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Building Capabilities of Informal Workers by Recognition of Prior Learning: The Current Practice and Alternatives

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a key pillar of India's **Skill India** mission under the **National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (NPSDE) 2015**, aimed at formalizing the skills of its vast informal workforce, which accounts for over 91% of total employment. By bridging the gap between experiential learning and formal certification, RPL has the potential to enhance employability, economic mobility, and workforce productivity.

However, India's RPL implementation faces significant challenges, including regulatory misalignment, limited industry adoption, and low stakeholder awareness, along with logistical barriers such as evidence verification and assessment costs. Primarily certification-driven, it lacks integration into the vocational training system, limiting its effectiveness as a pathway for skill advancement and higher income. Moreover, RPL is often used as a shortcut to boost certification numbers rather than as a tool for meaningful skill development.

This paper examines the evolution, implementation, and impact of RPL in India using national labor force survey data while benchmarking it against global best practices from countries such as South Africa and the UK. The study identifies key policy gaps and proposes strategic recommendations to strengthen RPL, ensuring it transitions from a certification-centric model to a robust mechanism for workforce inclusion, quality vocational education, and sustainable skill development.

Keywords: *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Informal Workforce, Skill Development, Vocational Education, Industrial Training Institutes (ITI), Workforce Certification, Craft Instructors Training, Skill India Initiative, TVET, Economic Mobility, Workforce Inclusion.*

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Introduction

In many economies worldwide a substantial portion of the workforce operates within the informal sector, often lacking formal qualifications and recognition for their skills. These informal workers play a critical role in various industries, yet their contributions are frequently undervalued and overlooked. Recognizing the skills and experiences of these workers through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) presents a significant opportunity to enhance their capabilities, improve their livelihoods, and contribute to overall economic development.

Around 60% of the global workforce is in the informal sector; in India, 91% of the workers are informal (without social security) and work in the unorganized sector of the economy (around 84% of all enterprises are informal). The vast majority of such workers have very poor education, if any, even though many are quite skilled, having acquired those skills on the job, as a '*Shagird*' (Student) with a '*Ustad*' (Senior worker or a Master). However, their life chances are limited, their likelihood of finding formal economy work remains limited, and that potential is likely to remain constrained for the rest of their working life because they have no recognized certificate. This is where the RPL can play an important part – to provide dignity to the skilled workers, with a certificate recognizing their knowledge, skills, and experiences.

In this paper, we examine the evolution and status of India's Recognition of Prior Learning initiatives following its integration into the overarching strategy of 'Skill India' within the framework of the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship NPSDE 2015. How important RPL was perceived to be can be gauged from the following. In 2015, the NPSDE 2015 committed to skilling around 400 million workers between 2015 and 2022, when there were approximately 460 million workers.⁴ Of this vast number, 100 million were to be new workers to be trained through formal vocational education and training (VET) system, and the remaining 300 million were those already in the workforce who would need to be provided RPL.

This paper aims to explore the current landscape of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in India, focusing on key aspects such as the entities involved in RPL activities, the methodologies employed, and its alignment with international best practices. This assessment is driven by the recognition of India's nascent journey in RPL, and the necessity to understand how it compares with established global standards. India's modern Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) journey itself is not particularly old. It was only in 2007 that, for the first time in the history of five-year plans in India, a chapter on Skill Development was inserted in the 11th Five-Year Plan document⁵. The only serious institutions that had been created until then were the system of nearly 4000 Industrial Training Institutes, popularly known as ITIs (roughly half each in the public and private sectors), and the nationwide Apprenticeship Act 1961, which had resulted in half a century to bring barely 250,000 apprentices in the organized sector.⁶ These were the only efforts at vocational skill development, which were falling short in developing a robust VET system and the 11th Five Year Plan

⁴ How the newly created Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) came up with the number of 400 mn to be skilled, is a separate question, outside the scope of this paper (though that question itself is worthy of further examination).

⁵ Discussed in Planning Commission (2008) and Planning Commission (2013), both had a chapter on Skill Development, the writing of which was led by one of the authors (Mehrotra). For a more recent assessment of India's apprenticeship programmes, see ILO,, 2023.

⁶ For a detailed survey based assessment of these two major skills programmes in existence for the last six decades, see Mehrotra ed, 2014,.

recognized that an economy growing at around 8% per annum was also falling short of skilled personnel.

The need for RPL in India should also be recognized when one notes the following stunning statistic: only 2.3% of India's workforce has any formally acquired vocational education or training; and in addition, another 7% of India's workforce has any formal technical education (i.e. one year certificate, two-year diploma or three-year degree) acquired after higher secondary education in general academic subjects. This is one of the lowest to be found in any country in the world. By contrast, the share in South Korea is over 90%, in China over 80%, and so on. This problem is further accentuated by the fact, that even in 1991, when India's GDP began to grow much faster than earlier, i.e. after the economic reforms began in the early 1990s, only 51% of India's population was literate; so nearly half was illiterate. That speaks volumes for why such a high proportion of the workforce is employed in the informal sector, after having dropped out of school early (see Mehrotra, 2025a). Millions of such workers, not only lack formally acquired foundational skills (of literacy and numeracy), but naturally also lack formal vocational education or training. RPL becomes critical in such a country for its workforce.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 1 spells briefly a theory that justifies RPL, and discusses the situation of India's workforce, which makes RPL valuable. Section 2 asks the question: how should an RPL system be governed in a developing country? It examines the way RPL has been implemented in India. Section 3 then discusses how the data about TVET in India has changed in response to the provision of RPL on a large scale; it examines NSS Periodic Labour Force Survey data to arrive at a conclusion that is worthy of re-examination. It also discusses what the evidence of implementing RPL in Delhi state has shown, and the weaknesses therein. Section 4 discusses the challenges of RPL in India and asks: what global practices could be useful for India to draw upon to evolve its own RPL system? With this question in view, this section examines the practices in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and other countries are collated briefly. Section 5 finally then spells out the alternatives and way forward for India's policy and implementation strategy in respect of RPL.

RPL - What is the theory?

There is a theory behind RPL. It is a process where an organization evaluates an applicant's previous knowledge to determine if it is equivalent to the learning outcomes of the destination qualification. This process eliminates duplication of learning, so applicants do not have to relearn things they already know. RPL also allows people to demonstrate their skills, knowledge, and experience to gain admission to or get credit exemptions from school TVET, or higher education programmes. RPL values all types of learning, including knowledge, skills and experiences acquired through less formal settings, like work history, industry experience, or voluntary work.

As much as 60% of the world's workforce is informal. A major portion of the informal workforce is looking for recognition of their competencies through the formal qualification system. RPL plays a crucial role in making education and training more inclusive. RPL empowers individuals to advance in their careers by obtaining formal recognition for skills gained through work experience. This recognition can enhance employability, open up new career opportunities, and facilitate career progression. It allows individuals from diverse backgrounds, including those with extensive work experience, to showcase their skills and gain recognition without necessarily undergoing the entire formal learning process. The objective of RPL is to recognise the skills learned outside the formal system and to certify those individuals, for countries where a National Vocational Qualification

Framework exists, such as in India (or the UK, Australia, South Africa, and many Anglo-Saxon countries) to the standardized qualification levels as specified in that framework, through formal assessment processes and certification.

The practice of RPL has been most advanced in the now industrialized countries (where too some 18% of the workforce is informal), and where millions only have a school education, often incomplete on account of the phenomenon of school dropout. RPL plays a role in providing accelerated routes to higher learning for mature people and is particularly relevant to part-time learners. RPL can significantly reduce the time required to attain a qualification by recognizing and accrediting existing skills and knowledge. This can also result in cost savings for both individuals and educational institutions.

More than 100 countries have the National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) Framework, which is a system used to recognize and accredit the skills and knowledge individuals have acquired through vocational training and/or work experience. In India, the vocational qualification framework is called the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF), which was introduced in 2013⁷ and amended in 2023. The formal certificate obtained through RPL serves as tangible evidence of the candidate's skills/abilities and helps them improve their employability, mobility, opportunity for further learning, social inclusion, and self-esteem. Providing qualifications to those who have acquired such informally learned skills contributes also to national skills development.

Most national policies covered under the study on comparative analysis of national skills development policies (NPSDE 2015) likewise recommend setting up RPL systems (Aggarwal and Gasskov, 2013). NPSDE 2015 in Annex 4, actually estimates what proportion of the workforce would need RPL. Of the 400 million to be trained it estimates that 300 million need to undergo RPL assessment. Here, the understanding is that they are merely to be assessed but not provided training. In this regard, International Labour Organisation (ILO)'s paper by Aggarwal (2015), suggests a similar approach.

One OECD study notes another dimension, on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. It states that while countries facing skills shortages often have unemployed workers with the required skills, such workers are invisible as they lack formal qualifications. Here, RPL contributes to reducing skills shortages by certifying and making visible such knowledge and skills (Werquin, 2010b).

Why is RPL so critical to India's current crisis of underemployment, low levels of human capital, as well as informality in the workforce? RPL was always required, but its value was understood by policy-makers, and also pedagogues, only recently, precisely because many types of problems have emerged that plague the Indian labour market: the first is that non-farm jobs need to grow for the relatively young workforce, yet the economy is not generating sufficient jobs even for the youth entering the labour force each year (about 6 million per annum), in addition to jobs for the already unemployed, usually reasonably better-educated youth in India.⁸ The other reasons for RPL having salience is that there is (a) the shortage of skill training institutes and still prevailing guru-shishya learning practices, leading to skill acquisition without the recognized certificate. A third reason could be the poor economic condition of many families where youth is forced to enter labour market to

⁷ The base draft of the NVQ was prepared for the Ministry of Human Resource Development in 2011, by a TaskForce constituted explicitly for the purpose, whose members were Prof S. Mehrotra (Chair), Prof Vinay Mehrotra (Member), and B. Banerji(NSDC Member). The paper produced is accessible at Mehrotra et al (2014).

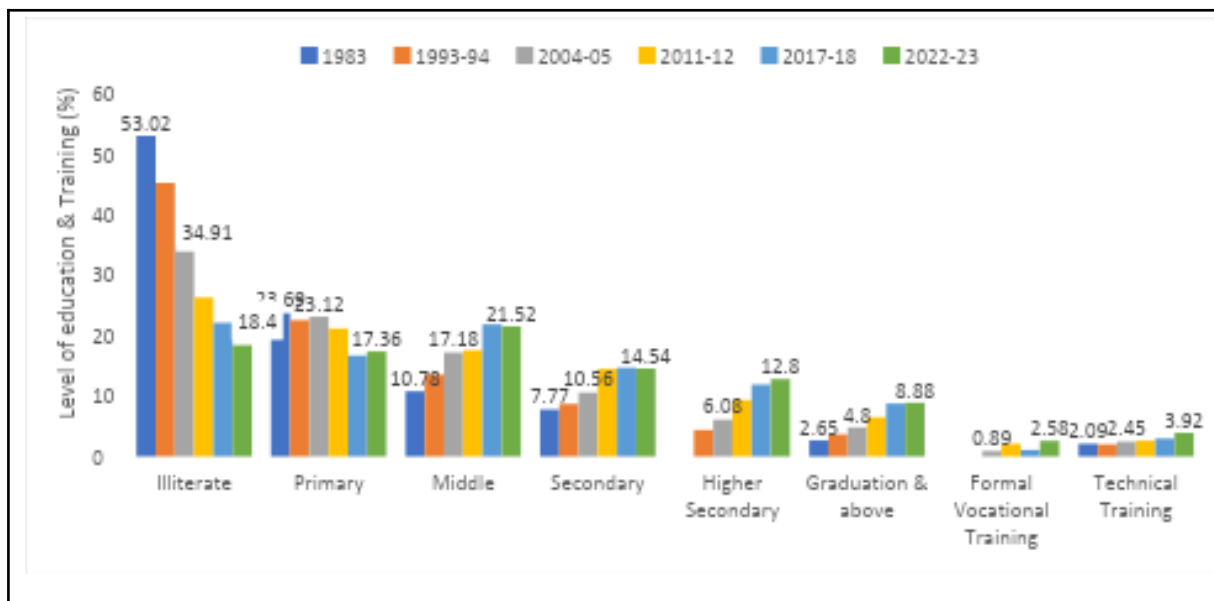
⁸ On this first problem see Mehrotra ed. (2025).

support the family financially. Fourthly, RPL becomes important also because of the market practices where for manual jobs, preference is for unskilled workers as they cost less for the organization.

The need for RPL has only been heightened in recent years on account of yet another development: the quantity of both school/tertiary general academic education has massified so quickly in the last 20 years that any society would have had difficulty in maintaining the quality of education, especially concerning learning, and hence, questions have risen about the employability of such 'educated' youth, who are certified, either in general academic or vocational education, but still lack basic foundational cognitive skills, forget having non-cognitive/transferable skills (commonly known as soft skills), and also domain knowledge in the vocational skills they have been certified in.⁹

In Figure 1, we show the education and skill levels of India's working population (15-59 year olds) in 2022-23. The situation should worry any policymaker, and given current rates of youth unemployment (44% for 20-24-year-olds, according to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy).¹⁰ (see Mehrotra and Parida, 2025b, for a more detailed discussion).

Figure 1: Working age (15 to 59 years) Population by Level of Education and Training in India, 1983-2023



Source: Authors' estimation using NSS-EUS and PLFS unit level data.

Figure 1 vividly illustrates the relatively low educational attainment of India's workforce, a significant factor driving its predominant engagement in the unorganized or informal sector of the economy. This underscores the crucial role of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) certification, serving not only as a valuable credential for job-seekers but also as a signaling mechanism for prospective employers.

⁹ For an analysis of these three types of skills, see UNESCO, 2013, on TVET, chapter 1.

¹⁰ Note that government data contests this unemployment rate based on the National Survey Organization (NSO) annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), which claims youth unemployment rate to be 12% (for Usual Principal and Subsidiary status). However, it should be pointed out that the PLFS definition of unemployment is not internationally compliant (see Mehrotra, S and J. Parida "Structural change reversed: A comparative analysis pre- and post 2015",).

The problem of employability goes deeper. For example, the gross enrolment ratio for upper secondary education in low-income countries is 29 percent, of which only five percent represents TVET (Aggarwal, 2015); India is no different since we can see in Fig 1 that barely 15% of the workforce, even in 2022-23, has a secondary level of education but an additional over 12% have higher secondary education. In the absence of recognized qualifications, they face severe disadvantages as far as finding decent jobs, migrating to other regions, and accessing further education. Unfortunately, most formal education systems are not geared to recognize non-formal and informal learning.

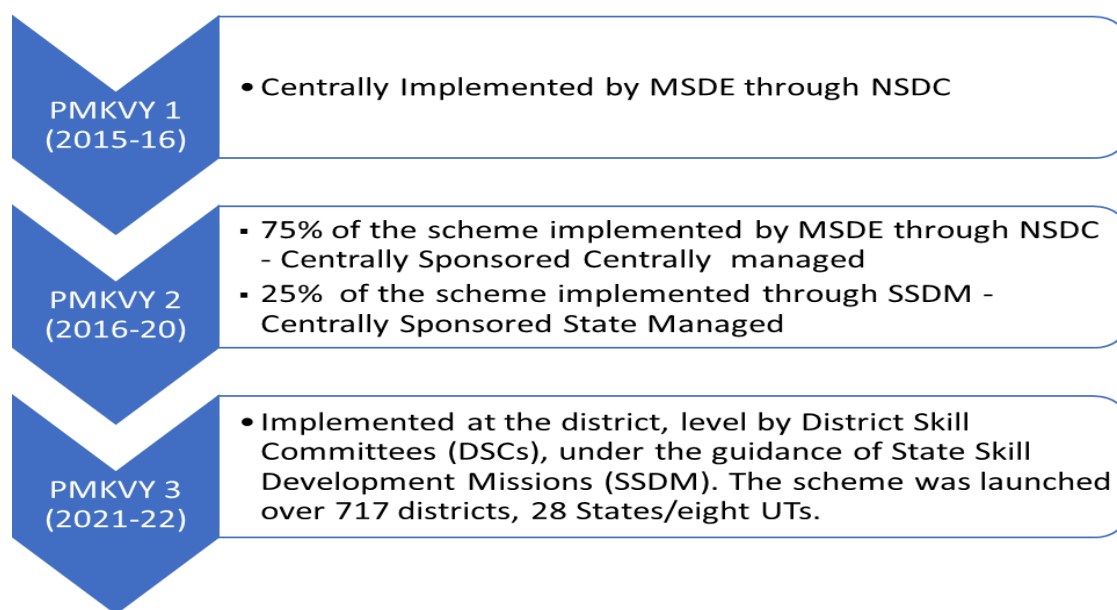
The Implementation of RPL in India

RPL in India is one of the components of the *Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana* (PMKVY) – the Prime Minister’s Skill Development Scheme, launched in 2015. National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC) under the guidance of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) has the responsibility of implementing the scheme. Over the years, the implementation pattern of PMKVY moved from centralised to decentralized which went up to the level of districts.

The RPL Process:

- a. **Self-Assessment:** The first step in the RPL process is for the individual to conduct a self-assessment of their skills and knowledge against the requirements of the targeted qualification. This involves reflecting on past experiences, and projects, and learning to identify relevant competencies.
- b. **Consultation with RPL Assessor:** Once the self-assessment is complete, the individual typically engages in a consultation with an RPL assessor. During this discussion, the assessor guides the evidence required and explains the RPL process.
- c. **Compilation of Evidence:** Evidence is a crucial component of the RPL process. It can include work portfolios, references, certificates, job descriptions, and any other documentation that demonstrates the individual’s competence in the relevant areas. The quality and relevance of evidence are key factors in a successful RPL application.
- d. **Assessment by RPL Assessor:** The RPL assessor reviews the evidence provided by the individual and assesses it against the competency standards of the targeted qualification. This assessment may involve interviews, observations, or practical demonstrations to validate the claimed skills and knowledge.
- e. **Feedback and Decision:** Following the assessment, the RPL assessor provides feedback to the individual. If the evidence is deemed sufficient, the individual is granted credit or a full qualification. If not, the assessor may suggest additional evidence or recommend further training to meet the required standards.

Figure 1: RPL governance strategies in India - 2015 to 2023



The evolution of RPL components of PMKVY (2020-2021) from its earlier versions is as follows:

Parameters	PMKVY 1.0 (2015-2016)	PMKVY 2.0 (2016-2020)	PMKVY 3.0 (2020-2023)
Mode of execution under RPL	Training Partners via training centres (Target allocation: NSDC-SSC-TP)	Done through Project implementing agency via different RPL types: Type 1 – RPL Camp, Type 2 RPL @ Employers’ premises, Type 3 – RPL Centres Type 4: Best-in-class employers	Execution mode: 1. RPL at Camps – through Project Implementing Agency (govt, NGO, etc) 2. RPL at Employers’ premises, – through Project Implementing Agency (govt, Company, etc) 3. RPL through demand – through PMKKs allocated target, demand will come via DSC and demand aggregation portal 4. RPL BICE – through SSCs 5. Online PL – Through SSCs via Online portal
RPL process	3 Step process Mobilization & Counselling, Assessment & Certification, Pay-outs	5 Step process Mobilization and pre-assessment, Screening and Counselling, Orientation (in 3 types), Final Assessment and certification	5 Step process Mobilization, Counselling & Pre-Screening. Orientation (Bridge Course Option), Final Assessment, Certification & Pay-out

Between 2015 and 2021, 65,86,385 beneficiaries of age between 18 to 45 years undertook RPL (MSDE Annual Report (2022-2023)).¹¹

The Government of India has introduced different types of projects to encourage RPL.¹²

The RPL Guidelines, August 2023

To provide a focused approach to RPL, a new RPL guideline was issued by the NCVET, MSDE in August 2023 (to replace the earlier 2015 simple guideline for RPL under PMKVY). The new guideline aimed at

- establishing minimum standards and processes for assessment, facilitating integration into the formal learning system, and strengthening the skill recognition system
- focusing on effectively implementing RPL assessments in the skill ecosystem and recognising all non-formal and in-formal learnings through RPL assessments.
- Serving as a motivator for the advancement of lifelong learning.

The guidelines have linked the National Credit Framework (NCrF) and concept of Recognition of continuous learning (RCL) with the new NSQF framework and are aligned with the vision and mission of the National Education Policy 2020. Accordingly, the RPL process has been divided into 4 different categories:

- Category 1: NSQF Level 1-3.5
- Category 2: NSQF Level 4-6 (Formal Education)
- Category 3: NSQF Level 4-6 (Non-Formal Education)
- Category 4: NSQF Level 6.5-8

The concept of RPL is also extended to the general education domain to create options for individuals to be assessed for a subject/ qualification at the same or a higher level, subject to meeting the competency levels and concerned regulatory compliances and clearing the requisite assessment. This shall effectively provide learners with options for Exams/Assessments on Demand.

Further, the guideline provides for new and innovative methods & models, including blended models, for assessments of RPL, Recognizing Agencies to conduct periodic RPL for their workforce as a part of Continuous Learning, and the Provision of earning and accumulation credits through RPL.

¹¹ However, there is also a different number available: more than 53 lakh youth were trained & and certified under the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) program in 38 sectors, according to the India Skills Report, 2022-23. https://do3n1uzkew47z.cloudfront.net/siteassets/pdf/ISR_Report_2023.pdf

¹² MSDE under its flagship scheme PMKVY 3.0 has launched several (RPL) projects. Some of these are:

- a. Upskilling for Weavers and Artisans in Traditional Crafts in Nagaland and Kashmir, an RPL project under PMKVY 3.0 is being implemented with value-addition services such as Entrepreneurship building and design development (RPL Type 1 with Bridge Module).
- b. Upskilling for Street Food Vendors (for e-cart license) in East Delhi Municipal Corporation- RPL for 2500 street food vendors who apply for an e-cart license to upskill them and make them well versed in hygiene, safety, customer centricity, digital transactions, and entrepreneurship skills.
- c. Launch of RPL project in Nagaland: **MSDE** launched a pilot project on 28.12.2021 for upskilling the cane and bamboo artisans of Nagaland under RPL. The project aims to upskill over 4,000 craftsmen and artisans.
- d. RPL Programme with NDMC: MSDE supports NDMC in certifying and upskilling its contractual staff and other staff engaged in work. The project aims to cover 75,000 candidates, of which 25,000 are supported under SANAKLP.
- e. In July 2020, MSDE and the Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR) signed an MoU for 'Skill Development Planning at Gram Panchayat'. The project focused on assessing the prior learning of the skilled workers who are engaged by the contractors engaged with Gram panchayat to ensure quality implementation

The RPL guidelines in such details have been issued for the first time. However, there are a **few concerns about the guidelines**.

These are the following:

- The guidelines give the impression that the learning outcomes for RPL will not necessarily be the same as the learning outcomes being followed in the formal training. Flexibility in exam and adaptation according to the situation and the candidate seems to be permitted. It may be noted that RPL normally is considered at par with the formal certificates and therefore, to provide acceptance of the RPL-certified skilled person, the assessment level must be maintained at par with formal courses and not diluted. It is important to maintain the standards of the assessment so that parity is maintained.
- The guideline builds on the premise that RPL will certainly lead to enhanced employability and increased income. However, though some of the studies conducted by NSDC in public sector organizations conclude that income increase was found in a few cases, it is not appropriate to generalise the result in the case of self-employed artisans and gig workers.
- The RPL scheme was designed on the premise that it will enhance earnings. However, there are no policy changes proposed or criteria defined that will ensure such a change will happen.

RPL, while valuable in recognizing existing skills and broadening access to skill development programs, is often employed as a **shortcut approach** to increase the count of certified youth rather than prioritizing in-depth skill enhancement.

It is notable that the Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship (MSDE) also issued “Guidelines for Recognition of Learning under the Craft Instructors Training Scheme” to increase and recognize Instructors for India’s 15000 or ITI, the only institution in India’s skills ecosystem that provides relatively longer term training for youth. The Scheme introduced in 2018 for two years was further extended in 2020 for five years.¹³ The scheme is meant to recognize and certify the skills of in-service instructors having at least three years of experience in teaching in ITIs and to provide individuals with the opportunity to obtain the National Craft Instructor Certificate (NCIC) based on their existing skills, knowledge, and experiences (source: <http://nimilearningonline.in/pdfs/RPL%20Guidelines.pdf>). How important is RPL for ITI success and improving the quality of their training of young trainees can be gauged from the following. The 15000 public and private ITI, which have grown too rapidly from under 4000 only 15 years ago, need 70,000 instructors. The existing 51 public and private training institutes for instructor training can only train 12000 per year; so there is a huge gap¹⁴. However, this does not involve any training for the eligible instructors because they have done 3 years as instructors.

However, we find this problematic for several reasons. First, instructors at ITI are not required to have had any pedagogical training. So unlike teachers in general academic schools, who have to have passed the B. Ed. Degree, plus pass the Teacher Education Test (TET), before beginning to teach there is no such requirement for ITI instructors, in the past or even at present. Second, it is notable that

¹³ <https://dgt.gov.in/sites/default/files/2024-02/extensionofcitsrplguide.pdf>

¹⁴ This scheme was introduced in 2019 and the guidelines were subsequently revised in 2022 (Source: <https://dgt.gov.in/sites/default/files/Modified%20Guideline%20for%20CITS%20RPL%20scheme.pdf> <https://divyangjan.depwd.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/RPL%20Guidelines%204Sep2020.pdf>

instructors in Senior Secondary vocational schools in China, by comparison, are required to have at least one year of industry experience before they can teach; and they must each year acquire another month of industry work experience in their field if they are to seek a promotion. No similar industry experience is requirement for instructors of ITI, nor for other VET institutions (eg secondary/higher secondary schools; vocational training providers of NSDC). This should be mandatory if the quality of learning for trainees is to improve; there are serious issues of employability that youth face after they complete either general academic education or TVET.

RPL: the data and the evidence on implementation

The data: what is it revealing?

We find that RPL related data and short term training (STT) data are being conflated. What we are seeing in Table 1 is a sharp drop among those in the Indian workforce who have ‘NO Training’, from around 93% to 65% in a matter of a few years – and that too during the post-Covid years. There is no evidence of such a large increase in those with ‘formal training’. While formal vocational training has seen a modest rise to 4.1%, informal training avenues—others have surged - particularly hereditary (from 1.45 in 2017 to 11.6% in 2023) and on-the-job training (from 2.04% in 2017 to 9.3% in 2023). The mystery can be resolved if we examine the sudden large increase in workers already in the WF who have been imparted a one-day to one-week Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which is a way of certifying those with self-learnt/on-the-job skills. A High influx of RPL-trained individuals who undergo courses often less than 24 hours in duration may be a plausible explanation for this sudden rise of “formally and informally trained individuals”.

Table 1: Percentage distribution of persons aged between 15-59 who received vocational training

Year	2004-05	2011-12	2017-18	2022-23	2023-24
Formal Training	2.4%	1.6%	1.8%	3.8%	4.1%
Non-Formal (Hereditary)	4.4%	1.8%	1.45%	7.9%	11.6%
Non-Formal (Self-Learning)	3.9%	1.1%	1.67%	5.7%	7.1%
Non-Formal (On the Job)	-	1.7%	2.04%	7.7%	9.3%
No Training	87.8%	92.6%	92.59%	72.6%	65.3%

Source: NSSO EUS and PLFS survey (various years)

In any case, Government data exposes a [disturbing reliance on short-term courses \(STT\)](#). PMKVY, Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS), and other schemes primarily offer brief training stints—sometimes as short as 10 days. The data does not allow a researcher to separate the STT from the RPL trained. Hence, the STT courses of RPL have suddenly also increased, and these are being designated as Non-formal training, and this has led to the fall (in Table above) of workers with “No training”.

Finally, the rise in STT is taking place at the expense of long-term training. In 2017-18, 29% of vocational trainees undertook courses lasting over two years, which halved in a matter of 6 years. [By 2023-24, this figure plummeted to just 14.29%](#). Meanwhile, the share of trainees attending courses shorter than six months shot up from 22% to 44%. This shift reflects a systemic preference for quick certifications over substantive skill development. There is a rapid decrease in the duration of skill development courses. So, overall, more people are getting degrees/certificates or formal education, but the duration of these courses is very short – in some cases, only 10 days. The rise in these short-term training (STT) courses is accompanied by the fact that 96.4% of individuals in India spend less than 15 years in formal education in 2011-12, and that number has now decreased to 95.8% in 2022-23 (NSSO, various rounds)

This excessive, and growing reliance on STT, plus the poor quality of RPL being imparted, raises important concerns, which are reinforced issues around the implementation of RPL itself. These as follows:

- Close ties between Assessment Agencies (AA) and Training Partners (TP):
 - Currently, the close association between AAs and TPs often leads to biases in assessments, as external checks are not conducted rigorously.
 - This leads to a fall in the quality of trainings
- Qualifications for Training Providers (TPs) are a concern:
 - The current criteria for becoming a TP do not mandate proficiency in the specific trade they are training for. Due to this many small private players enter this business not with the motive to skill and hire but with motive to gain short-term profits.
 - Encouraging domain-specific organizations—such as construction companies for construction training and automobile companies for automobile trades—could improve training quality and outcomes. For example, in Request for Participation for RPL training in Delhi, the pre-qualification criteria for construction skill training was applicants must be construction company operating for the last 3 years. Thus applications from only construction companies were received and the resultant training was of high quality.
- Complexities in the process and bureaucracy:
 - There are significant bureaucratic hurdles in revising curriculums and obtaining certifications in the RPL process. Streamlining processes and reducing administrative red tape can accelerate implementation.
- Post-Training Monitoring and Evaluation:
 - The current monitoring mechanisms for assessing the long-term impact of RPL are weak.
 - A structured six-month post-training evaluation framework could provide insights into improvements in wages, productivity, and employability.

The Challenge in RPL Practices and Global Practices

Although RPL offers significant benefits in acknowledging individuals' skills and experiences, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed. There are challenges in aligning RPL processes with regulatory frameworks and industry standards, especially in rapidly evolving sectors where

traditional qualifications may not adequately reflect current skills and knowledge. Another issue is the lack of awareness and understanding of RPL among stakeholders, including employers, educators, and individuals themselves, which can limit its uptake and effectiveness. Moreover, logistical barriers such as the complexity of evidence gathering, verification procedures, and assessment costs can deter individuals from pursuing RPL.

Addressing these challenges requires ongoing efforts to standardize assessment practices, provide training and support for assessors, promote RPL awareness and accessibility, and streamline administrative processes to make RPL more efficient and equitable. Drawing from diverse international experiences, several key learnings emerge that highlight effective strategies and common challenges in implementing RPL:

Awareness and Support: A common challenge across countries is the lack of awareness about RPL opportunities among potential beneficiaries. Effective communication strategies and support services are essential to guide individuals through the RPL process, as seen in initiatives from the UK¹⁵ and Australia.¹⁶

Both UK and Australia have implemented several initiatives to enhance awareness and communication of **Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)** opportunities. Besides making RPL widely accepted by all key stakeholders in the country, the UK has participated in international studies, such as the **Recognition of formal, non- and informal learning: use of learning outcomes (REFNILLO)** project. This initiative aimed to define consistent approaches within the NARIC Network for assessing certificates based on RPL, thereby enhancing awareness and discussion of RPL evaluation.¹⁷

In Australia, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA)¹⁸ mandates that RTOs offer RPL to learners. This ensures that individuals are informed about RPL as a viable pathway to attain qualifications based on their existing skills and experiences.

Inclusive Policies: Countries with inclusive RPL policies, such as South Africa, have made strides in addressing educational and employment inequalities. RPL is used as a tool to formally recognize the skills of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. (ARPL)

Addressing FLN Gaps: Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) lays the foundation for further learning and development, including the acquisition of skills and knowledge that may be recognized through RPL. However, if individuals lack adequate FLN, they may face challenges in effectively demonstrating their prior learning through RPL assessments. Therefore, addressing FLN gaps is essential to ensuring that RPL processes are inclusive.

Flexibility and Adaptability: Successful RPL systems are adaptable to the needs of various stakeholders, including learners, employers, and educational institutions. Examples from Canada and

¹⁵ <https://www.lshtm.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Recognition-of-Prior-Learning-Policy.pdf>

¹⁶

<https://medium.com/@bivasbiswas/recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-in-australia-a-comprehensive-guide-45bb1598c0ab>

¹⁷ https://www.ecctis.com/our-work-worldwide/contributions/recognition-of-formal?utm_source=chatgpt.com

¹⁸

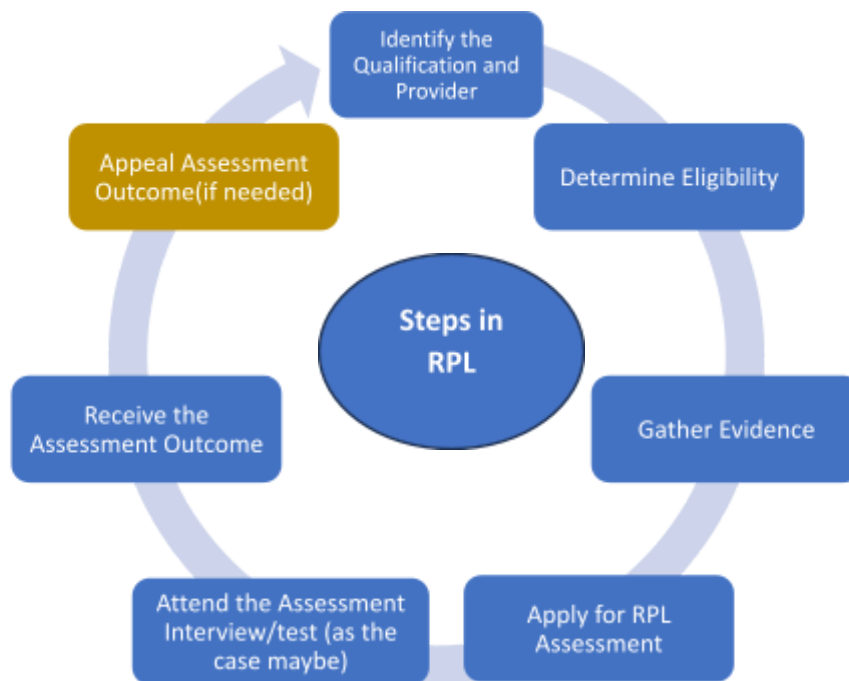
https://www.asqa.gov.au/guidance-resources/resources-providers/faqs/recognition-prior-learning-rpl?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Australia showcase how RPL can be tailored to diverse sectors and learning pathways, emphasizing the importance of flexibility in recognition practices.

Technology and Innovation: Advancements in digital portfolios and assessment tools have enhanced the efficiency and accessibility of RPL. Countries like Finland¹⁹ and the Netherlands²⁰ have incorporated technology to streamline the RPL process, making it easier for individuals to document and submit evidence of their learning.

Too many and complex guidelines on RPL The primary goal of RPL—to recognize and validate prior learning—may be overshadowed by administrative requirements and procedures. Different guidelines or interpretations of guidelines across institutions or jurisdictions can lead to variability in the RPL process. Overly rigid guidelines may also not adequately accommodate the diverse backgrounds of candidates, particularly those from non-traditional educational pathways or underrepresented groups.

At the global level, RPL is implemented through the 7 steps-process²¹, which includes:



Integration of RPL with National Qualifications Framework: In India, the RPL policy is linked to an outcome-based National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF) against which prior learning through formal/informal channels is assessed and certified. The RPL process includes a pre-assessment, a skill gap training and a final assessment leading to certification of existing skills for an individual. The RPL certification is on par with certifications following various skill trainings in the country. It provides both horizontal and vertical pathways for an individual to acquire additional skills for better livelihoods. Globally, effective RPL systems are well-integrated with national qualifications

¹⁹

https://tieke.fi/en/technology-invaluable-for-continuous-learning-and-recognition-of-prior-learning/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²⁰ https://amsterdam.tech/recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

²¹ Aggarwala (2015)

frameworks, allowing for seamless progression between different levels of education and training. This alignment facilitates mobility within education systems and the labour market, as demonstrated by the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS).

In South Africa, ARPL (Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning)²² is governed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). The Chief Directorate of National Artisan Development (INDLELA) has the core responsibility of coordinating artisan development nationally to achieve a single, common national standard across all economic sectors for artisan development as contemplated in the Skills Development Act. Besides formally recognizing what the youth already know and certifying these qualifications, RPL also helps in determining whether relevant experiences possessed are sufficient to meet the entry requirements for the course the candidate wants to take. In India, there may be a need to establish a similar mechanism for the coordination of skills development initiatives, including RPL. Establishing a central coordinating body or authority, similar to SAQA in South Africa, could help to ensure consistency, quality, and alignment of skills development programs and qualifications across different sectors and regions. This would contribute to enhancing the recognition of prior learning, promoting lifelong learning, and supporting economic and social development in India.

Stakeholder Engagement: Engaging employers and industry stakeholders in the design and implementation of RPL processes ensures aligning RPL with economic needs and workforce development goals. In Australia²³, trade unions and employers' associations often participate in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process. These organizations play important roles in shaping policies and procedures related to skills recognition and workforce development. They can provide support and guidance to their members who are seeking recognition for their prior learning through RPL. Trade unions may also collaborate with educational institutions, industry stakeholders, and government bodies to ensure that RPL processes are fair, transparent, and aligned with the needs of workers. Employers' associations, on the other hand, represent the interests of employers within specific industries or sectors. They work closely with educational institutions and government agencies to identify skill needs, industry standards, and workforce development priorities. Employers' associations often provide input on RPL assessment criteria, industry standards, and competency frameworks to ensure that RPL outcomes are relevant and meet industry requirements.

At the policy level, collaborative efforts between the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE), alongside partners such as the Ministry of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSME), SCOPE, Industry Associations, and Trade Unions, are vital. They should actively promote the engagement of individuals holding formal skill certificates, including those acquired through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), as skilled workers.

²² Artisan trades are broadly located in the manufacturing, mining and construction sectors, where some 20.0% of the labour force is located.

²³

<https://medium.com/@bivasbiswas/recognition-of-prior-learning-rpl-in-australia-a-comprehensive-guide-45bb1598c0ab>

Policy Framework and Support: Strong policy support and funding mechanisms are critical for the success of RPL systems. Government initiatives in countries like Norway and Denmark²⁴ have been instrumental in promoting RPL through legislation, funding, and national strategies.

Linking RPL with Apprenticeship: In South Africa, if the certificate obtained through the "Assessment of Recognition of Prior Learning." (ARPL) process is recognized as equivalent to completing an apprenticeship program, it signifies that the individual has demonstrated the necessary skills and competencies required for that particular trade or occupation. This recognition can be valuable for individuals seeking employment or career advancement opportunities in their chosen field. In South Africa, a process called Artisan Recognition of Prior Learning (ARPL) is used for the listed trades. It is possible, under certain conditions, for persons to apply for a trade test to become an artisan through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

Industry relevance : RPL should ensure that individuals in various industries remain current and relevant. This is particularly important in rapidly evolving sectors, such as Information Technology, where traditional qualifications may lag behind industry advancements. Guidelines to applicants on the types of evidence that will be considered "recent" should be mentioned. Assessors should be knowledgeable about current industry standards, current trends, and best practices to make informed judgments about the currency and significance of applicants' learning.

Quality Assurance: Ensuring the credibility of RPL processes is paramount, as seen in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF)²⁵ and the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (NZQF).²⁶ These frameworks provide guidelines for quality assurance in RPL, ensuring that assessments are reliable, valid, and consistent across different contexts. As per ILO,²⁷ in a successful RPL system, the nature of the relationship between the assessor and the candidate is quite different than seen in a traditional, formal education system. The assessors, while maintaining quality and accuracy in the assessment must provide correct information about the process and guide the candidate in collecting evidence. A candidate may have all the necessary credentials, yet may not know how to present them. Hence, before beginning the formal application process, candidates must be presented with full information about the qualifications and competency standards, the costs and the time frame and the advantages of RPL.

A Menu of Options for future RPL in India

Governments, in collaboration with employers' associations, trade unions, and civil society organizations, must raise awareness about the importance of recognizing informal workers' skills through RPL.

²⁴

<https://www.uil.unesco.org/en/articles/recognition-validation-and-accreditation-denmark#:~:text=The%20legislation%20provides%20adults%20with,and%20a%20bottom%20Dup%20approach.>"In 2007, a key legislation (Act no. 556) on validation of non-formal and informal learning was introduced, giving an individual citizen the possibility to have his or her prior knowledge and experiences recognized".

²⁵ https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

²⁶

https://www2.nzqa.govt.nz/tertiary/quality-assurance/guidelines-learning-for-credit/?utm_source=chatgpt.com Guidelines for recognition and award of learning for credit

²⁷ Agarwala (2015)'

National Credit Framework can offer flexible pathways for individuals to gain formal qualifications based on their existing skills and experiences. This could include recognition of partial qualifications or credit transfer arrangements

We will need to evaluate individuals' skills and knowledge in real or simulated work environments. This could involve observations, performance evaluations, and feedback from supervisors.

Integrating Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) into apprenticeship training programmes benefit both apprentices and employers, allowing apprentices to choose flexible pathways to achieve their learning goals, including options for self-directed learning, online courses, and additional training modules. We will need to make provision for credit or exemptions for competencies that the apprentice has already mastered through prior learning, such as formal education, work experience, or self-study. The RPL system could also incorporate on-the-job assessment and RPL methods into the apprenticeship training programmes to evaluate the apprentice's performance in real work settings. This can include observations by mentors/supervisors, practical tasks, and workplace projects. This can also shorten the duration of the apprenticeship training and allow the apprentice to focus on acquiring new skills and knowledge. However, this will need to be first pilot-tested before it is generalized to assess its value for trainees and employers.

Competencies gained through RPL are to be formally validated and recognized through industry-standard certification or qualification frameworks. This provides credibility to the skills acquired through prior learning and enhances the apprentice's employability. However, this would involve developing standard protocols, standardization of assessment criteria, providing training for assessors, and conducting periodic reviews of RPL practices.

Digitizing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes can streamline the assessment, documentation, and validation of individuals' prior learning experiences. There is a need to develop interactive online self-assessment tools that individuals can use to evaluate their existing skills, knowledge, and experiences relevant to a particular field or qualification. These tools can provide personalized feedback and recommendations based on the individual's responses. People working in the informal economy should be facilitated to create digital portfolios where individuals can compile evidence of their prior learning, such as certificates, transcripts, work samples, and testimonials. E-portfolios can be easily accessed and updated, allowing individuals to document their learning journey over time.

We will also need to provide access to virtual labs or Virtual Skill Labs (VSLs) and simulations where individuals can practice and demonstrate their skills in a risk-free environment. Virtual skill labs allow for hands-on learning experiences without the need for physical equipment or resources. The assessments can be adaptive, interactive, and include multimedia elements to enhance engagement and learning outcomes. Individuals should be able to utilize digital credentialing platforms to manage digital badges, micro-credentials, and certificates for specific skills or achievements. These digital credentials would be portable, verifiable, and can be easily shared with employers, educators, and other stakeholders.

Similarly, AI-driven assessment tools can provide instant feedback and personalized learning recommendations based on individuals' performance. Remote proctoring technologies, which use webcam and screen monitoring to deter cheating and maintain the credibility of assessment results, can be utilised for fair and transparent assessment. Blockchain technology to create tamper-proof records of individuals' learning achievements and credentials to ensure data security, integrity, and transparency, reducing the risk of credential fraud and misrepresentation can be utilised for

reliability of the assessment process. Integrating RPL processes into existing Learning Management Systems (LMS) to provide a centralized platform for managing training materials, assessments, and learner progress. LMS platforms can track individuals' RPL outcomes and facilitate communication between learners and assessors. A clear and transparent RPL framework outlining the processes, criteria, and documentation requirements for assessing prior learning is needed for digitizing RPL system.

Transitioning individuals from unskilled or semi-skilled categories to skilled worker status should come with tangible incentives, including monetary rewards for those successfully assessed through RPL. This incentive structure stands as a pivotal measure in enticing youth to pursue RPL opportunities, thereby bolstering their participation in skill development initiatives.

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