

AN APPROACH TO IMPROVE PENETRATION OF SKILLS RECOGNITION AND VALIDATION IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Skill development and recognition should become a policy priority for India. A growing young population, soaring unemployment rates, higher informality in labour markets, and lukewarm sentiments for growth ahead - India has more reasons to invest in human capital development, also amidst the COVID-19 outbreak, which has magnified workforce challenges. This paper aims to place the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), a tool for skills validation, at the centre stage and highlight how this tool can contribute to reduce the skills mismatch in Indian labour markets. While discussing the challenges involved in awarding RPL certification, the paper concludes by providing recommendations for improving outreach and penetration of RPL in India.

CLASSIFICATION: JEL J01, J24

KEYWORDS: *Informal learning; skill development; informal sector; labour market, employment; Recognition of Prior Learning; India*

1. CONTEXT SETTING

COVID-19 pandemic has not only affected the socioeconomic fabric of India but has also created sentiments of economic instability for coming years. Although annual GDP growth has been on a declining spree after 2016, the pandemic seems to have worsened the situation¹. As per Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI), India's real GDP contracted by a

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1 India's annual GDP growth rate as per The World Bank was reported at 7.044% for 2017, 6.12% for 2018, and 5.024% for 2019, retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=IN>

record low of (-)23.9% in the first quarter of FY2020–21². The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has further predicted an economic contraction of (-)9.5% for FY2020–21³. The unemployment rate was reported at 6.67%⁴ and CPI inflation (Consumer Price Index) was at an all-time high of 7.34% (worst since January) in September 2020⁵. COVID-19-induced lockdowns have had debilitating effects on economic activity across both product and labour markets. Supply chain was disrupted because factories and workplaces closed down temporarily, thus impacting employment and total production. The demand side stifled as private consumption contracted. Many key sectors such as tourism, hospitality, recreation, food services, real estate, MSME, wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, and aviation experienced immediate shock. Other sectors such as healthcare, public utilities, safety, social work, and transport witnessed an increased/emerging demand. A change in workplace dynamics was also seen with an increasing demand for specialised skills and more emphasis on information and communications technology (ICT) (job areas such as care giving, infection audit, online education platforms-commerce, and block chain technologies) As the disease outbreak created a burden on public infrastructure, particularly healthcare, it also magnified workforce challenges for the world's second-most populous country. India witnessed mass labour displacement. Low-skilled workers or those engaged in informal sectors, and youth or women participants were rendered more vulnerable to income loss and layoffs. The government undertook fiscal and monetary policy measures and measures to support enterprises and jobs, conducted social dialogue, among others. The government launched collaborative initiatives for skill mapping of citizens including those returning from overseas (SWADES)⁶. Talks about resettlement of displaced workers and preparedness in terms of healthcare, infrastructure, and availability of skilled manpower came to forefront.

The event highlights importance of strengthening the stock of human capital, particularly skills, in India. As per the Human Development Report (HDI, 2019), only 17.6% of India's labour force is skilled⁷. India is at 116th/174 position in the Human Capital Index (HCI) prepared by the World Bank in March 2020. HCI highlights how current health and education outcomes shape productivity of next generation of workers. India's score of 0.49⁸ (lower than all BRICS nations except South Africa) suggests that a child born today will likely be less than half as productive as a future worker as he would be, if

2 Data sourced from http://www.mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/press_release/PRESS_NOTE-Q1_2020-21.pdf

3 Data sourced from https://www.rbi.org.in/Scripts/BS_PressReleaseDisplay.aspx?prid=50479

4 Data sourced from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE)

5 Data sourced from the National Statistics Office, MoSPI

6 Information sourced from <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1628976>

7 During 2010–18

8 (0 being lowest, 1 being highest)

provided with complete education and health. India slipped 10 places in the Global Competitiveness Index to the 68th/141 countries in 2019. It ranks lower than the 100th position on 5/12 key pillars⁹ including skills, ICT adoption, and labour market. Interestingly, Singapore, Switzerland, and Australia are one of the top performers on both indices. Although a one-size-fits-all theory is not applicable, but it can be learnt how these countries have adopted an approach that is more pivoted around ‘improved human capital outcomes’(Two of the unique systems, namely Australia’s Skill Visa and Singapore’s Skills Future Credit, are discussed in this paper later).

As argued in the Economic Survey of India, 2018, India’s attempt at economic convergence (or more commonly to the process of keeping pace with richer countries in terms of economic development) is threatened by lack of structural transformations required to shift resources from low productivity to high productivity sectors. Visible challenges exist in terms of upgradation of human capital to cater to the demands in terms of future of jobs. India, currently being a lower middle-income country, has been striving to achieve an upper middle-income status. Risk for India, being a late converger is that resources (especially labour) will move from low-productivity, informal sectors to other sectors that are marginally less formal and only marginally more productive (Ministry of Finance, 2018). Consequently, this shall drive only marginal improvements in the desired socio-economic outcomes. Additionally, almost 70% of the population depends on agricultural activities for livelihood and resides in rural areas where higher levels of under-employment and low productivity are observed. As per Sanghi and Srija (2015), dearth of access to education and training keeps the vulnerable and marginalised sections in the vicious circle of low skills, low productive employment, and poverty. Skill development facilitates a high productivity cycle and increased employment opportunities, and hence, is crucial for reducing poverty, increasing sustainable enterprise development, and promoting inclusive growth.

These arguments indicate that skills development and recognition should become a policy priority for India. In the current scenario, skill development and recognition, as a means for human capital development, can be a good catalyst in improving the socio-economic wellbeing of the population and creating resilience against economic shocks. While upcoming sections discuss about supply and demand side dynamics, skills recognition as a concept requires a massive change in mindset, where all stakeholders believe in its benefits. This change may happen at a slower pace, which makes policymaking a challenging task.

9 GCI includes 12 pillars – Institutions, Infrastructure, ICT Adoption, Macroeconomic Stability, Health, Skills, Product Market, Labour Market, Financial System, Stability, Market Size, Business Dynamism, Innovation Capability

1.1 Objective and Methodology

The objectives of this paper are to understand reasons and the manner in which skills recognition using the tool of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) can contribute in reducing the skill demand and supply mismatch in Indian labour markets and to make recommendations for improving outreach and penetration of RPL. The paper also intends to establish that RPL should get a spotlight in policy decisions. Key findings and inferences drawn here are an offshoot of a combination of literature review, secondary research, analysis of data, stakeholder interaction, and observations. In this paper, Section 1 introduces the context. Section 2 explains RPL. Section 3 analyses the demographic profile of India, characteristics of labour markets, skill formation systems, and labour force participation trends and concludes to highlight the need for promoting RPL. Section 4 discusses the current scenario of RPL implementation in India. Section 5 discusses the challenges faced in awarding RPL, and the last section discusses recommendations for increasing RPL outreach.

2. CONCEPT OF RPL

Universally, RPL has no standard definition and its meaning is often derived from its applicability. Definition of RPL consumes diverse understandings, methodologies, processes, and intended outcomes. It refers to an assessment process used to evaluate an individual's existing set of skills, knowledge, and experience, gained either by non-formal or informal learning involvements, against prescribed standards towards partial or a full qualification (Aggarwal, 2015). Country-wise different terminologies used to recognise and validate of non-formal and informal learning system are illustrated in (Table 1).

Table 1: Different terminologies used to refer to recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning systems¹⁰

Terminologies used	Abbreviation	Popular areas of implementation
Assessment of prior experiential learning, assessment of prior learning	APEL, APL	UK, New Zealand
Recognition of prior learning	RPL	Australia, Hong Kong, India, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, South Africa
Prior learning assessment and recognition, recognition of acquired competencies, recognition of current competencies	PLAR, RAC, RCC	Canada

Terminologies used	Abbreviation	Popular areas of implementation
Validation of non-formal and informal learning	VNFIL	Europe
Recognition, validation, and accreditation (RVA) of alternative learning system	RVA	Philippines
Recognition, validation, and certification of competencies	RVCC	Portugal

The assessment process usually culminates towards gaining a qualification/award of a certificate and/or further learning and development. Implementation of RPL of India has been discussed in Section 4.

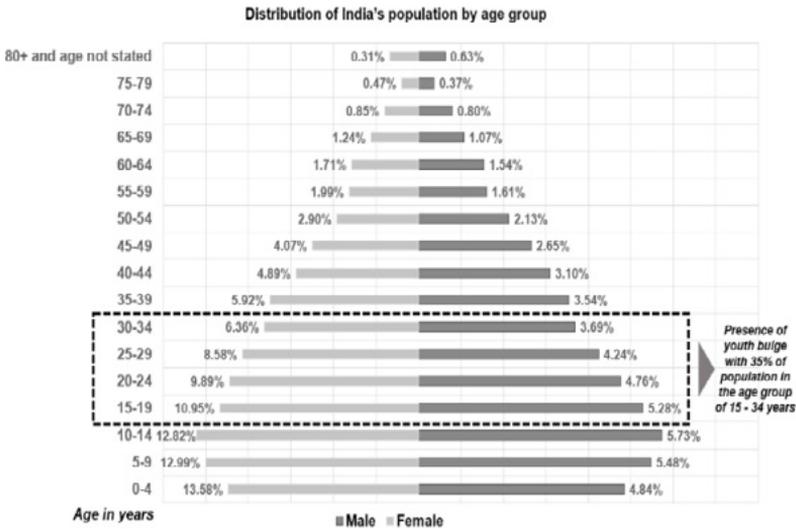
2.1 Process and benefits

The RPL process involves counselling and mobilisation of interested individuals, documentation, and evidence collection. This is followed by assessment and certification of learning outcomes with respect to certain standards of education and training. It is often integrated with skill gap training and relies heavily on assessment methodologies. RPL is deemed to have benefits for individuals (improves mobility, employability, self-confidence, productivity with skill gap training, access to lifelong learning), employers (identifies competency levels), government (promotes social inclusion), and other stakeholders (Wheelahan et al., 2003). It assumes even greater importance in the context of globalisation and labour migration wherein an increased need for developing mechanisms for recognition of learning across borders is sensed.

3. NEED FOR PROMOTING RPL IN INDIA

First, India is a young country where almost half of total population is aged below 25 years (**Figure 1**). It has competitive advantages because of the demographic dividend opportunity. Young population is an easy entrant to the country's already expanding workforce (62% in the working age group of 15–59 years) and is likely to supplement a reduction in the dependency ratio. However, the unemployment rate for the youth (15–29 years of age)¹¹ at 17.3% is higher than that of the working age population (6.2%). Complications for youth have aggravated with the COVID-19 outbreak. A risk exists that they will be scarred throughout their working lives leading to emergence of a “lockdown generation” (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020).

¹¹ Considering that youth belongs to the age group of 15–29 years, data areas reported in Annual Periodic Labour Force Survey 2018–19 by MoSPI

Figure 1: Distribution of India's population by age group¹²

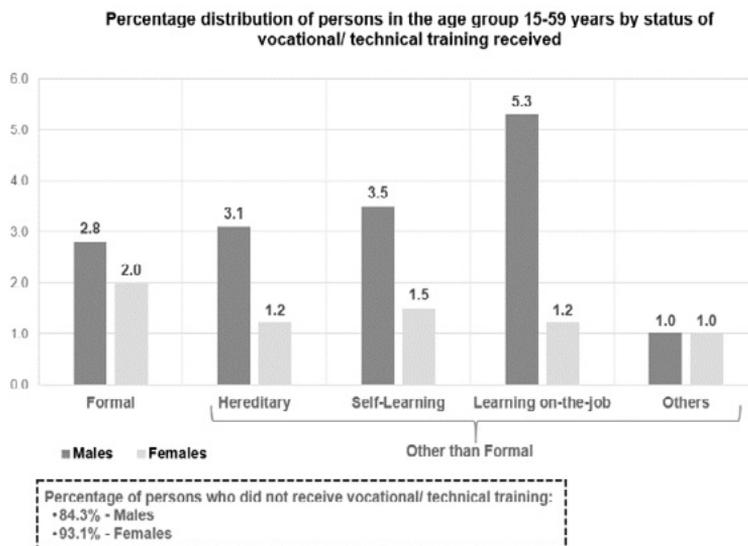
- Disruption in classroom training that could reduce potential employment opportunities in future.
- Those who have taken education loans may find it difficult to repay as immediate employment prospects may not be available.
- Those who are out of college, looking for work, or re-entering labour markets may find obtaining a steady employment challenging.
- A threat of reduced earnings, loss of employment, and collapse of businesses exists due to contraction in the economy.

Demographical heterogeneity is observed in India. Southern states such as Kerala and Tamil Nadu have a higher median age (29–31 years) vis-à-vis young states of north India such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand (20–22 years). Sanghi, Parvathy, and Khurana (2018) noticed that the population across southern states shall be ageing soon, the northern states would have a lower median age on average, and hence, a rising working age population. These aspects shall fuel a north–south labour migration. Thus, synchronising youth aspirations in line with the industry demand and addressing employment challenges for both sets of population are needed. While skill-based training is one way to resolve this problem, RPL can be used to formally map existing skill competencies acquired through informal channels or on-the-job.

Second, if we assume the status of vocational/technical training acquired by persons to give us a proxy for stock of skills, data suggest that skill distribution in India is uneven. As per Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2018–19, 88.7%

persons in the working age group did not receive vocational/technical training, 2.4% received it through ‘formal’ means, and remaining 8.9% (significantly higher than formal) received it through ‘other than formal’ means such as hereditary, self-learning, and learning on-the-job. This gap is more pronounced when viewed from a gender perspective (**Figure 2**).

Figure 2: Percentage distribution of Persons in the age group of 15–59 years by status of vocational/technical training received¹³



Asuyama (2011) explored the aspects of skill formation systems in India and highlighted how education and training policies as well individual incentives for skill acquisition have guided skill formation systems, among other factors. From the second five-year plan (1956–61), India started emphasising more on tertiary and technical education to build a skilled manpower to support extensive industrialisation. Only after the mid-1980s, universalisation of basic education was promoted. Study of the skill formation system in India is out of scope of this paper. One interesting observation from this study is that of a demand-side problem. There is stagnant increase in formal employment opportunities. While wage premium receivable through education is high for formal employment and low for informal, the investment in education in India does not necessarily ensure formal employment. This situation hinders people from investing more in education. So, even if the country intends to increase supply of skilled workers by introducing new initiatives of training/infrastructure, demand-side reforms may have to be undertaken to ensure that employment opportunities are generated for skilled workforce. These interventions are discussed in the recommendations section.

13 Data sourced from Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey of India 2018–19 (PLFS)

Third, gender inequalities are evident in labour force participation. As per the PLFS 2018–19, the labour force participation rate for males of 15 years and above was 75.5%, whereas it was only 24.5% for females. Moreover, a male regular wage/salaried employee earns on average 1.4 times the earnings of a female regular wage/salaried employee¹⁴. Overall, the unemployment rate for same age group was 6.0% for males and 5.1% for females, which is quite similar. However, the unemployment rate for females who had completed post graduation and above education (23.6%) was significantly higher than that for males (10.5%). A similar trend was observed for females who had diploma/certificate courses, graduation, and secondary and above education, and higher secondary education.

Conclusively, first, fewer females enter the labour market. Second, those who join earn less than their male counterparts and higher education deprives them of better employment prospects. Third, the unemployment rate for females is higher than that for males, irrespective of education attained. Many factors, such as lack of safety, appropriate transportation, early age marriage, social stigma, sexual harassment, and poor sanitation facilities at workplace, could explain this disparity. In such cases, RPL provides a good opportunity to female participants to create space in the labour market without undergoing lengthy training courses. Compared with other training interventions, RPL is a shorter duration assessment (mostly involves a week). The average cost of obtaining RPL certification is lower than that of other training courses¹⁵. RPL can help recognise competencies with added ‘flexibility’ (women could use online assessment).

Fourth, let’s look at another distinguishing characteristic of labour markets in India, which is informality. As per ILO, in formalisation of labour in India is the highest in the south Asian region. The share of informal employment in total employment is 88.2% of which 80.9% is employed in the informal sector, 6.5% in the formal sector, and remaining 0.8% in households¹⁶. Many research reports have highlighted that economies that have a higher quotient of informality in labour markets tend to display weaker dispositions in terms of economic and social development. A positive relation has been observed between high informal employment and poverty, excessive work hours, and low Human Development Index (HDI) value (ILO, 2018).

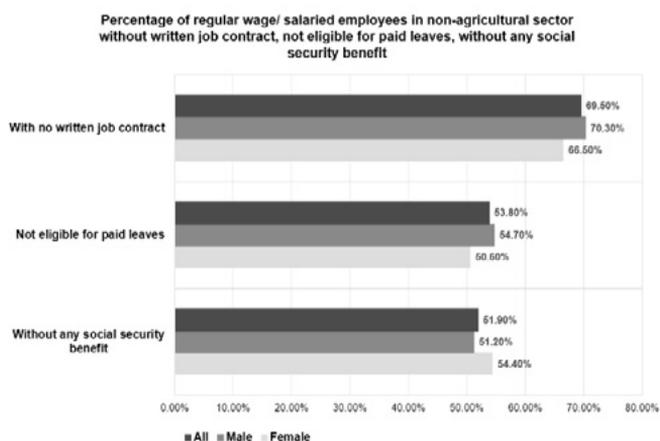
14 Author’s estimate on PLFS data; a similar trend of males earning more than their female counterparts was observed for casual labours engaged in work other than public works.

15 For instance, average per candidate cost of training under short-term training in the PMKVY Scheme of Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship is approx. Rs.15,000 compared with Rs.4,000 for RPL

16 While agriculture dominates informal employment, the services sector dominates formal employment

PLFS reported that 68.4%¹⁷ of workers (in the non-agriculture sector) were engaged in the informal sector during 2018–19. The share of the informal sector among male workers at 71.5% was higher than that among female workers at 54.1%. More than 50% of the regular wage/salaried employees had no written job contract, were eligible for paid leaves, and were without any social security benefits (**Figure 3**)¹⁸. Absence of a written job contract allows exploitation of workers as working hours, wages, and terms of employment are not documented. Lack of paid leaves, and maternity and other health benefits further expose them to higher risks of poverty. Poor workplace conditions compromise safety and hygiene standards.

Figure3: Percentage of regular wage/salaried employees in the non-agricultural sector without any written job contract, paid leaves, and social security benefits¹⁹



Lack of a social protection net also exposes the informal sector workforce to greater risks from unprecedented economic shocks. COVID-19-induced lockdowns in India are a good example of such shocks. After the lockdown was announced, many daily wage workers reverse-migrated to their home states due to the fear of loss of livelihood and starvation in the absence of undisrupted source of income and definite social protection benefits. The episode highlights importance of strengthening permanent social protection systems for the workforce. It hints moving towards a more formal economy, which can be catalysed by the formal recognition of competencies through RPL. As per ILO, approximately 400 million workers in the informal economy are at a risk of falling deeper into poverty during the COVID-19 crisis in India. RPL can hence

17 Percentage distribution of usually working (ps+ss) persons engaged in the non-agricultural and AEGC sectors

18 In PLFS, social security benefits considered were PF/pension, gratuity, healthcare benefit, and maternity benefit.

19 Data sourced from Annual Report Periodic Labour Force Survey of India 2018–19 (PLFS)

be viewed as an essential contributing factor to aid in transition towards a formal economy.

Fifth, a discrete look at India's labour market, particularly for informal sectors, provides an interesting viewpoint. The demand side consists of industry and employers who need skilled and productive workers to produce goods and provide services. The supply side consists of labour force willing and able to work in return for adequate compensation. The labour supply curve can be assumed to be highly wage elastic, whereas the labour demand curve can be assumed to be less wage elastic. This can be expected largely for informal sector markets, sectors with unskilled or moderately skilled labour, or sectors that depend on seasonal and migrant labour. RPL certification most likely influences the elasticity of the labour supply curve and provides more 'bargaining power' to the labour force vis-à-vis those who do not possess the RPL certificate. RPL certification with up skilling can positively influence the productivity of the workforce, thereby possibly leading to the production of more output with same/little more work hours as well as reduction in wastage. Additionally, skills recognition will allow labelling of the workforce, which will assist employers in aligning human resources with skill sets matching job profiles. RPL certification can help employers build an internal 'skill stock' and plan refresher trainings and employee fitment.

Lastly, resettlement of labour displaced due to COVID-19 has attracted the attention of policymakers. While many state governments have initiated/completed a skill mapping exercise of the returnee migrants, these data can help ensure appropriate alignment of labour force to employment opportunities. In this regard, the government launched Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan in June 2020; involving 25 chosen work categories in 116 identified districts (Aatma Nirbhar districts) and shall be a convergent effort between 12 different ministries/departments. RPL certification is selected as one of the implementation methods to ensure easy and relevant fitment of workers in labour markets.

Overall, from the aforementioned analysis, it can be summarised that RPL can help in reducing skills mismatch in labour markets due to the following 5 reasons and hence should be widely promoted.

1. To leverage the opportunity of demographic dividend
2. To reduce gender inequality in labour force participation
3. To catalyse transition from informal to formal economy
4. To provide more bargaining power to the workforce
5. To aid in the resettlement of workforce displaced due to COVID-19

Upcoming sections analyse the existing landscape of RPL implementation in India and enlist possible challenges in awarding RPL certification.

4. CURRENT SCENARIO

Earliest instances of RPL in India can be found in the conceptualisation of the National Skills Qualification Framework (NSQF, 2013), and Common Norms and direct assessment of skills under the Modular Employable Skills Scheme of Directorate General of Training (DGT). Multiple RPL interventions have been implemented across India through central government schemes, Sector Skill Councils (SSC)-led initiatives, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities by industry partners. However, RPL under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) of the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) remains one of the most prominent initiatives that has brought the concept of skills recognition to limelight in India.

4.1 PMKVY RPL and its Experience

PMKVY RPL is a pan-India level scheme aiming to recognise and certify million individuals across job roles along NSQF. PMKVY was launched in 2015 and subsequently re-launched in 2016. More than 2.7 million beneficiaries have been RPL-certified PMKVY 2016–20²⁰.

4.1.1 About PMKVY RPL

Under PMKVY RPL, candidates are assessed by third-party bodies accredited by SSC. Successful candidates receive a reward money of Rs.500²¹ and a 3-year accidental insurance policy. The scheme primarily started with three implementation modes but made two significant additions in 2018. These are briefly explained below, as analysed from the guidelines.

1. RPL at camps (Type 1): RPL at make-shift structures or camp facilities, mostly targets a location where a cluster of beneficiaries with a skill set are consolidated (industrial or traditional clusters).
2. RPL at employer's premise (Type 2): RPL of beneficiaries employed with different employers/industries at its premise.
3. RPL at centres (Type 3): RPL to be conducted at established training centres.
4. RPL with best-in-class employers (BICE, Type 4): RPL of employees of identified reputed companies and industry bodies with co-branded certification.
5. RPL through demand (Type 5): RPL of beneficiaries mobilised via an online demand aggregation portal and similar to type 3.

20 Data sourced from PMKVY 2016–20 dashboard accessed from <http://pmkvyofficial.org/>

21 Pass percentage in the assessment exam for job roles of NSQF levels 1, 2, and 3 is 50% and for job roles of NSQF level 4 and above is 70%

4.1.2 Experience from PMKVY RPL

RPL implementation has mirrored several achievements and failures. Two major achievements were made. First, PMKVY functioned as an effective platform for introducing RPL to Indian labour markets on a large scale. This led to establishment of an ecosystem and has provided a starting point. Second, the scheme has evolved with market demand. Diversified methods have been the point of focus, which is visible in the introduction of new project types involving formal industry connects and use of an online portal to structurally mobilise target beneficiaries (RPL types 4 and 5). No clear polarisation of sectors is observed across project types yet, which is visible in the guidelines.

There have been noticeable shortfalls. Foremost, evidence that certification creates an aspirational value for both target beneficiaries and employers is limited, as inferred from the fact that the scheme struggled to achieve its overall targets (Sharma, Y. S., 2020). Among other factors, limited ‘premium’ is attached to the certificate, which makes it difficult for participants to view RPL as a form of career progression. Employers, majorly from the labour-intensive industries, can exhibit resistance to participation. It resembles a typical causality dilemma. Both employers and beneficiaries have a large role in making RPL more aspirational, but both find limited incentives. Second, the scheme may have had operational issues. Targeted certifications have not been achieved. The guidelines reveal that proposal submission and approval is an offline process, which is likely to delay the overall implementation pace. Third, as argued by a report of the Committee for Rationalization and Optimization of the Functioning of the Sector Skill Councils, the essence of RPL does not seem to have been captured as more focus has been placed on achieving numbers. Considering the scale of operations, PMKVY RPL is inferred to compete with other components (short-term training and special projects) for availability of resources such as infrastructure availability, qualified trainers, assessors, and adequate monitoring.

4.2 Other RPL Programmes

Limited public information is available on experience from other RPL programmes that have been implemented through DGT, SSC, and CSR activities. A major difference in the RPL process flow between the DGT model and PMKVY RPL is that the former involves a pre-assessment test. If a candidate is able to pass pre-assessment or Level 1 assessment, he receives Level 1 certification and becomes eligible for Level 2 in 3 months. However, if he fails, he is provided a skill gap training on core and support competencies, followed by final assessment. If a candidate fails in the final assessment, he is further recommended for competency-based long-term training. The requirement for bridge training or upskilling is demonstrated through pre-assessment of skills. Whereas in PMKVY RPL, skill gap is covered during candidate orientation.

5. CHALLENGES INVOLVED

Following five broad challenges can be identified in the implementation and award of RPL in the country.

5.1 Behavioural and Institutional Inertia

RPL faces a dual behavioural challenge. Foremost, vocational education is highly under-rated and is considered less respectable vis-à-vis degrees/diplomas from premier institutions or the conventional education system. Second, an RPL-certified candidate commonly faces ‘institutional hostility’ particularly from trainers and employers (Wheelahan et al., 2003). An in-built inertia is observed towards acknowledgement of learnings of RPL-certified candidates. Employers perceive that these candidates are not competent, and the certification is ‘easy to get’. Trainers and fellow workers believe that candidates are not ‘well qualified’ as they have not attended formal learning programmes and may have put in less efforts.

5.2 Lack of Trust in the Assessment Process

Any assessment is largely a systematic process of collecting evidence on knowledge of an individual and is aimed at further improving his/her learning and certifying the outcome. No standardised assessment method is prevalent across sectors, and RPL assessments are variable in nature. These range from offline (pen–paper-based methods) to online (mobile/computer/tab-based assessments). For practical components of assessments, face-to-face demonstration and viva are preferred methods. If planned at a larger scale, shortage of reliable assessment agencies and qualified assessors may occur. Lack of adequate quality assurance mechanisms provide a playground for unethical practices to prevail.

5.3 Lack of Awareness and Low Aspirational Value

A major bottleneck in RPL implementation in India is lack of awareness about the concept, process, and potential benefits. Labour market participants are ignorant that skills gained through non-formal and informal settings can also be formally recognised. This hits the ecosystem at several levels, such as less participation from employers and candidates, wastage of skills, mismatch in the skill level and employment opportunities, and even lesser wages and productivity. Lack of awareness also contributes in making RPL less aspirational.

5.4 Lack of Cross-Pollination Activities

Existence of different sectors and associated multidisciplinary practices provides a wide array of opportunities for the development of a shared language. Best practices in one sector can be replicated in other sectors of relatively similar characteristics. Policy frameworks that incorporate cross-pollination are found to be more successful, cost effective, and stable. However, limited evidence of

cross-pollination activities is currently available for RPL.

5.5 Difficulties of Skills Recognition in Informal Economy

RPL is most frequently identified with a credentialing process where a participant provides a portfolio of evidence as a proof of prior learning and skills. The accepted methodology consists of documentation—resume, transcripts, and declarative methods. These methods cannot be applied as-it-is in an economic setting like that of India which has higher informality. This may be carried out on the basis of traditions, customs, social norms, and social networks. Informal recognition takes place at an individual level or consists of a collaborative effort by business or trade associations that recognise skills on a semi-informal basis and issue membership cards to apprentices who have graduated (Braňka, 2016).

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Following are some recommendations for improving RPL penetration in India and ensuring its effective execution on a large scale.

6.1 National Policy Framework for RPL

National RPL guidelines should be designed for the validation of skills acquired through informal or non-formal learning in India. In its multiple reports, ILO has recommended that all countries should establish RPL systems. As per Aggarwal (2015) policymakers should set up/strengthen a national level ‘exclusive institution’ to implement and monitor RPL programmes. This institution should function as the first point of contact for potential applicants, be an umbrella organisation for all RPL interventions, and act as a bridge to coordinate with all key stakeholders. This exercise should engage a decentralised institutional setup supplemented with adequate record-keeping.

6.2 Defining RPL

How one defines RPL largely determines its application. In cognizance of limited resource availability and large scale of operations, exclusive objectives should be set up and pursued one-by-one, rather than attempting to achieve all at once.

6.2.2.1. Should RPL be identified as an end in itself?—As pointed out by Wheelahan et al., (2003), whether RPL is identified as an outcome or as a process to achieve other motives shall impact the way it is defined and implemented. It can be discussed whether the intent is only to certify people or engage them in re-skilling and upskilling as well. One approach could be to define customised RPL methods for different NSQF levels.

6.2.2.2. Is RPL distinguished from a credit transfer mechanism?—A credit transfer mechanism assesses the concerned course/subject that an individual uses to gain access/award of credit to a course/subject. By contrast, RPL assesses

an individual's learning and extent to which he/she has acquired the skills to undertake a task or job. A key differentiator is that the course/subject is assessed in a credit transfer mechanism, whereas the learner/student is being assessed in RPL (Wheelahan et al., 2003). Whether RPL should be used to award credit towards partial or full completion of a course is an important question to be addressed during design. Currently, RPL is distinguished from credit transfer under popular programmes in India.

6.3 Manpower Database/ Skills Registry

A 'Skills Registry', if available, at a national level would be helpful in making vocational education more responsive to labour market needs. In times like that of COVID-19, this registry can be used to plan strategies for economic resettlement of those affected. Limited information is available on return on investment from RPL. The demand for RPL should be estimated through systematic data collection.

'Skills Visa' in Australia is a good example of skills assessment and mapping of migrants²². People who want to work in Australia are required to apply for Skills Visa, which suits the work intended to be performed. Skills assessment is mandatory for skilled migration to Australia under points tested, employer sponsored, graduate migrant, and temporary graduate visas. The government maintains an online portal 'Skill select' for facilitation purposes. A similar setup for Skilled Workers Visa exists in countries such as the UK, Canada, and New Zealand.

6.4 Re-engineer Delivery Channels

The government and industry both should take lead in driving RPL programmes. As argued by Aggarwal (2015), countries should have clear guidelines on cost-sharing of RPL between government, employers, and candidates to ensure its sustainability and upscaling.

6.4.1. Industry sponsored/co-funding model—Section 5 discussed that the conventional methods of providing RPL certification are difficult to implement in economies that are angled towards informal sectors. Hence, innovative implementation models are needed. RPL programmes may be funded/ co-funded by the government and industry. Industry should be adequately incentivised to support RPL through some regulations or other benefits.

6.4.2. Online assessment—Some countries are concentrating on making the portfolio method more user-friendly, using ICT for e-RPL or e-portfolio, and providing extensive support to candidates (Aggarwal, 2015). Digital methods have become an unavoidable part of training delivery after the COVID-19 outbreak and should be adopted for target audience where adequate

22 Information on immigration and citizenship sourced from the official website of Department of Home Affairs, Australian Government, retrieved from <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/>

infrastructure is available. There should be renewed focus on online assessment tests of RPL. Third-party assessment bodies and industry should collaborate to create an online repository of question banks. This route could be adopted for job roles of higher NSQF levels that have advanced learners. To promote online assessments, cost of assessment can be subsidised for beneficiaries who are willing to take tests, at least in short–medium run. Proctor-based assessments should be promoted at large.

6.4.3. RPL-based workforce classification and economic activities–Different delivery channels can be executed for different economic activities and workforce classification. For instance, government may take lead in promoting RPL for those engaged in agriculture and allied activities and for those engaged in ‘public works’. For latter, these may be taken up on the lines of RPL for construction workers registered with Building and Other Construction Workers (BoCW), conducted by DGT²³. It involves pre-training assessment of registered construction workers; training is imparted at the construction site in order to minimise disruption in work. The expenditure of training and assessment is borne from BoCW Cess funds, which also include wage compensation to workers during classroom training and assessment.

6.5 Minimise Asymmetry of Information

A ‘conceptual confusion’ about RPL and methods of implementation is observed. This confusion fuels comparisons of RPL with other modes of training in the vocational education space and creates doubts about its equivalence and acceptance. This challenge can be overcome in two ways.

6.5.1. Increase advocacy and targeted awareness–National-level workshops and seminars should be organised to provide conceptual clarity across stakeholders. Best practices adopted across sectors and geographies should be popularised through these workshops. A dedicated branding strategy should be formalised for RPL. Success stories should also be promoted heavily. A ‘one-stop website/application’ detailing concepts and terminologies of RPL shall be curated to provide updates and tips to interested stakeholders. ‘RPL melas’ should be organised on the lines of trade fairs and exhibitions, where RPL-certified candidate can display their products and expertise.

6.5.2. Capacity building of stakeholders–A ‘thorough assessment of value propositions’ should be conducted for all stakeholders to identify benefits of RPL for them. This information should be made available to all stakeholders publicly in interactive forms. **Table 2** provides a list of key stakeholders in the RPL ecosystem and their involvement across the RPL value chain.

23 Information sourced from the official website of Directorate General of Training (DGT), retrieved from <https://dgt.gov.in/>

Table 2: Key stakeholders and their involvement across RPL value chain²⁴

Key stakeholders and involvement across value chain		
SN	Stakeholders	Involvement Areas
1	Concerned government authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research and policy formulation ▪ Identification of stakeholders ▪ Capacity building ▪ Programme implementation and network operations ▪ Fund management ▪ Quality assurance ▪ Data management ▪ Impact assessment ▪ Grievance management
2	Sector Skill Councils or certificate-awarding body	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research and policy formulation ▪ Defining standards with relevant stakeholders ▪ Overview, design, and approval of content and curriculum ▪ Capacity building ▪ Fund management ▪ Quality assurance ▪ Data management ▪ Result approval ▪ Impact assessment ▪ Grievance management
3	Assessment Bodies, Assessors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Undertaking of Assessment Exam ▪ Data management ▪ Counselling of beneficiary ▪ Result preparation
4	Trainers, Instructors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Delivery of training modules ▪ Assistance in beneficiary documentation
5	Facilitating Institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Programme implementation and on-ground facilitation ▪ Mobilisation of beneficiary ▪ Counselling of beneficiary ▪ Data management
6	ICT Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Management Information System (MIS) ▪ Data management ▪ Beneficiary tracking ▪ Liaison with key stakeholders

Key stakeholders and involvement across value chain		
SN	Stakeholders	Involvement Areas
7	Industry, Academia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research and policy formulation ▪ Capacity building ▪ Overview, design, and approval of content and curriculum ▪ Counselling of beneficiary
8	Beneficiary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Documentation and gathering of proofs ▪ Programme feedback
9	Others– Participating financial institutions, banks, other enabling organisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Overall facilitation and programme implementation

6.6 Making RPL Certification More Aspirational

Although increased awareness and improvement in quality assurance mechanisms would be helpful, following methods shall also help in increasing the acceptability of RPL certification.

6.6.1. Introduction of a credit points system–RPL should be explicitly included in institutional negotiations and arrangements regarding credit transfer and articulation (Wheelahan et al., 2003). A credit points system may be incorporated in the RPL framework to align it with other TVET or formal education courses as well as promote pathways for taking international certifications. This would help the beneficiary group in attaining occupational mobility (ease in transition between jobs or ease of applying similar skills to a new environment).

6.6.2. Increased industry engagement across RPL value chain–One of the demand-led reforms, as discussed in Section 3, could be to provide more authority to industry in the entire RPL value chain. Industry should be encouraged to come to forefront in the design phase of the entire framework and participate actively across all value chain stages. Barriers relating to lack of trust, transparency, as well as perceived lack of value addition in the process, can then be overcome.

6.6.3. Mandating RPL certification as one of the employment criteria–Direct government intervention through regulatory frameworks can influence the economics of labour demand and supply. If RPL certification or any government-approved/awarded proof of skills recognition is mandated as one of the employment criteria, the target group may start rendering more significance to it. This could be another demand-led initiative. Such a mandate may initially be introduced in public sector enterprises on a pilot basis.

The Common Norms adopted by the government also indicate a similar need. As per the NSQF Gazette Notification²⁵, ‘the recruitment rules of the Government of India and the public sector enterprises of the central government shall be amended to define the eligibility criteria for all positions in terms of NSQF levels. State Governments shall be encouraged to amend their recruitment rules and those of public sector enterprises to define eligibility criteria for all positions in terms of NSQF levels’.

An excellent example of this proposition is from tenders released by Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation Limited (IRCTC) on the appointment of service providers for trains. In some of the tenders issued, it is mandated (as one of the criteria) that all catering staff engaged by the provider should be qualified/certified or gradually be qualified/certified in NSQF-aligned job roles. Requirements include roles such as train manager, food and beverage service staff, cooks, and pantry car manager. IRCTC also conducts RPL in association with MSDE under PMKVY.

Additionally, if national-level policies concerning employment, poverty reduction, development, migration, education, and training emphasise the importance of RPL, achieving the overall objectives would be easier (Aggarwal, 2015). Hence, inclusion of RPL certification in social welfare, financial inclusion, livelihood, employment generation, and related national schemes in India can very likely spur demand for the certification and enhance its value organically.

6.6.4. Incentivising people—One of the ways to promote greater use of RPL could be to incentivise a targeted set of population by subsidising the cost of assessments, at least in short–medium run. A good international example of this proposition is of Singapore’s ‘Skills Future Credit’. Introduced in 2015, this is a policy mechanism that encourages individuals to take ownership of their skill development and lifelong learning. An opening credit of \$500 is provided to every citizen aged 25 years and above, which is claimable for a wide range of credit-eligible courses and does not expire²⁶. France has established validation of experience as a law, which is a very positive initiative. The 133th article of law no. 2002-73 of 17 January 2002 that introduced the Validation des Acquis de l’Expérience (VAE - Experience Validation) process states that ‘every individual that is already in its active work life has the right to “validate” his (her) experience, especially the professional experience, in order to acquire a diploma, a title with a professional goal or a qualification certificate that is registered in the Répertoire National des Certifications Professionnelles (RNCP - National Registry of Professional Certifications)’ (European Commission, 2018).

25 Notification No. 8/6/2013

26 Information as sourced from the official website of SkillsFutureCredit, <https://www.skillsfuture.sg/Credit>

6.7. Strengthen Quality Assurance Mechanisms

Policy design should aim to adopt strategies that would increase the confidence of stakeholders in RPL certification. There is anxiety about quality of RPL assessments, which can be dealt with, to some extent, by making alterations in existing processes.

6.7.1. On-boarding of credible assessment and certification bodies—As per a report by Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board, assessment should be valid, current, sufficient, reliable, and authentic (Wheelahan et al., 2003). An important deviation from prevalent methods could be to expand the existing network and introduce more credible assessment bodies in the skill ecosystem. These bodies should include leading public and private institutions in the education space; reputed public and private universities at central and state level, such as various agricultural universities, law universities, and universities of health sciences; reputed think tanks; and reputed skill universities. Involvement of these institutions can help improve trust in the process.

6.7.2. Improved monitoring and audit—Continuous monitoring of RPL programmes should be another focus area. Policy frameworks should accommodate operational tasks and monitoring-related tasks as separate sub-functions in the entire process. In Australia, Australian Quality Training Framework is used to ensure the quality of provision in the VET sector. It consists of 12 pre-defined standards against which the providers are audited (Wheelahan et al., 2003). On similar lines, training providers and assessment agencies shall undergo regular audits on a sample basis. RPL programmes should be frequently audited for the quality of training, assessment, compliance with regulatory frameworks, access and equity, competence of trainers and assessors, financial management procedures, effective administrative procedures, data management, and ethical practices. Appropriate penalising mechanism should also be built-in to discourage unethical practices during implementation.

6.7.3. Frequent third-party impact assessments—A host of competent third-party agencies should be empanelled to regularly assess the impact of RPL programmes. These shall provide inputs on improvement in processes and highlight loopholes, thereby drive operational excellence. The common norms also suggest towards continuous tracking of beneficiaries after completion of skill certification.

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Interestingly, skill development and recognition have always been a critical factor in the jobs market, albeit in a very inconspicuous manner, especially for certain sectors. Many workforce participants who have undertaken short-term courses on English speaking, Tally, niche certifications in computer coding languages; or certifications for stock markets and life insurance have experienced an edge over

other participants. Similarly, live demonstration and practical assessment have been the common methods of validation of skills that are required to perform a job such as demonstration of skills and work samples in the beauty and wellness sector, handicrafts, apparel, and plumbing- or carpentry-related jobs. Hence, it is only required to be seen through a renewed lens in the current scenario. This paper aimed to provide a spotlight to the concept of skills recognition. Although many supply-side initiatives have been undertaken, a definite need to create a market (demand) for formally recognised workforce exists. What has been achieved so far in understanding and implementing RPL seems to be a beginning because India still has a long way to go. However, all stakeholders must establish coherence in the ecosystem while moving towards a shared goal of increasing skill-recognised workforce in the country.

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NOTES

(Endnotes)

- 1 As per UNEVOC, formal learning may be defined as the one that takes place in educational/training institutions and is recognised by national authorities, leading to diplomas/qualification. Non-formal learning can be considered as a more flexible version of formal learning and often takes place in workplace, community-based settings, etc. Informal learning is unintentional learning that occurs in daily life, family, workplace, communities, and through the interests and activities of individuals (Paraphrased from TVETipedia Glossary of UNESCO-UNEVOC accessed from <https://unevoc.unesco.org/home/TVETipedia+Glossary>).
- 2 ‘Employment in the informal sector and informal employment are concepts that refer to different aspects of the ‘informalisation’ of employment and to different targets for policy-making... The 17th ICLS defined ‘informal employment’ as comprising the total number of informal jobs, whether carried out in formal sector enterprises, informal sector enterprises, or households, during a given reference period... Informal employment comprises of own-account workers and employers employed in their own informal sector enterprises, contributing family workers, employees holding informal jobs, members of informal producers’ cooperatives, and own-account workers engaged in production of goods exclusively for final use by their own household (Husmanns, R., 2004).
- 3 The National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF) is a competency-

based framework that organises all qualifications according to a series of levels of knowledge, skills, and aptitude. These levels, graded from 1 to 10, are defined in terms of learning outcomes which the learner must possess regardless of whether they are obtained through formal, non-formal, or informal learning. NSQF in India was notified on 27 December 2013 (Ministry of Finance, 2013).

