on RPL, acknowledging the need to legitimise skills obtained through non-formal means (Ministry of Labour and Employment, 2009). The establishment of the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) in 2013 created a structured framework for the methodical execution of RPL by defining level-based competency criteria for evaluating prior learning (Mehrotra, 2019). The launch of the Skill India Mission in 2015 marked a significant milestone for the execution of RPL, incorporating RPL as a core component of the flagship Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) programme (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2015).

The mission established clear objectives for RPL certification and allocated specific finances, signifying a shift from theoretical recognition to practical implementation. Kumar and Singh (2020) contend that this policy reform reflected a growing recognition that India's demographic dividend could only be realised through comprehensive skills recognition including both formal and informal learning pathways.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasised the significance of RPL in India's educational system by explicitly linking it to the concept of lifelong learning. The plan envisioned RPL as a component of a flexible educational framework facilitating "multiple entry and exit points" to promote lifelong learning throughout an individual's career (Ministry of Education, 2020). This was a significant advancement, positioning RPL not just as a skills certification instrument but as an essential component of an integrated lifelong learning framework (Pilz and Regel, 2021).

National Credit Framework

The NEP 2020 established a transformative framework for higher education, emphasising the importance of lifelong learning, flexible academic pathways, and the formal recognition of prior learners. RPL was regarded as an essential method to improve educational access for those who had gained skills via employment experience, community engagement, or vocational training. The NEP 2020 mandated the establishment of frameworks that allow individuals to get formal degrees based on demonstrated learning outcomes. Consequently, the National Credit Framework (NCrF) was instituted to provide a structured system for the allocation of credits across various forms of learning, including academic, vocational, and experiential education. The NCrF promotes credit accumulation and transferability, therefore allowing individuals to transition seamlessly between job and education. The government has included RPL into the NCrF, facilitating the evaluation and assignment of academic credits for informally acquired competencies, hence improving access to higher education for a diverse student population. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has recently issued guidelines to facilitate the implementation of RPL in higher education institutions (HEIs).

These standards create a thorough framework for assessing prior learning, determining credit equivalency, and ensuring quality assurance in RPL procedures. The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), established in alignment with NEP 2020, aims to enable credit transfers, allowing individuals to accumulate and utilise RPL-based credits for obtaining formal degrees. Despite these advancements, challenges persist in the widespread use of RPL. Standardising evaluation protocols for diverse learning experiences, preserving the integrity of RPL certifications, and enhancing acceptance across corporations and educational institutions are critical concerns. Moreover, awareness of RPL and its benefits must be enhanced among potential beneficiaries, particularly informal sector workers and industry professionals.

Implementation Models and Key Initiatives

The implementation of RPL in India has employed many approaches, each customised to address specific industrial needs and target populations. The principal implementation method has been through PMKVY, which utilised a three-stage RPL process: candidate mobilisation and pre-screening, orientation and bridge training to address skill deficits, and evaluation leading to certification (National Skill Development Corporation, 2022). Between 2016 and 2022, the RPL segment of PMKVY certified almost 4 million persons in diverse sectors including construction,

agriculture, domestic work, and manufacturing (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2023).

The PMKVY implementation model includes three distinct approaches for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): camp-based, employer-premises, and RPL centres. The camp-based technique involves creating temporary assessment centres inside areas with a high concentration of skilled workers, demonstrating notable effectiveness in reaching rural and semi-urban populations (Sharma et al., 2019). The employer-premises approach emphasises employees in organised sectors, conducting assessments at job locations in collaboration with employers.

The RPL centres are permanent entities often established by Sector Skill Councils to provide continuous assessment services for certain enterprises (National Skill Development Corporation, 2022). Alongside PMKVY, other sector-specific Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programmes have been established.

The Construction Skill Development Council of India (CSDCI) has established targeted RPL programmes for construction workers, while the Healthcare Sector Skill Council has developed specialised assessment methods for healthcare professionals with informal training (Agrawal and Agrawal, 2021). Additionally, state governments have launched supplemental programmes such as the Delhi government's "Mission Buniyaad," which incorporates RPL components for informal sector workers (Government of Delhi, 2019). The digital transformation of RPL implementation is an emerging trend, evidenced by the introduction of the Skill India Digital site in 2021, which has streamlined the registration, assessment, and certification processes (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2022). Goel et al. (2023) observe that this digital integration has enhanced transparency and accessibility; nonetheless, obstacles to digital literacy remain for some demographic groups.

Assessment Methodologies and Quality Assurance

The reliability of RPL depends on strong evaluation methods and quality assurance systems. In India, assessment methodologies have transitioned from mostly theoretical evaluations to practical, demonstration-based examinations that correspond with occupation-specific National Occupational Standards (NOS) (National Skill Development Corporation, 2022). Assessment often integrates practical demonstrations (70%) with theoretical knowledge evaluation (30%). However, the specific ratio differs among industries (Pilz and Regel, 2021).

Quality assurance in India's RPL system functions at many tiers. The National Council for Vocational Education and Training (NCVET), founded in 2018, functions as the principal regulator for RPL certification, tasked with the approval of qualification standards and the accreditation of assessment organisations (Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, 2021). At the sector level, Sector Skill Councils formulate assessment procedures and educate evaluators, while independent assessment firms do the assessments to guarantee objectivity (National Skill Development Corporation, 2022).

Notwithstanding these systemic protections, research reveals ongoing quality concerns. According to Mehrotra (2019), assessor capability exhibits considerable variability, and the uneven implementation of evaluation criteria undermines dependability. Sharma and Choudhary (2021) also cite shortcomings in assessment systems, noting that they inadequately capture the contextual knowledge and adaptive abilities inherent in informal learning. Pilz and Regel (2021) further highlight the challenge of maintaining assessment rigor while ensuring accessibility, noting that overly complex assessment processes may deter potential candidates, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Impact on Lifelong Learning Pathways

The influence of RPL on promoting lifelong learning in India may be assessed through many dimensions: labour market results, educational advancement, and personal empowerment. According to research conducted by the National Skill Development Corporation (2022), RPL certification has had favourable employment results, with 32% of certified individuals seeing income rises and 22% obtaining more solid job contracts. Nonetheless, these advantages demonstrate considerable sectoral disparity, since regulated businesses such as healthcare and electrical services have a greater acknowledgement of RPL certification compared to uncontrolled ones (Agrawal and Agrawal, 2021).

The educational advancement route enabled by RPL is still underdeveloped. The NSQF theoretically facilitates vertical movement from RPL certification to formal educational credentials; however, the practical execution of these paths has been constrained. Kumar and Singh (2020) note that few educational institutions have implemented clear credit recognition systems for RPL-certified applicants, limiting the reciprocal exchange between practical and academic learning typical of advanced lifelong learning systems.

The psychological and social effects of RPL certification constitute a substantial although sometimes neglected aspect. Qualitative research conducted by Sharma et al. (2019) reveals that RPL certification produces significant psychological advantages, such as enhanced self-confidence and professional identity among previously overlooked competent professionals. These psychological consequences may stimulate ongoing learning engagement; however, long-term studies examining such patterns are limited in the Indian setting.

Challenges and Limitations

Notwithstanding encouraging advancements, India's RPL system encounters significant obstacles that hinder its efficacy as a facilitator of lifelong learning. Awareness and accessibility constitute fundamental obstacles, as research reveals a lack of understanding of RPL options, especially among distant and marginalised populations (National Skill Development Corporation, 2022). Administrative intricacies and paperwork prerequisites further hinder accessibility, particularly for applicants with restricted literacy or internet access (Sharma and Choudhary, 2021).

The evaluation approach poses an additional considerable challenge. Contemporary methodologies frequently fail to appropriately represent the contextual and adaptable abilities inherent in informal learning, prioritising standardised capabilities that may not accurately reflect the many expressions of skills in informal environments (Mehrotra, 2019). Goel et al. (2023) contend that this evaluative restriction restricts RPL's capacity to comprehensively acknowledge the profound learning inherent in traditional knowledge systems and communal behaviours.

The sustainability of RPL systems is a continual problem. Significant reliance on government financing prompts concerns over long-term sustainability, but minimal employer investment indicates persistent doubt about the usefulness of certification (Kumar and Singh, 2020). The lack of a self-sustaining financing model jeopardises the continuity and scalability of RPL projects, potentially compromising their function in facilitating lifelong learning paths.

The fragmentation of the RPL environment hinders the advancement of lifelong learning. Numerous certifying bodies, varying quality standards, and restricted interoperability across certification systems provide navigation difficulties for learners aiming to accumulate certifications (Pilz and Regel, 2021). This fragmentation undermines the integration concept fundamental to effective lifelong learning systems

Discussion

The study underscores a critical disjunction in the execution of RPL inside India's vast informal sector and its aspirations to evolve into a knowledge economy. Despite RPL being recognised as a crucial tool for lifelong learning under policy frameworks, including the 2009 National Skills Development Policy and the National Education Policy 2020, its implementation has not fully realised this potential.

The study challenge examines the gap between the theoretical promise of RPL and its actual effectiveness in creating meaningful learning pathways. Despite millions obtaining certification through initiatives like PMKVY, the data indicates that RPL has predominantly functioned as a skills certification tool rather than as a fundamental component of a comprehensive lifelong learning framework. The current evaluation methods fail to sufficiently reflect the contextual and adaptive capabilities intrinsic to informal learning, prioritising standardised competencies that may not accurately represent the many manifestations of skills in non-formal environments. The difficulties of this execution is particularly significant given India's socioeconomic context, where traditional educational institutions inadequately meet the demands of the 93% of workers in the informal sector. The research suggests that while RPL theoretically promotes vertical mobility within the NSQF, few educational institutions have established explicit credit recognition systems for RPL-certified individuals, thereby limiting the crucial connection between experiential and academic learning pathways.

The fragmentation of the RPL environment, marked by several certifying bodies and varying quality standards, creates navigational difficulties that hinder the necessary integration for successful lifelong learning. This is compounded by sustainability challenges, since the substantial reliance on government funding without enough employer backing threatens the viability of RPL initiatives. The psychological impact of certification - enhanced self-confidence and professional identity among previously disregarded capable workers - suggests the potential for ongoing engagement in learning. However, without addressing the systemic shortcomings in assessment quality, industry recognition, and the incorporation of educational routes, RPL is expected to remain peripheral rather than central to India's lifelong learning goals.

To facilitate RPL's effective contribution to India's transition to a knowledge economy, research indicates that significant reforms are required in assessment methodologies, institutional capabilities, and system integration to create genuine pathways that acknowledge existing skills while fostering lifelong learning among citizens.

Conclusion

The RPL is a crucial method for promoting lifelong learning in India, particularly in light of the country's substantial informal sector and diverse educational practices. Notwithstanding significant progress in the development of RPL frameworks and the execution of certification programmes, more modifications are required to effectively use RPL's promise as a driver of lifelong learning.

Despite the National Skills Qualification Framework providing an institutional foundation for RPL, concerns persist around industry acknowledgement, assessment integrity, and the actual educational advancement facilitated by RPL certification. The principal recommendations from this analysis include: strengthening assessment methodologies to better capture contextual and adaptive skills; increasing industry engagement to improve certification recognition and sustainability; creating strong links between RPL and formal education through clear credit recognition; expanding digital infrastructure while ensuring accessible alternatives; and developing comprehensive monitoring systems to assess long-term learning and employment outcomes.

As India advances towards a knowledge economy, the significance of RPL in certifying diverse learning pathways will become increasingly crucial for economic competitiveness and social inclusiveness. By addressing current limitations and using established frameworks, India may develop a RPL system that certifies existing competencies and encourages continuous learning, so fostering lifelong education for all citizens.

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