Chapter 3
Understanding Recognition of Prior Learning as a Tool for the Labour Market Integration of Skilled Migrants

Per Andersson

Introduction

Sweden is a country that has received, and welcomed, high numbers of migrants since the 1970s. After the beginning of the Syrian war, the reception of refugees increased significantly. Sweden, Germany, and Austria were the three countries that received the most asylum applications in Europe. During the period 2014–2017, Sweden – with a population of ten million – received about 270,000 asylum applications, whereof about one third were from Syrian citizens, and granted about 140,000 residence permits. A substantial number of these migrants were skilled. Highly skilled migrants generally have a higher employment rate than migrants who are low skilled, but nevertheless these highly skilled migrants have lower employment rates than low-skilled native-born Swedes, even after 10 years in the country (Irastorza & Bevelander, 2017). This indicates that there is a lack of recognition of the skills of migrants in the Swedish labour market, and that it is important to understand and develop recognition processes to improve labour-market integration.

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a key factor in the integration of skilled migrants. The prior learning of migrants, be it from formal education or from informal learning in qualified positions in their prior labour market, should be central in determining the demand, inclusion, and integration of such migrants and their skills and competences into a new workplace, labour market, and society. Several initiatives have been taken in policy and practice to facilitate labour-market integration through processes aimed at the recognition of prior learning. The OECD (2016) has also highlighted RPL as an important measure for the integration of refugees and has identified factors that make recognition procedures particularly valuable for this

P. Andersson (✉)
Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning, Linköping University, Linköping, Sweden
e-mail: per.andersson@liu.se

group. For example, it is likely that both education and training and the labour market in their home country are more different from those in the host country than is the situation for other migrants, and it is also more likely that such refugees lack proof of their qualifications or have had their studies cut short by war. Thus, help with the assessment and documentation of skills and competences, and tailormade supplementary education, should improve labour-market opportunities and integration for refugees. However, there are also problems emerging in such processes. Problems and opportunities in recognition processes will be highlighted in this chapter, centring upon three key concerns: Firstly, the *object* of recognition, secondly the *subject* of the recognition process, and thirdly the very *process* of recognition. The objects of recognition refer to the skills, competences, and qualifications of the migrant, which are the actual and formal aspects of what should be assessed and recognised through RPL. However, there is always an individual, a subject, who possesses these "objects", and who experiences the process in a certain way. And this recognition process is in itself critical to the experiences and outcomes of RPL.

This chapter is a research review based on earlier studies of RPL,[1] mainly in Sweden, as well as theoretical perspectives and concepts that have been employed in these studies to understand and problematise different practices of RPL. The aim of the research review is to develop an understanding of the potentials and problems in the recognition of prior learning and a critical perspective on them, with a particular focus on RPL measures to facilitate the integration of skilled migrants into the labour market. The earlier studies do not concern this specific group alone, but they do provide relevant findings that contribute to our understanding and the present discussion.

Lack of recognition is also a problem identified by, for example, Bauder (2003). His interview study in Canada about the situation of South Asian and Yugoslavian immigrants, amongst whom half of those from the former Yugoslavia came as refugees, describes what is called "brain abuse". That is, migration does not only mean a "brain drain" from the country of origin, but also "brain abuse" in the sense of de-skilling and the non-recognition of credentials in the host country. Bauder discusses this problem from the perspective of Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, identifying the importance of the national (in his case Canadian) origin of institutionalised cultural capital, the credentials, from which follows non-recognition of foreign credentials. This devaluation of institutional cultural capital results in the exclusion of migrants from regulated professions, which becomes a major barrier to employment. Bauder also reflects upon the informal category of cultural capital, which is local experience of the profession, "Canadian experience" in his case. Experience becomes another category leading to the non-recognition and exclusion of those lacking such local experience, particularly in less regulated occupations. The consequence is that migrants are appointed to less qualified positions and lower wages, compared to natives with similar qualifications and experience, which leads to the

---

[1] The abbreviation RPL is used when suitable to refer to specific activities that are organised to make prior learning visible and give recognition to such learning, to avoid confusion in relation to when the concept of recognition is used in a more general sense.

reproduction of a Canadian domination of the professions. However, in another study from Canada, Dietz et al. (2009) show how formal, official recognition of foreign credentials as equivalent to local credentials improves the situation. Such recognition processes reduce prejudice and is important for a fair treatment of migrant employees.

A comparative analysis of the integration of refugees in Austria, Germany, and Sweden (Konle-Seidl, 2018) also identifies the need to prioritise "assessment of skills and recognition of qualifications". There are certain initiatives taken at the European level to facilitate recognition, such as the online skills profile tool for self-assessment (European Commission, 2019). The particular challenge that is described (Konle-Seidl, 2018) concerns recognition in relation to the vocational education and training systems in Germany and Austria. Here, the focus on equivalence to reference qualifications or occupations – even in formally non-regulated occupations – is an obstacle. That is, the recognition process is expected to show the equivalence of refugees' skills to existing qualifications in the receiving country. The recognition of partial qualifications, where equivalence to the full qualification is not required, has been discussed as an option to avoid this obstacle.

In the German context, Brücker et al. (2018) also show the value of formal recognition of foreign occupational qualifications. Their study identifies substantial gains from occupational recognition for employment rates as well as wages among immigrants. In the Swedish context, RPL is one of the central measures for labour-market integration, as part of a two-year-long establishment programme organised by the national Public Employment Service (PES) (Arbetsförmedlingen), including primarily language and civic orientation courses but also RPL activities. Another initiative that builds upon prior learning and experiences are the fast-track programmes developed in cooperation between PES, social partners, and higher education to combine and facilitate professional Swedish language training, placement, RPL, additional professional training etc. for migrants with a background in shortage occupations such as teaching, nursing, or medicine (Andersson Joona et al., 2016; Konle-Seidl, 2017, 2018). A third initiative including RPL is the bridging programmes in higher education, targeting graduates who have a foreign qualification equivalent to a Swedish one (SUHF, 2016). The character of such initiatives in terms of RPL are discussed below.

Recognition of Prior Learning

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has developed in policy and practice around the world in recent decades, and it is also a developing research field. RPL is known under different names, such as accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR), or, in Sweden and some other countries, validation of prior learning (VPL; "validering" in Swedish). Initiatives in RPL are typically related to mobility in one sense or another. The target could be to stimulate mobility in the labour market, particularly during times of structural

change and unemployment, or of widening access to higher education, or of meeting recognition challenges related to migration and integration, which is the focus here (cf. Andersson & Fejes, 2010; Bucken-Knapp et al., 2019).

There is a certain variation, not only in concepts but also in RPL practices and contexts. However, the basic idea is still about giving recognition to prior learning wherever and whenever such learning has taken place. This idea is often enacted in formal assessment systems providing the basis for recognition, but also in more non-formal (organised but not legally formalised) and informal processes, where prior learning is made visible and gains recognition without a formal credential as the outcome. It should be noted that it is not the candidates' prior learning *per se* to which different institutions give recognition, but rather the results of their prior learning; that is, the formal and/or actual qualifications, competence, knowledge, and skills. These are assessed in different ways, for example, through methods such as interviews, portfolios, formal tests, and authentic assessments in workplaces. As indicated above, RPL is often related to processes of the transfer/mobility of knowledge – in place and/or time. People need to gain recognition for what they have learnt before, often in another context, to be able to use their knowledge and skills in a new context. It could be a matter of mobility between countries, or between workplaces, or from informal to formal learning contexts (from daily life/working life to education). A recognition process could include different methods and have different results. These results could be admission to education or to working life, credits/exemptions in study programmes, and/or formal/non-formal documentation of competence – degrees, certificates, CVs, etc. The demands on the assessment in RPL could be more or less strict – from equivalence to similarity compared to the formal demands of the educational system that typically define what is valid knowledge in the new context. On the one hand, if equivalence is required, applying exactly the same criteria and demands as in examinations in the corresponding educational programme makes it more difficult to give recognition to knowledge developed and situated in another (national) context. On the other hand, it is easier to give recognition when, instead, similarity is demanded, which allows a higher degree of flexibility with more variation concerning what proofs of skills and competences will be accepted (Andersson, 2010; Andersson & Fejes, 2010).

The demand for equivalence or similarity means a more or less strict and formal approach to recognition, which depends on the context and the aim of the process. In a formal context, and with a summative aim, there are probably greater demands for equivalence. The summative aim means that the result should be a documentation of competence, and hopefully formal credentials that are valid in the receiving country. On the other hand, a formative aim means that the recognition process is mainly expected to be a starting point for further study and learning. Then, the important thing is that the prior learning, and future learning needs, of the individuals are identified in a way that helps them to "start from where they are". These different aims and approaches also suggest that the process will be more or less convergent – targeting whether the individual knows certain things – or divergent – opening up opportunities for a wider spectrum of knowledge and skills to be made visible.

In other words, recognition of prior learning has to balance between standardisation and flexibility in approach. This is also a matter of how fairness, in assessment and in the use of outcomes, could be secured. In RPL, the starting point is an individual learning process and its outcomes, which could vary concerning where and exactly what has been learnt, and how this could be expressed. If the assessment of such individual learning outcomes is to be fair, this calls for flexibility in approach; for example, different methods adapted to individual ability. But if the results of RPL are to be used as the basis for comparisons between individuals, for example in the admissions to a professional education programme, or in recruitment for a job position, there is also a demand for fairness between individuals. Thus, there is also a need for standardisation, to be able to compare outcomes between individuals. Both these aspects of RPL are important, and the balance often poses a dilemma that has to be overcome in practice.

The Research Field of Recognition of Prior Learning

The research field of recognition of prior learning has developed significantly in parallel to the developments in policy and practice. A thematic overview shows different areas and central themes in RPL research (Harris et al., 2014). One central theme is the "prior learning assessment for immigrants in regulated professions", which is discussed from a critical theory perspective (Moss, 2014). This discussion focuses on the power relations between different stakeholders, and who has the power to decide what knowledge and competence should be assessed and given recognition in relation to regulated professions.

There are also overviews that are based on research from different countries, including national reviews (Harris et al., 2011), as well as certain empirical studies (e.g. Andersson et al., 2015). Different theoretical perspectives have also been applied to understanding RPL (Andersson & Harris, 2006; Harris, 2014), some of which will be employed in this chapter. Research on RPL provides perspectives and insights of value to the development of policy and practice in this area. In addition to this, the relevance of findings often goes beyond the specific topic of RPL, because in many cases they touch upon more general issues faced in educational research, as well as in other fields where educational issues are of interest, such as migration studies. Young (2006, p. 326) describes this relevance as follows:

> Questions about knowledge, authority, qualifications and different types of learning will always be with us. Once RPL is freed from its largely rhetorical role as the great radical strategy or the great solution to inequality, it offers a unique and very concrete set of contexts for debating the fundamental educational issues that such questions give rise to, and for finding new ways of approaching them.

This refers to matters such as how learning, knowledge and qualifications from different contexts are valued and included or excluded – in the educational system, in the labour market, and not the least in migration processes. Here, RPL offers unique contexts where assessment and evaluation of knowledge are more or less freed from

the contexts of learning, which gives the opportunity to approach these matters in new ways. The focus will now turn to a discussion of the three concerns in RPL introduced above: the object, the subject, and the process of recognition.

Competence: The Object of Recognition

The first concern is the *object* of the recognition process, the competence of the individual, the skilled migrant. In this chapter, "competence" is used as a broad concept that includes both theoretical and practical aspects of knowledge and skills, and the ability to apply them in practice. Competence, including actual knowledge, skills etc., is the outcome of the prior learning processes of the individual. One distinction to be aware of, which complicates the use of the concept of "competence", is the difference in connotation between formal and actual competence, which also needs to be clarified.

Formal Competence

There are recognition processes that focus on *formal competence*, which in our case is mainly formal credentials from higher education in another country, typically the country of origin, and the degree of equivalence between these "foreign" credentials and the credentials valid in the receiving country. This focus in a recognition process – formal credentials – will mean, in the best-case scenario, that the credential is accepted as equivalent to one in the new country. However, it is most likely that the recognition process will result in making visible what it is possible to get credit for, and what is lacking in relation to the requirements in the new country. This in turn will lead to demands for supplementary education and examination before a new formal credential is awarded. This could mean that the foreign credentials of immigrant professionals are not accepted, even though they were valid in the country of origin, and the recognition process becomes a barrier instead of a facilitator (Andersson & Guo, 2009; Bauder, 2003). In Sweden, this is typically the case in regulated professions, such as teaching, nursing, and medicine. Here, the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket), and the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen), are responsible for such recognition and licensing in their respective professional areas.

   Alternatively, the outcome could be a non-formal certificate that indicates the degree of equivalence of the candidate's credentials compared to the qualifications that are valid and known in the receiving country. The latter is a more likely and acceptable outcome in non-regulated professions. In Sweden, the Swedish Council of Higher Education (Universitets- och Högskolerådet) is responsible for assessing such qualifications. In these areas, it is the employer who decides whom to employ and how to assess credentials and other proofs of competence. Thus, the employer has a more important role in labour-market integration in non-regulated areas, and

the degree of trust in different types of proofs could be crucial. Here, it should be noted that the extent of regulated and non-regulated professions differs between countries, with Sweden having a relatively low degree of regulated occupations in general (cf. Konle-Seidl, 2018).

Actual Competence

The other focus in terms of the object is the *actual competence*; that is, what the individual actually knows and is able to do. Professions with regulations (such as medicine) have to focus on the formal competence, even if the actual competence also needs to be ascertained for access to the labour market. Fast-track programmes are an initiative designed to also build upon the actual competence in order to facilitate recognition and integration in such professions.

However, there is greater potential for emphasising the actual competence in non-regulated professions (e.g., in the Swedish context, engineering). In this latter case, employers are more interested in the actual competence, which for example is demonstrated, at least in Sweden, in the tendency to employ engineering students even before they have received their qualifications, as long as their actual competence is assessed as valuable.

Thus, an initial question for understanding the approach of a certain RPL process is to ask whether the focus of the process is formal or actual competence, or both, which could lead to very different approaches. It should also be noted that we cannot take it for granted that employers in non-regulated areas will put their trust in the outcomes of non-formal recognition processes. The trust in students even before they have their qualification is based on trust in the educational institutions, and relations with students during, for example, periods of practicum or workplace-based projects. Non-formal recognition processes targeting the actual competence of such groups as foreign engineers have to earn legitimacy in the industry, if they are to help in labour-market integration. Another approach would be to leave the recognition in non-regulated areas to employers, who will still employ the workers they want. However, this would mean a withdrawal from the opportunities to facilitate labour-market integration that are available through RPL processes. And, furthermore, this would probably also lead to a higher risk of other exclusion processes developing, such as the emphasis on local work-life experiences described by Bauder (2003).

The Skilled Migrant: The Subject Experiencing Recognition

The second concern is the *subject* of the process, the migrant her/himself. Starting from the individual and her/his experience and competence implies a different process and results than starting from the professional regulations and labour-market needs of the new country.

In a recognition practice, starting from the subject's perspective means focusing on the importance of guidance and the mapping of prior learning and actual competence, before turning to the formal competence and qualifications. Even if the individual is highly skilled and qualified, we should not take it for granted that these qualifications provide the only path towards integration. Becoming a migrant is a turning point in life, and even if you are qualified you might not want to continue in the same direction as before in working life. That is, the individual has a personal history grounded in a context that she or he has left, and maybe had to leave as a refugee, and this background could mean that she or he, due to such factors as traumatic experiences, no longer wants or is able to work in the same profession as before. In such a situation, guidance could help the individual to identify and describe desires and plans for the future. Such guidance could also include the mapping of more general key competences (or key qualifications) that would be valuable and could help in labour-market integration, independent of the professional area from which the individual comes or wants to enter. A highly skilled person is very likely to have competences that will help in labour-market integration in a number of different areas.

Another aspect of the importance of starting from the subject, from the skills and competences of individual migrants, is that RPL has to target their specific backgrounds. If the choice of the object, the professional areas that RPL processes are developed for, is based solely on local labour-market needs, then there is an obvious risk that RPL is offered for professional areas that do not match the current target group. Thus, starting from the professional backgrounds of the present migrant group is necessary, but if their backgrounds do not fit specific labour-market needs, it might be more valuable for them to gain recognition for more general key competences that employers still need and ask for.

Experiences of RPL

It is also important to take the individual perspective when it comes to the experience of the recognition process *per se*. An interview study focusing on the experience of such a process (Andersson, 2006) reveals different types of experience that influence ways of relating oneself to the process. If the recognition process is experienced as *an opportunity for personal development*, this combines the awareness and refreshment of prior learning that comes from the very recognition process itself, with experiences of new learning opportunities, which in turn means a *developmental* relation to the process. On the other hand, if the recognition of prior learning is experiences mainly as *a matter of assessment and control*, the focus is solely on existing knowledge and competence, which means a *credit-exchange* relation to the process. A third way of experiencing the process of recognition was that it was "*only scratching the surface*". That is, the individual experience was that prior learning was only made visible to a limited extent, while there was more knowledge and skills that did not gain recognition. The result was a *critical* relation to the process, and the individual saw little personal value or exchange from it.

Thus, there is a problem if the expectations of recognition are not fulfilled, when the process is only "scratching the surface". Such an experience could be the consequence of a lack of information concerning the object of recognition. If the migrant expects the process to make visible and formally recognise a broad spectrum of knowledge and skills, it is likely that he or she will be dissatisfied, as a recognition process typically focuses on a specific knowledge area, such as a profession and its required competence. But the study referred to above also identifies potential in the developmental relation to the recognition process, something that will be developed further in the next section on the process of recognition.

Concerning RPL targeting highly skilled refugees, Bucken-Knapp et al. (2019) show in their interview study that Syrian refugees in Sweden experience RPL (validation) as a lengthy and bureaucratic process involving a lack of recognition. Even if the refugees have a degree and work-life experience, this does not mean that they will gain recognition for this. On the contrary, the RPL process might take a long time and still result in the demand to undertake extensive supplementary education rather than providing access to the labour market. Another problematic experience is when different measures are not coordinated. For example, when the refugees' skills are mapped by the public employment service as well as by educational institutions (Konle-Seidl, 2017).

RPL as a Divisive Practice

Another perspective that contributes to the understanding of problems and potentials in integration measures, such as recognition of prior learning, is to identify divisive practices and techniques of inclusion/exclusion (Andersson & Osman, 2008). In a study of labour-market integration programmes in Sweden, Foucauldian concepts are applied to interpret the integration practice of the recognition of prior learning. The analysis shows that the recognition of prior learning, in the programmes that were followed, acts as a *divisive practice* of in/exclusion. The programmes target certain vocations, based on labour-market demands, and the opportunities for further training differ. Observations and examinations of participating migrants and their skills are understood as *technologies of power* (Foucault, 1977), which – for those who are included in the programmes – result in a subordinate inclusion in society and the labour market, by which they are included but in a subordinate position compared to what could be expected. For example, such subordinate inclusion is the outcome for a qualified nurse who gains recognition for (part of) her knowledge and skills but only attains the position of assistant nurse. Such non/recognition has also been identified in a comparative study of the recognition practices in Sweden and Canada (Andersson & Guo, 2009), which states that the recognition practice "has become a technical exercise and a governing tool rather than a form of social transformation" (p. 423), in which the prior learning and work experiences of immigrants are discounted and devalued.

Intersubjective Recognition

However, we could also turn to perspectives that provide more positive potentials in relation to the individual subject. The *theory* of recognition developed by Honneth (1995, 2007) has been employed to theorise the *practice* of the recognition of prior learning (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013). Honneth's theory describes a process of inter-subjective recognition, including the development of self-confidence through love (in a broad sense) within family and friendships, the development of self-respect through public recognition as a person and a citizen with legal rights, and the development of self-esteem through the recognition of achievements, capabilities etc. in contexts such as workplaces and education.

A study of RPL processes among "paraprofessionals" in health and social care (Sandberg & Kubiak, 2013) identifies conditions for recognition, and the argument is that the RPL activity can support self-realisation and self-esteem through recog-nising the value of competence developed in the workplace. Salary and appreciation from colleagues could support such recognition and create the potential for self-realisation. One condition for this is mutual recognition in the relation between assessor and candidate in the RPL process. Thus, Honneth helps us to see the poten-tial of recognition in a deeper sense through RPL processes, but also the problems that can arise concerning self-confidence and self-esteem if mutual recognition is lacking.

The Process of Recognition

The third and final concern discussed in this chapter is the *process* of recognition. Recognition processes could be seen solely as a matter of the classification and assessment of prior learning. But this misses the fact that the recognition process also means a learning process for the individual, who has to learn what is required, what she or he actually knows, and how to present this knowledge and competence in a way that is related to the requirements. If she or he does not understand these matters, the conditions for a valid RPL process do not exist.

The RPL Process as a Sorting Mechanism

Diedrich et al. (2011) examined RPL as part of a labour-market project in Sweden, targeting immigrants with the aim of improving integration into the labour market and society. However, they show that the recognition process becomes a procedure of classification, a sorting mechanism in relation to existing occupations in the Swedish labour market. The outcome is that many skills and qualifications remain invisible, something that could have been avoided with a more comprehensive understanding.

Communicative Action in RPL

To theorise this concern, we can turn to Habermas (1984, 1987) and the theory of communicative action. Then, the problem could be seen as a lack of understanding. For the participants or candidates (these two "labels" are used interchangeably for the people who take part in RPL to gain recognition of prior learning), the problem is to understand what is expected from them and how to show or present this; for the assessor, the problem is to understand the meaning of what is presented by the candidates. A lack of understanding within this process could in turn be the consequence of a lack of communication: if the assessor and the system do not manage to communicate their requirements in a reasonable way, they are difficult to understand; and if the candidates are not able to communicate the "proofs" of their knowledge and skills, it will be difficult for an assessor to identify them. This problem of a potential lack of understanding becomes particularly important when the RPL process is targeting migrants, where both language issues and differences in cultural contexts could influence the degree of mutual understanding. Another problem that is made visible through Habermasian theory is that the assessment practice could be characterised by strategic rather than communicative action. This is the case if the result of the assessment, for example recognition of a formal qualification, or a certain type of classification (cf. Diedrich et al., 2011), in itself becomes the aim of the process – instead of a focus on the individual's knowledge and skills, which should be made visible and, in the next step, developed.

The Habermasian perspective on RPL has particularly been employed by Sandberg (2010, 2012, 2014), who studied RPL in the healthcare sector, and by Sandberg and Andersson (2011) in a study of professional education. Sandberg shows how a "caring ideology" becomes a central aspect in the implementation of RPL in healthcare. This ideology creates a trusting relation between teachers/assessors and participants, and the process becomes more one of recognition of their personal qualities than an assessment of their knowledge and skills. Thereby, according to Sandberg (2010), a normative, subordinate discourse on what a good job means in this female-dominated caring vocation is emerging. The consequence for the assessment of knowledge is that the candidates do not fully understand what actually achieves recognition in the RPL process. This lack of understanding of the assessment and grading means that the strategic actions of the teachers – aimed at providing formal credentials to the participating women – are dominant, rather than communicative actions and mutual understanding between teachers/assessors and participants (Sandberg, 2012). Still, there is a potential for integrating critical discussions with the aim of understanding and learning from the process, which would mean the recognition and further development of prior learning and tacit knowledge (Sandberg, 2014).

Thus, communicative action is also a potential in RPL and assessment practices. Mutual understanding between candidate and assessor creates conditions for a fair and valid assessment (Sandberg & Andersson, 2011). In addition to this, true communication also increases the likelihood of the RPL process becoming not only a

matter of assessment but also a learning opportunity. However, it should be noted that this theoretical perspective presents a communicative "ideal", unlikely to be reached in practice, but it still provides valuable insights to assist in improving the practices of RPL. The value of mutual understanding is particularly important to keep in mind in RPL targeting migrants, where the extent of language skills is key and also a potential obstacle for a candidate to make skills visible.

The learning opportunities embedded in the recognition process are elaborated further in Andersson (2017), where three dimensions of the potential learning process are identified: firstly, to learn what you already know – in other words, to develop awareness of your prior learning; secondly, to learn what is required in the recognition process; and, thirdly, to learn how to present your knowledge in order to gain recognition. RPL is also discussed as either a separate activity, or as an intertwined part of the process of recognition and new learning. An important point is that it could be difficult to make a valid assessment in a process where the sole focus is on retrospective recognition. The argument is that the candidate probably needs learning in all of these three aspects to be able to present valid proofs of prior learning, and without such proofs the assessment will not be valid. This is important, not least in RPL processes targeting refugees and other migrants, who lack key knowledge of and experiences in the receiving country.

Discussion

Recognition of prior learning offers a unique context for discussions about fundamental educational issues concerning the value of learning and knowledge (Young, 2006) but also about issues extending beyond educational matters. In particular, this chapter identifies issues concerning recognition that are highly relevant for the integration of migrants into a new society and its labour market. Recognition of prior learning, and how credentials, qualifications, competences, knowledge, skills, etc. are valued in different contexts, is a critical aspect of such integration processes. Nevertheless, of even greater importance is probably the personal dimension of recognition, which means that you are accepted and included as a valuable individual in a new context.

With the focus here on the recognition of prior learning, competence, knowledge, and skills are foregrounded as the objects of recognition. However, an organised recognition process targeting migrants will mean very different things depending on whether the object is actual or formal competence. An assessment of what an individual can prove that she/he knows and is able to do here and now, the actual competence, is different from an assessment of formal proofs based on prior assessments made in (typically) educational institutions or by professional organisations in another country. On the one hand, assessment of actual competence provides the opportunity of proving your competence independent of formal qualifications and could give recognition to the outcomes of informal and non-formal learning. But here, the situated character of learning should be born in mind.

If an RPL process is built on the expectation that a migrant should fulfil all competence requirements in the new context, e.g., a vocation in the Swedish labour market, there is an obvious risk of failure. Actual competence from a different, but similar, context would probably be a good basis for entering and learning in the same vocation in Sweden, but further learning, situated in this new context, would most likely be needed to be fully qualified here. On the other hand, recognition of formal competence, qualifications from another country, could mean a faster track into the labour market. Here, the assessment of actual competence is already made, and the recognition process builds upon trust on the prior assessment and "foreign" qualifications, which could grant access to the labour market. However, there could be mismatch in the formal qualifications too, depending on how similar/different the vocation and its formal education/training are in different countries, which means that supplementary education and training most likely is needed even for migrants with formal qualification. Thus, RPL should not be expected to provide a "quick fix" but rather some pieces in the competence puzzle, and the challenge is to find and add the pieces that fit together.

But it is not only the competence that gains recognition. There is also a subject of recognition, the individual who could win recognition for her/his competence. Mutual recognition between the individual migrant and the assessor is a condition for recognition in the deeper, more personal sense. However, RPL could also act as a technology of power that devalues prior learning and work experience. Without a carefully designed RPL process, the outcome could thus be exclusion or subordinate inclusion, rather than actual recognition. These are also critical aspects to be aware of when trying to promote labour market integration through recognition of prior learning.

Conclusion

Therefore, the process of RPL is crucial for how recognition is experienced by the individual participant and how her/his actual and formal competences are assessed. Here, the studies referred to highlight the value of mutual understanding, communicative action, and a developmental perspective, as ideals to strive for in the recognition of prior learning. Participant and assessor have to understand both conditions and requirements – and each other – for the process to become successful and valid. Strategic actions might result in either of the parts being more successful in terms of formal outcomes such as qualifications, but then the price paid is a less valid outcome, in which the formally recognised competence does not correspond to the actual competence of the individual.

There are potentials and problems in the recognition of prior learning as a measure for the labour-market integration of skilled migrants. These problems must be addressed in order to employ the full potential of RPL initiatives. The present chapter particularly highlights that RPL is a key factor in policy and practice for labour-market integration. However, RPL is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution. There are

different approaches to RPL that need to be considered, depending on context and conditions, in order to reach its potential. The role and influence of formal requirements in RPL processes should be considered. Recognition of formal qualifications from a country of origin, and recognition of actual competence are different types of process. Likewise, there is a difference between RPL aiming to achieve the formal qualifications of the new country, or non-formal recognition in terms of descriptions of competence. The importance of the formal dimension depends on whether or not the process is targeting formally regulated professions.

RPL is a measure for individuals who have formal and/or actual competence stemming from prior learning and organising RPL should start from the individual's needs and conditions. The starting point should not be only the current needs of the labour market. The labour market needs cannot tell if there actually are individuals with competence that are matching those needs, and starting there would thus mean a risk of RPL initiatives without target group. Furthermore, disregarding individual needs also implies a risk that certain skills and qualifications remain invisible.

RPL is not only a practical arrangement for the assessment of competence. RPL that starts with the individual could lead to recognition in a deeper, more personal sense, extending beyond formal qualifications – recognition that could be crucial for integration. However, prior learning, competence, and highly developed skills in a certain professional area imply neither an immediate understanding of formal competence requirements, particularly in a new national and cultural context, nor the skills of presenting your actual competence in an assessment situation. Thus, the RPL process should be designed to develop mutual understanding and learning opportunities, to reach the full potential of recognition.

References

Andersson, P. (2006). Caretakers' experiences of RPL. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 58*(2), 115–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/13636820600799502

Andersson, P. (2010). Provision of prior learning assessment. In E. Baker, P. Peterson, & B. McGaw (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of education* (Vol. 1, 3rd ed., pp. 169–174). Elsevier. https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-044894-7.00035-X

Andersson, P. (2017). Validation as a learning process. In R. Duvekot, D. Coughlan, & K. Aagaard (Eds.), *The learner at the centre: Validation of prior learning strengthens lifelong learning for all* (pp. 121–127). European Centre Valuation Prior Learning/VIA University College. https://ec-vpl.nl/downloads/book-2017-english-vplbiennale-the-learner-at-the-centre.pdf

Andersson, P., & Fejes, A. (2010). Mobility of knowledge as a recognition challenge: Experiences from Sweden. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 29*(2), 201–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601371003616624

Andersson, P., & Guo, S. (2009). Governing through non/recognition: The missing 'R' in the PLAR for immigrant professionals in Canada and Sweden. *International Journal of Lifelong Education, 28*(4), 423–437. https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370903031264

Andersson, P., & Harris, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning*. National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE).

Andersson Joona, P., Wennemo Lanninger, A., & Sundström, M. (2016). *Reforming the integration of refugees: The Swedish experience*. Institute for the Study of Labor.

Andersson, P., & Osman, A. (2008). Recognition of prior learning as a practice for differential inclusion and exclusion of immigrants in Sweden. *Adult Education Quarterly, 59*(1), 42–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713608325173

Andersson, P., Fejes, A., & Sandberg, F. (Eds.). (2015). *Recognition of prior learning: Research from around the globe*. Routledge.

Bauder, H. (2003). "Brain abuse", or the devaluation of immigrant labour in Canada. *Antipode, 35*(4), 699–717.

Brücker, H., Glitz, A., Lerche, A., & Romiti, A. (2018). *Occupational recognition and immigrant labour market outcomes*. IZA Institute of Labour Economics.

Bucken-Knapp, G., Fakih, Z., & Spehar, A. (2019). Talking about integration: The voices of Syrian refugees taking part in introduction programmes for integration into Swedish society. *International Migration, 57*(2), 221–234. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12440

Diedrich, A., Eriksson-Zetterquist, U., & Styhre, A. (2011). Sorting people out: The uses of one-dimensional classificatory schemes in a multi-dimensional world. *Culture and Organization, 17*(4), 271–292. https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2011.590305

Dietz, J., Esses, V. M., Joshi, C., & Bennett-AbuAyyash, C. (2009). *The evaluation of immigrants' credentials: The roles of accreditation, immigrant race and evaluator biases* (Canadian labour market and skills researcher network, working paper no. 18). University of Western Ontario.

European Commission. (2019). *Skills profile tool kit for third country nationals*. https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1412&langId=en

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Penguin Books.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 1). Reason and the rationalization of society, Polity Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). The critique of functionalist reason. Polity Press.

Harris, J. (2014). Advances in theorising RPL. In J. Harris, C. Wihak, & K. Van Kleef (Eds.), *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning: Research into practice* (pp. 43–64). NIACE.

Harris, J., Breier, M., & Wihak, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Researching the recognition of prior learning: International perspectives*. NIACE.

Harris, J., Wihak, C., & Van Kleef, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning: Research into practice*. NIACE.

Honneth, A. (1995). *The struggle for recognition: The moral grammar of social conflicts*. The MIT Press.

Honneth, A. (2007). *Disrespect: The normative foundations of critical theory*. Polity Press.

Irastorza, N., & Bevelander, P. (2017). The labour market participation of humanitarian migrants in Sweden: An overview. *Intereconomics, 52*(5), 270–277. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10272-017-0689-0

Konle-Seidl, R. (2017). *Public employment services (PES) initiatives around skills, competencies and qualifications of refugees and asylum seekers*. European Commission.

Konle-Seidl, R. (2018). *Integration of refugees in Austria, Germany and Sweden: Comparative analysis*. European Parliament.

Moss, L. (2014). Prior learning assessment for immigrants in regulated professions. In J. Harris, C. Wihak, & J. Van Kleef (Eds.), *Handbook of the recognition of prior learning: Research into practice* (pp. 384–406). NIACE.

OECD. (2016). *Making integration work: Refugees and others in need of protection*. OECD Publishing.

Sandberg, F. (2010). Recognising health care assistants' prior learning through a caring ideology. *Vocations and Learning, 3*(2), 99–115. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12186-009-9031-8

Sandberg, F. (2012). A Habermasian analysis of a process of recognition of prior learning for health care assistants. *Adult Education Quarterly, 62*(4), 351–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713611415835

Sandberg, F. (2014). A reconstructive analysis of the potential for critical learning and change in recognition of prior learning: A Habermasian analysis. *British Educational Research Journal, 40*(4), 682–698. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3113

Sandberg, F., & Andersson, P. (2011). RPL for accreditation in higher education: As a process of mutual understanding or merely lifeworld colonization? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 36*(7), 767–780. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2010.488793

Sandberg, F., & Kubiak, C. (2013). Recognition of prior learning, self-realisation and identity within Axel Honneth's theory of recognition. *Studies in Continuing Education, 35*(3), 351–365. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2013.768230

SUHF. (2016). *Swedish higher education institutions' activities associated with refugees.* Swedish Council for Higher Education, SUHF. https://suhf.se/app/uploads/2019/11/swedish-hei-activities-associated-with-refugees.pdf

Young, M. (2006). Endword. In P. Andersson & J. Harris (Eds.), *Re-theorising the recognition of prior learning* (pp. 321–326). NIACE.