



Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Skill Deficit: The Role of Open Distance Learning (ODL)

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Abstract

Skills acquisition is vital for any economic growth, particularly in an era of economic and technological changes. The need for skill development is a vital challenge, foremost for a developing nation, such as India. Therefore, vocational education and training (VET) is a direct means of providing workers with skills more relevant to their livelihood needs and generating a harmonized condition that should be linked directly to industry's needs and requirements. Skilling half a billion of India's population by 2022 is the biggest challenge and most ambitious goal ever set by the country in the field of education and training.

On the one hand, there are millions of people in India who have a considerable level of skill in a particular area but they do not have any formal certification to verify their existing skills, and on the other hand they are unable to further improve upon this already acquired skill to be commensurate with industry's needs. Hence, there is a need for a way to credit these already acquired skills through a qualifications framework, against which individuals' skills could be mapped. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a relatively new concept for India. Presently no system has been developed in the skill training sector for assessment, accreditation and certification of prior learning.

During 2013, the Government of India entrusted the National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) with the responsibility for developing a robust system for assessment, accreditation and certification of prior learning by educational institutions, both in the formal and non-formal education sectors. A concerted effort has been made by the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), an examining body at the school level, devoted to disadvantaged groups using open distance learning (ODL) mode, under the auspices of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, for assessment, accreditation and certification of skills in the informal sector workforce with industry partners. An attempt has been made through this paper to portray the framework developed by NIOS, and to discuss the issues and challenges related to implementing RPL in a socio-economic environment as diverse as India's.

Backdrop

Skill building is viewed as an instrument to improve the effectiveness and contribution of the workforce in terms of overall productivity and production. It could also be seen as an instrument to empower the individual and improve his/her social acceptance or value. In this era of globalization and economic change we must strive to offer learning opportunities to all, throughout life, by developing and improving structures and procedures to recognize all forms of learning, particularly the outcomes of both non-formal and informal learning.

As estimated by the government of India, approximately 93% of the country's workforce is in the unorganized sector, which consists of all unincorporated private enterprises owned by individuals or households engaged in the sale and production of goods and services operated on a proprietary or partnership basis and with less than ten workers in total. This cuts across all economic activities and includes rural and urban areas. It contributes about 60% of the country's GDP. Strengthening the skill base of the work force of the unorganized sector would improve productivity, working conditions, and, thus, living standards. Hence, it has been thought appropriate to develop a system of institutional mechanisms, which would help to develop an action plan, execute the strategic plan, and monitor the skill development efforts for the unorganized sector. The government of India's 2009 National Skill Development Policy emphasizes all of this in view of the importance of the unorganized sector, its contribution to a sustainable economy and resulting, thereby, in nation building.

With about 12 million persons expected to join the workforce every year in India, and an existing skill development capacity of about 3.4 million workers, it is imperative that the country enhances its skilling, technical and vocational educational capacity to about 15 million, since significant sections of the existing workforce need to be trained. India has set a huge target of training 500 million youth by 2022, as per skill development policy that has been developed by the government.

India has one of the youngest populations in the world and a very large portion of this young population has a reasonable knowledge of English. Therefore, it has been thought appropriate that this group of people gain the potential to reach the same skill levels as in other countries, and also become competent enough to accommodate India's own demand for skilled workpower.

As far as skill development in the informal sector is concerned the same is taking place largely in an unstructured way, i.e., people acquire skills at the work-place while they help their parents, relatives and employers, and in the process acquire a skill, often a rudimentary one, that subsequently gets refined to a more advanced level. Such persons do not have a formal certificate and, thus, earn lower wages and are exploited by employers. They have come through the informal system, due to the socio-economic circumstances of the family and the necessity of earning a livelihood, rather than attending a formal course. While their productivity is low, their contribution to the national GDP cannot be ignored. The terms "unorganized" and "informal" sectors are often used interchangeably, as mentioned in the *Report of the Committee on Unorganized Sector Statistics*. Learning through working does help in acquiring skills, and needs to be recognized, certified and appropriately rewarded. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is an appropriate method of assessment that considers whether the candidates can meet the assessment requirements for competencies that they already possess. Valuing and recognizing these learning outcomes may significantly improve the self-esteem and well being of individuals, motivate them to further their learning and strengthen their labour market opportunities. This may also help integrate broader sectors of the population into an open and flexible education and training system.

India's VET system has almost no process where the prior learning of someone who may have worked in the unorganized sector for decades can be recognized and certified. On 19th December 2013, the Cabinet Committee on Skill Development approved the National Skills Qualifications Framework (NSQF), a quality assurance framework which organizes qualifications according to a series of levels of knowledge, skills and aptitude. These levels are defined in terms of learning outcomes which the learner must possess, regardless of whether they were acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning.

Another problem is the significant drop-out rate for students after completion of Class 10. Current statistics indicate that net enrolment in vocational courses in India is about 5.5 million per year, compared to 90 million in China and 11.3 million in the United States (US). A mere two per cent of Indian workers are formally skilled. Significantly, the bulk of the labour force in India who work in the unorganized sector — about 93 per cent — are largely untouched by any kind of formal training. By way of comparison, 96 per cent of the workers in South Korea receive formal skills training, as do 80 per cent in Japan, 75 per cent in Germany and 68 per cent in the United Kingdom (UK). According to the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) report prepared for the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), India's workforce in 2006–07 numbered 484 million (Sinha et al., 2008). The BCG study indicates 40 per cent of the current workforce is illiterate and another 40 per cent is made up of school dropouts. Those who are vocationally-trained, diploma holders, graduates and above comprise a mere 10 per cent of the overall workforce, while those who have completed 12 years of schooling comprise another 10 per cent. (Chinoy, 2013).

India has set a huge target of training 500 million people by 2022, which requires programs that are scalable, replicable and accessible. A large portion of the employment would occur

in the lower portions of the skill pyramid. There is large demand and supply gap, where the current supply is unable to meet the ever-growing labour demands both in quality and numbers.

However, in the Indian context the qualifications system still focuses on recognition of competencies acquired through the formal system of education. As a result, a large number of individuals who have acquired learning through informal or non-formal learning modes remain unrecognized. This has led to a huge under-utilization of human talent and resources in Indian society. Therefore, the learning outcomes that young people and adults acquire in the course of their life in non-formal and informal settings need to be assessed, certified and recognized, to motivate them for lifelong learning and to enhance their productivity.

This paper intends to address these issues by making suggestions for the development of a policy on the recognition of prior learning in Open and Distance Learning.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a tool that is widely used internationally to bring people who have been excluded from learning back into training and education. It does this by recognizing and giving credit for the knowledge and skills these people already have, by boosting self-esteem and allowing for access to new training opportunities or better employment prospects. RPL can help deliver a fairer, more efficient, more flexible and more inclusive skills system, especially where many people have little formal education. After the notification of the National Skills Qualification Framework, National Skills Development Agency (NSDA) organized a preliminary meeting on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) on 27th January 2014. The small number of participants in the first meeting agreed that a broader set of stakeholders should be involved in the process. Consequently, The National Skill Development Agency (NSDA), along with the National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS), organized a National Workshop on "Strategy Planning for Implementing RPL for Informal Sector Workers" on 24th April 2014, after which, RPL Pilots in five sectors were planned. The pilots in some sectors have just started and others have yet to get underway.

The Need for RPL in India

India is often thought of as a country with millions of unskilled people. Year after year, large numbers of people drop out of school at various stages and are without any qualifications. They are then absorbed in the enormous informal economy and have to make their living as best as they can. But are these millions really "unskilled"? In many cases, no. They may lack qualifications and they may stand to benefit greatly from training, but rarely are they starting from a base of zero in terms of skills. Although employers (or even the individuals themselves) may not recognize it, workers in India's informal economy often have significant skills, knowledge, and know-how that could form the basis of their further development. Three hundred and fifty million out of India's 510 million strong workforce are employed in the informal sector and acquire skills at their workplace through non-formal/tacit learning.

The need for RPL in India arises from the national objective of moving towards a lifelong learning society, in which learners will be enabled to take up learning opportunities at chosen stages throughout their lives.

We know that Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the formal assessment, certification and recognition of the skills and knowledge a person has acquired regardless of how or where these competencies were attained. At the same time RPL creates new routes to qualifications for adults, taps unrecognized talent, and, in many cases, motivates people to resume their formal studies and provides a baseline assessment, which is a good start before re-skilling.

RPL, for the employer, is a cost effective and efficient method (time-wise, since there is no duplication of learning) to build skill levels in an organization and is a critical and relevant investment for the workforce. This also provides employers with the flexibility to make calculated, differential wage / compensation plans linked to workforce skill-levels.

Solution

The solutions to address the challenge of skill acquisition within the informal sector workforce, in our opinion, rest largely upon interventions, skill recognition and training including a recognition of prior learning assessment frame-work and on-demand, modular

vocational skills training accessible to workers) and support with employment linkages. These solutions are listed below:

- Link RPL to a national curriculum and qualification as the currency of learning, speed up the process of RPL for the underprivileged, who lack educational opportunities, and for those acquiring skills in informal situations. A common RPL framework is, therefore, needed as vocational training, both in the formal and informal modes, which vary greatly in India.
- Develop an RPL policy and practices that explicitly address the visible and invisible barriers to learning and services. Such an approach is required to ascertain the commitment from all players involved, and to remove barriers so as to build a visible, usable, and credible system which leads to an effective and creative vehicle for lifelong learning.
- Develop an RPL framework of outcomes-based qualifications against which prior learning can be mapped, in order to produce a form of recognition that can be interpreted by training providers and employers, as well as the learners themselves. NIOS has developed a framework, for Recognition of Prior learning with the support of COL and OPNZ.
- From a skills development perspective, a credible 'prior skills recognition programme' that helps measure the knowledge and skill levels of the workforce can play a pivotal role in addressing the skill gaps of the Indian workforce.
- Recognize prior knowledge to help policy makers undertake systematic planning that addresses the characteristics of the learners. This would serve as a diagnostic tool for dynamic planning, which, in turn, would increase the productivity of the country.

Recognition of Prior Learning as a Tool in the Development of India

A very important and prevalent system of skill training in India has been informal training. Such training is often passed on from generation to generation. It is also acquired at the work place as on-the-job training. Persons trained this way earn low wages, despite being fully skilled, and are often exploited by the employers since they do not have any formal certificate. Even though their productivity is low in comparison to that of others who have been formally trained, their contribution to the national GDP cannot be ignored.

To overcome this situation it is essential to develop a system of certification that not only recognizes such skills but also provides further education and training in a mode that suits their economic circumstances, among other factors. This would not only help the informally trained to earn a decent living but would also contribute to the national economy through increased productivity.

Technical and vocational education and the training of large populations is an important aspect of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). But traditional systems of training individuals for technical and vocational careers often cannot meet the massive need. Among the options available to achieve the targets of the MDGs is the application of open and distance learning (ODL) methods. Over the past over forty years, trainers all over the world have come to appreciate the immense value of using ODL methods to provide continuous, "just-in-time" training for workers in various fields.

Open learning in vocational and technical education has a tremendous amount to offer the new world of work because it is responsive, flexible, fosters independent learning, can be set up in a way that fosters teamwork and allows the immediate transfer of skills through workplace-based learning. Open learning also reinforces qualities of self-reliance, mobility and rapid adjustment to the change needed for economic survival in today's world. The potential and possibilities in the open distance learning mode have undergone remarkable changes so that, today, ODL systems, which use a variety of technologies and learner support modalities, can go well beyond teaching merely theoretical subjects. There is enough experience around the world to show that appropriately organized, distance learning experiences, supported by both Face-to-Face (F2F) and virtual interactions, and hands-on skill development sessions, can be an effective mode to develop technical and vocational competencies. (Mennon, 2013)

Recognition of prior learning is a crucial area in an open and distance learning system. Recognition of prior learning enables effective and maximum utilization of human resources and can be considered as a 'tool'.

The relevance of vocational education has increased in the rapidly growing Indian economy,

especially in light of the government's thrust towards universalisation of secondary education, skills development and social justice through inclusive education and training. Through the National Vocational Education Qualifications Framework (NVEQF) the government is looking to formally integrate vocational education with its current conventional secondary and post-secondary educational streams, to provide an opportunity and incentive to students to explore a universe of opportunity.

RPL has the potential to be a powerful tool in the development of India and in the implementation of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. It can empower individuals, provide a skill focus for employers, and assist in economic and social development. In terms of the current political, economic and social context in the country, RPL is seen to have the capacity to contribute to redress equity by opening up more ways for people to attain qualified status. It could:

- enable more people to reach higher levels of qualification and expertise by beginning with an acknowledgement of existing skills and knowledge
- contribute to enhancing international economic competitiveness by building on often invisible and unacknowledged workforce skills
- offer the first step in attaining the goal of developing a multi-skilled and flexible workforce by acting as an auditing tool to quantify existing competence.

Education and training should be available to all, and the process of lifelong learning should be encouraged. People should be continually involved in acquiring new skills and should also gain rewards for existing skills, experience and learning previously unrecognized. RPL in India can thus be seen as a mechanism to accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities.

Conclusion

Prior learning assessment and recognition can take various forms and outcomes can be used for a large number of purposes relevant to the goals of individuals, labour market partners and society at large. Institutions and employers can make better use of their resources by not making people learn and do what they already know and can do. It will also enable millions to gain livelihoods and take our country ahead in its path towards inclusive and sustained growth.

From an organizational perspective, RPL provides a solid base for long-term human resource development and improvements in morale, quality service, and variability. For individual employers RPL could directly address the lack of self-confidence so acute due to recent economic and employment trends in India.

From a skills development perspective, a credible 'prior skills recognition programme' that helps measure the knowledge and skill levels of the workforce could play a pivotal role in addressing the skill gaps of the Indian workforce.

Skills recognition and certification initiatives in the informal economy through Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes will provide an important pathway for the 90 per cent of Indians who work in the so-called unorganized sector (NCEUS Report, 2009). However, the process of skills recognition in the informal economy will need to be accompanied by provision of an RPL infrastructure, which is affordable, reliable and efficient. There will be challenges in identifying where skills exist, documenting those skills, communicating with the potential candidates, as well as administering the process. Methods for this should be established, such as portfolio review, written/oral exams, and demonstrations. A relatively open examination system relating to a national qualifications framework and the relevant standards should be created for more transparency, so that it benefits those people who have acquired their knowledge and skills outside the education system. Guidance and information campaigns will be needed for the learner to be guided through the process (Singh, 2011).

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