

## RPL and Skill Deficit: The Role of ODL

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### BACKDROP

Skill building is viewed as an instrument to improve the effectiveness and contribution of workforce to the overall productivity and production. It could also be seen as an instrument to empower the individual and improve his/her social acceptance or value. In this era of globalization and economic change we must strive to offer learning opportunities to all, throughout life, by developing and improving structures and procedure to recognize all forms of learning, particularly the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning.

Approximately 93% of country's workforce is in the unorganized sector. The sector cuts across all economic activities and includes rural and urban areas. It contributes to about 60% of the country's GDP. Strengthening the skill base of the unorganized sector will improve productivity, working conditions ,and thus the living standards. Separate institutional mechanism will be explored which will interalia plan, implement and monitor the skill development efforts for the unorganized sector". This is an extract from India's National Skill Development Policy of 2009. It underlines the importance of unorganized sector and its contribution and potential in nation building.

With about 12 million persons expected to join the workforce every year, and an existing skill development capacity of about 3.4 million, it is imperative that we need to enhance the skilling and technical education capacity to about *15 million* (considering that even sections of the existing workforce would have to be trained). India has set a huge target of training 500 million people by 2022.as per skill development policy .

On the other hand India has one of the youngest populations in the world and a very large pool of young English-speaking people. Therefore, it is thought that it has the potential to meet the skill needs of other countries and also to accommodate its own demand for skilled manpower.

The skill development at present is taking place mostly in the informal way, i.e. persons acquire skill at the work-place when they help their parents, relatives and employers etc. Such persons do not have a formal certificate and thus earn lower wages and are exploited by employers. They have come through informal system due to socio-economic circumstances of the family and the compulsions of earning a livelihood rather than attending a formal course. While their productivity is low, their contribution to the national GDP cannot be ignored.

Learning through working does help in imbibing skills, and needs to be recognized and certified and appropriately rewarded. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a welcome method of assessment that considers whether the candidates can meet the assessment requirements for competencies or a set of competencies that they already possess. Valuing and recognizing these learning outcomes may significantly improve individuals self esteem and well being, motivate them to further learning and strengthen their labour market opportunities. This may also help integrate broader sectors of the population into an open and flexible education and training system.

India's VET system has almost no system where the prior learning of someone who may have worked in the unorganized sector for decades is recognized and certified. Recently the country has come out with the NVEQF, which is an open flexible system and permits individuals to accumulate their knowledge and skills. NVEQF is organized as a series of levels of competencies / skills arranged in ascending order from RPL 1 and RPL 2 leading into level 1 to 10 .

On the other side there is a significant drop-out of students after completion of Class 10. Current statistics indicate that net enrolment in vocational courses in India is about 5.5 million per year compared to 90 million in China and 11.3 million in the United States (US). A mere 2 per cent of Indian workers are

formally skilled. Significantly, the bulk of the labour force in India — about 93 per cent — who work in the unorganized sector are largely untouched by any kind of formal training. By way of comparison, 96 per cent of the workers in South Korea receive formal skills training. This is 80 per cent in Japan, 75 per cent in Germany and 68 per cent in the United Kingdom (UK). According to a Boston Consulting Group (BCG) report prepared for the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), India's workforce in 2006–07 numbered 484 million (Sinha et al. 2008). As per the BCG study, 40 per cent of the current workforce is illiterate and another 40 per cent is made up of school dropouts. Those who are vocationally-trained, diploma holders, graduates and above comprise a mere 10 per cent of the overall workforce, while those who have completed 12 years of schooling comprise another 10 per cent. (cited NSDC Knowledge bank Dilip Chenoy Skill Development in India ;A Transformation in the Making.)

India has set a huge target of training 500 million people by 2022 which requires programs that are scalable, replicable and accessible. A large portion of the employment would occur in the lower portions of the skill pyramid. There is large demand and supply gap where the current supply is unable to meet the ever growing labour demands both in quality and numbers.

However, in Indian context the qualifications system still focuses on recognition of competencies acquired through the formal system of education. As a result, a large number of individuals' who have acquired learning through informal or non-formal learning modes remain unrecognized. This leads to a huge under-utilization of human talent and resources in society. Therefore, the learning outcomes that young people and adults acquire in the course of their life in non-formal and informal settings need to be assessed, certified and recognized to motivate them for lifelong learning and to enhance their productivity.

This paper intends to address these issues for making suggestions for the development of a policy on recognition of prior learning in Open and Distance Learning.

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a tool that is widely used internationally to bring people who have been excluded from learning back into training and education. It does this by recognizing and giving credit for the knowledge and skills they already have, to boost self-esteem and allow for access to new training opportunities or better employment prospects. RPL can help deliver a fairer, more efficient, more flexible and more inclusive skills system, especially where many people have little formal education.

### **What is Recognition of Prior Learning**

RPL is a form of assessment that acknowledges skills and knowledge gained through formal training or non-formal or informal training or work experience and life experience . Worldwide there is no consensus about an acceptable term which is used to describe RPL . There are a number of terms that have been used to describe the process of recognizing the skills and knowledge gained from work experience, life experience and formal training. These include: Recognition of prior learning (RPL) / Accreditation of prior learning (APL) / Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) /Prior learning assessment, / recognition of skills (PLAR ) / Recognition of current competencies ( RCC)

The demand for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning with a focus on non-formal and informal learning outcomes was expressed through the Belém Framework for Action, adopted by 144 Delegations of UNESCO Member States at the Sixth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA VI) in Brazil in December 2009.

The RVA of non-formal and informal learning is a key lever in making lifelong learning a reality. It renders visible and gives value to the hidden and un-recognized competences that individuals have obtained through various means and in different phases of their lives. Valuing and recognizing these learning outcomes may significantly improve individuals' self-esteem and well-being, motivate them to further learning, and strengthen their labour market opportunities. RVA may help to integrate broader sections of the population into an open and flexible education and training system and to build inclusive societies.

### **The need for RPL in India**

India is often thought of as a country with millions of unskilled people. Year after year, large numbers of people drop out of school at various stages and are without any qualifications. They are then absorbed in the enormous informal economy and have to make their living as best they can. But are these millions really “unskilled”? In many cases, no. They may lack qualifications and they may stand to benefit greatly from training, but rarely are they starting from a zero base in terms of skills. Although employers (or even the individuals themselves) may not recognize it, workers in India’s informal economy often have significant skills, knowledge and know-how that could form the basis of further development. 350 million out of India’s 510 million work – force are employed in the informal sector and acquire skills at their workplace through non-formal/ tacit learning.

The need for RPL in India arises from the national objective of moving towards a lifelong learning society, in which learners will be enabled to take up learning opportunities at chosen stages throughout their lives.

As we know that Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the formal assessment, certification and recognition of the skills and knowledge a person has regardless of how or where the competencies may have been attained. At the same time it creates new routes to qualifications for adults, taps unrecognized talent, in many cases it motivates for resuming formal studies and provides baseline assessment, which is a good start before re skilling.

RPL, for the employer, is a cost effective and efficient method (time-wise, since there is no duplication of learning) to build the skill levels in an organization and is a critical and relevant investment for the workforce. This also provides the employer the flexibility to make scientifically based differential wage / compensation plans linked to workforce skill-levels.

## **Solution**

The solutions required to address the challenge of skills within the informal sector work-force, in our opinion, largely rest upon interventions, skill recognition and training (including a ‘recognition of prior learning’ assessment frame-work and on-demand, modular vocational skills training accessible to workers) and support with employment linkages.

- To link RPL to national curriculum and qualification as the currency of learning, speed up the process of RPL for under privileged people who lack educational opportunities and for those acquiring skills in informal situations. A common RPL framework is, therefore, needed as the vocational training, both in the formal and informal modes which vary greatly in India.
- An approach to the development of RPL policy and practices that explicitly addresses the visible and invisible barriers to learning and services. Such an approach is required to ascertain the commitment from all players involved and to remove the barriers so as to build a visible, usable and credible system which leads to an effective and creative vehicle for lifelong learning.
- In order to be successful, RPL requires a framework of outcomes-based qualifications against which prior learning can be mapped, in order to produce a form of recognition that can be interpreted by training providers and employers as well as the learner himself. NIOS has developed a framework, for Recognition of Prior learning with the support of COL and OPNZ.
- From a skills development perspective, a credible ‘prior skills recognition programme’ that helps measure the knowledge and skill levels of the work-force can play a pivotal-role in addressing the skill gaps of the Indian work-force.
- Recognition of prior knowledge helps the policy makers to make systematic planning understanding the quality of the learners. It serves as a diagnostic tool for a dynamic planning which in turn increase productivity of the country.

## **Recognition of Prior Learning as a tool in the development of India.**

A very important and prevalent system of skill training in our country has been the informal training. Such training is often passed on from generation to generation. It is also acquired at the work place as on-the-job training. Such persons in spite of being fully skilled earn low wages and are exploited by the employers since they do not have any formal certificate. Even though their productivity is low in comparison to that of others who have been formally trained, their contribution to the national GDP cannot be ignored.

To overcome this situation it is essential to evolve a system of certification which not only recognizes their skills but also provides further education and training in a mode that suits their economic compulsions among other factors. It will not only benefit the workforce to earn a decent living but also contribute to the national economy through better productivity of this workforce.

Technical and vocational education and training of large populations is an important aspect of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). But traditional systems of training individuals for technical and vocational careers often cannot meet the massive need. Among the options available to achieve the targets of the MDGs is the application of open and distance learning (ODL) methods. Over the past over forty years, trainers all over the world have come to appreciate the immense value of using ODL methods to provide continuous, "just-in-time" training for workers in a various range of fields .

Open learning in vocational and technical education has a tremendous amount to offer the new world of work because it is responsive, flexible, fosters independent learning, can be set up in a way that fosters teamwork and allows the immediate transfer of skills with workplace based learning. Open learning also reinforces qualities of self-reliance, mobility and rapid adjustment to change needed for survival in today's world. The potential and possibilities in the open distance learning mode has undergone remarkable changes that today ODL systems with use of variety of technologies and learner support modalities can go well beyond teaching theoretical subjects. There is enough experience around the world to show that appropriately organized distance learning experiences supported by both F2F and virtual interactions and hands on skill development sessions can be an effective mode to develop technical and vocational competencies. (M.B Mennon 2013 )

Recognition of prior learning is a crucial area in open and distance learning system. Recognition of prior learning enables effective and maximum utilization of human resources. This can be considered as a 'tool'.

The relevance of vocational education has increased in the fast growing Indian economy, especially in the light of the Government's thrust on Universalisation of Secondary Education, skill development and social justice through inclusive education and training. National Vocational Education Qualifications Framework (NVEQF) - The Government recognizes the need and is looking to formally integrate vocational education together with its current conventional educational streams across school and higher education space for providing an opportunity and incentive to the students to explore a large universe of opportunity.

Recognition of Prior Learning has the potential to be a powerful tool in the development of India and in the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. It can empower individuals, provide a skill focus for employers and can assist in economic and social development. in terms of the current political, economic and social context in the country, RPL is seen to have the capacity to;

- Contribute to redress equity by opening up more ways for people to attain qualified status;
- Enable more people to reach higher levels of qualification and expertise by beginning with an acknowledgement of existing skills and knowledge;
- Contribute to enhancing international economic competitiveness by building on often invisible and unacknowledged workforce skills; and
- Offer the first step in attaining the goal of development a multi skilled and flexible workforce by acting as an auditing tool to quantify existing competence".
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Education and training should be available to all, and the process of lifelong learning should be encouraged. People should be continually involved in acquiring new skills and should also gain reward for existing skills, experience and learning previously unrecognized. RPL in India can thus be seen as a mechanism to accelerate the readdress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities.

## Conclusion

Prior learning assessment and recognition can take various forms and outcomes can be used for a large number of purposes relevant to the goals of individuals, the labour market partners and society at large. Institutions and employers can make better use of their resources by not making people learn and do what they already know and can do. It will also enable livelihoods for millions and take our country ahead in its path towards inclusive and sustained growth.

From an organizational perspective, RPL provides a solid base for long-term human resource development and improvements in morale, in quality service and variability. For individual employers RPL will directly address the self-confidence factor that has been so badly undermined by recent economic and employment trends in India.

From a skills development perspective, a credible 'prior skills recognition programme' that helps measure the knowledge and skill levels of the work-force can play a pivotal-role in addressing the skill gaps of the Indian work-force.

Skills recognition and certification initiatives in the informal economy through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes will provide an important pathway for the 90 per cent of Indians who work in the so-termed unorganized sector (NCEUS Report, 2009). However, the process of skills recognition in the informal economy will need to be accompanied by provision of RPL infrastructure which is affordable, reliable and efficient. There will be challenges in identifying where skills exist, documenting those skills, communicating to the potential candidates, as well as administering the process. Methods will need to be established, such as portfolio review, written/oral exams, and demonstrations. A relatively open examination system relating to a national qualifications framework and the relevant standards would need to be created for more transparency, so that it benefits those people who have acquired their knowledge and skills outside the education system. Guidance and information campaigns will be needed for the learner to be guided through the process (Singh, 2011).

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