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## **Career Guidance and Recognition of Prior Learning: A Proposed Model**

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### **Abstract**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is at the top of the policy agenda in the fields of education, training, and/or work in almost all countries across the world. The rationale and possible procedures have been well described. This contribution attempts to shed light on the impact of career guidance when integrated into the RPL process. Career guidance covers a range of activities that enable individuals to identify their capacities, competencies, and interests in order to make meaningful decisions both in the fields of education and occupation. It is deemed necessary for applicants to be successful in their recognition of prior learning process and for successful applicants to best exploit their newly acquired qualification in the labor market.

This contribution proposes a model for career guidance to be organized in an efficient and effective manner. It introduces a gradient in the intensity with which career guidance is integrated into the recognition of prior learning at different stages of the pre-assessment and assessment process.

### **Introduction**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is at the top of the policy agenda in the fields of education, training, and/or work in almost all countries across the world (Aggarwal, ILO, 2015; Cedefop et al., 2019; Duvokot et al., 2005; Hoffmann et al., 2009; Travers and Evans, 2011; Werquin, 2007, 2010, 2012). Countries are all striving to establish a sustainable system by which individuals can have all their competencies, however acquired, validated, and recognized. Many countries have decades and decades of experience in accepting and operationalizing the idea that people learn everywhere and all the time, and that their corresponding competencies (i.e., learning outcomes) could be given visibility and currency, through a qualification for example. The most common alternatives, instead or in addition to awarding a full-fledge qualification, are credits toward a qualification, exemption of academic prerequisite to enter the formal education and training system (e.g., higher education), partial/transitional qualifications, and certificate of labor market competencies with only local or sectoral currency (see Pielorz and Werquin, 2020,

for details). To simplify, this contribution focuses on RPL as leading to a qualification, but the line of argument may be extended to all these other awards without loss of generality.

An example of a country with a long-established RPL tradition is Malawi. It has had its [Trade Testing Service](#) in place since the 1950s. Uganda also has had a trade testing approach carried out under the auspices of the [Directorate of Industrial Training](#), and France, as early as 1934, [recognized the experiences](#) of workers who were serving as engineers without formal qualification so they could be awarded a formal qualification without necessarily studying in the formal learning system (Werquin, 2021).

Today, many countries have a system in place so that individuals can use various RPL opportunities, while others are at the piloting RPL stage. The rationale for implementing an RPL system may vary, but the intention is consistent: people who have learning outcomes from learning non-formally and/or informally can be assessed and awarded a qualification when their competencies meet the expected predefined qualification standards.

Although there seems to be congruency in the philosophy as to why to provide RPL opportunities, there are variations in the ways in which RPL is organized and implemented. For example, some countries only recognize learning outcomes strictly connected to an occupation in the labor market. Others extend recognition to learning outcomes coming from the private sphere (e.g., volunteering, family work). Yet, all countries see RPL as an approach for promoting equity because it provides a second chance of qualification, regardless of socioeconomic status. However, data collection is scarce and there is little hard evidence about the actual impact of RPL on economic outcomes and/or societal progress. There is also little evidence on the reasons for the different levels of participation in RPL. Nevertheless, work in the field shows that especially in countries where the level of competencies is high but not documented by qualifications, there is a relatively high rate of participation in RPL. RPL is therefore particularly attractive in Africa where competencies are many but rarely documented in a qualification. Countries and regulated occupations where social status and access to employment heavily depend on having a qualification are where RPL is most needed. In many countries, qualifications are a visa for work and, in most cases, the only way to access work with sufficient living wages. Lack of communication about and value of RPL opportunities could contribute to lower rates of participation. If people are not aware of these opportunities, they certainly cannot participate. Another related issue regarding participation rates is the lack of career guidance for access to, and participation in, an RPL process. Very little is known about the impact of career guidance when integrated within the RPL process or on the ways in which career guidance should be organized to best serve individuals. This is why this contribution focuses on this latter issue of career guidance when applied to the RPL process, RPL applicants, and potential applicants.

The rationale for such a focus is that little is known about career guidance in the context of RPL and that it is believed, based on fieldwork in more than 50 countries on five continents, that it is a key determinant of success.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

Career guidance has received a lot of attention in public policy and research circles (ELGPN; OECD, 2004; OECD and European Commission, 2004), where it has been defined as: “A range of activities that enable citizens of any age, and at any point in their lives, to identify their capacities, competencies and interests; to make meaningful educational, training and occupational decisions; and to manage their individual life paths in learning, work and other settings in which these capacities and competencies are learned and/or used” (Council of the European Union, 2008). The Council of the European Union claims that the definition of career guidance should not change when applied to RPL. Defining career guidance in the context of RPL may well prove consistent with a key part of the definition of career guidance: it includes both educational guidance *and* vocational/occupational guidance. Oftentimes, these two components are erroneously treated separately. The first focuses only on navigating the education and training system (e.g., subject matters, learning pathways, level of, and which qualifications to aim for); the second helps people make decisions regarding the labor market (e.g., jobs to apply for, reskilling activities, adult learning). Nevertheless, they are two sides of the same coin.

Consistent with the previous definition, Sweet and Watts (OECD, 2004) also view educational guidance and vocational/occupational guidance as intrinsically connected. Guichard et Huteau (2005) see educational guidance in a similar way, as a response to a need to coordinate social influence and the evolution of the world of work, as well as an opportunity to give direction to one’s life. This is also consistent with Schiersmann’s (2011) approach for whom career guidance is a service that supports individuals in all phases and situations of their lives to recognize and further develop their interests, resources, and competencies and to deal with problems of action and make decisions. Career guidance aims to support individuals in shaping their educational and vocational goals and stories.

In 2009, Recotillet and Werquin concluded that guidance is twice as useful for RPL applicants for success in achieving a qualification, due to the validation process of their non-formal and informal learning outcomes, and the use of these outcomes within a newly acquired qualification in the labor market. This conclusion was based on econometric modeling research using data collected by several French ministries to better understand their RPL system (Validation of Experiential Learning Outcomes, or VAE, in French).

The encompassing dimension of career guidance, whereby educational and vocational/occupational decisions are not treated separately, aligns well with RPL processes. Within RPL, potential and actual applicants are informed and guided through the validation/assessment process in relation to their learning outcomes, including the initial decision to apply and the application of RPL outcomes into further education and employment. However, the specificity of career guidance in

the field of RPL does not reside in its definition, but rather in the way career guidance is organized in the context of RPL due to the fact that RPL entails several related but quite different stages, from initial guidance to guidance toward eligibility to become an RPL applicant, to guidance for actual assessment guidance and to post-RPL guidance (for an optimal use of the newly achieved qualification in life and, in particular, in the labor market). Due to its particular nature, career guidance needs to be seen as a multipurpose sequentially organized process in the context of RPL.

Since then, few studies have been published in Europe on the role of guidance in RPL, with the notable exception of the RPL Inventory of the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop et al., 2019), which touches on career guidance issues. The role of career guidance in RPL therefore should be revisited.

### **The European Inventory on RPL**

The European Inventory on Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning is a regularly updated overview of RPL practices and arrangements across the European Union

<sup>1</sup>. It is produced in cooperation with the European Commission and the European Training Foundation.

Providing a rich source of information, the Inventory supports dialogue and mutual learning among countries and stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of RPL in Europe. The latest Inventory, in 2018, contains the reports of 36 countries and describes the developments of the last years, illustrated with examples of good practice. In these reports, career guidance has been described and sometimes analyzed in the context of RPL in Europe. Important features have been identified that describe the current practices. They help illustrate good practices for further development of career guidance in the context of RPL and make visible shortcomings in RPL guidance.

### ***The Different Target Groups for Career Guidance in Relation to RPL***

The target groups benefiting from career guidance are of various types, and their needs are addressed in different ways among the European countries. The Inventory's country reports reveal a focus on groups of people who are perceived as important and worthy of support given the focus of the national policies. These selected groups are oftentimes unemployed or out of the labor force but are seen as more likely to be (re)integrated into employment. The rationale is that the costs associated with these target groups regarding different social protection systems (e.g., unemployment benefits, pensions, health care) can be reduced by (re)integrating them into the labor market.

In practice, most countries' career guidance services focus on unemployed people and migrants and, to a lesser extent, on young people and students. For the latter group, the rationale is to help shorten the program they are enrolled in. Target groups such as mothers after parental leave, prisoners, or people with disabilities seem absent.

### ***Focus of Career Guidance Services***

The focus of career guidance in many countries is typically aligned with the objectives of public policies for different target groups. For example, in almost all countries, career guidance is only focused on vocational/occupational guidance, as opposed to educational guidance, for the purpose of helping people acquire jobs. In many countries, RPL systems are labor market-oriented and focus on the development of individuals to acquire qualifications and/or further training for (re)entry into the labor market. A fair fraction of the work carried out in the context of career guidance for RPL is connected to the assessment of the portfolio of competencies and is typically organized at the beginning of the RPL process to determine eligibility toward selected qualifications.

### **Career Guidance Providers and Provision**

An important distinction when comparing RPL countries is the extent to which institutions offer career guidance and what those practices include. There are different examples of where career guidance can be found regarding RPL. In fact, it can be found in several places in many countries. Key differences among these examples lie within which RPL intuitions are connected to or cooperate with non-RPL institutions, and how they are financed.

There are career guidance centers that are directly connected to the RPL providers, which means that all information and results from the guidance work and career guidance processes can be made available to the RPL staff at different stages (e.g., career guidance officers, assessors). In most cases, the costs for guidance are completely covered by the institution, providing initial basic information free to RPL applicants, but within some examples, the costs are partially borne by the individual. In order to establish a broad network for initial information on RPL processes, some countries (e.g., France, Belgium-Wallonia, Switzerland) set up regional centers. This has provided opportunities for active exchanges of experiences among RPL guidance officers (for example in Belgium-Wallonia or France).

There are countries where independent guidance institutions focus on vocational/occupational guidance and/or adult learning guidance later in the RPL process after the applicant has enrolled in the RPL process. Independent guidance institutions are typically organizations that operate independently of the public guidance system and are not necessarily connected to the dedicated RPL guidance service. They are usually specialized in certain topics (e.g., school, work, or family-related issues) and may back up public guidance institutions. When such institutions provide RPL guidance, the applicants usually cover up to one hundred percent of the guidance costs, unless there are special subsidies from the State; for example, funding targeting certain groups may be built into national policies. Independent guidance institutions that provide career guidance beyond basic information often do so when their own guidance services are better than those provided within the RPL system itself and/or when the RPL system does not offer career guidance free of charge.

A third large group of career guidance providers is composed of public organizations financed by the State, which have career guidance among their mission statements, such as the Public Employment Service. In this case, career guidance is automatically integrated into the design (e.g., occupational mobility and/or reskilling for unemployed people or RPL for migrants). In most cases, these career guidance services are provided free of charge to individuals.

Finally, countries find it important that all institutions offering career guidance in the context of RPL are registered as career guidance providers and thus have access to the same information (accurate, relevant, and up-to-date) regarding RPL.

Career guidance is a rather complex landscape of varying practices and structures. What is lacking in career guidance practices is a focused integration into the RPL process with clear ways in which career guidance can augment and enhance the RPL process. Understanding the mechanisms that place career guidance at the forefront of key factors for success in RPL systems will not only shed light on the process of RPL as such but will also inform policy making and improve better informing and guiding practices of potential applicants before, during, and after their journey within the RPL system. This contribution explores a model for integrating career guidance into the RPL process.

### **When and Why Career Guidance in the RPL Process**

There is no one unique design for typical pathway RPL applicants to follow, from the moment they hear about RPL to completion of a qualification or use of this acquired qualification in the labor market. Nevertheless, four stages appear to be present in all approaches, regardless of country or context:

- Information Seeking Stage: Individuals learn about and gain information on possible opportunities for RPL.
- Initial Decision and Eligibility Stage: The individual decides to or not to pursue RPL opportunities and proceeds with the administrative registration, and the staff overseeing the RPL process decides or not to accept the individual application.
- Validation Stage: Applicants engage in assessments, or compile evidence, of learning outcomes to be assessed; assessors review all the pieces of evidence provided and/or organize practical tests for all prior learning outcomes to be considered; and
- RPL-Decision Stage: Decisions are made regarding awarding of qualifications and the best possible uses of the newly acquired qualification, typically in the labor market when successful; or whether to appeal and/or to apply again in case of failure. In some cases, the outcomes of the RPL process are processed into a tailored learning and/or working trajectory.

This contribution provides a model (see Figure 1) for organizing RPL systems so that there is career guidance at each of these four main stages. Indeed, the focus and depth of these career guidance services must vary in scope and depth from one stage to another. The proposed model provides key moments where career guidance would be most beneficial to RPL potential and actual applicants seeking a qualification. As part of the proposed model and based on fieldwork in many

countries with different socioeconomic contexts, this contribution indicates a possible choice for the number of hours dedicated to guidance at each of the four key stages. It is not an average, but from our experience, it is several hours deemed necessary with efficiency and cost-effectiveness in mind. Each number of years is a cumulated time, and it can be broken down into several sessions.

**Figure 1**

*Embedding Career Guidance into the RPL Process Model*

Stage	Key Career Guidance Activities	Level of Career Guidance
Information Seeking Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide potential applicants with information about RPL, and the RPL process.</li> <li>• Guide potential applicants to reflect on their overall plans, including occupational/vocational plans.</li> <li>• Help potential applicants to align their objectives set for RPL and individual plan for overall success.</li> <li>• Support the decision to pursue or not to pursue RPL</li> </ul>	Medium
Initial Decision and Eligibility Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help applicants to confirm their choice of qualification:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support to collect the relevant documents to substantiate their choice.</li> <li>- Help the applicants to select the qualification that fits their prior learning outcomes.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Light
Assessment (or Validation) Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help the applicants to prepare the assessment.</li> <li>• Help the applicants translate their knowledge, skills, and competencies so that they align with the qualification standard of their choice.</li> </ul>	Heavy
Post RPL- Decision Stage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help the applicants to make use of their results and/or help to identify next steps:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In case of success: support the individuals to target possible employment and uses of the acquired credential.</li> <li>- In case of failure: help to understand the reasons for the failure. Assist individuals to seek employment even</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Light

	without the qualification or inform them about additional learning outcomes they need (e.g., through further education and training, or through further experience) so that they may apply again.	
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Source: proposed by the authors.

**Information Seeking Stage: Deciding to Apply – Medium Career Guidance**

During the information-seeking and initial decision-making stages, potential applicants make the key initial decision to enter the RPL process and to choose a targeted qualification. In both decision points, career guidance services are a necessary component of the provision. The career guidance services may not need to be highly focused on the assessment/validation process itself but should inform applicants that RPL is first and foremost an assessment process (and that they are already in it as it were). Potential applicants must realize they will be assessed with quality-assured procedures – e.g., against qualification or assessment standards – and they will have to substantiate their claim regarding their competencies (learning outcomes from experience). This means individuals will provide pieces of evidence, typically in the form of a portfolio of competencies, and/or be assessed in real-life situations (e.g., observation, simulation, written test). In short, RPL is not necessarily an easy process and potential applicants need proper guidance to avoid high levels of disappointment, frustration, and therefore dropout.

At this point, with the support of career guidance, potential applicants reflect on their overall plans, including occupational/vocational plans. RPL can start an individual on a personal journey that can be quite demanding: between a few months to a couple of years, depending on the targeted qualification and whether the individual pursues the qualification full-time or part-time. Acquiring a qualification may have important advantages for an individual's life, and aligning the objectives set for RPL and the individual plan supports overall success. Career guidance is needed to help applicants not only understand what is involved in the RPL process but also to understand the possibilities an individual has with a competency set applied to different fields and required qualifications that match those competencies.

Career guidance services at this initial stage should therefore be quite considerable, with at least medium effort. Career guidance at this point helps individuals decide to pursue RPL within the context of their employment goal and become an RPL applicant. To ensure sufficient time exploring RPL and career options, a minimum of four hours of personal interview/work with a career guidance officer is advisable.

**Initial Decision Stage: Eligibility – Light Career Guidance**

A key step in the RPL process, for the applicant and for the system, is the eligibility stage. This stage is a pre-assessment that screens for applicants who meet the requirements of the assessment standards of the qualification of choice. The

eligibility stage is meant to protect both the system and the applicant. The former because too many applicants without the proper learning outcomes could result in higher personnel and resource costs, because of likely high failure rates. The latter because applicants without the proper learning outcomes would most likely not be awarded a qualification and this could create frustration, resulting in negative word-of-mouth and be detrimental to the system.

Career guidance at this stage consists of helping applicants to confirm their choice in relation to the qualification they target, and to collect the documents they have that may substantiate the relevance of their choice. Relevance here means “actual chances to achieve the targeted qualification.” Selecting the qualification that fits applicants’ prior learning outcomes – i.e., non-formally and informally acquired competencies – is paramount and requires targeted career guidance to help ensure the alignment between applicants’ competencies and qualification standards. Fieldwork suggests that this is the most difficult and time-consuming stage in an RPL process for applicants to realize what they know and can do, especially for applicants far removed from the formal education and training system, because, for instance, they have been out of school for a long time and/or dropped out from it at an early age. Career guidance services at this second stage could be minimal; one or two hours of personal interview/work with a career guidance officer is advisable.

### **Validation Stage: Assessment – Heavy Career Guidance**

The assessment stage is the heart of the RPL process. When applicants pass the eligibility stage, they start the “real” assessment process, which then can lead to the awarding of a qualification. The actual assessment process may be relatively short in comparison to the preparation and presentation of evidence of competencies. Most of the time, applicants do not know what to expect and have little or no experience in the assessment of learning outcomes. For many applicants, their assessment experiences were of traditional academic assessments, some of whom may have experienced failure with these types of assessments. The RPL assessment process will be unique to many.

Career guidance at the assessment stage consists of helping applicants prepare for the assessment, which can be very demanding. Assessment is a major endeavor and requires individuals to translate what they know and can do into competencies that align with qualification standards. This can be a difficult task and career guidance officers need to understand the competencies that are developed through different work and life experiences; therefore, career guidance is absolutely necessary at this stage. If there can be only one provision of career guidance services, it should be at this stage. The career guidance services at this third and key stage should be maximal; at least twelve hours of personal interview/work with a career guidance officer is advisable.

### **RPL-decision Stage: RPL Graduates – Medium Career Guidance**

The fourth and last stage is probably the least often seen connected to career guidance in countries that have an RPL system up and running. Most countries have initial information, pre-assessment, and full assessment stages, but few

invest in providing career guidance to applicants (successful or unsuccessful) after the final decision is made by assessors. Nevertheless, this is a key stage for career guidance in the context of RPL because it is the stage when all the investment of time and energy that applicants have made into RPL pays off for those who are successful. At this point, career guidance can help individuals target possible employment and uses of the acquired credentials.

For those who were not successful, a career guidance officer can help individuals understand the reasons for failure, and what else could be done to reapply and be successful next time. Now that the individuals have identified their competencies, career guidance officers could also assist individuals without the resulting qualifications to seek employment or further education and training that align with their competencies.

For the successful applicants, this stage consists of helping them make good use of their newly acquired qualification and identified competencies, as well as identifying the next possible options. The career guidance services at this fourth stage could be medium to most likely light, but they should be provided to all applicants, whether they succeeded or not in the RPL process. Around two hours of personal interview/work with a career guidance officer is typically advisable.

### **Funding Career Guidance Services**

To integrate career guidance into the RPL process, financing the career guidance hours needs to be considered. The RPL process requires great individual efforts in terms of time and money. Most people who enter the RPL process are around 30 years of age or older. They have gained enough work and life experiences to have their informally or non-formally acquired competencies recognized and may have other qualifications from initial education and training through formal systems, as well as be currently employed, sometimes with a permanent position or several part-time jobs. These are all points that need to be considered when investing in career guidance because applicants may need considerable career guidance to interpret and assess their varied competencies. Ideally, career guidance is financially supported within the RPL process. There is potentially a return on investment for the State when RPL graduates enter the labor market, pay taxes, and contribute to the local economy with spending income. In addition, they are not on social benefits anymore, reducing the cost to society.

Career guidance entails costs, often supported by the institutions offering RPL. In some cases, costs are incurred by the RPL applicant proportionally to their income<sup>2</sup>, which can increase the motivation to complete the process successfully for all. There are other cases where it is the work status that plays a decisive role in financial support, e.g., in Romania, where all validation services (including career guidance) are free of charge only for the unemployed. The costs are covered by the unemployment benefit fund. In Iceland, financial support is degree-related. The RPL process including guidance is free of charge if the applicant has not completed upper secondary education. Some countries do not offer financial support at all when it comes to career guidance in the context of RPL.

The decision to support RPL applicants seems to boil down to whether and which institutions, associations, and ministries are convinced of the benefits gained from providing career guidance, and from RPL altogether. Without the conviction that information should be disseminated more widely and the RPL process supported more deeply, career guidance will not be supported in the context of RPL. This conviction is based on the belief that potential applicants will successfully complete a qualification more easily through active guidance for the various stages of the RPL process, and/or whether the qualifications and other results achieved through RPL can be effectively used, typically in the labor market.

## **Conclusion**

Several conclusions can be drawn from the ETF Inventory, setting in motion RPL systems, and learning from individual experiences. Firstly, the fact that career guidance is offered in more or less all European countries and embedded in the RPL processes shows that the need for career guidance in RPL is well perceived. The fact that it is even funded in some European countries shows that the importance of making the process understandable and more structured for the applicants has been understood. Applicants receive a description of the procedure, of the documents and they also receive support for dealing with them. This not only saves time for applicants but also minimizes dropouts due to unclear information or helplessness. It is also less time-consuming for the case handlers of the applications who do not have to work with incorrect or incomplete documentation. This means that career guidance not only supports the applicant but also the staff in the RPL system. In addition, there is an increased likelihood that the RPL process will be perceived more positively by applicants, even if the desired qualification cannot be achieved, as the processing of the results is also a rewarding aspect. More best-practice examples will emerge and there will be less negative word-of-mouth.

Overall, career guidance can improve RPL outcomes because it supports individuals in their education, employment, and life choices. This is even truer for disadvantaged populations (in relation to education and/or the labor market).

Therefore, more intensive research should be conducted on different practices related to career guidance in RPL to be able to describe their impact more precisely and to define their characteristics to ensure high-quality and consistent practice.

A tired and tested model based on scientific work, with the one proposed herein as a starting point, would help institutions to target the integration of career guidance into RPL and therefore ensure more coherence in RPL practice. Even though practice repeatedly shows that successful models cannot always be successfully transferred from one country to another, or from one context to another, they are of immanent importance in providing orientation and foundations. For this reason, studies are of great importance to test the success of different variants in career guidance in different contexts.

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<sup>1</sup> The European Training Foundation (ETF), another European Union agency, carries out similar work for European Union neighboring countries.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Popovic (2018, p.12) for French-speaking Belgium.

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