



Article

Recognition of Prior Learning in Nepal: A Gateway to Socio-Economic Inclusion

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has become a popular policy instrument across the world—both in developed and developing countries. RPL is highly relevant in the context of Nepal, as it aims dignified employment to its people. Nepal has a huge number of people working in informal sector, including large number of migrants returning home every year with skills and experiences. However, the skills and competencies of these people are not yet harnessed to ensure them dignified jobs and better earning. This article is based on the secondary information along with author’s personal experiences and interaction with few RPL candidates. It presents the basics of RPL, the importance of RPL in the context of Nepal, and then looks at some problems and issues of RPL provision in Nepal. Finally, the article draws the conclusion on how the RPL can become a vital tool to boost Nepal’s socio-economic status.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning, TVET, access, equity, qualifications framework

Introduction

The technical and vocational education and training (TVET) is increasingly seen from a lifelong learning perspective, promoting competencies for work and life and ensuring that all youths and adults have equal opportunities to learn (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2015). On the one hand, the goal of TVET is to assure livelihood of an individual through education and learning and, on the other, it is to contribute to sustained economic growth and development of the country through the productive workforce. It also has the objective of contributing to achieve social objectives of increasing access to TVET opportunities for the disadvantaged groups who are

economically poor and socially discriminated (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). Additionally, it contributes to poverty alleviation, greater equity and social justice (Smith, 2006), thereby reducing societal inequalities and enabling a sustainable future. In this context, skill development, job creation and employment is a global concern. This has been reflected in the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) targets, which is explicit in terms of inclusion of TVET. The SDG 4 states “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning for all” and the target 5 of SDG 8 states “employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay

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for work of equal value” (UN, 2015).

However, in contrast to these principles, inequality persists in many forms. Systemic discrimination, inequalities related to course materials and school infrastructure, and discriminatory career guidance practices are examples of common barriers affecting access to and participation in TVET programs (UNESCO, 2020). Besides these, the non-recognition of skills and competencies is one of the prominent barrier, which is yet to be addressed systematically in many countries, especially in developing countries. In the developing countries, the majority of young people acquire workplace skills by non-formal or informal means that could be at work or at home, or elsewhere. However, their knowledge, skills and competencies are rarely recognised. Hence, they face challenges in finding appropriate and decent jobs or accessing further education in their own country or overseas. This hinders development of human capital and also causes under-utilization (Aggarwal, 2015).

Nepal aims to provide dignified and productive employment for all citizens. This has been explicit in the government's legal and policy documents. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) highlights employment as a fundamental right, the 15th periodic plan recognizes TVET as a crucial instrument to enable people to secure employment. While these visions are gradually translated into practice, the majority of young people in Nepal acquire workplace skills by non-formal or informal means that could be at work, at home or elsewhere. Further, large number of youths leave country annually for better foreign jobs and return home after few years with occupational and social

skills. However, when the knowledge, skills and competencies are left unheard and unrecognized, these people face challenges in finding appropriate and decent jobs or accessing further education in their own country or overseas. (Aggarwal, 2015).

The above context warrants importance of recognition of skills and experiences of youth, thereby reinforcing relevance of the concept of RPL in the developing country like Nepal. The RPL concept is assumed to have originated in Europe several decades ago with the aim of promoting lifelong learning for the personal development of people. Since then, RPL has become a popular policy instrument for promoting equity and access across the world. RPL is increasingly becoming popular in both developed and developing nations. The increased understanding around the globe is that the systems and institutions must ensure everyone's equal access to TVET opportunities regardless of gender, age, religion or ethnicity. The RPL is one of the crucial instruments in the TVET sector that allows the recognition of knowledge, skills and competencies of people acquired through non-formal and informal means. Skill assessment and certification through RPL serve as an instrument of inclusive learning and employment opportunities. Therefore, it is becoming a political and social issue and drawing attention of policy makers in many developing countries.

With an increasing recognition of the learning acquired through formal, non-formal and informal means, many countries have sought to implement established RPL systems. A study conducted by ILO on RPL highlights that the outcomes of RPL is positive for workers because it improves

their employability and enables them to obtain further education and training as well as promote social inclusion and self-esteem (Dyson & Keating, 2005). Similarly, a study conducted in Bangladesh highlights that the RPL facilitates the transition of unemployed workers into employment and increases the chances of finding work formal and larger private companies through formal job search channels (Nakata et al., 2022).

RPL has proven to be beneficial for industries and workers, including returnee migrant workers on several occasions. Businesses and industries have used RPL for recognizing skilled migrant workers and skills in the workplace, and certifying skilled workers in occupations with human resource gaps (Nakata et al., 2022). In some countries, RPL is also used as entry points for people to specific industries, training programs or universities. RPL was used to identify skill gaps and training needs among workers in Tanzania. Similarly, it was used to recognize certificates of the population in South Africa who suffered educational discrimination for admission to higher education institutions (Aggarwal, 2015).

This paper is based on the secondary information along with author's personal experiences and interaction with purposively selected ten youths from Koshi and Bagmati Provinces, who applied for the skill test through RPL mechanism. The information was gathered during the period from 2022 to 2023.

This paper discusses the basics of RPL, the importance of RPL in the context of Nepal and draws the conclusion on how the RPL can become a vital tool to boost Nepal's socio-economic context.

The Basics of RPL

Meaning and Purpose of RPL

RPL has become a popular policy instrument across the world. It is known by different names in different countries. It is known as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Accrediting Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) in the UK; RPL in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa; Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in USA; and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada. Furthermore, when the Council of the European Union refers RPL as the 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' (VNFIL), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) refers to it as 'recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes' (RNFILO) (Andersson, Fejes, & Sandberg, 2013). Similarly, the UNESCO uses the phrase 'recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning' (RVA) (UNESCO, 2012).

Even though different countries use different terms to RPL, it commonly refers to the same process of "identifying, documenting, assessing and certifying formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes against standards used in formal education and training" (ILO, 2024). The RPL is a process to identify, assess and certify a person's knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through any means regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred against prescribed standards for a part or full (Aggarwal, 2015). The OECD (2021) highlights that the RPL has three main purposes: (i) social justice, (ii) social change, and (iii) economic development. The purpose

of RPL is social justice as RPL is established to foster a lifelong learning, broadening the individuals' opportunities for further skills development and enhanced employability (Social Justice). Similarly, RPL is established to enhance the individuals' access to formal education through transparency of the education system, creating a better condition for social awareness and change (Social change), and RPL is a policy tool that can be used as 'fit for purpose'. Furthermore, RPL is established to improve competitiveness, economic development and labor market matching (Economic development).

RPL is a procedure in which a designated organisation confirms that a person has acquired certain competencies in informal or non-formal ways (or also through formal programs in other countries) that are otherwise usually acquired as part of a specific formal or non-formal education (Maurer, 2021, p. 3). RPL is done for all prior learning which has never been assessed or credit-rated. These can be any learning achieved through life and work experiences (paid and voluntary); gained in workplace or during continuing professional development; acquired independently or in non-formal contexts. Recognition must be transferrable and not only context specific (ILO, 2023).

RPL Methods and Process

RPL encompasses many processes and methods for acknowledging prior experience as learning. RPL happens all the time: while screening job candidates by employers, while developing education programs based on the assumptions of students existing learning (Caves et al., 2023). However, RPL assessment can take different forms. Andersson et al. (2013)

describes two main methods of RPL besides traditional tests. The first is a 'portfolio' and second is an 'authentic' assessment. Portfolios are considered useful method to collect materials, such as certificates from training courses or information on voluntary activities, letters from employers, products developed by the applicants as well as providing evidence of their competences acquired through experience instead of formal learning. Authentic assessment is the assessment of knowledge and competence in a simulations of real-life situations. Authentic assessment enables people to exhibit their competencies in a close to the real situation as far as possible (Andersson et al., 2013). Whereas, the European Center for the Development of Vocational Training identifies eight types of assessment for RPL: (1) debate, (2) declarative methods, (3) interviews, (4) observation, (5) portfolio method, (6) presentation, (7) simulation, and (8) tests and examinations (European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training [CEDEFOP], 2022).

Depending on the need of a country, RPL process might lead to a full or partial qualification. Full qualification is a formal outcome of an assessment process resulted into a certificate, diploma or a title. Whereas, a partial qualification is a component of a qualification that can be used for renewal or specialisation purposes. The assessment may also lead to a credits/units towards a qualification or an exemption from admission prerequisites or a certificate of labor market competences (OECD, 2021).

RPL and Qualifications Framework

Credibility of RPL mechanism is based on the occupational standards that are developed

in line with qualifications framework. The qualifications framework is a transparent tool to assess skills and knowledge against occupational standards prescribed for a qualification. It is a way of structuring existing and new qualifications, which are defined by learning outcomes (Tuck, 2007). Although qualifications frameworks are common drivers of RPL, they are not necessarily prerequisites to it. In many countries, especially in North America, RPL has been initiated without qualifications frameworks, mainly for the purpose of mainstreaming and formalising policy and practice, as well as to enable people to enhance their opportunity for increased employability and skills development (Harris & Wihak, 2014, p. 13). Similarly, in Bolivia, RPL is used to recognize the skills and competencies of youth so well that they are hired at jobs or enrolled at higher level training, when the country has not yet developed a qualification frameworks (personal interaction with Bolivian authority, 01 February, 2024).

Importance of RPL in Nepalese Context

RPL is a relevant concept in the context of Nepal. While Nepal aims to provide dignified and productive employment to its citizens, social and economic challenges persist. With an estimated unemployment rate of 11.7%, nearly 1 million of the country's work force is without job. Out of the employed labor force, 39.3% are underemployed (Central Bureau of Statistics [CBS], 2019). Unemployment is particularly high among young people, who account for 48 percent of the labor force but make up 69 percent of those unemployed (Ezemenari & Joshi, 2019). Out of the employed labor force, 62.2% are occupied in the informal sector

in the low-paid employment. Majority of those in the informal sector are women and disadvantaged groups who are working under unregulated and poor working condition (CBS, 2019).

Until now, lack of appropriate skills and competencies of the workforce is often taken for granted as the main reason behind the unemployment and underemployment in Nepal (Authors' personal experience). Whereas, the benefits of systematically harnessing existing skills and competencies of people in the informal sector and/or returnee migrants has not been seriously discussed. The bitter truth is that due to the non-recognition of the skills and competencies, these people are often excluded from the employment opportunities in the national and international labor market. The RPL process can help these labor force in the informal sector acquire a formal qualification that matches their knowledge and skills, thereby contributing to improvement of their employability, mobility, lifelong learning, social inclusion and self-esteem. This increased prospect for inclusion in the labor market is a win-win situation for all. Employers will be able to access proof of skilled personnel and better match them with suitable jobs, while also increasing their productivity. Governments will be able to have better assurances of increased competitiveness and economic growth, as well as social inclusion and equity.

Furthermore, the recent population survey shows Nepal has around 15,689,777 economically active individuals (CBS, 2021). However, a huge number of youths leave Nepal for the better opportunities abroad. Between 2008/09 and 2021/22,

more than 4.7 million migrant workers left country (MoLESS, 2022). Majority of these Nepali migrant workers go abroad without skills. The remittance of the migrant workers is accounted in a GDP of the country. The remittance inflow is accounted as of NPR 961.2 billion (ca. USD 7.5 billion) in 2020, however, the skills and experiences gained overtime while working abroad is not yet formally recognized in Nepal upon their return. As there is no established mechanism yet for the recognition of their existing skills and experiences gained abroad, many of these returnee migrant workers are not able to get the job as per their capacity in the Nepali labor market. According to the labor force survey, 2017/18, out of the total returnee migrants until 2018, only 42.8 percent are employed in the domestic labor market, while 13.4 percent are unemployed and another 43 percent out of the labor force (CBS, 2019). One of the main reasons behind unemployment and underemployment of the returnee migrant workers is the lack of concrete mechanism for testing and certification. The learning and experiences of workers in the informal sector and the returnee migrants are rarely harnessed, leading to low productivity of the workforce. This has forced them to search the opportunity again in foreign countries. Nepal labor migration report 2022 highlights that over 1.8 million migrant workers have renewed their labor permit since 2011/12. Besides, 94,617 youths renewed their labor permit to go abroad in 2020/21 (MoLESS, 2022).

It is obvious that if skills and experiences of returnee migrants are tested and certified by the national system, it allows them to enter into the Nepali labor market and enhance their earning possibility. Further, with the

recognized certificate, the returnee migrants may have opportunities to obtain higher-level skills to boost their competencies so that they would earn more in the domestic as well as international labor market. The government has approved the Directive for Returnee Migrant Workers, 2022 and has stressed three interrelated dimensions of the reintegration efforts: social integration, employment and entrepreneurial development. It has prioritized skill development and certification as well as programs, such as financial literacy, vocational training, recognition of prior learning, psychological support, shelter, etc. for the reintegration of migrant workers (MoLESS, 2022).

Current Provision, Challenges and Issues

With the approved National Qualifications Framework¹, the RPL has received a special emphasis. It has been considered an important mechanism at all levels of training and education system. However, the author argues that in Nepal, the RPL is remained at policy level only and not yet concretely translated into action. Due to absence of a concrete plan with the designated human resources at all levels of government and also due to limitation of financial resources, it is still at the premature stage. Importantly, the existing RPL process is not accessible to everyone. When RPL is being conducted at several places, this has lessened the issue of physical access to some extent. However, the RPL is still beyond the reach of needy youths due to existing policy and practices of the RPL itself. To date, only around 1,500

¹ Government of Nepal endorsed a blended mode National Qualification Framework (NQF) in 2020. A NQF is a single framework that includes the qualifications in basic education, TVET education and higher education.

people have participated in the RPL process (Nepal Vocational Qualifications System Project [NVQS], 2023), which is a negligible number as compared to those people working in the informal sector.

There are several issues and challenges behind the slow progress of RPL in Nepal. At present, RPL process in Nepal is centrally managed by the National Skill Testing Board (NSTB) at CTEVT, which is the authorized institution to manage RPL. The RPL process includes (i) Submission of application when there is a call for application from the NSTB, (ii) Counselling by the RPL counsellor to the individual and suggestion for evidences (proof of their skills from employers or from Municipality), (iii) Skill test and result publication (NSTB/NVQS, 2023). However, there are thousands of youth who are entitled to receive adequate information on the RPL process so that they would be encouraged to apply for it. Besides, the RPL process itself takes significant amount of time with several administrative hassles, preventing many needy youths to apply for it.

During the interaction with RPL candidates, the author has noted their reactions and feedback. RPL candidates repeatedly mentioned that they had faced a difficulty during the application, as they had to bring evidences validated by employer or the municipality. All ten RPL candidates mentioned that due to this requirement, many of the potential applicants are not able to apply for RPL. Besides the duration of assessment process, the results are also delayed significantly. Several skill assessment centres mentioned that the RPL candidates were also frustrated, mainly due to delay of results for several months. The

RPL is conducted in the premises of TVET institutions, which are NSTB recognized skill assessment centres. These institutions are the contact point for the applicants, thus are responsible to answer the queries raised by the applicants. When the purpose of RPL is for social justice and social change, the RPL assessment must be learner-focussed and accessible to everyone. It should be a gateway not a barrier. Therefore, information on the process and its potential benefits must be communicated clearly to all for the purpose of awareness raising. Besides, the RPL process must be flexible and easy to understand to the beneficiaries and easy to implement by the implementing institution (ILO, 2023).

Despite various concerns, the existing RPL process has notable positive responses from the youths who went through it. The author has noted positive points in feedbacks from several RPL candidates. After receiving a RPL certificate, a man said that now he had a certificate that had boosted his morale. He will use the certificate to enrol in further training. Similarly, a woman recalls her experience that she once had no proof of her competency on masonry skills. She always had to explain much to people before to getting job. Now she is confident, as she can show the certificate as a proof of her competency (NVQS, 2023).

Conclusion

Majority of productive workforce in Nepal is employed in the informal sector with their skills unrecognized by the system, which leave them to work in a low-paid and substandard condition. Besides, many youths leave country for better opportunities

abroad. Upon return home, their skills and competencies are rarely harnessed that would allow them to contribute to the economic development of country. RPL can play an important role in improving access of these people to higher level training and better employment, ensuring equitable opportunities. RPL helps deliver a more efficient, flexible and more inclusive skill development opportunities to youth, especially to those who were excluded from the opportunities due to lack of recognized certificates. RPL is not a new concept for Nepal, however, its mechanism needs to be further sharpened to make it easy and hassle-free to benefit all needy youths. Properly planned and implemented RPL will enable people to validate their existing skills that opens the pathway for them to obtain higher level skills at chosen stages throughout their lives. It will also increase their chances to enter/re-enter to labor market for better earning. Therefore, considering the current economic scenario, there is an urgency for expansion of RPL provision in Nepal so that it would be at needy one's access.

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