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## Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning: Corner Stone for Continuing Education

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**RECOGNITION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: CORNER STONE  
FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION**

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### **Abstract**

Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) learning involves acknowledging knowledge and skills acquired through non-formal and informal ways of learning. The process of RPEL seems to be practiced from dates back to post war era in Europe; however consistencies on process has not been traced across the world to date. Qualification framework is prevalent in many countries as a tool for RPEL. The successful implementation of RPEL reinforces the aspiration of Life long and continuing education. The implication of RPEL would be more demanding and challenging with the globalization and migration of workforce with their diverse skills set, experiences and knowledge.

**Keywords: Experiential learning, formal, informal, non-formal, recognition, qualification framework, continuing education.**

## **RECOGNITION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING: CORNER STONE FOR CONTINUING EDUCATION**

### **Introduction**

People learn knowledge and skills in various ways ranging from very informal to formal and structured environments. The recognition of learning in nontraditional ways is described in various ways as lifelong learning, prior learning, informal learning or prior experiential learning. The purpose of the paper is to explore relevancy, importance and practices of Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) focusing on vocational and technical education. The globalizing phenomenon including more open labor market, increased citizens' rights to migration, increasing right to learn, live and work in any country of the world needs clearly defined knowledge and skills credentials that can be utilized also in other countries other than country of origin. While discussing the recognizing of prior learning Harris (1999) describes as Globalization and marketisation are motifs and the knowledge society and lifelong learning are central concepts.

Getting due recognition of prior learning and utilizing it for further learning is significant as it not only encourages individuals but also contributes to body of knowledge among human beings. It is imperative that usually formal learning leads to credible certificates and non-formal and informal may not lead to credible certificates automatically. Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) refers to the process where skills, knowledge and attitudes gained through non-formal (mainly work base) and informal (life experience) are recognized for the purpose of continuing learning (Adam, 2008). The RPEL must be underpinned by the broad principles of transferability, flexibility, mobility and mutual recognition of learning outcomes and consequently qualifications.

RPEL involves the comparison of the previous experiential learning against the requirements of existing qualifications for the purposes of credit access or credit exemptions and involves mainly informal and non-formal training and the time range expands throughout life (Adam, 2008). Anderson & Hellberg (2009) mention that the recognition of prior learning started in the US in the 1970s and was validated by Department of Education in 1996 as a policy of Adult Education, even though it was in practice earlier than that and was extensively used by non education sector employment before it became a matter of concern in higher educational programs. Valk (2009) expresses RPEL in global context as “APEL were introduced in France as early as the 1930s, more mainstream development began in the UK and in France in the 1980s, in parallel with similar developments in the USA and Canada. Developing recognition procedures could be seen as a reaction to the massification of higher education in the 1960s and 1970s, on the one hand, and to the dearth of formally qualified workers in the regulated job market, on the other” (p.83). RPEL is developing its research field, and has been studied and analyzed from different perspectives and also it is not only epistemological question but also political question, where situated learning theory brings the collective dimension to the epistemology (Anderson & Hellberg, 2009). The trend to embracing and recognizing the importance of lifelong learning along with recognizing prior experiential learning in all form such as formal, non-formal and informal learning is increasing significantly. Beaudin (2008) illustrates the Canadian context where RPEL is widely accepted and is practiced by universities and colleges, professional regulatory bodies, certification boards, sector councils, industries and employers in all provinces and territories. A prominent organization the Canadian Association of Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) with expertise on prior learning and assessments and recognition states the three aspects of RPEL in Halifax resolution of 2002 as a) the recognition of

prior learning is fundamental to a life long learning culture, b) all learning should be recognized or considered for recognition by educational, professional and work organization, and c) Canadians including immigrants to Canada, should have right to have their prior learning assessed and recognized (Beaudin, 2008). In France, Feutrie (2008) states that the process of recognizing prior learning can be traced as early as 1934 when schools were authorized by law to recognize working individuals as engineers who have five years of experiences, but the modern process of recognition of non-formal and informal learning really started in 1985.

### **Benefits of RPEL**

The outcomes of RPEL process envisaged benefits to individuals, higher education providing institutes, employers and nations tangibly. The employer gets employee with the skills and knowledge they need, the higher education also get more students as their clients, and nation saves resources and time developing human resources avoiding duplications. Rauhvargers, (2008) mentions six distinct values for individuals because of the RPEL process as follows:

- Providing access to higher education for matured and excluded individuals but who have gained knowledge and skills through experiential learning,
- For migrating workers and students providing opportunities to work and access to higher education because of their experiential prior learning,
- For those who want to broaden their career but are hindered by previous qualifications that needs adjustments. RPEL can discover what needs to be adjusted,
- For returnee students to complete their program they had initiated earlier but learning has taken place in between.

- RPEL provides framework for those who are seeking professional qualifications but need evidence of skills and knowledge requirements,
- Course waive for students who have knowledge and skills to complete particular programs.

The implementation of RPEL also contributes to the methodological approach of teaching and learning. The benefit of RPEL is not only awarding credits by higher institutions but also it contributes to learning through experiences and fosters transformative learning (Stevens, Gerber, & Hendra, 2010).

### **Principles, Policies and its application**

Public policies are a crucial factor for recognition of life long learning strategies. Beaudin (2008) states in Canada policies regarding RPEL have been developed and implemented in a decentralized way and varies on the magnitude and details of the processes and strategies. He adds on that colleges, universities, regulatory bodies are found executing the process, but consistencies with the process are not found. Valk (2009) puts as some common European principles for the identification and validation of non-formal and informal learning as individual entitlements, obligations of stakeholders, confidence and trust, and credibility and legitimacy.

### **Qualification framework as basis to recognition of prior experiential learning**

The objectives of qualification framework is to facilitate the transfer, validation and recognition of learning outcomes acquired by an individual moving from one learning area to other. The development of qualification framework has profound effects on all educational providers by forming the environment easier for the recognition of formal, non-formal and informal education and technique applied to ensure prior learning is categorized as undertaking existing assessments, creating a portfolio, submitting a project, development of a personal

development plan and oral assessments (Adam, 2008). Qualification frame work can be another reliable basis for recognition of prior experiential learnings. For the first time a qualification frame work appeared in the educational systems of New Zealand, Australia and South Africa (Bergan, 2008). Tribby (2009) states that in a workbase scenario it is difficult in establishing social compromises and collective regulation, so it is important for a third party to be able to intervene to define the value of work and this value will be determined by laws but also by the external third party, which is constituted by the education system. Adam (2008) puts “A fully integrated transnational credit based frame work for lifelong learning that aligns national system is essential to ensure transparency between higher education and vocational education and training” (p.44). Qualification framework should contribute to determining five aspects of learning: level, workload, quality, profile, and learning outcomes.(Bergan, 2008). Minshi-Marja,(2009) states that qualifications framework and numerical credits are there in discussion to make the comparison and to determine the eligibility to go further up in the academic ladder and also furthers that the implication is envisaged as smooth transfer of students from one area of learning to another area, particularly in South African context. He furthers that qualification framework facilitates to update in the area of learning up to the standard and higher level and also points out that there is no uniformity on approaches to curriculum because of the dearth of legislation or professional standards including diverse institutional cultures and expertise in South Africa. The core competencies are elusive because of the constant /continuous evolution of the professions. The aspect of work integrated learning are identified but are not suggested as how to provide weight to such learning concretely. Qualification framework is relevant to how prior learning is recognized so that horizontal and vertical transition of learners takes place. To explore possibilities of smooth transition of human beings from one learning position to other



with advancement and continuous learning qualification framework can be a catalyst for facilitating further education.

### **Implementation arrangements**

The institutional settings for RPEL implementations as suggested by Raughbers (2008) are: a part of ministry, a statutory public organization, an independent agency, and a private company which can develop guidelines, process tools and techniques for implementing RPEL. Each particular academic institute will implement RPEL adhering the guidelines provided by the established agencies as mentioned. In Canada all three levels of government, federal, provincial and institutional, are implementing RPEL strategies and some governments have developed prior learning assessments recognition policies; other strongly recommend universities, colleges, professional regulatory bodies and certification boards to include their recognition processes and policies to prior learning and assessment (Beaudin 2008).

### **Resistance**

The RPEL challenges orthodox views regarding knowledge, skills and pedagogy. The Kinaesthetic theory of learning by doing is extolled, raising the important questions by researching the contour between adult experiences and learning academic knowledge traditionally in typical, formal institutions. Resistances are prevalent in bringing the changes because of the RPEL implementation. The evolving theoretical dimensions like learning by doing regarding RPEL are to be disseminated vigorously to minimize the resistance. Again the institutions are resisting the due attention to the RPEL citing as a heavy burden to them financially and also it involves huge amounts of time of both faculty and staff (Beaudin, 2008). Vince & Reynolds (2007) state that experiential learning inevitably raises the tension that is inherent in both learning and organizing and is associated with the political purpose of educating managers to comply with institutional

norms and expectations. Feutrie (2008) puts as “ Assessments of non formal and informal learning is mainly based on what is not expected, because non-formal and informal learning are not in line with programs, disciplines, or structured learning process”(p.54), and university programs are mainly described on content basis which does not support validation of experiential learning easily. Two attitudes regarding RPEL can be sensed as the first one showing favor to individual by over awarding recognition maximum possible and the other involves one protecting institutional interest by the evaluator. The later one could be more subjective and needs more attention while implementing RPEL.

### **Conclusions**

The important issue before educationist now is how individual can be brought closest to perfectness on the basis of knowledge and skills that he or she had acquired through formal, non-formal and informal learning. The learning from any of the aforementioned ways must be recognized and given credits to encourage individual's search for knowledge. The Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL) has become a buzz word, but modern educators should pay careful attention in advocating it such that acquired knowledge and skills are not lost in the absence of recognition by due authorities. An individual should be allowed to pursue for higher education based on his/her accomplishments on any form of informal, non-formal and formal learning. Educational philosophies like John Dewy's pragmatic theory of learning by doing, and Paulo Freire's advocacy of informal educators that emphasizes on dialogues and concerns for the oppressed on the path of education, are relevant in recognizing prior learning as both theories go beyond to very structured formal learning.

It is equally important to save skills and knowledge lost as a result of not recognizing it to imparting it to new individuals. If we do not put recognizing prior experiential learning system in

place in authorized institutions and make it effective, the acquired knowledge through experience will be lost. RPEL is taking momentum as an aspect of globalization but still according to Feutrie (2008) there are ambiguous answers to the questions like national qualification frameworks, acceptance from company, and resistance from educational institutes that need careful attention by the educationists.

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