

Recognition of Prior Learning within Formal Adult Education in Denmark

Michael Andersen and Christina Laugesen, Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA), Denmark

1. Introduction

This paper presents the key findings of a study on the recognition of prior learning (RPL) within formal adult education in Denmark.¹ The study took place from December 2009 to April 2010 and focused on practices at educational institutions under Danish legislation, in particular Act No. 556 of 6 June 2007,² on RPL within adult education. Two criteria have been crucial for the selection of the findings presented here: first, those results that illustrate the possibilities and the limitations for the use of recognition of prior learning in the Danish adult educational system; and second, those results that might be of interest to readers outside of the Danish educational context.

An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report (Werquin, 2010) based on national background reports from 22 countries concluded that recognition processes often are “marginal, small-scale and not yet sustainable” (p. 3). This study indicated that this characterization can also be applied to Denmark. In addition, the report concluded that the “lack of any purposely collected specific data and appropriate research activity is probably the most obvious shortcoming for understanding and analysing systems for recognizing non-formal and informal learning outcomes in all countries in the study” (p. 84).

To address this shortcoming, the aim of the study was to evaluate the implementation of new possibilities introduced by Act No. 556, which addresses the validation of prior learning within adult education in Denmark, and to assess the extent to which this Act has satisfied its objectives. The study focused on four themes: spread, application, barriers to spread and organization of RPL, and was followed-up by 11 research questions (Andersen et al., 2010).

Act No. 556 covers the following programs (the acronyms refer to Danish terms):

- subjects within general adult education (at primary or lower secondary levels) (AVU) at Adult Education Centers (VUC)
- general upper secondary subjects at VUC (also called higher preparatory single subjects)
- adult vocational training programs (AMU)
- adult vocational basic education programs (GVU)
- short-cycle post-secondary adult education (VVU)
- medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma degrees)

The study identified a range of practices at educational institutions in regards to the four themes. The findings relating to these themes will be presented below.

1.1 Definitions

Prior learning is defined as a person's total qualifications, knowledge, skills and competencies, irrespective of where and how they were acquired (Danish Ministry of Education, 2004).³ In Danish legislation, recognition of prior learning has to be conducted in relation to specific (formal) educational targets. In this paper, we use the term “recognition of prior learning” (RPL) as the overall term for the entire assessment and recognition

process, as well as the formal results of this process.

1.2 The Danish context

The Danish educational system contains two separate parts: the first addresses the ordinary educational system for children and young people covering primary, lower and upper secondary teaching, as well as higher education; and the second addresses the parallel educational system specifically for adults. To some extent, the parallel system covers the same types of teaching and learning as in the ordinary system, but is focused on adults. In addition, there is a range of specific adult programs; for example, VVU, Diploma degrees and master's studies only exist as adult education. According to the legislation, adult education has an obligation to take into consideration the needs and experience of the adult participants; therefore, having a job and the ability to study must be possible at the same time.

Act No. 556 extended possible uses of RPL in the adult educational systems to areas in which it already existed (AMU and GVU), and it introduced RPL into new educational areas (general adult education, general upper secondary subjects, VVU and Diploma degrees). Validating skills or qualifications prior to being admitted to an education program or a subject is not entirely new, as there was already a basic set of rules for credit transfer. Under the new Act, this continues to exist.

Credit transfer and RPL share similarities; for example, they can both include documentation in the form of exam certificates, etc., but there are differences, as well. One of the main differences is that RPL is based on prior learning, which may have been obtained from work experience or from a hobby. Often the learning will not have been documented beforehand and is assessed specifically by the institution conducting the RPL. In addition, there can be different provisions on credit transfer that do not apply to RPL: for example, a stipulation that a qualification is out of date (periods of limitation). Similarly, there are provisions that do not apply to credit transfer: for example, in relation to issuance of certificates of competency or education. This study dealt exclusively with RPL and not with traditional credit transfer.

The Danish educational system

Ordinary educational system		Adult and continuing educational system		
Primary and lower secondary school		General adult education	Adult vocational education and training	
Primary and lower secondary school		Preparatory adult education (FVU)		
		General adult education (AVU)		
Upper secondary education				
General upper secondary education	Vocational education and training	Higher preparatory single subjects	Basic adult education (GVU)	Adult vocational training programmes (AMU)
Higher education				
Bachelor's Degree, Bachelor's Degree in Arts/ Fine Arts	Professional Bachelors Degree	Academy Profession Degree	Academy Profession Degree (VVU)	
			Diploma Degree	
Master's Degree, Master's Degree in Arts/ Fine arts			Master Degree, Master Degree in Arts/ Fine Arts	
Ph.d				

(Danish Evaluation Institute, EVA, 2011, pp. 21-22)

The new regulations following Act No. 556 provide prior learning assessed as a right that individuals can claim within the adult and continuing educational system.

For the individual, an RPL implies the following possibilities:

- Qualification for educational programs (admission to programs)
- Individual planning and possible shortening of educational programs
- Obtaining a “certificate of competency,” if the competencies are equivalent to those obtained by completing part of an educational program
- Obtaining a “certificate of education” if the competencies are equivalent to those obtained by completing an entire educational program (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008).

The Danish Ministry of Education (2008) summarized the basic principles in RPL for Denmark through these seven points:

- The individual citizen is able to request an assessment of his or her prior learning, based on the framework and regulations applicable within the individual areas of education
- The individual also has a responsibility for contributing to the documentation of his or her prior learning
- A user fee may be charged for a competence assessment, except for the low skilled
- A competence assessment should always be based on the objectives and admission requirements of the education programme in question
- The individual’s competencies should be recognised, irrespective of where and how they were acquired, but without compromising the quality/standard of the education and training programmes
- The methods used must ensure a reliable assessment, inspiring confidence in the outcome
- The result of the assessment should be documented by issuing a certificate. (p. 11)

These seven basic principles, along with the four possible outcomes of an RPL (mentioned earlier) are useful to keep in mind as the study results are discussed in relation to the challenges arising from the organization of RPL in Denmark.

2. Methods

The study comprised a quantitative questionnaire survey and a qualitative interview survey.

2.1 The quantitative questionnaire survey

The survey was conducted as a Web-based survey in February 2010. To achieve a high response rate, two rounds with reminder emails were conducted. A total of 156 questionnaires were distributed, with 132 responses (response rate of 84.6 percent).

Initially, the questionnaire form was pilot tested by 10 individuals from six different educational areas represented in the study. Pilot testers were asked to respond as to whether questions, categories of responses and concepts that were used in the table were relevant, understandable and comprehensive. Comments were recorded in a systematic manner, and changes to the questionnaire were implemented if several pilot testers had similar comments or amendments to the same questions.

The questionnaire was sent to the entire population in the study; that is, individuals who represent the educational institutions that are governed by Act No. 556. A prerequisite was that, as far as possible, the respondents should have an awareness of what was happening at the institution in relation to RPL.

Eighty percent of the respondents were heads of institutions, which may have influenced the results. The leaders may have focused more on quality systems and procedures, profitability ratios for the institution's various activities, etc., and therefore, might have responded differently to a number of questions than those

respondents not in management.

The assessment of the barriers is based on quantitative data. Participants were presented with a predefined list of barriers and were asked to indicate if they completely or mostly agreed with a particular barrier statement. Thus, the number of leaders not experiencing the barrier is not highlighted in the data. The barriers were assessed in this way to determine the number of people experiencing any particular barrier.

The assessments of barriers are presented as perceived by the educational institutions. Because of this, the barriers, which place responsibility outside of the institutions, might be rated higher than internal barriers. Had a questionnaire survey among participants or potential participants been conducted, additional barriers, such as the participant payment for RPL, which can be relatively high for VVU and for Diploma degrees, might have appeared as an important barrier for utilizing RPL.

2.2 A qualitative interview survey

In addition to the quantitative questionnaire survey, a qualitative interview study was conducted involving focus group interviews and phone-based personal interviews. The interviews utilized questionnaires tailored to the different educational areas and groups of participants.

The qualitative interview survey comprised:

- Twenty-six telephone interviews with participants. These interviews provided data about personal experiences with RPL. The participants were randomly selected from lists commissioned from educational institutions covering all six areas of education. These interviews focused on the perceived quality of the processes the participants had been through (quality) and the subsequent use of RPL (application). The interviews were used to explore further RPL practices in the different educational areas.
- Ten interviews with selected representatives from educational institutions. Five of these represented educational institutions with a relatively high RPL activity, and the other five represented educational institutions with no or a very low RPL activity. The interviewees were selected on the basis of questionnaire data, and the interviews were conducted immediately after the survey. These interviews provided a deeper understanding of the results of the questionnaire survey and greater insight into why some institutions have very high RPL activity while others have very low activity, including barriers to the use of RPL.
- Five focus group interviews with persons engaged in RPL. The participants in each group came from the same educational area. The interviews focused on the specific challenges they face in their work with RPL, and as a source of data, the interviews illuminated the practice of RPL and attitudes to it in the different educational areas.

3. Results

The results of the study are organized into four themes: spread of RPL, application of RPL, barriers to RPL and organization of RPL.

3.1 The spread of RPL

The following table shows the spread of RPL at the six different education areas covered by Act No. 556.

Table 1						
The spread of RPL						
	Subjects within general adult education (at primary or lower secondary levels) (AVU) (N=27)	General upper secondary subjects (N=27)	Adult vocational training programs (AMU) (N=93)	Adult vocational basic education programs (GVU) (N=63)	Short-cycle post-secondary adult education (VVU) (N=28)	Medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma programs) (N=18)
Share of institutions that conducted at least one RPL in 2009 within different education areas:	42 %	70 %	71 %	91 %	29 %	50 %

The spread of RPL within the six education areas varies considerably. Overall, the spread of RPL is least within VVU and AVU, while it is most widespread within general upper secondary subjects, AMU and GVU. In other words, the spread of RPL in Denmark is greatest within vocational education and training at basic levels. At the same time, the overall picture is characterized by the fact that there is a relatively large group of institutions within all the education areas with no RPL activity, except GVU. A small group of institutions, primarily within GVU and AMU, has a relatively high level of RPL activity. This indicates that institutional practices affect the spread of RPL to a high extent.

3.2 The application of RPL

The results showed that RPL is applied very differently within the various education areas. Within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects, RPL is typically utilized because participants need a certificate of competency to continue in the education system. For example, universities have admission requirements that include specific subjects at specific levels. Both general adult education and general upper secondary subjects can issue certificates of competency for part of subjects or full subjects. However, the legislation does not allow certificates to be issued for a full general preparatory examination (general adult education) or higher preparatory examination.

RPL within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects will therefore typically replace teaching and possibly tests/examinations that would otherwise be alternatives for participants. In simple terms, this means that RPL at VUC may result in VUC losing ordinary course participants on the one hand, while on the other hand, participants and society gain time and resources if, with the aid of RPL, participants can avoid having to complete courses and tests on material they already know.

Within AMU, institutions can issue certificates of education for full AMU (education targets) or for individual subjects that are included in a common description of competency, and they can issue certificates of competency for parts of these. However, the documentation shows that issuing certificates of competency, and especially issuing certificates of education, is the exception rather than the rule. Instead, RPL is primarily applied in AMU to draw up personal education plans and, to a limited extent, to shorten courses. In other words, RPL is often applied in a manner that resembles the legislation *prior* to 2007, under which it was not possible to issue certificates of competency and education.

In GVU, institutions can issue certificates of education for full education programs and certificates of competency for parts of these. RPL was reported to be conducted as a foundation for a personal education plan in order to complete a training program individually organized for adults; therefore, the 2007 legislation has not led to changes in the GVU.

In VVU, institutions can issue certificates of education for full education programs and certificates of competency for parts of these. However, neither of these is very common. None of the eight respondents who replied that their institution conducted at least one RPL in 2009 stated that they had issued either certificates of competency or education. A single respondent stated that their institution had used RPL as the basis for personal education plans.

In Diploma degrees, institutions can issue certificates of education for full education programs and certificates of competency for parts of these. However, overall certificates of education are rarely issued: only within Diploma degrees for management were examples found of institutions issuing certificates of education, and only two out of eight did this. Within the other seven Diploma degree areas, certificates of education were not issued. This picture also involves the fact that there is a certain amount of resistance among teachers to the right to receive a certificate of education in the Diploma degrees environment. Certificates of competency are more common, especially within Diploma degrees for management and the pedagogical Diploma degrees. In the Diploma degrees area, RPL is primarily applied for admission to Diploma degrees where the applicants have not already met the admission requirements.

Therefore, in general, RPL is primarily used to give access to the education programs that institutions provide themselves, rather than other uses, including recognition of competencies to replace education and teaching, and for direct utilization in the labor market. In addition, the limited issuance of certificates of competency and education means that people miss out on the opportunities to use such certificates in the labor market, such as in connection with job seeking.

Looking more closely at the 26 participants interviewed corroborates this picture. Of these, 22 indicated that their RPL was primarily for use in education, while four indicated they would use it in connection with a job. Of the 22 participants who were to use their RPL for education, 17 used their RPL for education at the institution that was assessing and validating their prior learning. Given that, within several education programs, RPL is primarily applied for admission to an institution's own programs. Interviews with participants indicated that the institutional interests in recruiting new applicants can influence the outcome of assessments. Looking more closely at how institutions can separate organization of RPL from their financial interests is important in conducting education/training courses.

3.3 The barriers to RPL

The use and application of RPL meet substantial barriers in the Danish adult educational system.

3.3.1 Key external barriers

The most important barrier is the lack of public awareness of RPL. Of the respondents who represented institutions, a great majority indicated that the lack of public awareness and knowledge about RPL was a barrier to RPL that was becoming more widespread. Within the different educational areas, the proportion that assesses this barrier varied from 80 to 96 percent. These figures are supported by the interview survey. They point to one of the most important barriers to the spread of RPL in Denmark.

The second most important barrier relates to the financial aspects of conducting RPL. The proportion of respondents within the different education areas who deemed that it is difficult to see how RPL can be profitable for the institutions only fluctuated slightly: from 72 percent (general adult education) to 82 percent (VVU and GVU).

Some minor but still important barriers connected to the lack of public awareness of RPL were related to communication. Communication of knowledge about RPL, both internally at the institutions and externally, are important for the spread of RPL. However, there are large differences in the proportion of institutions within the various education areas that have informed employees internally in the organization about RPL. Within the different educational areas, the proportion that assesses this barrier varied from 46 to 92 percent (see Table 2). In most cases, internal communication about RPL takes place within meetings.

Table 2						
Lack of public awareness is the greatest barrier						
Share of institutions that agree or mostly agree in:	Subjects within general adult education (at primary or lower secondary levels) (AVU) (N=24-25)	General upper secondary subjects (N=24-25)	Adult vocational training programs (AMU) (N=87-88)	Adult vocational basic education programs (GVU) (N=59-61)	Short-cycle post-secondary adult education (VVU) (N=27-28)	Medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma programs) (N=17-18)
The lack of public awareness and knowledge about RPL was a barrier to them becoming more widespread.	96 %	96 %	85 %	82 %	86%	80 %
They have informed employees <i>internally</i> in the organization about RPL	84 %	92 %	76 %	80 %	46 %	56 %
They have informed <i>externally</i> about RPL	54 %	58 %	70 %	87 %	43 %	56 %

There were also large differences in the proportion of institutions within the various education areas that have informed *externally* about RPL. Within the different educational areas, the proportion that assesses this varied from 43 to 87 percent. Looking at how institutions have provided information in the various education areas, there is a tendency that within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects, information has mainly been communicated through a student counselor and websites; AMU, GVU, Diploma degrees and, in part, VVU have mainly used their own consultants and websites. Among providers of AMU and GVU, there is generally a great deal of outreach work in connection with enterprises, and therefore, to base the dissemination of knowledge about RPL on this work would be obvious. This may also explain the high spread of RPL, with some providers of AMU conducting more than 1,000 RPLs in 2009. In relation to this, AMU and GVU have a good starting point compared to other education areas.

This external communication is particularly significant for the spread of RPL, especially since all respondents have pointed to the lack of public awareness of RPL as the largest barrier to the spread of RPL. In general, there exists a marketing challenge in the dissemination of information about and promotion of RPL. The interview study shows that there are attitudinal barriers among a large number of teachers at VUC, and to some degree at the academies of professional higher education and the university colleges – barriers that can have a negative impact on motivation to provide information about RPL.

The results varied by educational area depending upon who informed the 26 participants about RPL. Within

AMU, most participants were made aware of the possibility through their employer, and no one within AMU first became aware of the possibility through a student counselor or similar individual at his or her education institution. Conversely, for Diploma degrees, general adult education and general upper secondary subjects, most people were informed about the possibility of RPL by the education institution itself. Within GVU and VVU, there is a wider spectrum of sources, including trade unions and job centers.

3.3.2 Other external barriers

Four other external barriers were identified by respondents across the education areas, although these barriers were identified by less than half of the respondents.

First, there is a shortage of courses for personnel working with RPL. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 32 to 43 percent. Therefore, there seems to be an unmet need for relevant courses for those working with RPL at institutions.

Second, connecting skills development at enterprises with RPL in the formal education system is difficult. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 22 to 46 percent. Within AMU, the study revealed that the higher the level of RPL activity at the institution, the fewer people believe that this was a barrier. This may mean both that more experience makes it easier to manage this challenge and that a high level of RPL activity links with closer cooperation by enterprises with a similar effect.

Third, connecting skills development for participants with RPL in the formal education system is difficult. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 28 to 43 percent. Although a minority point to this barrier, it is nevertheless crucial to the entire RPL concept, as recognition of participants' skills development in relation to education targets in the formal system is at the very hub of the scheme. Therefore, this is a barrier to be addressed, including through skills development of employees and development of methods, etc., for assessment and recognition.

The proportion of institutions that have developed the skills of their employees working with RPL varied greatly: Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 21 to 80 percent. Across education areas, skills development has primarily been addressed externally at seminars, conferences and courses and through participation in the exchange of experiences across institutions.

Fourth, there is limited interest in conducting RPL because there appears to be a lack of interest in the use of RPL to shorten the length of education. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 17 to 37 percent. The highest percentage in the lack of interest in shortening education was within AMU, which is not surprising given that much shorter education/training courses are carried out there. However, the results were surprising that around one-quarter of the representatives from institutions think this applies for the much longer programs, for instance within VVU.

Other external barriers						
Share of institutions that agree or mostly agree in:	Subjects within general adult education (at primary or lower secondary levels) (AVU) (N=23-24)	General upper secondary Subjects (N=25)	Adult vocational training programs (AMU) (N=87-89)	Adult vocational basic education programs (GVU) (N=59-61)	Short-cycle post-secondary adult education (VVU) (N=27-28)	Medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma programs) (N=17-18)
There is a shortage of courses for personnel working with RPL	35 %	32 %	42 %	42 %	43 %	33 %
It is difficult to couple skills development at enterprises with RPL in the formal education system	26 %	24 %	38 %	36 %	46 %	22 %
It is difficult to couple skills development for participants with RPL in the formal education system	30 %	28 %	34 %	32 %	43 %	28 %
There is a limited interest in having RPL conducted because there is no wish to use RPL to shorten education	26 %	24 %	37 %	23 %	25 %	17 %

3.3.3 Internal barriers

Looking across the education areas, there were no statements on internal barriers to which more than half of the respondents within all the areas agreed. However, there was one barrier for which between one-third and one-half of the respondents within all the education areas indicated. The respondents found that making individual teaching plans to follow-up on the specific outcome of the RPL is difficult for the institutions. About 50 percent within AMU and GVU agreed with this and about one in three agreed from the other areas.

Another internal barrier indicated by many was that there is difficulty in explaining to applicants what actually is prior learning and how it can be documented and assessed. In this respect, however, there were somewhat greater differences between the education areas, from less than 30 percent within Diploma degrees and just under 40 percent within GVU and VVU, to almost 50 percent within AMU and around 60 percent within general adult education and general upper secondary subjects.

A third internal barrier was the lack of time to upgrade the skills of personnel at institutions in relation to RPL. The Diploma degrees area differed here in that only one in five saw this as a barrier, while in the other education areas about 40 to 45 percent viewed it as a barrier. Other barriers, such as the difficulty in integrating RPL work into other work at the institution and that the process related to RPL is too laborious for participants, were mentioned by 30 to 40 percent of respondents within the various education areas.

All in all, the respondents seemed to find the external barriers more of an issue than the internal barriers, with the majority of respondents pointing to the lack of awareness and to financial barriers.

3.4 The organization of RPL

With regard to the organization of RPL, the study focused on three aspects: assessment tools, collaboration on RPL across institutions and quality assurance.

3.4.1 Assessment tools

Common to all education areas was the use of interviews and inclusion of documentation such as CVs, etc., in connection with RPL. However, interviews with participants revealed that there were also examples of participants who have not been to a personal interview, even though typically, there is a clarification or guidance interview with a student counselor within the RPL interviews.

Furthermore, there were a number of differences between the education areas themselves with regard to which tools were applied. Tests and exams were not used in Diploma degrees, while all respondents from general adult education and general upper secondary subjects, as well as the majority from AMU, GVVU and VVU stated that they used tests and exams. Instead of tests and exams, Diploma degrees used various other tools such as reflection tasks, cases, etc.

3.4.2 Collaboration on RPL across institutions

Several persons engaged in RPL mentioned examples of effective collaboration on RPL across institutions. They indicated that collaboration with other institutions provides good opportunities to discuss which tools are relevant, and it ensures some alignment in the tools institutions use in an RPL. Therefore, collaboration could potentially enhance confidence in and the legitimacy of RPL. According to the focus group interviewed, collaboration and knowledge sharing with other institutions about RPL was particularly widespread within Diploma degrees, where providers met each other in a networking group several times a year. Moreover, participants from VUC mentioned the great benefit of a common materials database and a manual in conducting RPL at VUC. In general, the advantages of collaboration and knowledge sharing were highlighted in relation to skills development and better management of specific cases.

3.4.3 Quality assurance

The Danish Ministry of Education (2008) handbook on RPL within adult education and continuing training, "National Actions for Promoting Recognition of Prior Learning," placed great emphasis on the importance of quality assurance of institutions' work with RPL. The handbook stressed that work on assessing and validating prior learning should help ensure legitimacy by applying valid and reliable methods. It states, "Institutions must develop transparent guidelines to ensure quality, validity and reliability, and are expected to clarify the professional groups that are to take on the various tasks" (pp. 31-32). Several of the criteria for quality assurance of institutions' work with RPL also were addressed in the publication, "European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning," by CEDEFOP (2009).

In this study, not all institutions indicated a documented system to ensure the quality of RPL. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 43 to 89 percent.

Table 4						
Quality assurance						
Share of institutions that agree or mostly agree in:	Subjects within general adult education (at primary or lower secondary levels) (AVU) (n=24-25)	General upper secondary subjects (n=24-25)	Adult vocational training programs (AMU) (n=87-89)	Adult vocational basic education programs (GVU) (n=59-61)	Short-cycle post-secondary adult education (VVU) (n=27-28)	Medium-cycle post-secondary adult education (Diploma programs) (n=17-18)
The institution has a documented system to ensure the quality of RPL	69 %	69 %	48 %	61 %	43 %	89 %
The information about the institution's procedures and standards for RPL, e.g., on the institution's website, is made public*	33 %	33 %	19 %	29 %	50 %	100 %
The institution has documentation to ensure that decisions can be checked*	56 %	50 %	60 %	66 %	63 %	67 %
The institution uses criteria or standards for use in RPL*	56 %	61 %	60 %	56 %	50 %	78 %
The institution let the participants evaluate RPL*	11 %	6 %	48 %	34 %	38 %	0 %

Note: In regard to these questions, the share is calculated only in relation to those institutions that have made at least one RPL in 2009 (for the six educational areas, this means that n is 9, 18, 66, 55-57, 8. Note that some of the numbers are very small.

Quality assurance of RPL also requires transparency in the process, so the applicants can understand the purpose of the assessment. For instance, there must be guidelines available to the public for the entire procedure so that stakeholders can assess whether there is alignment between guidelines and practice (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008).

The results indicated that information about the institution's procedures and standards for RPL, e.g., on the institution's website, is only made public to a limited extent, except for Diploma degrees. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 19 to 100 percent.

Another important element indicated in the Danish Ministry of Education (2008) handbook was that the methods of assessment ensure reliability, which relates to the concept of being able to repeat results. Documentation to ensure that decisions can be checked is available at all institutions. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 50 to 66 percent.

A decisive element in quality assurance is that the assessment is repeatable. This is the reason behind the cross-education area recommendation to all providers (except VVU) that all educational institutions conducting RPL ensure that assessment and RPL are documented so that decisions can be tested to strengthen the legitimacy of RPL, at a minimum, to see how the process has taken place and on what the assessment is based should be possible.

The tools and procedures used by institutions to ensure the quality of RPL at their institutions vary considerably; cooperation with other institutions on quality development of RPL is one of the most common. This applies particularly within Diploma programs, where all institutions cooperate with other institutions on quality development, while about 66 percent cooperate in other education areas, except for general upper secondary subjects, where 44 percent cooperate.

The use of criteria or standards as a basis for RPL varied within the different educational areas from 50 to 78 percent. The other tools and procedures to ensure quality of RPL were generally used to a much lesser extent.

In all the education areas, about 50 percent replied that employees evaluate RPL, but allowing those employees evaluate who are also RPL participants is more the exception than the rule. Within the different educational areas, the proportion varied from 0 to 38 percent.

All in all, there seems to be a potential for improvement of quality assurance of RPL, and it is likely that such an improvement would have a significant impact on the legitimacy of RPL and on eliminating some of the barriers to using RPL.

4. Discussion

4.1 Spread and barriers

The overall picture is characterized by the fact that there is a relatively large group of institutions within all the education areas with no RPL activity, except GVU. A small group of institutions, primarily within GVU and AMU, had a relatively high level of RPL activity. This indicates that institutional aspects affect the spread of RPL to a significant extent.

There were large barriers across all the education areas, partly in relation to the financial aspect of conducting RPL, and partly due to lack of public awareness of RPL. All other barriers were minor when compared to these two themes. However, different external – and to a lesser extent internal – barriers can be important in specific areas of education.

The financial barrier and its connection to lack of public awareness of RPL have also been identified in other studies; for instance, in Ireland, an expert group noted that there was a connection between how RPL is funded and the extent to which they actively promote this option to learners (Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, between one-third and one-half of the respondents within all the education areas indicated that if an institution were to use RPL, making individual teaching plans to follow-up on the specific outcome of the RPL was difficult for institutions. This is also a well-known challenge internationally. Nistrup and Lund (2010) mentioned that Norway has experienced difficulties in organizing subsequent education/training courses so that they take into account validated prior learning (p. 78). This barrier is linked to the fact that, as a point of departure, educational institutions plan for groups of participants in order to economize on resources, while recognition of prior learning means that subsequent education/training courses have to be organized more individually. In some contexts, participants can risk going in and out of longer education/training courses depending on which elements in the course they have had validated. This can present planning and pedagogical challenges that may negatively affect attitudes toward RPL.

Another internal barrier indicated by many was that it is difficult to tell applicants what actually is prior learning and how it can be documented and assessed. The fact that as many as 60 percent of respondents found it difficult to explain RPL to applicants and how it can be documented and assessed, may make this barrier related to attitudinal barriers about RPL in some educational areas. The fact that so many considered this a barrier within GVU was surprising, given that RPL has been within this area for many years. However, perhaps this is an indication that this is an important barrier that may help explain the poor level of public awareness of RPL.

The study also indicated that many representatives of educational institutions found it difficult to connect skills development at enterprises with RPL in the formal education system. However, the study gave no indication as to the reasons for this. This result is important and should be addressed in future studies.

4.2 Application

In general, RPL is primarily used to give access to the education programs that institutions provide themselves, rather than other uses including recognition of competencies to replace education and teaching and for direct utilization in the labor market. In addition, the limited issuance of certificates of competency and education means that people miss out on the opportunities to use such certificates in the labor market, e.g., in connection with job seeking. The participants interviewed confirmed this finding. Therefore, to look more closely at how institutions can separate organization of RPL from their financial interests is important in conducting education/training courses with many participants.

The study indicated that there are some approaches to RPL that could benefit from further consideration. One would be to address the phase *before* the formal RPL process by providing greater clarification on the objectives of an RPL. In this phase, guidance and counseling can play an important role. There might be some advantage if these activities were not too closely connected to the interests of the specific educational institution. The study indicated that this phase is often missing or separate from the RPL process.

The current legislation only focuses on educational goals as the standard against which individuals are assessed. This complicates the possibilities of using RPL as a tool to describe skills and competencies in a broader sense – detached from the educational goals. Nistrup and Lund (2009), who work at the National Center for Prior Learning, pointed out that in Denmark, and especially in AMU, this historical development represents a move from a broad guidance objective of the RPL (focus on preparing a development and training course) to a more narrow assessment of competencies measured against the specific learning objectives (focus on the short training courses and exchanging informal skills with formal certificates and documentation). This raises the question whether the current organization of RPL opportunities focuses too narrowly on access, shortening training or training plans, as compared to previous schemes in Denmark (IKA [Individual clarification of competencies] in AMU).

The study indicated that RPL is primarily used in relation to two of the four politically formulated purposes of RPL: to provide access to training and to shorten training. This means that RPL is not used enough to issue certificates of competency for the labor market or to clarify competencies more broadly on the basis of the individual's wishes. These two objectives naturally fit best within the education system's logic, which, of course, is about education. In addition, there is the challenge that institutions are rewarded financially for the number of students they educate rather than the number of students they exempt from parts of programs using RPL.

4.3 Organization

The study indicated that there is a wide range of organizational challenges in regard to tools, collaboration, quality assurance, skills development of employees, and information and communication.

Common to all education areas was that they normally used interviews and included documentation material such as CVs, etc., in connection with RPL. However, there were a number of differences across the education areas themselves with regard to which tools should be applied. Participants indicated that collaboration with

other institutions provides good opportunities to discuss which tools are relevant and it ensures a sort of alignment in the tools institutions use in an RPL. Therefore, collaboration can potentially enhance confidence in and the legitimacy of RPL.

Many institutions did not have a documented system to ensure the quality of RPL. Information about the institution's procedures and standards for RPL, e.g., on the institution's website, was only made public to a limited extent. Another important element of quality assurance was that the methods ensured reliability, which relates to the concept of being able to repeat results. Documentation to ensure that decisions can be checked was available at all institutions, but to varying degrees. The use of criteria or standards in RPL also varied considerably at the institutions conducting RPL. In all the education areas, about 50 percent replied that employees evaluate RPL, but those undergoing the assessment process for themselves rarely participated as an evaluator of others.

All in all, there were many examples of good practice in regard to the tools used for RPL and collaboration among practitioners. On the other hand, there seemed to be a potential for improvement of RPL quality assurance. Such improvements could have an impact on the legitimacy of RPL and decrease some of the barriers to using RPL in wider contexts.

4.4 Initiatives as a result of the study

Based on this study, the Danish Ministry of Education (2011) prepared an action plan and established a working group with a focus on four core themes related to the RPL in Denmark. These themes have partly been taken as a response on this evaluation.

The themes are:

- mapping guidance and counseling activities before conducting RPL (pre-phase activity)
- uncovering the possibilities of developing RPL with a broader scope, including a business and employment scope
- developing quality assurance of RPL with special focus on developing a code of conduct for RPL
- strengthening information of RPL to the public.

In sum, a focus on exploring opportunities to spread RPL and a wish to develop a broader employment scope for RPL is increasing. In relation to the third theme, there has not been agreement on a quality code for RPL. Instead, there is a broad consensus about widening dissemination of examples of good practice.

Another initiative, in the wake of this study, is a recommendation from an OECD Review group of experts (Field et al., 2012) “to strengthen incentives for RPL through adjustment of the funding system, stronger quality control and better information” (p. 8).

5. Conclusion

What can we learn from the Danish experience with RPL in adult education? The Danish model, in which the educational institutions are responsible for RPL, has several advantages, including the fact that the assessments are made by professionals who have thorough knowledge of the educational goals for which prior learning is assessed. On the other hand, the model has a number of challenges that is important to focus on if society wants more RPL of high quality.

The spread of RPL within the six education areas varied considerably. However, in general, the spread of RPL in Denmark was greatest within vocational education and training at basic levels. The big variations of activity at similar types of institutions indicated that institutional aspects affect the spread of RPL to a great extent.

There were large barriers to using RPL across all the education areas. The most important barriers were the

lack of public awareness and the funding of RPL. But there were also a range of other barriers, for instance that many representatives of educational institutions found it difficult to connect skills development at enterprises with RPL in the formal education system. In general, the external barriers were seen as being more important than the internal institutional barriers.

In general, RPL was used primarily to give access to the education programs upon which institutions provide themselves, rather than other uses, including recognition of competencies to replace education and teaching and for direct utilization in the labor market.

There were many examples of good practice at the institutions all over Denmark. However, at the same time, there seemed to be a potential for improvement of quality assurance of RPL, and likely such an improvement could have an impact on the legitimacy of RPL and decrease some of the barriers to using RPL more extensively.

In regard to further research, we see at least two needs. First, following the spread of RPL within adult education in Denmark along with its quality and application must be considered over the coming years. Will institutions improve the ways in which they promote RPL, assure the quality of RPL and address the barriers identified in this study? To answer these questions, new research is needed using both qualitative and quantitative data. Second, institutions dealing with these challenges need to systematically identify and visualize examples of good practice of RPL that can be shared across institutions. In this way, better quality practices have a greater potential to spread across more institutions.

Notes

- ¹ The study was conducted by a team from the Danish Evaluation Institute (EVA) including special adviser Michael Andersen (project manager), evaluation officer Maria Mogensen, evaluation officer Christina Laugesen, evaluation officer Morten Brock and methodology consultant Thomas Hem Pedersen.
- ² Act No. 556 of 6 June 2007 (Lov nr. 556 af 6.juni 2007 om ændring af forskellige love på Undervisningsministeriets område [Udbygning af anerkendelse af realkompetence på voksen- og efteruddannelsesområdet mv.][Expansion of recognition of prior learning within adult education]).
- ³ There is a wide consensus among researchers, politicians and practitioners in Denmark about this definition. See for instance the National Center for Recognition of Prior Learning (Nationalt Center for Realkompetencevurderinger, www.nvr.nu).

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