

# Organizing RVA at national, regional and local levels

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## Making RVA the core mechanism of a quality lifelong learning system

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The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) is a specialized institute and works with 195 countries world-wide. Only a few countries have progressed in a systematic way to implementing their RVA systems. In many countries that have an RVA policy and legislation, true implementation remains limited or it is focussed only on certain institutions and certain fields of study and certain groups (Orr and Hovdhaugen, 2014). Often implementation excludes the delivery of RVA that reaches significant numbers. There are several studies that concentrate on isolated good practice and project-oriented approaches. Only few countries have undertaken evaluation studies into the successes achieved, problems encountered and long-term impact (Andersen and Laugesen, 2012). Most perspectives on the organization of RVA come from developed countries. Very seldom is a comprehensive and detailed analysis undertaken of the diverse needs and perspectives of local stakeholder groups, such as employers, young people, elected representatives, representatives of training systems, and trade union representatives and how these needs interact with the education, employment and social systems.

The following section spells out the conceptual approach for organizing RVA. The approach is based on findings documented in literature and in UIL's work on the Global Observatory of Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of Non-formal and Informal Learning with 28 countries and 50 case studies (UIL, 2017). It also draws on UIL's contribution to the Global Inventory of Regional and National Qualifications Frameworks (Cedefop, ETF, UIL, UNESCO, 2017)

### **1. Conceptualizing the organizational aspects of RVA**

To understand the organization of RVA systems in different contexts it will be useful to come up with a rough classification of countries according to socio-cultural contexts.. The present paper draws on the works of Saar and Ure (2013) and more recently, the work of Pilz (2017), who rely on previous approaches that combine various dimensions such as 'skills formation', 'stratification',

‘standardization’ and ‘learning practice’ to produce different typologies of education and training, lifelong learning and skill formation systems. In line with these approaches, the present paper, first, adopts a comprehensive approach to categorize selected countries implementing RVA according to their skill recognition system. Second, this paper adopts a systems approach and sees RVA as a core mechanism of a lifelong learning system. A lifelong learning systems approach links a countries education and training, employment and social systems. Third, in discussing the issue of organizing RVA, the approach used in this paper, is to integrate all three levels – macro, meso and micro.

Table 1. Macro, Meso and Micro levels

<b>Macro level</b>	Skill formation system.
	Legislation
	Financing
<b>Meso-level</b>	Standardization and quality assurance approaches
<b>Micro-level</b>	RVA practice

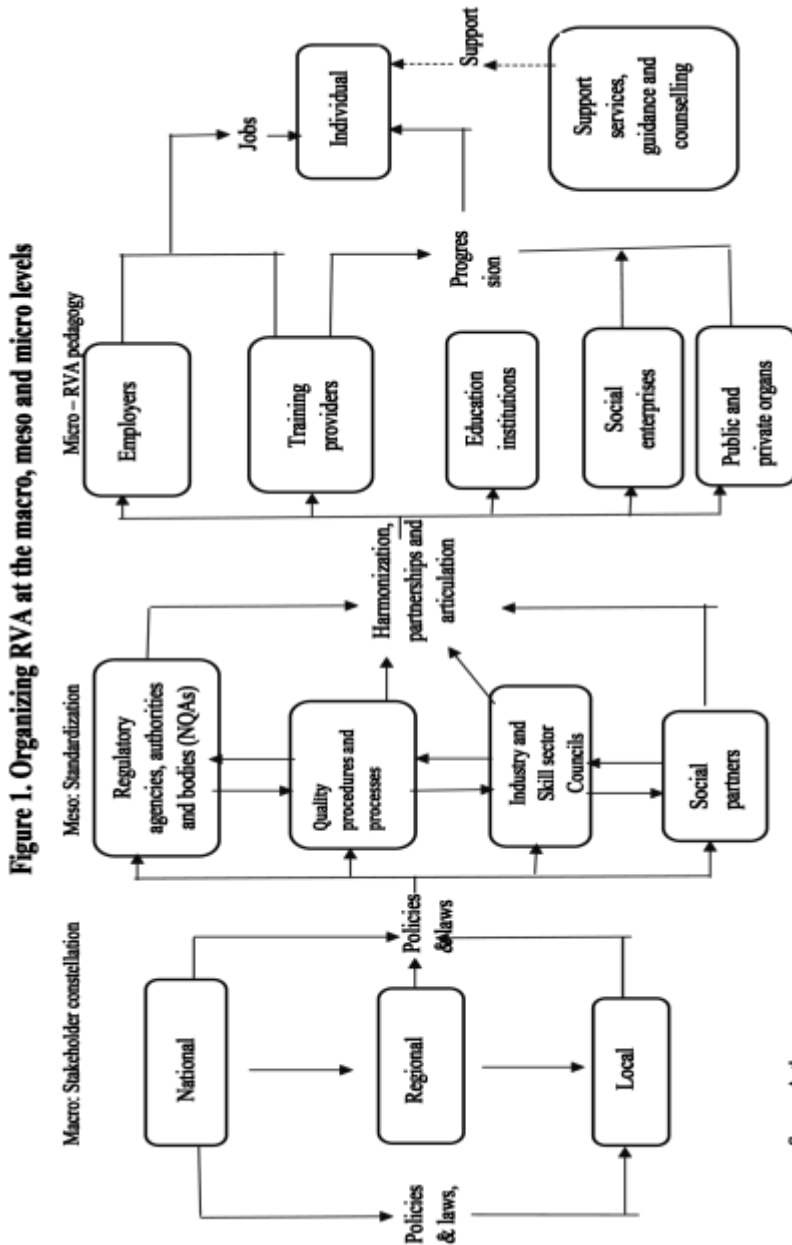
At the *macro-level* a key consideration is to arrive at a rough categorization of countries. The skill formation model is used as a starting point for categorizing countries according to the influence of state and potential for activity from companies and the private sectors and other stakeholders (Pilz, 2017). Where both influences are limited, other stakeholders may be prioritized. On the basis of this understanding it is possible to come to up with a constellation of stakeholders groups. The needs for RVA must be discussed explicitly with the decision makers and with those involved with local stakeholder groups. Political decisions ensuring the legal basis for ensuring RVA initiatives as well as well as the issue of direct funding and financial involvement and the governance of RVA are of crucial importance to understanding how RVA at the macro level.

Another important dimension to take account of at the macro level is the level of stratification in the education system as this has an influence on the organization of RVA. Stratification is related to issues of tracking, the differentiation and separation of general and vocational education, and the different routes to education and training in a system depending on access, selection and transition mechanisms (Allmendinger, 1989, p. 233). Stratification, can for example effect the status of certain tracks in the education and training system. A case in point is the image of vocational education and training, or that of adult education in several developing countries.

At the meso-level, a key consideration is standardization. Shavit and Müller (2000, p. 443) define standardization as follows. (...) the degree to which the quality of education needs the same standards nationwide. Variables such as teacher training, school budgets, curricula, and the uniformity of school leaving examinations are relevant in measuring standardization'. Standardization is a useful term to understand the structures, processes and outputs underpinning the organization of RVA systems. On the input side focus should be on RVA in relation to reference points such as curriculum, qualifications and occupational standards. Input also relates to the level of expertise of RVA personnel. Processes will refer to the role of regulatory agencies, inter-institutional relationships and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Agencies and partnerships are important for ensuring quality processes in the development of standards and maintaining tools and methodologies etc. Certification and the accompanying entitlements relate to the output side and are of particular relevance. For example, they may explain whether RVA forms part of exit-based or entry-based systems. For example, entry-based systems are those where follow-up training institutions devalue certification.

At the *micro-level*, the pedagogical perspective comes into the discussion. Here the focus is specifically on the concrete relevance of the delivery of RVA in education, working life and civil society. Many approaches can be made use of. On the one hand, the learning content or the standards used to compare the individual's evidence of prior learning need to be analysed in relation to learning outcomes that are holistically defined, as against a fragmentary and non-integrative understanding of learning outcomes. This means, for example, that in addition to technical skills, it is necessary to consider the situational orientation and context. On the other hand, it is also important to consider whether the personnel involved in RVA are able to do a comprehensive personal career planning process for the individuals. Furthermore, the methods used, the kind of arrangements made, are all very important. It is also important to ask if the employment system is included at the micro level with the necessary support services. Of importance is also the extent to which institutions and organisations (public or private, workplaces, industry, NQGs and community-based organizations, TVET and educational institutions) employers and employees associations, have a stake and interest in RVA processes and are able to ensure real benefits in terms of their employability, lifelong learning and personal development. At the micro level questions of ownership and control as well as usefulness must be clarified (See Bjørnåvold, 2000, p 20). The participation of stakeholders and the role of information as highlighted by Eriksen (1995), are also important micro-level issues. The organization of RVA, therefore, cannot be limited to questions of methodology. It is important for enterprises and institution to trust and accept the results of RVA of non-formal and informal learning.

The organization of RVA at all levels must pay attention to all these aspects. Figure one is a diagrammatic presentation of organizing RVA at macro, meso and micro levels.



## 2. The macro-level: typology

Drawing on Pilz's (2017) typology, we categorize countries according to their skill formation system, the level of stratification, standardization and practice-based learning. This could be the first step to understanding the requirements for RVA and its organization.

In 'mixed systems', both companies and state have a high influence on skills development. 'Individualised systems' are those where both companies and states have low influence. A third group of countries are those where the state has a high influence. Finally there are those countries where the private sector dominates. For illustrative purposes, only some cases are elaborated below. The values of high and low are relative values rather than absolute values.

Table 2. Categorization of selected skill formation systems

<b>Countries</b>	<b>Skill formation system</b>	<b>Stratification</b>	<b>Standardization</b>	<b>Practice-based learning</b>
Australia and New Zealand	Individualized (low state, low employer activity)	High	Yes	High
USA and Canada	Individualized (low state, low employer activity)			High
France	State Dominance	High	High	Low
Germany, Austria, Switzerland	Mixed (state and company dominance)	high	High	High
Denmark Norway Finland, Netherlands	Mixed (state and company)	Low	High	High
Portugal, Greece, Turkey	Individualized	High	Low	High
Jordan Lebanon, Egypt	Individualized	High	Low	Low
Rumania, Bosnia and Herzegovina	Individualized	High	Low	Low
India, Mexico, South Africa, Philippines	Individualised	High	Low	High
Afghanistan,	Individualised	High	Low	Low

Pakistan					
South Africa Namibia, Mauritius	Individualized	High	Low	High	
Hong Kong SAR China	State dominance	High	High	Low	
South Korea, Hong SAR China	Market oriented	High	High	Low	
USA and Canada	Individualized	Low	Low	High	

Adapted from Pilz, 2017.

### Mixed systems

Within **Germany, Switzerland, Austria**, both state and the private sector share responsibility for skills formation and skill recognition. **Germany** has recognized the need to widen participation through RVA routes, but it is faced with several obstacles given that Germany, has a stratified education and training system. Germany has the tightest link between academic success in the schools system and eligibility to enter higher education. This means that introducing RVA routes into the Germany system effectively calls this tight link into question (Ore and Hovdhaugen, 2014). As a result, RVA routes mainly come from the vocationally-oriented side of the education system. Accordingly legislation exists in a range of relevant legal acts and regulations set in the education and training systems, allowing institutions and government departments to develop a variety of mechanisms and practical arrangements for RVA, depending on the diversity of purposes of RVA and different interests at stake. In line with its skills formation system, social partners play an important role in RVA legislation in Germany. The inclusion in collective agreements of arrangements for the recognition of experience-based non-formal and informal learning is particularly conducive to the development of RVA. A legal basis for the recognition of employees' skills and qualifications in collective agreements is provided by Article 9 Section 3 of the Basic Law, in which freedom of association is defined as a fundamental right, and the Collective Agreements Act, asserts the principle of the autonomy of collective bargaining. Pursuant to these acts, employers and employees are free to agree on working conditions in companies with no regulatory intervention by the state. In addition to defining pay and working hours, this includes arrangements for training and continuing education (Germany. Federal Ministry of Education and Science (BMBF) 2008, p. 50).

In Germany, while the country's unemployment rate has declined as a result of greater buoyancy in the labour market, there are nevertheless concerns related to qualifications and unemployment, particularly as affecting specific groups such as migrants and youth (Germany. Federal Ministry of Education and Science (BMBF)

2008). The recognition of migrants' prior learning and experiential learning is expected to become an important integration policy issue in the coming years. In addition, there is emphasis on utilising existing potential skills in the economy (Germany. Federal Ministry of Education and Science (BMBF) 2008). In Austria, recognition of non-formal and informal learning is considered to enhance the integration of marginalised groups such as migrants, elderly persons or the unemployed by giving them a "second chance". (Austria. Federal Ministry of Education Arts and Culture 2011).

In **Finland, Norway, Denmark**, as well as in the Netherlands, while the main stakeholders in skills formation and skills recognition are the national authorities, social partners encourage skills formation in the context companies and organizations. With regard to stratification, particularly the entitlement to enter higher education, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark, when compared with Germany, have relatively weaker links between school success and eligibility to higher education. This has made RVA routes to higher education more likely. A number of countries especially the Scandinavian countries, have started public policy with a legal framework. Laws stipulate functions and criteria for RVA and also allocate tasks to specified institutions, bodies and authorities. The involvement of social partners, including professional associations, is a key feature of RVA legislation. Legislation targets specific groups, such as adults lacking secondary education adults, who may benefit from participating in a process of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. However, here again studies (Ore and Hovdhaugen, 2014) have shown that the situation of implementation is quite different from policy and legislation. In Norway, principles anchored in legislation are reflected in the successive introduction of various elements which together comprise a national lifelong learning policy package (Christensen, 2015).

### **State dominated systems**

France by contrast has a skills formation system formation system that is primarily state oriented (Bussemeyer and Trampusch, 2012, p.12, ) the education and training system is highly segmented and stratified. And teaching and learning processes are theoretically-oriented with low level of relevance to practice (Brockmann et al. 2011). As a response to the highly stratified education and training system, RVA legislation in France gives every individual the right to apply for RVA. In the French case there are several other laws, such as the Law of Decentralisation accompanying the Modernisation Law of 2002, which have given stakeholders and providers particularly in Continuing Vocational Education and Training (CVET) the power to implement RVA, The Law on Lifelong Vocational Training and Social Dialogue, particularly enables employees to access training outside working hours. This is an important legislative instrument, as it gave employers an important role in RVA.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rumania**, skills formation is dominated by the state, with very little responsibility shared by industry. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, there is a need for more communication and cooperation among government

entities/district/cantons, the education sector and the labour market. In Rumania, One of the main challenges is to link structures and stakeholders from Vocational Education and Training (VET), higher education and the labour market in a more comprehensive framework.

### **Individualized skill formation systems**

The dominant issue in skill formation and recognition in **Australia** is the separation of general and vocational education and the low status of vocational training. To respond to this situation, the government established the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF), whose key features have been the standardization and integration of trade qualifications centred on workplace competency with other VET qualifications and higher education qualifications. The development of flexible progression pathways was also a key objective. This would support mobility between higher education and VET sectors and the labour market by providing a basis for RVA (Cedefop, ETF, UIL, UNESCO, 2017). The recognition of non-formal and informal learning plays an important part in these efforts, particularly because the increases in certification serves the aim of ensuring a better integration of vocational education and training into higher education and better collaboration with key stakeholders to encourage improved transition to work arrangements. Closing the gap between educational opportunities for different groups in society is an important goal for New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa particularly those of indigenous groups raising the skill potential workers who can and want to work or are currently excluded from the labour force (see New Zealand. Ministry of Education, 2008) Australian Government, Social Inclusion Unit 2009).

Within **USA** and skill formation is seen as having a liberal approach with a low level of state and company influence and high level of individual influence (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012, pp. 12-149). The widespread model of skill formation recognition in the workplace is given priority (Barabasch and Rauner 2012). In line with the latter, in the US, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 (Public Law 105–220) was instrumental in establishing a fund for Adult Basic Education (ABE) services, which encourages the development of RVA pathways for low-skilled adults to increase their educational attainment and obtain higher skilled jobs. The fund targets at-risk youth, under-educated and/or unemployed/underemployed adults, youth and adults with disabilities, and English language learners (ELL). The skill formation system in **Canada** is more or less the same as in USA (see Pilz, 2017). This is the case despite the fact that college programmes have a strong skills development component than in the USA. USA and Canada do not have legal frameworks for RVA. A significant level of RVA activity is undertaken in the USA and Canada, for instance, despite a lack of relevant government policies or legislation. In the USA, the governing structure of higher education is locally controlled within each individual state, although financial support is delivered through a combination of individual, local, state and federal funding. In Canada, the certification bodies for regulated professions have developed RVA practices for



their jurisdictions and the Canadian Sector Councils have sponsored a range of initiatives to promote RVA at the workplace.

The dominant context **India** is one of low levels of state and company influence in skills development, even if some industrial training institutes exist (Mehrotra, 2014). Stratification is high in particular because of the strict separation between general and vocation training. Vocational training has a low status. Skill formation in the Indian system is dominated by informal structures and processes, with vocational education and training institutions, certifications and formal curricula playing only a minor part. However, as a result of the informal system of, the learning processes tend to directly linked to practice. The potential for recognizing unrecognized skills in the informal sector is therefore exceedingly high.

In **Mexico**, the education and training system is highly stratified with general and academic education strictly separated from the vocational track. The vocational training is unorganized and follows a 'learning by doing approach', mostly on the basis of private motivation. (Kis et al. 2009). Given the highly stratified system, and small formal VET system, the main issue is the social and economic pressure for young people to enter the workforce without completing their formal education and this trend is set to continue. Through accreditation, Mexico is aiming to promote the recognition of outcomes of non-formal and informal learning and encourage the development of small enterprises. In Mexico, the conception and development of Agreement 286 of the Ministry of Education (issued on 30 October 2000) (and associated Agreements) is designed to give both workers and learners access to all levels of the education system by offering an alternative pathway to that provided by the formal system.

In **Portugal** skill recognition is associated with efforts to reverse the historical trend towards of an increasingly poorly educated workforce. Seeking to overcome this situation, stakeholders in Portugal have initiated a major drive for investment in adult education and training courses, including the establishment of the RVCC and a national qualifications framework.

**Turkey** faces the challenge of educational bottlenecks that hinder access to the current tertiary education system for young people, as a result of which many are compelled to join post-secondary vocational schools (MYOs), which are not sufficiently labour market-oriented.

### **Governance: roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the organization of RVA**

In keeping with the broad categorization of countries in terms of their skill formation systems, this section now looks at the governance of RVA and the roles of responsibilities of stakeholders in the organization of RVA. The successful organization of RVA is dependent on the extent to which various partnerships drive the coordination of the RVA process. Information gathered from numerous countries on their policies and practices indicates that partnerships with various stakeholders differ significantly. We refer to three models of implementation and

coordination that emerge from the country cases. The elaboration of examples does not aim to be exhaustive but rather illustrative.

- Social partnership model
- Stakeholders in the adult and community learning sector
- National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) coordinating RVA

### **The social partnership model**

In the Germany, Switzerland and Austria multiple social partners and stakeholders treat implementing RVA as a shared responsibility, coordinating their work in accordance with laws, regulations and guidelines. This ensures legitimacy within a decentralised education. Austria is well equipped to operate a system of shared responsibility in recognition policy (Schneeberger, Petanovitsch and Schögl, 2008). It divides its recognition procedures between levels of state authority, private stakeholders and agencies of civil society. The responsibilities for the regulation, provision, financing and support of learning activities are divided between the national and provincial levels. Social partners play a role in the design of the legal, economic and social framework conditions. Educational institutions organize or provide preparatory courses for exams and design other procedures to validate prior learning, based on their respective quality assurance. In Germany, there is neither a central institution nor a standardised institutional framework in place for validation. Instead, a variety of approaches exist. The chambers of crafts, industry, commerce and agriculture regulate admission to the external students' examination. With respect to access to higher education, the German Rectors' Conference has defined a framework for recognition, but specific regulations and procedures are established by the respective university. The ProfilPASS system is managed by a national service centre which supports 55 local dialogue centres (Otero et al. 2010). The responsibility for continuing education falls across a number of areas. Continuing education in Germany experiences less regulation at the national level than other areas of education and as a result it features a high degree of pluralism and competition among providers. Voluntary participation in continuing education is one of the guiding principles (Germany. Federal Ministry of Education and Science (BMBF) 2008).

In Norway, the Ministry of Education and Research has regulatory responsibility for all levels of education. Employers' bodies and trade unions are important stakeholders nationally and regionally, with both setting policy goals and realising practice (e.g. supporting adults in VET schemes by offering apprenticeships and other training schemes in enterprises locally). It is the responsibility of county authorities to realise the individual right to validation of prior learning and assure quality of the process. Funding is delegated to the 19 counties, and regional centres provide information and guidance. They are also responsible for the quality of the validation process and for training assessors. At the upper secondary level, the practice of RVA is usually carried out within the regional education system. Often, upper secondary schools also function as assessment centres. In order to

give the same opportunity to job-seekers who want their competence validated, projects are initiated to improve co-operation between the education system and the Labour and Welfare Administration.

In Denmark, while the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Education and Research have the main regulatory responsibility at all levels of education, social partners are important in implementing the continuing vocational education and training system. In 2000, the Danish government introduced a major reform of the vocational education (VET) and continuing training (CVET) system, aimed at creating a more coherent and transparent adult education system. The Danish education system now contains two separate parts: a general education and training system and a parallel adult education and continuing training system that can be compared to all levels of the general system.

National institutes such as Skills Norway, the Knowledge Centres in the Netherlands and Denmark respectively are established under their respective ministries of education, which in turn co-operate with trade unions, enterprises, national labour agencies, national educational associations, organisations, universities and colleges, public and private educators, and social partners. Skills Norway, is the body designated by the Ministry of Education to work on RVA at the national level. It is responsible for developing guidelines for validation towards enrolment in tertiary vocational education and towards exemption in higher education. In addition, in 2013, the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training developed national guidelines for RVA in lower and upper secondary education. Skills Norway cooperates with NGOs and social partners in order to further adult learning in working life.

One distinctive feature of stakeholder participation in the Netherlands is the voluntary character of engagement on the part of employers, employees and educational institutions. This reflects the choice of the Dutch government to favour a bottom-up method for the stimulation and implementation of RVA, putting the initiative in the hands of sectors, regions and individuals. This system relies almost entirely on local initiatives and decentralised policies. Within this approach, stakeholders have an active role in supporting individual learning process; ensuring the relevance of the system of recognition to the individual; and raising awareness of its importance nationwide. In addition to this, stakeholders are responsible for activities such as planning, administration, management and evaluation at different levels of the educational system. In the Netherlands, the EVC (Erkenning van Verworven Competenties) Knowledge Centre works in cooperation with a network of RPL regional offices. These regional offices serve as one-stop offices where individuals can walk in and access multiple services appropriate to their specific needs. In 2006, stakeholders agreed to a quality framework for RPL that while voluntary, promotes transparency and articulates minimum standards (Maes 2008). Individuals working through the available RPL structures are granted a Certificate of Experience to submit to educational institutions. The certificate has the status of an advisory document and the “autonomous institutions decide for themselves how to use the results of EVC procedures” (Duvekot 2010).

Finland has a clear division of responsibilities at different levels. The responsibilities for competence-based qualifications relevant here, such as the development of the qualifications, quality assurance, and the actual provision of examinations and training are divided among various actors:

- The Ministry of Education and Culture decides which qualifications are admitted to the national qualification structure.
- The Finnish National Board of Education draws up qualification requirements for each competence-based qualification.
- Sector-specific Qualification Committees supervise the organisation of competence tests and issue the qualification certificates.
- Education providers that have signed agreements with the respective sector specific
- Qualification Committees arrange competence tests and provide preparatory training for candidates.
- A Qualification Committee is appointed for each qualification. The Qualification

Committees consist of representatives of employers and employees, teachers and sometimes also entrepreneurs. The committees oversee the implementation of competence-based qualifications, ensure the consistent quality of qualifications, and issue the certificates to successful candidates. If necessary, certificates can also be awarded for individual modules, for instance if the candidate does not intend to complete the whole qualification (Blomqvist and Louko, 2013).

### **Stakeholders in the Adult and Community Learning Sector**

The high influence of individualization in skill formation in the USA can be seen in the fact that (Travers 2011), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is not governed by legislation. PLA is conducted in many colleges and universities. PLA policies and practices plays an important role in a number of higher education institutions that have been serving the adult learner population RVA. These institutions gave birth to work on how outcomes from adult non-formal and informal learning could be assessed at an individual level. Funding for the PLA services is generally the responsibility of individual educational institutions. Assessment fees are normally charged to the individuals undertaking assessment. PLA programmes. The quality of higher education remains a top priority. Some of the six regional accreditation commissions located across the country have issued policies and guidelines on PLA that allow for varying degrees of institutional flexibility. For example, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (2005) restricts individualised PLA to the undergraduate level, but allows flexibility in programme structure. The policy and practice for accepting Prior Learning assessment credits, established by individual institutions, much reflect local faculty agreements (Travers, 2011, p. 251) and are responsible for monitoring the quality of higher education through a formal accreditation process. PLA development has been facilitated by the

American Council on Education (ACE) which is the national body responsible for coordinating higher education institutions across the country. CAEL is a national, non-profit organisation that works with educational institutions, employers, labour organisations and other stakeholders to promote creative, effective adult learning strategies. Networks and structures like CAEL aim to bring greater coherence to RVA at the level of higher education.

In Canada, PLAR is a highly decentralised process with the responsibility for assessment and validation distributed across the various provincial/territorial governments, educational institutions and professional bodies. Both policy development and the way that PLAR is used in practice vary in different parts of Canada. While a bottom-up decentralised and provincial approach has served well in Canada to date, strategic direction at the country level could help to facilitate cooperation and comparisons across provinces and territories.

In Canada, adult educators have been at the forefront of RVA. It was the community of Canadian adult educators who became acquainted with the work of CAEL in the USA and began to promote RVA in Canadian post-secondary education, as highlighted in an article by Joy Van Kleef (2011). Their reasons for promoting RVA lay in the nature of adult education, which is that adult education is community-based and encourages the development of knowledge and skills within a framework of lifelong learning. Three groups of adult educators – institutional practitioners, community-based practitioners and academic researchers – have been the primary sources of PLAR research in Canada.

At the national level, it is important to highlight that the CMEC has responsibility for the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials which provides information on formal credentials assessment services, provincial/territorial education systems, post-secondary institutions, regulated and unregulated occupations and how to connect with provincial/territorial regulatory bodies that have responsibility for issuing licences to practice in each jurisdiction. Although Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) and Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) are undertaking several supportive activities alongside CMEC (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada: the mechanism whereby provinces and territories liaise with each other on education policies) they have no regular arrangement on PLAR. In addition, stakeholder engagement at the national level includes CAPLA's yearly conference that attracts a wide range of RPL stakeholders from across Canada and abroad.

### **NQFs coordinating RVA**

In many countries RVA is subsumed under acts passed under the establishment of their NQFs. In South Africa the recognition of prior learning in the post-apartheid era takes place in the context of the South African Qualifications Framework (SAQF) that came into effect with the passing of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995. The SAQF is a single integrated system comprising three co-ordinated qualifications sub-frameworks for: the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications overseen by the Council on General and

Further Education and Training (Umalusi); the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-framework overseen by the Council on Higher Education (HEC); the Occupational Qualifications Sub-framework overseen by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). These players are also key players in assuring quality in RPL procedures and processes.

SAQA is the main coordinating body for RPL and is engaged in a number of RPL projects, facilitating and implementing a variety of RPL models and practices across various sectors. SAQA has the responsibility for the quality assurance of RPL

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) facilitates the progression of students through qualifications by giving credit for learning outcomes they have already achieved.. Credit outcomes may allow for entry into a qualification or provide credit towards the qualification. Credit given may reduce the time required for a student to achieve the qualification.

The organization issuing RPL determines the extent to which previous learning is equivalent to the learning outcomes of the components of the destination qualification, takes into account the likelihood of the student successfully achieving the qualification outcomes and ensures that the integrity of the qualification is maintained.

The AQF Qualifications Pathways Policy establishes the principle that pathways are clear and transparent to students and can facilitate credit for entry into, as well as credit towards, AQF qualifications.

The Mexican Qualifications Framework (MQF) is a comprehensive framework developed by the General Directorate of Accreditation, Incorporation and Revalidation (Dirección General de Acreditación, Incorporación y Revalidación; DGAIR), within the Ministry of Public Education (SEP). Stakeholders from all sectors (industry, education and civil society) have participated in the development of the MQF. CONOCER has been active specifically on issues related to the National System of Competency Standards (NSCS) and on equivalencies with formal educational degrees. Additionally, in October 2012, the Ministry of Education announced the new Mexican Bank of Academic Credits (announcement published by DGAIR on the official Mexican Government Diary of October the 4th 2012, article 8), which allows certificates of competence from CONOCER and from other recognised private and public training / certification centres to be accredited as part of formal education programmes at lower and upper secondary levels.

### **3. The meso-level: standardization**

Standardization is a useful term to understand the structures, processes and outputs underpinning the organization and quality of RVA systems. Standardization and quality assurance of RVA is about the role of regulatory agencies, inter-institutional arrangements, and establishment of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Inter-institutional arrangements that link academic, vocational and continuing education programmes/institutions provide potential for awards/credits or generic

awards across levels, subjects, and sectors. Partnerships across sectors between stakeholders from education, industry, and community adult learning sectors are important to make recognition processes relevant and transparent. These aspects of quality and standardization at the meso level need attention.

One of the landmarks in the standardization and quality assurance of RVA systems has been the development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs). NQFs are an important development in education and training reforms in developed, transitioning and developing countries (Singh and Deij, 2017). Their number seems to have reached a saturation point, with developments deepening within some countries and not much progress happening in other countries. But NQFs will remain very important tools to support education, training and lifelong learning. Many countries consider that the existence of a qualifications framework may help to promote systems for recognizing non-formal and informal learning outcomes, especially in the case of recognition procedures formalized to the extent of awarding qualifications. NQFs provide a central reference point for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Written record of qualifications available through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes would confer a status and form of legitimacy by associating them more closely with qualifications obtained via formal channels. Where recognition of non-formal and informal learning can lead to the award of a qualification, these qualifications should be included in the national qualifications directory. Incorporating the qualifications available through recognizing non-formal and informal learning in a qualifications register is necessary for securing social recognition and legitimacy. In addition the standard should be accepted by all stakeholders and in particular by the various ministries that award qualifications, such as the ministries of labour and ministries of education.

Learning outcomes have had an important impact on how levels and qualification standards have been defined. The use of learning outcomes can promote clarity and thus enhance participation through emphasizing the relevance of programmes. However learning outcomes require attention in several respects. At the level of policy, they need to be overarching, at the level of qualifications standards, they need to deal with intended learning outcomes and at the level of learning programmes they need to deal with specific learning outcomes that are related to inputs and have a more pedagogical purposes. Learning outcomes should not be formulated in narrow and restricted ways which could limit rather than broaden the expectation of learners. From a lifelong learning perspectives learning outcomes need to reflect all contexts from life-wide, life-deep and lifelong learning perspectives.

Regulatory agencies such as national qualifications authorities and accreditation bodies must be able to harmonize in relation to minimum standards for accreditation of qualifications obtained through all learning – formal, non-formal and informal learning. Furthermore, registration for educational providers and training institutions as well as systems for the assessment of learning, and issuance

of qualifications and certifications are important components of a quality lifelong learning system.

Evidence from Mauritius, Seychelles, Ghana, Botswana, and South Africa reveals that Qualifications Authorities, as models of shared responsibility between stakeholders, are prime movers behind the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal learning. In these countries, for all qualifications that are being validated by the Qualifications Authority and placed on the NQFs, there is now a requirement that recognition, as an alternative route to gaining qualification should be possible. In most cases, the Qualifications Authorities elicit/engage the support of professional organizations and employment agencies to take forward the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and in possibly garnering financial support for recognition initiatives.

The challenge, however, for the national qualifications authorities is how to equip education providers and training institutions for them to initiate the RVA exercise and start offering opportunities to potential candidates on a continuous basis. The planning process will need to incorporate issues such as industry needs , initial training of assessors , procedures for the registration of providers; maintenance of a central register of qualifications, audit and moderation functions, and portfolio development.

An evaluation study from Denmark shows that the spread of RVA varied from institution to institution. A large number of institutions (education) are with no RVA activity. Some of the barriers are lack of awareness of RVA, financing connecting skills development to formal education is difficult. Advocacy raising awareness for making the transition from system level to the user level or training provider level is an important quality issue.

In New Zealand and Australia, only registered training organizations that fall under the quality assurance framework of their NQFs are also those that undertake the recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning. The New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) has a policy that education providers use.

Even in countries such as the USA and Canada without national qualifications frameworks, there is already a trend in some institutions to design degree programmes around student learning outcomes, or competences, rather than college credits. Evaluative frameworks are being developed in increasing numbers for competency- based prior learning assessment programmes in order to equate their effectiveness to other programme evaluation processes within institutions of higher education. Thus, instead of reinventing the wheel, CAEL standards for competency-based PLA are being interrelated with quality criteria used in the evaluation of college academic programmes with the aim of developing overarching evaluative frameworks that embed the effectiveness of PLA programmes as well. In Canada also, measures for the assessment of educational quality (e.g., CAEL standards for PLA) are applied to the assessment of prior learning in competency-based education and assessment, for example in the area of professional registration.



In New Zealand and Australia the trend is to structure non-formal learning such as workplace learning to meet formal objectives resulting in credits and qualifications. Traditionally, assessment has been based on requirements of, and expected performance in formal education and training. This process however, is not suitable in a lifelong learning system that recognizes outcomes from a diversification of learning paths. New Zealand, for example, assesses outcomes from prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL) and in general against designated current learning outcomes or standards, which make up the qualifications. In Australia, workplace-learning assessment includes assessment of formal, non-formal and informal learning and credit transfer arrangements exist even for workplace learning. In other words non-formal learning is structured to meet formal objectives and results in credits and qualifications and falls under the jurisdiction of formal quality assurance processes.

Countries in the European Union are gradually beginning to grant non-formal and informal learning contexts the same value as formal learning process. However many institutions awarding non-formal qualifications need further assistance in describing their qualifications in terms of learning outcomes in order to comply with the NQF requirements.

#### **4. The micro-level: pedagogy of RVA**

At the micro-level we concentrate on six core factors to be taken into consideration in organizing RVA at the local level, with the end-user in the centre of RVA. The six core factors, do not indicate at the operational level how RVA should be implemented, but make up the framework for organizing RVA at the local level. Only some examples are shared for illustrative purposes to help advance the discussion.

##### **Ownership and acceptance of stakeholders at the local level**

The first core factor emphasizes the ownership and acceptance of local stakeholders. The specific requirements of the RVA system in a country can be identified not only from a recognition policy perspective but also, and in particular, by taking into account the roles of those involved at the local level - learners, employers, employees, learners, training providers, trainers, educational institutions, NGOs, public and private organizations, representatives of trade unions, small, medium and micro enterprises, adult associations and youth organizations. Local level needs should be compared against macro level needs as well as related with the existing education and training and other parts of the lifelong learning system. This process enables local needs to be identified but also aims at securing substantial acceptance and ownership through the participation of those involved. In India, training providers and staff of the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) are directly involved in serving underprivileged and low-educated groups in society who have not completed eight years of school (eight

years' schooling is the minimum to gain entry into a vocational training institute) and who lacked the basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary to enter the lowest level of the Indian skills qualifications framework. This target group is being given access to competency based courses at the pre-vocational levels in the qualifications framework through the NIOS. In the Netherlands, local stakeholders apply validation as a tool to tackle the economic crisis and targets young unemployed persons lacking Level 2 vocational qualifications, those who are at risk of losing their jobs, or those who need to achieve mobility on the labour market. In Botswana and South Africa recognition serves to allow adults to participate in adult basic education and training (ABET) upon becoming literate. However, in many countries local stakeholders need to be made aware of the recognition schemes and their benefits among potential users, including citizens, businesses, and their employees, education and training providers, voluntary associations and social partners organization in the labour market. Mauritius is focusing on communication strategy to expose major stakeholders to international RVA best practice.

### **Resources**

Since the end user and recognition processes at the local level form the focus of our approach, RVA must be underpinned with appropriate resources as this is the only way to address both qualitative and quantitative needs of RVA in relation to the target groups. The necessary resources include rooms for the dissemination of information, guidance and counselling, identification and documentation of evidence, assessment centres, target group specific tools and materials, and appropriately trained RVA staff. Norway shows that target specific assessment tools at the upper secondary level for adults include dialogue-based methods, portfolio assessment and vocational testing. Care needs to be paid to ensure capacities of assessors and guiders to interpret standards of relevant qualifications, curricula, objectives and admission requirements of the education programme in question, or workplace-specific competence demands.

RVA without stakeholder input will not be trusted. In the US having at least one agency in the region supporting or encouraging the adoption and use of RVA methods has been highlighted in a CAEL study (Klein-Collins, 2010). According to the purposes of RVA, representation from the world of work, youth and adult organizations as well as the labour market is required in developing RVA processes, methodologies and assessment criteria.

In many countries such as South Africa, the take-up is limited by staff and resource shortages, and projects have been developed in only a few sectors. Costs to individuals and education systems for information and guidance, assessors and awarding bodies is a further challenge.

### **Expertise**

Different kinds of expertise and resources will be needed to develop an effective assessment and recognition system. Recognition practitioners include individuals

delivering information, guidance and counselling, those who carry out assessments, the teachers and managers of educational institutions, workplace instructors, employers, and a range of other stakeholders with important but less direct roles in the recognition process. The role of RVA personnel is underestimated in many cases. Only well trained RVA personnel can manage meaningful recognition processes and communicate clearly about what the recognition of non-formal and informal learning really means. Nor can such skilled personnel be replaced by technology or online learning packages. Such materials need guidance from RVA staff in using them. It is necessary therefore for adequately trained RVA personnel to be trained and employed in assessment centers and educational institutions, social enterprises, workplaces and public employment centers. Existing RVA staff would need to have experience in workplaces as well as didactical and pedagogical training as an integral part of their training.

It is important that expertise is able to contribute to broadening understanding of assessment and evaluation; increasing knowledge of recognition processes through professional development opportunities; using a variety of assessment methods and tools; and reviewing non-formal learning programmes and courses for continuous improvement. RVA personnel should also have the task of communicating the vocabulary and concepts of recognition so as to make RVA a part of a commonly accepted practice.

Developing certificate courses for practitioners working in the field of non-formal learning and in the area of the recognition of individual competences, could help to improve the quality of teaching, guidance and counselling as well as help managers to coordinate non-formal learning and recognition processes (Austria). These certificates need to be positioned at a certain level of the qualifications framework and modules can be prepared for the formal diploma programme offered either in colleges, or in continuing education departments of universities. In Portugal, professionalization is sought through the sharing of practices, knowledge and experiences among teachers and trainers who carry out adult learning programmes and undertake validation assessments. Good practice from Denmark shows that arrangements for the collaboration of assessors across institutions provides good opportunities to discuss which tools are relevant. This collaboration ensures some alignment in the tools institutions used in an RPL. In addition to knowledge sharing and collaboration, there could be great benefit of a common material database and a manual for conducting RVA. A common language to describe the subject matter of RVA and tools is necessary to reach significant number of individuals.

### **Progression**

Many RVA candidates are those whose knowledge, skills and competences are still in the process of being developed. So RVA should be conducted in a way so that it forms part of an education and training programme or a preparatory bridge course. It is crucial to make participation in education and training or preparatory courses as attractive to them as possible (Finland). All RVA

processes should, therefore center on an assessment in terms of an extent to which they motivate participation in a further education and training measure. It is important that when educational and training programmes are being put in place, that the state focuses particularly on progression. State bodies should ensure that learning processes ends in an assessment of knowledge, skills and competences that is then recognized and certified according to an agreed procedures.

This is the only way of ensuring transparency with respect to the standard achieved by individual participation. The certification should ensure both transition into the labour market for individuals and groups of individuals who are not yet integrated into the employment system, as well as ensure access to general education. In Denmark, an evaluation study (Andersen and Laugesen, 2012) showed that while RVA is primarily used to give access to the education programmes that institutions provide, most candidates apply for RVA in order to gain recognition of competences to replace teaching and education, for direct use in the labour market

In developing countries where vocational education and training are of low status, it is crucial that more substantial training courses are certified in a way that also ensures access to general education for the trainee concerned. This will be important to boost the status of vocational education and training and cater to a greater parity of esteem between formal and non-formal learning. Rapid economic and societal changes actually increase the importance of personal development, while reducing the importance of task-specific and narrowly defined instrumental knowledge and skills (New Zealand). Progression pathways in the US are called “certification crosswalks”. These include: College Credit for What You Already Know: a project developed by CAEL designed to bring prior learning assessments to scale, and increase the number of adults who would benefit from access to college education programmes. (Ganzglass, Bird and Prince, 2011).

In Canada progression through access to formal qualifications still remains the key aspect of prior learning assessment and recognition. However opening up access and progress in skilled and professional occupations in the labour market is now reported as the key issue across Canada.

### **Encouraging employers to be involved in RVA**

Employers, who ultimately, are the users of skilled staff, need to be consistently encouraged to become involved in the training /recognition processes as this is a way of ensuring that skills development builds on the recognition of actual practice and that skills that need to be learned need to reflect the real world. Employers should be involved in shaping the recognition processes and the courses of training. Employers may find it helpful to use recognition to become more familiar with the stock of knowledge, skills and competence available in their enterprise. In Mexico, workers obtaining certification of competences is considered to be a good proxy for increasing in productivity of workers and the

firms and reducing the turnover of workers in firms (García-Bullé, 2013). In Mauritius, employers are encouraged to invest in the training of those with very low skills, who need to be brought into the productive economy. Mauritius is making concerted efforts through the Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA) to implement RVA to support workforce development in certain industry sectors (specifically tourism, financial services, real estate, information and communication technology (ICT) and seafood). Employers understand the role of RVA in supporting a highly skilled workforce and they contribute to the MQA's fees for this exercise. Moreover, well-established companies are also sponsoring RVA candidates. Currently, 19 Industry Training Advisory Committees are generating NQF qualifications in all TVET sectors of the Mauritian economy. While such qualifications are offered by both public and private providers, there is a centralized awarding body that awards the NQF qualifications. In Mauritius, RVA and the NQF co-exist in a symbiotic relationship, where the former is directly linked to the outcomes of NQF qualifications and a smooth transition of many learners is possible to the NQF (Allgoo, 2013). However, the concerns and needs of companies need to be taken into account in RVA. They must receive a return on their investment. Moreover, in-company training and recognition initiatives should be designed in such a way that this a clear advantage to companies in terms of their cost/benefit of engaging in such activities.

#### **RVA-benefits for low skilled workers**

RVA must also have real benefits for low-skilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers who are already in employment. In certain sectors of the labour market, the demand for workers with the requisite knowledge, skills and competences is growing faster than the supply, often because the formal system of education and training is not sufficiently responsive. However, recognition practices must also gain the acceptance of all employees. In Hong Kong SAR, China, it appears that the government overestimated workers' interest in further education, at least as presented by the labour union representatives, and underestimated their insistence on using the qualifications frameworks for job security and improving wage levels. It also lacked foresight in anticipating employers' strong opposition to the use of potentially unverified work experience rather than assessed skills and competences. As of today, RVA and its pace of implementation is a matter to be solely determined by the industries concerned (so far 22 industries have joined the QF, covering about 53 per cent of the total labour force in Hong Kong SAR China, and there is currently in-depth discussion to reach a consensus before proceeding with its implementation). Consideration needs to be given to how skilled workers can be appropriately deployed in employment so that the competences they have can be used meaningfully and in way that will motivate them. Factors playing a role here include not only technical skills but also skills related to computers, to health, safety at work, etc. Even more important, however, is raises in their payment.

Demand for training, and the likelihood that training activities will bring success depends on there being a long-term monetary advantage to the individual employee in acquiring skills. State agencies and social partners should therefore, work towards a regulatory framework that prevents discrimination and market distortions. In Germany, RVA features in collective agreements, giving greater security to individuals who have acquired skills through informal and non-formal learning in recognized apprenticeship trades. Similarly, provisions exist within the German public sector for scaled remuneration on the basis of work experience and length of service. Individuals can enroll in training programmes provided that they have a minimum of practical experience, with industry training agencies providing leadership in the design and development of RVA processes.

## **5. Summary**

This paper provided a comprehensive framework for understanding the conditions for organizing the structures, processes and output of RVA in different countries, both by means of a typology of countries and an analysis of initial indicators at the local level, keeping in mind that the end-user is at the center of the RVA process. Taken together, these elements can be usefully used for understanding the organization of RVA-systems at the national, regional and local level.

At the macro-level the paper has shown that usually the constellation of stakeholders involved in RVA and its governance depends to a very large extent on country-specific skill formation systems and how these interact with the existing education and training and employment systems. Often existing education and training systems are differentiated in terms of access routes, selection and transition mechanisms.

At the meso-level, standardization is a key term to understand the quality of structures, processes and outputs underpinning the organization of RVA-systems. On the input side the utilization of agreed standards or benchmarks is an important feature of RVA. Assessment based on learning outcomes has become an important quality issue in RVA. Quality assurance of policies, procedures and processes is vital for gaining trust among users. For this, there must be regulatory agencies, inter-institutional arrangement and multi-stakeholder partnerships to harmonize in relation to minimum standards for accreditation of qualifications obtained through all learning.

At the micro-level, the paper has highlighted the demand side of RVA. While countries have invested in the financing of RVA and other measures designed to remove or reduce the disincentives for providers and other bodies to award RVA, less attention has been given to the demand society, for example how companies and individuals can be encouraged to access RVA? What actual benefits will it hold for employers and low-skilled workers. Aligning RVA to

career and skills development requires a huge cultural shift in employing organizations. At the same time employing organizations need to align with the educational systems if true parity of esteem between formal and non-formal learning outcomes is to be achieved. Linking the efforts of all stakeholders and national authorities is essential for delivering access to education and recognition of all competencies.

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