Article

Why Is It So Difficult to Contribute to Social Inclusion Through Vocational Education and Training? An Analysis of Policies to Promote the Recognition of Prior Learning in Bangladesh, North Macedonia, Sweden and Switzerland

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Abstract

This paper compares "recognition of prior learning" (RPL) schemes in four countries, to find out the impact of VET policy reforms on social inclusion. The study finds that RPL schemes have only made limited contributions to social inclusion in these countries, for the following reasons: firstly, there are challenges in
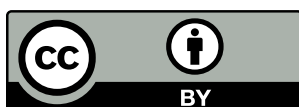
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upper secondary VET, which, in all four countries, requires a substantial level of general education and transversal competencies, on which the key educational policy actors are not willing to compromise. Secondly, some countries used RPL to provide access to non-formal qualifications, but such schemes were only successful when those non-formal qualifications were already well-established in society and the labour market (prior to having been made accessible through RPL). The article argues that, for RPL to contribute more to social inclusion, schemes need to be less complicated and should also include complementary education and training provisions for all those who lack work experience in sectors where access to employment depends on certain qualifications.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning, vocational education and training, comparative case study, policy analysis, social inclusion

Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has become an educational policy instrument in most countries in the world (Cedefop, 2022; UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL], 2022). Although different policy objectives are pursued with RPL, it undoubtedly belongs to the set of instruments in vocational education and training (VET) designed to foster social inclusion. This is evident, for example, in European education policy documents (Cedefop, 2018; Council of the European Union, 2012), and has also been discussed in the research literature for some time (Harris, 1999). However, the use of RPL to promote social inclusion faces considerable challenges: not only is the number of holders of a VET qualification who have undergone RPL expanding much more slowly than expected in many countries, but there are also particular challenges in reaching key disadvantaged target groups (see e.g., Cedefop, 2018). This article examines why this goal of contributing to social inclusion through RPL is so difficult to achieve. It does this by comparing four country case studies. The aim is to arrive at some generalisable conclusions, despite these four VET systems being very different.

Research questions, specific focus and country selection

Four specific research questions guide the study:

RQ 1: What are the linkages, at the political level, between social inclusion and RPL, and what are the target groups defined at this level?

RQ 2: What are the key features of RPL in the four countries, especially with regard to the qualifications they lead to and how competencies are recognised?

RQ 3: To what extent are target groups being reached?

RQ 4: What factors influence how well the target groups are reached?

The focus of this article is on RPL as a means to acquire VET qualifications. Of interest are both formal (i.e., officially recognised) qualifications and non-formal qualifications that are not integrated into the regular education system (Colardyn & Bjornavold, 2004). The role of RPL schemes in the field of higher education

and labour market policy is explicitly not part of the analysis. In view of the diversity of the country contexts presented here, the analysis focuses not only on classical (e.g., portfolio-based) RPL schemes, but also includes more traditional forms of competence recognition (such as regular examinations after waiving regular school-based preparation).

Various factors were considered in the selection of the country cases. We decided to select two countries that had had RPL schemes in VET for a comparatively long time. For this, Sweden and Switzerland were chosen, not only because they had long-established RPL systems, but also because their VET systems are of different types: Sweden's is state-centred, whilst Switzerland's is collectively organised (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2012). The other two countries had less established RPL systems that were developed mainly in the context of international cooperation. One was Bangladesh, which belongs to the group of "least developed countries" that started quite early with RPL; the other was North Macedonia, which is one of the EU candidate countries where RPL has been discussed for some years, in the context of EU integration policy.

Methodological approach of the article

The findings presented here are the result of a structured focused comparison (George, 2019 [1979]; Gläser & Laudel, 2019) of the development and implementation of RPL in the four countries studied, building on detailed case studies on the four countries that have been published elsewhere (Maurer, 2019, 2021, 2022; Maurer & Morshed, 2022; Maurer & Spasovski, 2021). The case studies were prepared iteratively, starting with the case of Switzerland and in focussing on causal factors emphasised in some of the existing RPL literature (e.g., Cooper & Harris, 2013), which are also presented below. In line with grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994), the analysis of cases was, however, not reduced to an examination into the causal factors emphasised in the literature but was opened to include additional factors that were of obvious causal relevance in the cases analysed. The individual cases were examined primarily on the basis of qualitative data, in particular primary documents as well as qualitative interviews, all of which were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2018; Mayring, 2010).

The following synthesised presentation of the four cases primarily refers to the documents mentioned, the qualitative interviews are not referred to here. Each of the research questions of this article is being addressed on the basis of respective documents: The first question is about the political strategies surrounding RPL; it is answered by examining policy papers dealing with RPL since its emergence in the four countries. The second is about the specific forms of RPL in each country; this section also draws on policy documents (specifically pertaining to RPL regulations), and details the qualifications that are made accessible, the ways in which competencies are recognised, and additional support measures that may exist. The third section deals with the quantitative expansion of RPL, based on the data available at national

level on the number of RPL candidates. Finally, the fourth section discusses the challenges in reaching the target groups. Again, it argues primarily on the basis of primary documents, but also refers to the detailed case studies on the four countries that have been published elsewhere (Maurer, 2019, 2021; Maurer & Morshed, 2022; Maurer & Spasovski, 2021).

For the sake of clarity, the key cross-case findings are summarised at the beginning of each section and then illustrated with examples from the four countries.

Social Inclusion and RPL: theoretical considerations

Social inclusion in education

The issue of social inclusion has received special attention in education policy, both at the level of individual countries as well as at the global level, as clearly expressed in the subtitle of the Global Education Monitoring Report of 2020 – "all means all" (UNESCO, 2020). "Inclusive education" has also been a central topic in research for many years (see e.g., Daniels & Garner, 1999; Yada et al., 2022).

Three aspects of the social inclusion discussion in education are of particular importance to this paper.

The first is the target group(s) of inclusive policies; such policies specify whether they are aimed at specific groups of beneficiaries and, if so, which groups these are. Lindmeier and Lütje-Klose (2015) have found three approaches in this regard: a more traditional understanding, which focuses on physically and mentally impaired people; a broader understanding, including vulnerable groups such as sexual or ethnic minorities; finally, a third understanding that does not focus on any specific social group, in the sense of "all means all".

Secondly, inclusive policies need to define what inclusion is aiming at. In education policy, and particularly in VET, it therefore needs to be clarified whether access to VET is of intrinsic value (in terms of the knowledge acquired), or whether it is a mere means to an end – namely, to access the labour market and/or further education (see e.g. Larsen & Thunqvist, 2018; Wheelahan, 2015).

Thirdly, inclusive education policies generally seek to remove barriers that make it difficult for certain social groups to access educational opportunities (see e.g., Colley et al., 2007; Kruse & Oswal, 2018). These barriers are particularly obvious in the case of VET: instead of individuals having an unconditional right to enrol in such programmes, there are admission requirements (in most countries) and the attainment of the qualification is conditional upon proving a certain level of competence, which is usually justified in terms of labour market or further education and training expectations, but often comes at the cost of excluding socially disadvantaged groups, such as refugees (Bergseng et al., 2019; Chadderton & Edmonds, 2015). In

the educational literature on social inclusion, barriers are mostly perceived as negative; this contrasts somewhat with the sociological and comparative education literatures, which suggest that education and training systems in fact rely to some degree on such barriers (see e.g., Dreeben, 1968).

RPL and social inclusion

RPL is:

> a procedure in which a designated organisation confirms that a person has acquired certain competencies in informal or non-formal ways (or also through formal programmes in other countries) that are otherwise usually acquired as part of a specific formal or non-formal education (Maurer, 2021, p. 3).

RPL has expanded to many areas of education the world over, but it has become particularly important in VET, to provide access to full or partial formal and non-formal vocational qualifications (Cedefop, 2022; UIL, 2022). In principle, many forms of RPL do not lower competency requirements for a qualification, but rather adapt the process to attaining it (see e.g., Bohlinger, 2017). In some cases, special RPL schemes give individuals direct access to a qualification, for instance via a portfolio procedure that enables candidates to showcase their employment of specific vocational competencies at work (Brown, 2001; Pokorny, 2013). In other cases, RPL allows individuals to access a regular final examination or skip a regular entry requirement when enrolling in a training or study programme. Furthermore, depending on context, RPL candidates are supported by additional measures, such as supplementary educational offers, counselling and guidance or designated financial aid (Maurer, 2021, p. 3).

Although RPL is often justified in educational policy terms as a way to promote social inclusion, there have long been indications in the literature that it is difficult to realise this ambition (see e.g., Andersson & Guo, 2009; Harris, 1999). In fact, the number of people graduating from RPL has grown quite slowly, and in many countries reaching particularly disadvantaged social groups is a major challenge (Cedefop, 2018; Cooper & Harris, 2013; Werquin, 2021). Different reasons for these challenges have been given: Cedefop, for example, suggests that a lack of international sharing of good practices, low budgets and poor monitoring and evaluation have prevented people from being reached through RPL (Cedefop, 2018, p. 45). Studies of individual countries suggest that the reasons are much more complex: in their analysis of RPL in South Africa, Shalem and Steinberg (2002) point to numerous "invisible criteria" that reflect the traditional barriers, especially the requirements for theoretical knowledge (see also Cooper & Harris, 2013). Accordingly, despite the intention to value "experiential learning" (Kolb, 1984), in many cases the requirements have little to do with the actual competencies of the candidate (Andersson, 2008; Andersson & Guo, 2009; Harris, 1999). In a recent study of RPL in France, focusing on the reasons for the declining number of RPL-applicants, Werquin (2021) finds that many of them are not "RPL-ready". Further studies have also suggested that a lack of political motivation is a key reason for the low uptake of RPL in many

cases (see e.g., Cooper & Harris, 2013, p. 448). It is this context of low-RPL uptake that gives relevance to the research questions in this paper, which are now discussed in light of the findings from the four country case studies.

Comparing RPL and social inclusion in the four countries

Linkages between social inclusion and RPL at the political level

All four countries under study have declared that VET qualifications should be accessible via RPL. Different policy goals are invoked to justify this, but they all cite the social policy goals of VET – even if the term "social inclusion" only appears explicitly in the VET policy documents of Bangladesh and North Macedonia (Ministry of Education, 2011; Ministry of Education and Science & Adult Education Centre, 2016). At the political level in all four countries, RPL is aimed at individuals who lack recognised or relevant qualifications and are therefore disadvantaged in the labour market, though different groups are targeted and these target groups can change.

Sweden is one of the countries where RPL has existed for a comparatively long time (see e.g., Andersson et al., 2002). Since the beginning, the main focus of RPL has been on migrants who arrive in Sweden in adolescence or even adulthood but lack a qualification that is recognised in the Swedish labour market. Seeing the challenges facing recent migrants in the Swedish labour market, the central labour market authority (arbetsförmedlingen) was one of the earliest actors to promote validation in Sweden. It launched a vocational examination for immigrants (yrkesprövning för invandrare) in 1991, with the objective of facilitating access to a non-formal VET qualification (Olsson & Ragnarsson, 1998). Since then, RPL – or validation (validering), as it is called in the Swedish context – has been the subject of two national task forces (Valideringsdelegationer), the second of which explicitly mentioned various target groups, including recent migrants (many of whom are not well established in the Swedish labour market) and individuals who have employment but are at risk of becoming unemployed due to outdated qualifications (Valideringsdelegationen, 2017, pp. 29-32).

In Switzerland, a scheme for individuals with work experience to take a regular final VET examination has existed since the 1930s, defining the minimum amount of work experience required for individuals to take the exam; today, it is five years (Maurer et al., 2016). In the 1990s, policy making began to discuss ways to increase opportunities for individuals with five years of work experience to have their prior learning recognised, with a focus on women who wanted to re-enter the labour process and individuals in need of requalification in the context of structural changes in the labour market (Schweizer Parlament, 1993; Widmer et al., 1999). Increasingly, however, against the backdrop of trade union lobbying, the focus has also been on people without upper secondary qualifications (Fritschi et al., 2012; Staatssekretariat für

Bildung, Forschung und Innovation [SBFI], 2014, p. 19).

In Bangladesh, RPL was introduced in the context of the Skills Development Policy 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2011), the formulation of which was mainly supported by the European Union and the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh, 2006). In this policy, VET is seen as a central instrument for poverty reduction amongst a number of disadvantaged target groups. A key concern of this policy is to open up VET to socially disadvantaged people without a Junior School Certificate, i.e., those who have dropped out during the first eight years of school and, in many cases, have gathered work experience in the informal part of the labour market. It is for these individuals that RPL is considered to be of particular relevance (Ministry of Education, 2011).

In North Macedonia, social cohesion and social inclusion are considered central goals of VET in the country's education policy, which is strongly influenced by the goal of EU accession (Ministry of Education and Science, 2013, pp. 35-36). RPL – or validation respectively – has been considered a key instrument for achieving these goals since 2012 / 2013, with the country being supported in this area by the European Training Foundation (ETF), in particular (Spasovski, 2018). From the beginning, the RPL policy focused explicitly on certain target groups, especially "[t]hose without completed basic (primary) education" and other social groups disadvantaged in the labour market (Ministry of Education and Science & Adult Education Centre, 2016, pp. 36-37).

Design of schemes to recognise prior learning

The comparison of the four countries suggests that the types of qualification made available through RPL relate to a key dimension of VET at upper secondary level: its orientation towards higher education. In fact, in three of the four countries studied, the RPL schemes are designed in such a way that they primarily provide access to non-formal or what we label "semi-formal qualifications" (as they are not recognised in the education systems in the actual sense). The focus on non- and semi-formal qualifications can be explained by the fact that, in these three countries, formal VET at upper secondary level involves a lot of theory that enables VET graduates to access higher education, and it is therefore considered to be too demanding for individuals for the target groups of RPL.

In Sweden, regular VET programmes are strongly integrated into formal upper secondary education and fully modularised. These programmes lead, in principle, to a "gymnasium" qualification, which, as far as VET is concerned, is intended to prepare for graduates the labour market as well as for higher education (Skolverket, 2021). Adults can access such an upper secondary qualification within the framework of communal adult education (Komvux), whereby it is also possible to have competencies recognised. Yet, most people who have their vocational competencies recognised only complete individual modules or the

vocational part of these qualifications (vocational packages) (Cedefop, 2018, p. 16; Valideringsdelegationen, 2018). In addition, recognition is possible with regard to sector-specific non-formal qualifications (yrkesbevis), the contents of which are defined by the relevant sectoral associations (in which employers are usually represented) (branschvalidierung) (Myndigheten för yrkeshögskolan [MYh], 2017).

In Bangladesh, regular formal VET can be accessed by those who have acquired the Junior School Certificate (JSC) after eight years of schooling. It consists of upper secondary level VET programmes (SSC and HSC vocational), which prepare students for studies at polytechnic institutes in particular, as well as numerous shorter VET programmes that are more practically-oriented, but still require the JSC (Haolader et al., 2017). The lack of access to formal VET for the more socially disadvantaged individuals without JSC led to the establishment of so-called "pre-vocational certificates" – which were at the lowest level of the then newly established National Technical and Vocational Qualifications Framework (NTVQF) (in the context of the aforementioned Skills Development Policy of 2011) – catering to individuals with "limited general knowledge" and a "very limited range of skills and use of tools required to carry out simple tasks" (Government of Bangladesh, 2013, p. 11). The 2011 policy actually envisaged that RPL should be possible with regard to all existing formal VET qualifications. In reality, however, RPL was mainly promoted for pre-vocational certificates. Recognition would generally be based on a practical examination focused primarily on vocational skills, with additional courses offered for preparation, on the assumption that successful candidates could, after certification, start training at the next higher level of the NTVQF (Bangladesh Technical Education Board [BTEB], 2012).

In North Macedonia, the large majority of VET students enrol in a 4-year programme that leads to an opportunity to take a state matura and provides entry to university education (State Statistical Office, 2018). Shorter upper secondary VET programmes (2 and 3 years in length) that focus more on vocational skills and occupations and do not provide entry to higher education are now of little relevance. It is in this context that the country's education policy makers had suggested focusing RPL on non-formal, adult education that offers shorter and more vocationally-oriented programmes (e.g., Ministry of Education and Science & Adult Education Centre, 2015, 2016). Despite the development of a legal framework, concrete RPL schemes have not yet been established at national level. Still, validations are carried out sporadically, in the context of a few projects funded by international donors (Adult Education Centre, 2021; Build up Skills, 2016).

In contrast, Swiss RPL is focused on formal qualifications. This is related to the fact that upper secondary VET is strongly practically oriented (despite considerable differences between occupations in terms of theoretical contents), and makes higher education accessible only through an additional qualification (the

Federal Vocational Baccalaureate) (SBFI, 2021). Therefore, at the level of policy making, upper secondary VET qualifications are considered to be accessible to RPL candidates, who are required to have at least five years' work experience, and may already have acquired a vocational qualification. One of the schemes, mentioned above, has existed since the 1930s, and enables candidates to take a regular final examination. Another scheme – the validation procedure (Validierungsverfahren)– was established after 2004, enabling candidates to have their competencies recognised via a portfolio and professional interviews (SBFI, 2017).

In all countries under study, RPL schemes normally include additional support measures for candidates: in Sweden, this takes place within the regular structures of municipal adult education (Skolverket, 2015), while in Switzerland there are large differences between the cantons with regard to the provision of courses to prepare for RPL schemes, and financial support for candidates (Maurer, 2019; SBFI, 2014). In Bangladesh and North Macedonia, such measures are financed within the framework of international cooperation (Development Technical Consultants, 2016; Spasovski, 2018).

Reaching target groups through RPL

It is difficult to compare the official data on access to RPL schemes across the four countries. Yet, the available evidence suggests that RPL schemes do not reach as many people as expected by the policy makers, and that it is particularly difficult to reach individuals who have had little education (relative to the context).

The figures for Switzerland are comparatively detailed: although the number of adults acquiring a vocational qualification has been increasing (from 7653 in 2014 to 9737 in 2019), this increase is mainly made up of individuals completing regular apprenticeships, not those having their competencies recognised (SBFI, 2021, p. 16; Wettstein, 2015, p. 3). The number of those who have gone through the validation procedure developed since 2004 remains particularly disappointing, which is why the authorities have been lowering the importance they attached to this scheme (SBFI, 2017). And even if the educational backgrounds of RPL candidates are not systematically recorded at national level, there are clear indications that only a minority of successful candidates did not have an upper secondary level qualification prior to the validation procedure (Maurer & Schneebeli, 2018; Schmid et al., 2017). However, it is clear that the proportion of adults achieving a VET qualification via RPL is clearly higher in some cantons in French-speaking Switzerland (Bundesamt für Statistik [BFS], 2021).

Education policymakers in Sweden have equally pointed out that progress in RPL has fallen far short of expectations. The few figures available suggest that almost no comprehensive upper secondary VET qualifications are obtained via RPL, and that – with the clear exception of the health sector – the number of vocational package qualifications (at upper secondary level) obtained via validation also remains very low,

as does the number of branch qualifications obtained via RPL. Furthermore, studies make it clear that one key target group of Sweden's RPL policy – recent migrants (in particular asylum seekers) from low-income countries – has little work experience in sectors where skilled labour is in high demand, and therefore lacks an important requisite of RPL (see e.g., Valideringsdelegationen, 2008, 2019).

Somewhat contradictory is the evidence from Bangladesh and North Macedonia, where RPL has mainly been promoted by the international community. In Bangladesh, a substantial number of individuals with work experience in industry (e.g., garments) were in fact able to have their competencies recognised through projects financed by the international community. Yet, given that the funding of RPL assessment centres was project-based, sustaining RPL within the regular VET structures was not possible (Nakata et al., 2021). In North Macedonia, RPL schemes have, so far, only been piloted in the context of the projects mentioned above. The outcomes of these projects are instructive: in the first (EU-funded) project, the focus was on energy-efficient construction. It was primarily aimed at companies wishing to establish themselves in this sector and at workers from these companies. 967 workers participated, but despite the comprehensive validation procedure, hardly any of them had their competencies recognised, as they and their companies did not have enough experience in the field of energy-efficient construction. Accordingly, the workers underwent the required training in order to acquire a certificate (Build up Skills, 2016). In another, more recent project which focused on validating the skills of waiters and facade workers, there was almost no interest from candidates (Adult Education Centre, 2021).

Explaining the low level of expansion of RPL among target groups

The comparative analysis of the cases reveals important cross-country patterns when it comes to explaining why RPL has not expanded more among the target groups.

The competency requirements represent a particular challenge to increasing access to RPL. This challenge is more evident in RPL schemes that provide access to formal VET qualifications; these schemes are particularly prevalent in Switzerland, and Swiss policy actors felt pressure to avoid lowering the existing requirements for adult candidates. Thus, the RPL scheme developed and implemented after 2004 is too demanding for many of the potential candidates (Maurer et al., 2016; Schmid, 2019). Candidates are not only expected to have a high level of vocational competence, but also very strong language skills and transversal competencies that allow them to prepare and defend their portfolio (SBFI, 2017), which also helps to explain why, as outlined above, a majority of successful RPL candidates had graduated from upper secondary education already before undergoing the recognition process. The fact that the proportion of adults who achieve a VET qualification via RPL is particularly high in some cantons of French-speaking Switzerland can also be explained by the existence of comprehensive measures to support candidates to meet the competency requirements (e.g., preparatory courses and supplementary financial support) (BFS,

2021; Maurer, 2019). The challenge of competency requirements is somewhat less pronounced in Sweden: recognition does take place with regard to upper secondary VET modules, but these can each be completed and certified separately. The challenge is greater when – as in the case of the health care workers – a defined set of modules is to be certified. In any event, as mentioned above, important parts of the target group in Sweden lack the work experience required to have a substantial amount of competencies recognised in occupations with high labour demand (Skolverket, 2020; Valideringsdelegationen, 2008, 2019; Vård- och omsorgscollege, 2018). In the cases of Bangladesh and North Macedonia, high competency requirements cannot be regarded as a major barrier to accessing qualifications through RPL: here, the requirements of the strongly practically-oriented RPL schemes can certainly be met by people with relevant work experience, even if they have not completed primary education (Adult Education Centre, 2021; Build up Skills, 2016; Development Technical Consultants, 2016).

With regard to these non-formal or semi-formal qualifications, a second challenge becomes apparent: qualifications made accessible through RPL provide successful candidates, in many cases, with little additional value in the labour market and the education system. This is particularly evident in the example of Bangladesh, where the new levels defined in the NTVQF framework, especially the pre-vocational ones, have not yet properly established themselves. Firstly, such qualifications hardly improve access to jobs, just as in the case of traditional formal VET qualifications, which are little known in the world of work. Secondly, and in contrast to the intentions of the 2011 Skills Development Policy, individuals with a pre-vocational certificate but no Junior School Certificate are not granted access to established VET programmes, because the competency profiles of the pre-vocational certificates do not include basic competencies (e.g., literacy and numeracy), which are usually acquired in an eight-year school education. This challenge of lack of added value from RPL-attained qualifications is becoming evident in a different way in Sweden: here, the huge importance of the traditional, comprehensive gymnasium qualification in the labour market complicates efforts to motivate people to access semi-formal (yrkespaket) or non-formal (yrkesbevis) qualifications via RPL. One of the few sectors in which there is higher demand for RPL is the healthcare sector: due to the major shortage of skilled workers, employers (such as care homes and hospitals) are willing to hire employees without a gymnasium qualification for various roles, such as assistant nurses, provided they have completed a relevant training course or have undergone RPL (Maurer, 2021; Skolverket, 2020; Vård- och omsorgscollege, 2018).

As the examples of Sweden and Switzerland in particular show, skills shortages in the labour market, i.e., unmet demand for individuals with VET qualifications, are a factor that can support the expansion of RPL. In particular, such shortages in specific sectors can lead employers to deviate from their standard recruitment requirements, as the Swedish example shows. At the same time, the shortages can also help to adapt the requirements of RPL schemes to the competencies of the target group. For example, the skills shortages in

the Swedish health sector contributed to the fact that the relevant branch association promoted the establishment of the vocational package earlier than in other occupational fields, and in Switzerland, the less demanding and thus more accessible RPL schemes in the health sector came about as a result of pressure from employers in this occupational field (Maurer, 2021; Skolverket, 2020; Vård- och omsorgscollege, 2018).

Finally, differences in the use of RPL can also be explained in terms of political will, with evidence from Switzerland being particularly relevant: while national provisions on RPL are the same across the country, the relative share of qualifications obtained by adults via RPL is significantly higher in French-speaking Switzerland (especially Geneva) (BFS, 2021), a fact which can be explained by more extensive support for the RPL candidates from these cantons (Maurer, 2019).

Conclusions

Based on the comparative analysis, the four research questions presented in the introduction of this article can be answered as follows:

RQ1: Linkages between social inclusion and RPL at the political level

In the four countries studied, RPL policies have been formulated to make VET qualifications accessible to those who have acquired competencies informally or non-formally. These policies are primarily aimed at people who have work experience in a given sector but lack appropriate qualifications (usually the socio-economically disadvantaged), although some countries target other specific marginalised groups (e.g., migrants or women). In any case, RPL can be described as an element of socially inclusive VET policy in these countries.

RQ 2: Key features of RPL

This study shows that in three countries (Bangladesh, North Macedonia and Sweden) the focus is placed on the acquisition of non-formal or semi-formal qualifications, mainly by individuals without upper secondary qualifications, which has been related to a fundamental feature of these countries' VET systems – they aim to prepare VET graduates for higher education, which makes the qualifications difficult to achieve for the target group of RPL. In contrast, RPL in Switzerland is geared towards comprehensive formal VET qualifications, which are more practice-oriented at upper secondary level, and do not provide access to higher academic education. Although this connection is not very surprising, it is barely discussed in the RPL literature. In fact, the distinction between formal and non-formal qualifications is often considered to be unhelpful in RPL debates (see e.g., Bohlinger, 2017, p. 591).

RQ3: Extent to which target groups being reached

In terms of reaching the target group, the comparison of the four countries essentially confirms findings that have been identified in the literature for many other countries. In particular, it shows that fewer people are reached with RPL schemes than education policy often hopes for, and that reaching people with a lack of formal education is a particular challenge (Cedefop, 2018; Cooper et al., 2017; Werquin, 2021).

RQ 4: Factors that influence how well target groups are being reached

The analysis of the reasons for these challenges confirms some existing indications from the literature. It was found, in line with Cooper and Harris (2013) and Werquin (2021), that the high competency requirements of RPL are a significant barrier, both in terms of the competency requirements of the qualifications to which RPL provides access, as well as the "invisible criteria" (Shalem & Steinberg, 2002) that are required to undergo RPL (e.g., to write a portfolio). These requirements are a major barrier when the schemes provide access to formal qualifications, and if there is little or no support to help candidates with less education prepare for RPL. The findings from Sweden, where recent migrants are a particularly important part of the target group, are also insightful: given that migrants often lack work experience in sectors with particularly high demand for workers, many of them are not well prepared for RPL.

The findings from the study also point to another important challenge that has hardly been considered in the literature – the low added value of the qualifications on the labour market and in the education system. This challenge is particularly evident when it comes to non-formal or semi-formal qualifications. The non-formal branch qualifications in Sweden, for example, are usually acquired by individuals who already have a formal upper secondary qualification; therefore, for those who lack upper secondary qualifications, these branch qualifications hardly improve access to employment in many sectors. In other cases, as in Bangladesh, non-formal qualifications are created precisely in the context of establishing RPL schemes, but the jobs to which RPL-acquired qualifications give access can also be accessed without these qualifications, and access to formal VET is denied to individuals with low levels of schooling, even if they have acquired a non-formal qualification through RPL.

The added value in the labour market of qualifications acquired through RPL also depends on the demand for qualified labour in specific sectors, a finding which is also barely reflected in the existing RPL literature. This is particularly evident in the case of RPL in the health and social sectors in Sweden and Switzerland, where the supply of skilled workers through regular upper secondary VET is insufficient, creating high demand for individuals who have obtained a qualification through RPL. In both countries, this high demand for qualified workers even led to employers advocating for the most flexible possible schemes for adults – in the form of vocational packages in Sweden, and less demanding portfolios in Switzerland. However, the establishment of schemes that are in line with the competences that the target group brings along also

depends crucially on political will, as the large differences between the expansion rates of RPL in individual cantons in Switzerland suggest.

Synthesis and prospects

In summary, RPL can provide alternative routes to attaining qualifications and the approach certainly has potential to contribute to social inclusion. But RPL schemes seem to be particularly suitable for facilitating access to qualifications that are already established in society and the labour market; otherwise, they lack attractiveness, both for employers and potential candidates. This requires RPL schemes that are credibly oriented towards the competency requirements of these already established qualifications. However, to reach marginalised target groups towards the goal of social inclusion, such schemes should not be overly complicated and bureaucratic, and should include complementary educational support in preparing for RPL. This last point is particularly important in view of political ambitions to improve access to labour markets through RPL: if individuals lack experience in those sectors of the labour market where qualifications are in high demand, education and ultimately also labour market policy must take responsibility and support them in acquiring vocational competencies through relevant experience.

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