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# *Recognition of prior vocational learning in Sweden*

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## **Abstract**

Initiatives in the recognition of prior learning (RPL) have been taken in Sweden in recent years, mainly focusing on prior vocational learning among immigrants. The government started different projects to find methods for recognising a person's prior learning in the field of vocational competence. This article presents a study of how these projects were organised and their starting points. Differences are identified concerning whether they were integrated with, or parallel to, the school system, and whether the starting point was a few vocations or a number of different vocations (depending on the background of the participants). The article then looks at some problems that arise when trying to recognise prior learning. We find that knowledge of the Swedish language is essential in this process, but that the demands are flexible and the criteria informal. The article also discusses the relationship between RPL and the educational system, where most of the projects had problems in not being too influenced by the school tradition where the main documentation of competence is grades. Finally, the article discusses conditions for the development of trust in RPL.

## **Keywords**

prior learning, competence, Sweden, experiential learning, adult education

## **Introduction**

This article discusses recognition of prior learning (RPL) in Sweden. In the past few years, there have been a number of ongoing projects aimed at developing models of RPL. This article is based on studies of these projects and there are two main data sources: policy documents and interviews. The interviews were carried out with project leaders, assessors and participants in local RPL projects in 18 Swedish municipalities.<sup>1</sup> Visits were made to 14 of these municipalities, and in the other four cases,

telephone interviews were carried out with project leaders. In addition to the interviews, written documentation from the projects has been used. The material has been analysed qualitatively, which has resulted in certain categories and themes.

In recent decades, there has been a shift from a situation where education was focused on to one where the focus is on (lifelong and lifewide) learning (Edwards *et al*, 1996). When the focus is on learning, it becomes important to make different kinds of knowledge visible. The important thing is to identify what you know, rather than what courses you have studied, and learning from experience might not give exactly the same knowledge as learning from studying. The adults', and especially immigrants', need to identify, assess and document their knowledge and competence has thus been emphasised. Their knowledge and competence is expected to be assessed, recognised and accepted, as society needs/wants to utilise and use all the real knowledge and competence that exist. In Sweden, this is partly a matter of the political ambition to integrate immigrants and partly a matter of labour market requirements.

The activity/process that makes the individual's knowledge and competence visible is called 'validering' (validation) in Swedish. Formal and informal recognition, assessment and accreditation of prior learning are included in the concept. Different countries place emphasis on different aspects of 'validering'. For example, APL (accreditation of prior learning)/APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning) in Great Britain, PLA (prior learning assessment) in the USA, and RPL (recognition of prior learning) in Australia and South Africa. RPL is seen as a more 'generative' concept, as it includes formal assessment and accreditation as well as more informal processes of recognition. In this article, the term RPL is used as a translation of 'validering'.

In Sweden, the main focus in RPL has been the recognition of vocational competence. In this article, we discuss both knowledge and competence, but further discussion on the meaning of these terms is beyond the scope of the article. The term 'competence' is mainly used in the sense of real competence, the actual ability to use one's knowledge. We also discuss real competence in relation to formal competence, where the latter is formally accredited competence.

The aim of the article is to develop the understanding of RPL through an analysis of:

- ways of organising local RPL projects;
- the relationship between RPL and the educational system; and
- the role of language in the RPL process.

## The history of RPL

RPL emerged in higher education in the USA at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s. The pedagogical approach, with a focus on students' needs, influenced the development of RPL. This first type of RPL was regarded as a tool of social justice that made higher education more available to individuals from 'untraditional' student groups. An experimental project at Princeton, New Jersey, during this period showed that it was possible to use different certificates to grant the students admission to the university. It was especially useful in higher education admission processes for adults with wide experience. This CAEL<sup>2</sup> Project was continued in the form of a council, which played an important role in the further development of RPL and spread RPL ideas to other countries (Challis, 1993; Evans, 2000; Michelson, 1996; VEETAC, 1993).

In the 1980s, RPL was introduced in Great Britain. In the beginning, it was still

focused on admission to higher education and social justice. At this time, there was no central RPL system but there were activities in individual educational institutions. Later, the focus on admission to higher education shifted to a focus on the labour market. France developed RPL in the area of professional (vocational) competence. The form of RPL introduced in Australia in 1987 was also connected to the labour market (VEETAC, 1993). Davies (1999) gives an example of how recognition and accreditation can be successfully used to award credits even to those 'at the bottom of the pile', those individuals who have little or no formal qualifications, in this case conductors at a bus company. However, it is pointed out that examples of this type are rare, and that cultural changes are needed in the workplace to enhance learning and development. There is also a tendency to develop a market in qualifications, or a market culture rather than a learning culture (Davies, 1999).

RPL has spread to other countries too. In South Africa, RPL has been seen as a possible tool for changing society by making visible and utilising the learning that has taken place in informal contexts. RPL gives opportunities to groups that had no or limited possibilities to enter the formal educational system during the apartheid era. These groups, in turn, are expected to influence the development of society and RPL could contribute to changes in the educational system (Harris 1999, 2000a, b). Thus it is not only a matter of social justice in admission to higher education but also a matter of change on societal level. Castle and Attwood (2001) argue that RPL initiatives in higher education (in their case in South Africa) should focus on access rather than on credit. There is a problem of equivalency when experiential learning is compared with more theoretical knowledge in RPL for credit. In addition to this there is a risk, according to Castle and Attwood, that RPL for credit will promote an instrumental view of the curriculum with a focus on qualifications rather than learning, excluding students from important learning opportunities inherent in the study process.

## **Different aims, models and methods of RPL**

There are three main aims (explicit or implicit) of RPL identified above in the history of RPL and in different contexts. The first aim is social justice, the second is related to competitiveness, economic development and the potential of using available competence in the labour market, and the third is social change (Andersson *et al*, 2003b).<sup>3</sup> Different models are developed according to which aims are the focus. Models of RPL have been categorised in two main types: RPL adapted to the system; and RPL changing the system (Andersson *et al*, 2003b).

One model of RPL adapted to the system is described as 'Procrustean RPL' (Harris, 1999; Jones and Martin, 1997) and focuses on the demands of the educational system or the labour market. This is illustrated by using the myth of Procrustes who made everyone fit his bed by either stretching him/her out or by chopping off his/her feet. This describes the situation where the individual's competencies are measured and assessed according to the prescribed criteria that determine which specific competence and knowledge are useful. Here, knowledge and competence are regarded as products or goods, a perspective that is related to human capital theory. But it is not easy to transfer the individual's informally acquired competencies to a formal system. It is pointed out that the individuals whose competence satisfies formal demands are the only group that can take advantage of this kind of RPL. Even though social justice and benefits to the individuals are stressed as the aims of RPL, it is the formal system's needs

and demands that determine the values of one's knowledge and competencies (Harris, 1999). The forms of recognition of vocational competence developed in Europe since the 1980s are mainly in line with this convergent model. The convergent assessment – assessing *if* you know (certain things) – is discussed in relation to divergent assessment – assessing *what* you know (Torrance and Pryor, 1998).

One ambition of the models of RPL changing the system is to recognise the knowledge and experiences of the participants on their merits in a divergent way. RPL changing the system stresses the idea that all knowledge is valuable in itself and that therefore the individual's knowledge and competence could be accepted, even if the formal merits are lacking.

One model of RPL changing the system is called 'Trojan-horse RPL' (Harris, 1999). This kind of RPL represents a more inclusive and divergent approach. Trojan-horse RPL means that untraditional groups enter the (higher education) system as a result of RPL. These untraditional groups gain access to the system not just because their competence meets the demands of the system but also because the system recognises the individuals' experience and competence on their own merits. Ethnic minority groups and women in higher education are examples. It is also expected that when the individuals enter the system with their knowledge, experiences and perspectives, they are able to bring about changes in the system from inside (Harris, 1999).

### **Methods of RPL**

There are two main methods employed by models of RPL, besides traditional tests. The first is the portfolio and the second is 'authentic' assessment. Reflection and documentation are important parts of the portfolio process, focusing on individual 'experiential learning' (Kolb, 1984). A problem noted here is that a process like this could cause exclusion. Some people come from collectivist rather than individualist traditions of knowledge production and, in addition, experiences can be 'painful and confusing', provoking 'feelings of inadequacy or unpreparedness' (Castle and Attwood, 2001). Authentic assessment has the ambition of assessing knowledge and competence in a real situation, which can be linked to an (implicit) basis in theories of situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and a socio-cultural perspective (Säljö, 2000). There is, however, a tendency towards behaviourism in assessment when the focus is on the ability to perform certain defined tasks. RPL still has a strong need to develop reliable methods to ensure its legitimacy (Andersson *et al.*, 2003b).

### **Adult education in Sweden**

Adult education in Sweden started to expand in the 1950s. In 1968, Swedish municipal adult education was created with the goal of giving adults, who had earlier not had the chance, a formal education. The focus soon shifted from adult educational potential to adults with the lowest level of education. This was an educational reform aiming at an allocation policy instead of a service policy. This meant that it was primarily a way of distributing resources instead of a service to those wanting to attend adult education (Höghliem, 1985; Rubenson, 1982). Municipal adult education, mainly funded by the local authorities with support from the state, expanded until the end of the century.

Municipal adult education has the same curriculum as the upper secondary school (Lpf 94). This also means that vocational education/training is an integral part of the school system. The idea behind upper secondary education in Sweden is to give

students a broad knowledge base, not only to prepare them for a specific vocation but also for higher education. This is especially the case where young people study different programmes over three years. The vocational programmes contain both vocational and theoretical courses. In municipal adult education, you can choose different courses, theoretical and/or vocational, and plan your own study programme, but you can also study pre-planned programmes more or less equivalent to upper secondary school level. For example, you can study a nursing programme, but in less time and with a greater focus on the vocational elements.

In the mid 1990s, an initiative was taken by the state in the area of municipal adult education. It was called the 'Adult Education Initiative' (AEI). Studies had shown that there were many adults who had not reached the educational level of upper secondary school. The aim was to make it possible for these adults to raise their education to this level. The initiative was time limited; it started in 1997 and continued until 2002. The state funded 100,000 study places during a period of five years (SOU 1996:27). This led to an expansion of adult education in Sweden; more people got the chance to study as adults. When the initiative ended, the state reduced its funding of municipal adult education, thus forcing the municipalities to fund a larger proportion of their adult education. As a result, some local authorities have cut back the number of students enrolled due to a lack of resources.

Adult education is a large part of the educational system in Sweden, if municipal adult education, universities, folk high schools, study circles and labour market training, are included. At the end of the last century, adult education in Sweden included up to 700,000 study places for adults each year (SOU 2000:28). This can be compared with a total of nearly nine million inhabitants.

Even if the main target group of the AEI (and of the RPL projects described below) has been the unemployed, employees are an important group participating in adult education in Sweden. The law on study leave plays a central role in Swedish adult education policy, but not much attention has been paid to it in adult education research. The law functions well and the problems are more in the related area of study finance (Gould, 2003).

### ***RPL in Sweden***

Similar phenomena already existed before the concept of RPL ('validering') was introduced in Sweden. There are, for example, YPI ('Yrkes Prövning för Invandrare', tests of immigrants' vocational competence), and the 25:4-system according to which adults, who are at least 25 years old and have worked for at least four years, can receive general credit for work experience in order to gain access to higher education. This general credit can be compared with the corresponding American system, where the *content* of the experience is focused on in another way (Abrahamsson, 1989). The Swedish Scholastic Aptitude Test is another example used in the selection process for higher education studies. Its aim is to test the general capacity of individuals to study in higher education; the test does not require that knowledge and skills have been gained in formal or special educational systems.

Some characteristics of a more informal RPL can also be observed in the adult education institutions. It is stressed in the national curriculum that adult education should be organised in such a way that the individual student's previous knowledge is the criterion for determining the level and/or subject(s) at which the student should begin (Lpf 94).

RPL was introduced in Sweden as part of the Adult Education Initiative in 1996 (SOU 1996:27). Compared with other countries, Sweden was a late starter in this respect (Bjørnåvold, 2000). The development of Swedish adult education in recent years has included initiatives to develop models of RPL (SOU 1998:165; SOU 2001:78). The AEI defined RPL as identification, assessment and accreditation of the individual's knowledge and competence. Subsequently, this view was broadened when the idea that RPL would make knowledge and competence visible and acceptable was included (SOU 1998:51). The AEI added the importance of documents and formal recognition of knowledge and competence to the definition of RPL. It is stressed that the individual's real knowledge and competence should be identified and documented in such a way that both the educational system and employers can accept the description. In other words, RPL is a process that transforms real competence into formal competence.

On a policy level, there have been two official reports focusing on the recognition of foreign vocational competence (SOU 1998:165; SOU 2001:78).<sup>4</sup> They concentrate especially on RPL with respect to knowledge and competence at the upper secondary school level. The second report (SOU 2001:78) included three pilot RPL projects focusing on foreign vocational competence (see Andersson, 2001). Even if the focus was on immigrants, there were also Swedish participants in these projects, which were later expanded to eight experimental projects for immigrants. These activities gave the participating municipalities the freedom to gain experience and develop models since there was no special centre for cooperation between the projects. Within these broad frameworks, the pilot projects and the experimental projects were expected to use a proposed 'competence certificate' (SOU 2001:78), which was intended to document vocational, basic and general competence in a new way. The empirical part of this article is about these expanded experimental projects, which ended in spring, 2002 (see Andersson *et al.*, 2002, 2003a).<sup>5</sup> These eight experimental projects, in a total of 18 municipalities had 320 participants (Prop. 2003/04:1). In addition to this, many municipalities ran their own RPL projects where Swedish participants were also included. In practice, these projects with different target groups were integrated, which means that our results concerning how RPL was organised at the local level are not limited to the experimental projects but also describe the total situation in the municipalities in question.

Different benefits of RPL have been stressed in Sweden. For individuals, the benefit is to get an opportunity for formal assessment of their competence. It is expected that RPL will make it easier for individuals to enter the labour market or higher education when their competencies have been documented. It is a matter of social justice. It had also been proposed that the law on study leave and the system of study finance should be extended to include participation in RPL (SOU 2001:78). Employers would have better access to formally competent employees when RPL makes real competence visible. RPL will thus be given a role in economic development. For the government, it is also about saving money, which otherwise would be used for vocational training, since education and vocational training could be shorter and cheaper.

When it comes to the question of immigrants' competence, two different types of RPL are being discussed in Sweden. The first type is the recognition of learning that the individual has acquired informally in everyday life and/or in workplaces. The second is the assessment of learning made in formal educational systems in their home countries. In the first case, it is a question informal learning that has not been documented. In the

second case, it concerns formal competence that needs to be translated and transferred to another system, what in some contexts is called 'credit transfer'.

RPL has thus been regarded as something positive and neutral that broadens the individual's opportunities in higher education and in the labour market. It has even been regarded as a benefit for employers and for society, making it easier for employers to find qualified staffing and increasing national competitiveness on the global level. But recently, some more problematical questions have been raised, such as what values and power relations lie in RPL and whether there are different alternatives.

## **RPL in practice – the Swedish case**

Here, we will change focus and look at how the experimental projects arranged their RPL. We found that the municipalities arranged their RPL activities in different ways. First, the starting points were different. One alternative was that a few *vocations* were chosen as the basis of the project. Another was that the basis of the process was the *individual participant's* vocational background. Second, there was a difference in organisation – the activities were either *integrated* in the school system or organised as a *parallel* system.

### ***Different starting points***

The municipalities deciding on only a few vocations did so for different reasons. One choice was to work with certain vocations, which were in demand, i.e. labour market needs were the main starting point. Another choice was to work with a vocation because there were a lot of unemployed immigrants who had competence in that area. Here, the starting point was more the needs of (a certain group of) immigrants. Hairdressers were a typical example of this. A third reason was that the municipality had had previous experience of working with RPL for certain vocations, which made it easy to continue along the same lines. Thus, the reasons were (a mix of) labour market needs, immigrants' needs and project convenience. The recognition of competence among unqualified assistant nurses in order to give them a qualification as staff nurses is an example of the mix of labour market needs and project convenience. There is a great need of qualified staff nurses and there had already been local RPL initiatives involving this vocation in many municipalities.

The municipalities focusing on what vocational competence the individuals had recognised prior learning in a number of different vocations. This was a way of helping the individual to get the documentation he/she wanted. The starting point was the needs of all immigrants who wanted to participate in the project. But there was also another reason for working with RPL in different vocations – money. The projects were granted a certain sum for each participant in the RPL process, which made it more or less necessary to work with a number different vocations in smaller municipalities where there were problems with recruitment to this new and unknown RPL project.

### ***Different forms of organisation***

The projects were all run by the municipalities, but they were still organised in different ways. Some were closely connected to municipal adult education and the school system, and some were more independently organised in what we have called a 'parallel system'. Recognition of prior learning integrated with the school system could result in adaptation to the demands made in vocational training in upper secondary school to make it possible for the participants to continue in the educational system

after recognition of their prior learning. This is often one of the aims of RPL. This could even mean that some participants gained access to an entire study program where the first part was to recognise prior learning and the second part was to continue the 'traditional' schooling. The school system determines the progress of the RPL process.

The parallel system is more separated from the school. It is not necessary to adapt to the school system in the same way; instead you can adapt RPL to the more or less explicit occupational standards of different trades. The recognition of competence among construction workers is one example of this approach, where there are clear trade-based standards. When these standards constitute the starting point for RPL, supplementary education is not a natural component, as in the case of the integrated system. The trade in question has the power over the process. In cases where there is supplementary education, it is not necessarily arranged within the school system.

### ***Four types of RPL***

If we place these two differences in starting points and forms of organisation in relation to each other, we can see four different types of foci in the RPL activity (see Figure 1). In *vocational and educational recognition*, the starting points are a few vocations and the organisation is integrated with the school. The project focuses on labour market education; it is a matter of recognising prior learning in order to help the existing labour force to acquire formal competence that corresponds to a certain level of education. Supplementary education is not necessary but is a natural continuation of the recognition process.

**Figure 1** Different types of recognition of prior vocational learning

Form of organisation	Starting points for recognition of prior learning	
	Vocations	The individual
<b>Recognition integrated with the educational system</b>  <i>Vocational training at upper secondary level</i>  Documentation – principally grades	Vocational and educational recognition  Focusing on labour market education	Individual and educational recognition  Focusing on educational guidance
<b>Recognition parallel with the educational system</b>  <i>The trade in question</i>  Documentation – vocational certificate – competence certificate – grades, etc	Vocational and trade-based recognition  Focusing on labour force supply	Individual and trade-based recognition  Focusing on labour market guidance

In *vocational and trade-based recognition*, the starting point is certain vocations, although the organisation is parallel to the educational system. The focus is on the occupational standards of the trade in question; this is a more direct focus on the supply of the labour force to different trades. The standards of different trades can be more or less formal in character. There is a direct relationship with the trade in question instead of with formal education/training at upper secondary level.

*Individual and educational recognition* focuses on a kind of 'educational guidance'. The focus is on guiding the individual to the supplementary courses that are required to acquire formal educational competence in a certain vocation. The *individual and trade-based recognition* focuses on 'labour market guidance'. By means of different forms of assessment and documentation of competencies, the aim is to help the individual to find employment in the trade in question.

If we look at what views of knowledge these different types of recognition imply, the ones that take as their starting points a few different vocations imply that the participant has to 'fit' into the occupational standards. This leads to a more or less static view of knowledge, a 'Procrustean RPL'. If, instead, the starting point is the participants' vocational background, this seems to imply a more dynamic view of knowledge. Ideally, it is the individual's competencies (not matched with a number of static standards) that are important and this is the foundation of further guidance aimed at formally acknowledged competence or employment. In the first case, RPL is a matter of convergent assessment. In the second case, it seems to be a matter of divergent assessment – but this is probably not always the case. To a certain extent, the process is divergent when any vocation is included, but when it comes to assessment of actual vocational competence, the convergent standards of the vocation are likely to set the agenda.

### ***RPL and the educational system***

The school-integrated system presents the view of knowledge that exists in school. This implies at least two things in relation to vocational training. First, the relation to upper secondary school, when recognising prior learning, means that this recognition is related to standards of vocational knowledge normally used in the assessment of young people (but also adults) who are, more or less, new to the vocation. This seems to imply a convergent Procrustean RPL, which might be a problematic approach when trying to recognise experiential learning, which has taken place in a number of different settings. The knowledge and competence resulting from experiential learning in different workplaces is probably more divergent than that learnt in formal vocational training. Could this be assessed according to the same standards? Second, the educational approach could mean that the knowledge regarded as important could be broader than demanded by the vocation. As mentioned earlier, the idea behind upper secondary education in Sweden is to give students a broad knowledge base through programmes that prepare them for more than a specific vocation. Even if you can choose courses and study more limited programmes in adult education, this idea probably also has an impact on single courses. On the one hand, this could be a problem when assessing a narrower but deeper vocational competence – it might not be broad enough to meet the standards. On the other hand, the ambition on national level to recognise not only vocational but also general and basic competence through RPL has not been fulfilled in the projects. The focus has actually been on vocational competence. The consequences of this for the individual depend probably on the

demands on the labour market. If the focus is on specific vocational competence, there might be no problem. But if employers want employees with broader formal competencies, then the individual also needs this documentation from the RPL process.

If we look at the results from the municipalities, we can see that it was difficult for many of them to differentiate between school 'thinking' and RPL. It is easier to recognise the participant's prior learning within the existing system, something that often leads to documentation in the form of grades. There are several reasons for this, one being that the people who work with the RPL projects often also work in municipal adult education. This could imply a decision to relate RPL as much as possible to the everyday practice, in this case to grading.

Another reason could be that it is more profitable to give the participants grades because this gives municipal adult education money. In Sweden, every course in upper secondary school (and municipal adult education) is worth a certain number of points according to its size. If a participant has his/her prior learning assessed in relation to the demands of one of these courses in, for example, a fifth of the time it takes to study the course in question, this still results in the same amount of money to the adult education institution because the same number of courses could be reported. This is important to bear in mind when looking at activities such as this because the economic incentives are important. A third reason for the domination of school grades is that in most trades, there are no clear standards for what is required to gain employment. If there were standards like that, sanctioned at a central level, it might make it easier to recognise prior learning 'outside' the school system in more trades. You could focus on the occupational standards of different trades and try to match them instead of the demands in upper secondary school.

The recognition of prior learning from working with horses exemplifies this dilemma. One municipality started a programme for recognition of competence as a groom. It was organised so that RPL was integrated with supplementary education and resulted in grades being given. But nevertheless, a central aim of the programme was to prepare the participants for the trade examinations for a groom certificate.

### ***Language and the RPL process***

Our results show that speaking the Swedish language is essential in the RPL process, as well as for access to the labour market, for foreign participants. One of the criteria for gaining access to this process is normally that you should be able to communicate in Swedish. The reason for this is described as making sure that the assessors can recognise what the person actually knows. More theoretical aspects of professional knowledge have to be assessed through language, which means that you have to know the professional language. Using interpreters in this context is a problem as even if you can interpret from another language to Swedish, it is not certain that you can interpret the specific professional language.

Language demands are typically flexible. There are no fixed criteria for what language knowledge is required to gain access – this depends on what is needed in the specific vocation. This is related to a focus on vocational competence rather than on language in itself. Nevertheless, language is often an important part of vocational competence. You have to be able to communicate with your customers and with co-workers. Language is a more or less necessary tool in interaction. Through language we learn in our social context (Vygotsky, 1978). Without language, we are excluded, which has a negative impact on our learning. This means that the demands are not only on

professional language but also on everyday language. Hairdressers, one of the vocations included in some of the projects, are, for example, expected to communicate with their customers on everyday matters.

Language is not only a problem observed from the outside. The participants themselves highlight the importance of the language dimension, but it should be noted that this is based on more than their own experience. It is also what they hear from teachers, supervisors, etc. The participants want more focus on learning the language in parallel with the RPL process. Some of them highlight the function of the workplace in learning the professional language. It is important that immigrants gain access to working life, as well as acquiring documentation of their competence.

Problems are described when it comes to immigrants being accepted as potential members of the workforce. A project leader says that he deliberately tries to choose RPL assessors who are not suspicious. It is difficult to find workplaces where immigrants can get practice. Some trades are more conservative than others. For instance, there seems to be a belief that immigrants are unable to handle security matters adequately, which, for example, is explained in terms of their inability to read/understand security instructions.

The result is that language demands risk becoming criteria for exclusion, criteria that could also be used instead of other hidden motives. A problem is that there are no clear criteria, which paves the way for arbitrary informal assessments. Thus, there is a need for clear and accessible language criteria, which minimise the risk of arbitrariness and hidden discrimination.

It is important to reflect on what the process should result in. Is it a basis for further education, or is it mainly documentation of what the participant knows at the moment? On the one hand, language demands might be higher when education is the next step – as the language demands in a study programme with literature and teaching in Swedish might be relatively high. On the other hand, there is also the matter of ‘risk’ in the RPL assessment (VEETAC, 1993). If the assessment of the individual’s competence is summative and made only within the RPL process there is a high risk – a risk that the assessment will not give a ‘true’ result. Consequently, the assessment must be both careful and extensive. But if the assessment is formative and will be followed by education the risk is low, as there will be more assessments within that study programme. This means that the RPL assessment does not need to be that careful and extensive.

It is also questionable whether national initiatives for local experimental RPL projects with unemployed immigrants as the main target group is the best strategy. In particular, local project leaders have questioned the provisional competence certificate without established legitimacy in the labour market. Local freedom and lack of central control meant that the certificate was not used as expected.

## **Trust in the value of RPL**

We may well ask whether the RPL initiatives are worthwhile. In order to say yes to this question, RPL should achieve its aim of making the real but formally invisible competence and knowledge visible, and the results of RPL should be accepted in society. The results of RPL are expected to have utility value, exchange value and intrinsic value. When individuals realise their real competence and knowledge and acquire greater self-esteem, we can say that RPL has achieved intrinsic value. We can also say that

competence and knowledge have not only utility value in the different contexts but also exchange value when people become employed or gain admission to higher education as a result of recognised competence and knowledge. Formal competence and knowledge have a strong position here. We have already pointed out that RPL is a process that translates real competence and knowledge into formal competence and knowledge. An important part of RPL is that the participants acquire documentation of their competence and knowledge. To realise the exchange value of RPL, it is important that the employers and the educational system trust in the formalisation of real competence and knowledge through RPL. RPL is not an established system in Sweden. It is expected that it will take time for RPL to earn the trust commanded by an established system.

There are two questions concerning trust in RPL. The first is the question of method and the second is the normative criteria. It has been pointed out that RPL still needs to develop reliable methods to ensure its legitimacy. There are two main aspects of method, validity and reliability. Validity is about the question of whether it measures what the methods aim to measure and reliability is about the question of how reliable this measuring is. When you want to measure competence and knowledge, which are 'silent' and contextual, you need to have open and flexible methods. This could conflict with the reliability criteria that stress standard methods. In other words, there are two ambitions as regards methods. The first ambition is to make a just assessment of the individual's competence and knowledge. The second ambition is to make assessments that make possible fair comparisons between individuals. Consequently, there is a great need to develop methods with a good balance between these two aspects (Andersson, 2001; Bjørnåvold, 2000).

There are also some normative aspects of RPL concerning trust. RPL is not just about assessment but also about estimation, valuation and recognition. In order to achieve these aims, RPL must be formally legalised. Clearer methods and political outlines should help RPL to become accepted in society and to achieve its legitimacy.

RPL can be an entrance ticket to society, especially for immigrants whose competence and knowledge have not been accepted in the Swedish context. They will probably be recognised when their competence and knowledge have been translated by RPL. Accordingly, Swedish society needs to develop methods and normative criteria to strengthen trust in RPL.

## Final reflections

RPL is developed and used in different contexts. There are questions about how RPL should be organised and what the criteria determining acceptable knowledge and competence should be. Questions concerning power and influence have been highlighted. The importance of contexts is also connected to difficulties in developing general models of RPL. Here, difficulties are identified in relation to the ambition to make knowledge developed in a specific context visible and to document this knowledge in a way that is transferable to another context (Andersson *et al.*, 2003b). An important aspect of this difficulty is the relation between experience and language; a central part of competence is to be able to express and explain what one knows. It is difficult for participants to get fair assessments of their competence when they are unable to express what they know with proper linguistic tools. The other difficulty lies in the differences between educational and vocational contexts in different countries (Andersson *et al.*, 2003b). It is, for example, especially difficult to use RPL with foreign

professional academics. In Sweden, there is as yet no established RPL system for this group, especially when formal documentation is missing.

One question stemming from this is what is the Swedish state trying to solve by introducing RPL? In Sweden, there are a lot of immigrants and many of them have high levels of education from their home countries. Today, many immigrants are working in areas that do not do justice to their competencies. It has been shown that immigrants with an academic background more frequently work in areas where they are over-qualified and are more often unemployed, compared to Swedes with a corresponding level of education (Berggren and Omarsson, 2001). Consequently, a system of recognising their prior learning would help maximise the utilisation of their competencies in Sweden. It could also be a way of opening up the labour market to many immigrants who are unemployed today. Another answer could be that this is a matter of introducing a way of formalising competencies that is (expected to be) cheaper than municipal adult education. In our interviews, we could see that economic incentives were an important factor for some municipalities in their decision to participate in the experimental projects.

RPL represents a possibility for the individual to make his or her knowledge visible and to use this knowledge to a higher degree but also to supplement it, starting from its actual level rather than from a basic level. In addition to this, RPL enables available competence to be utilised in the labour market. RPL also has the potential to change the system. There are still problems related to generalisation and legitimacy. The assessment dimension also means that RPL is a potential instrument of power and classification (Andersson *et al.*, 2003b). Is Sweden prepared for RPL to change the system, or will RPL be a new practice adapted to the system?

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## Notes

- 1 The municipality is the local level in the Swedish political system. Sweden is divided into 288 municipalities, each with its own government for local affairs.
- 2 Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning, later Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning and Council for Adult and Experiential Learning.
- 3 Two of the authors of the present article were author and co-author of the book referenced. The book was published as part of one of the projects on which this article is based. It contains an extensive review of RPL literature. All the references used in the book are not mentioned here, even if we refer to the results of the analyses presented in the book.
- 4 'Foreign vocational competence' is the expression used officially, focusing on what immigrants learnt prior to arrival in Sweden. Compare this with the alternative 'immigrants' vocational competence', which does not differentiate between what immigrants have learnt in the country and what they had learnt before arrival. In practice, it is not that easy to differentiate between these two aspects of vocational competence.
- 5 A regional project studied in greater detail, included one of the national experimental projects.

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