The ‘recognition of prior learning’ in vocational education and training systems of lower and middle income countries: An analysis of the role of development cooperation in the diffusion of the concept

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Abstract
‘Recognition of prior learning’ (RPL) has developed into an important instrument to support the permeability of education and training systems. Based on an extensive review of documents, this article analyses the global diffusion of RPL in vocational education and training systems (VET), with a specific focus on its diffusion through development cooperation between multi- and bilateral donors and lower and middle income countries (LMIC). This article argues that RPL became a core component of development cooperation when VET came to be seen as a means to foster equitable access to employment and income for the poorest. At the same time, it shows that the model of RPL transferred to LMICs is derived from the specific relations between labour markets and education and training systems in donor countries, where VET qualifications are often critical to accessing positions in the labour market, which is often not the case in LMICs.

Keywords
Policy diffusion, education policy, vocational education and training, recognition of prior learning, validation, adult education

Introduction
When governments and authorities of specific countries design education and training policies, instruments or approaches to be used in their respective countries, they often employ models that have evolved elsewhere in the world. While some of those models are clearly linked to their place of
(apparent) origin (e.g. the dual model of vocational education and training, which is often linked to collective skill formation systems such as in Germany and Switzerland), other models have become more decontextualised, and have virtually become a common good of the global education and training landscape. Some of those models have become cornerstones of modern education systems, such as the model of formal schooling, the global diffusion of which has been extensively studied in the literature (Meyer et al., 1992; Ramirez and Boli-Bennett, 1982). Other models, such as competence-based education and training (CBET) or national qualifications frameworks (NQF), are much more specific, affecting only sub-domains of education systems, but have nevertheless also gained considerable attention in the literature (Allais, 2014; Steiner-Khamisi, 2006; Young, 2003).

Instead of the term ‘policy transfer’ (which insinuates a displacement of a model from country A to country B), (see e.g. Geiben, 2017; Li and Pilz, 2021) the literature on models that have become decontextualised uses the term ‘policy diffusion’, acknowledging the fact that the use of such models has spread throughout the world (Lütz, 2007; Maurer, 2018; Schriewer and Caruso, 2005). Such a process of policy diffusion can be particularly observed in development cooperation, which often invokes decontextualised ‘good’ or ‘best’ practices, whose concrete origins have become opaque.

Against this backdrop, the following article discusses the uptake and diffusion of the concept of ‘recognition of prior learning’ (RPL) in development cooperation. It does so because RPL has become, like NQF, an element of what McGrath (2012: 625) described as a global VET policy toolkit. It has become not only an important topic in the global VET discourse, but also a key element of VET policy in many lower and middle income countries (LMIC). This article analyses in detail how and why RPL became a core component of donor support for VET in development cooperation.

The analysis is undertaken from an actor-centred institutionalist perspective (Schimank, 2007; Schimank, 2016). Accordingly, it focuses on the agency of organisations mainly operating at the global level – known as the ‘lenders’ – and how they create institutions (such as decontextualised policy instruments) which then influence policy making at country level throughout the world. The analysis is based on an extensive review of documents issued by both international organisations and bilateral donors, as well as on research and evaluation-related fieldwork in countries in which RPL is being implemented, in particular Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Lao and Macedonia (Bolliger and Maurer, 2018; Maurer and Teutoburg-Weiss, 2020; Maurer and Karangaleski, 2016; Maurer and Morshed, 2021). An important part of the analysis will be based on categories proposed by Jakobi (2009) for the study of the influence of international organisations (i.e. standard setting, financial means, coordination and technical assistance).

### Theories of diffusion processes in the comparative education literature

RPL has become not only a key tool of policy making, but also a topic of considerable interest in the education literature – which also includes a large set of definitions of RPL (cf. Andersson, 2008; Bohlinger, 2017). In line with many contributions to the literature, this article considers RPL to be 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: 3). Given its widespread use in the research literature, the term ‘recognition’ is used here, rather than ‘validation’ that has become an established term in European education policy (see e.g. Council of the European Union, 2012), especially against the background of French literature (see e.g. Malaquin, 2013).
There are many studies of the different forms and instruments of recognition and their conceptual underpinnings, including from a comparative perspective (Bohlinger, 2017; Fejes and Andersson, 2009; Werquin, 2014). Some have examined how RPL emerged – which is a key topic of this article – and why its implementation has been much more difficult than many policy makers would have hoped (Cooper, 2014; Cooper et al., 2017). Some of this research also points to linkages between the overall expansion of education systems, the growing role of qualifications in labour markets, and the challenges for individuals who lack such qualifications – creating pressure on policymakers to address such difficulties, for example, by introducing RPL schemes (Maurer, 2021). While there is some literature on the social processes underlying the development and implementation of RPL, it is more theoretical or focused on specific countries. There is virtually nothing on the diffusion of RPL at the global level, let alone with a focus on development cooperation.

As a matter of fact, the analysis of RPL’s global diffusion can benefit from earlier studies in comparative education on models of education and training, which were not only transferred from one country to another, but also diffused globally. This body of literature has different strands, which explain policy diffusion differently. However, most theorists in this field would agree that, firstly, policy diffusion goes through a series of stages. Steiner-Khamsi (2006), for instance, has defined three such stages – the ‘growth stage’ with early adopters, the ‘explosive growth stage’, in which the model is adopted in large parts of the world, and the ‘burnout stage’, in which a few late adopters undergo reform. Secondly, most theorists studying the world-wide diffusion of education and training models would argue that this process is driven more by exogenous factors, that is, global-level factors, than endogenous factors.

A first important approach in the study of policy diffusion is that of the world polity theorists, who follow a neo-institutionalist research paradigm. Representatives of this school argue that it is global ideologies and Western organisational myths that have led to the convergence of education and training systems world-wide. Nation states are left with little scope for autonomous educational planning, and idiosyncratic features of national education and training systems are delegitimised (Meyer et al., 1992). In one of the few neo-institutionalist analyses of VET systems, Benavot (1983) suggests that converging trends across these systems are attributable to changing global ideological currents. Focussing on global enrolment trends between 1950 and 1975, this author documents a world-wide decline of diversified secondary education and its vocational tracks, and relates this trend to the growing role of ‘individualism’ – a normative prescription in modern societies that undermines diversified secondary education, and thus VET at the upper secondary level.

A second strand in the study of policy diffusion emphasises more that agency matters, and therefore focuses the analysis on specific actors engaged in the diffusion process, their (material) interests and motives and their positions and networks. Theorists in this tradition make use of the distinction between ‘lenders’ and ‘borrowers’ in educational development (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Gonon, 2011). Many of them have researched the considerable weight and influence of a number of specific lenders in development cooperation in LMICs, reminding scholars of educational development of the material interests of donors and of the power asymmetries that have remained, despite a growing discourse about ‘partnership’ in development cooperation (De Mesquita and Smith, 2009; King and McGrath, 2004).

Against the background of this brief literature review, some of the central assumptions of this paper will be made explicit:

Firstly, this paper understands the global career of RPL as a policy diffusion process. Following Steiner-Khamsi (2006), this diffusion process is divided here into three phases, the ‘pioneer phase’, the ‘policy attraction phase’ and the ‘global standard phase’, whereby the designations of the phases
used here are not identical to those of Steiner-Khamsi, but take up references from Philipps (2006: 557) on ‘cross-national policy attraction’ and from Jakobi (2009: 476) on the importance of global standards in education.

Secondly, and in contrast to world polity approaches to policy diffusion in education, this contribution adopts an actor-centred institutionalist theoretical framework (Schimank, 2007; Schimank, 2016). This framework assumes an interdependent relationship between institutions, understood as ‘binding informal or formal regulations which stabilise social processes’ (Maurer, 2011: 50), and actors which operate in concrete historical situations and at different levels of education and training. While in other contributions taking a similar perspective (Maurer, 2019; Maurer, 2021; Maurer and Morshed, 2021), the focus is more on the interrelationship between national-level regulations and key actors, the focus here is on global-level actors and institutions, in particular the global-level RPL standards. On the one hand, global actors are constrained in their actions by an institutional set of rules; at the same time, they influence the further development of this set of rules. As contributions to political science literature and comparative education literature suggest, they are also guided by organisation-specific cultures as well as by an interest in retaining or increasing their influence in the global governance of education and training (see e.g. Barnett and Finnemore, 2004; Heyneman, 2011).

Thirdly, global-level actors, that is, mainly international organisations, but potentially also bilateral donors, are able to influence educational development in LMICs through four distinct types of activity: (a) setting standards (including informal ones), (b) contributing financial means, (c) engaging in coordinative work (e.g. by creating cross-country monitoring systems) and (d) providing technical assistance to partner countries (Jakobi, 2009). In consequence, some international organisations or bilateral donors may be able to influence policy diffusion by supporting projects in specific partner countries financially, while others increase their leverage rather by defining standards, for example, by formulating best practice recommendations for RPL, and by supporting countries to then implement them.

**VET in the international development cooperation discourse**

One of the core conclusions of this paper is that the rise of RPL in development cooperation was also a consequence of the fact that VET, from the mid-2000s onwards, became a priority aid theme – seen as an important direct means to foster equitable access to employment and income for the poorest (King and Palmer, 2007). In order to contribute to an understanding of these linkages, the article continues with a short overview of the trajectory of VET in development cooperation, distinguishing three major phases.

A first phase was characterised by strong interest of key development actors in VET, mainly for economic reasons, lasting from the early years of the post-World War II era until approximately 1990. While, undoubtedly, colonial education policy had supported the development of vocational and technical education prior to this period (Clignet and Foster, 1964; Singh, 2001), the rise of a new multilateral aid architecture dominated by the Western world gave it a considerable boost in terms of coordinated support, envisioning societal change based on economic growth from the development of modern industry. VET played a central role in these considerations, as central development actors, especially the World Bank, assumed that industries in developing countries needed not only capital and infrastructure but also skilled labour, especially at the intermediate and higher skill levels (Jones, 1997; Middleton et al., 1993). This view was shared not only by the experts from the Western group of countries but also by those of the communist world: while the expert views on the feasibility of manpower planning certainly differed greatly (Edwards, 1983; Samoff and Carroll,
the view was nevertheless widespread in both camps that the governments of developing countries – with external support – should be strongly committed to VET, but also to areas of higher education that were particularly relevant economically. In VET, the focus was on formal forms of education, whereby the World Bank was particularly interested in supporting diversified secondary education, which is characterised in particular by sector-specific vocational streams at the upper secondary level (World Bank, 1974). Other international organisations, such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO), were also involved in VET, but with a somewhat stronger focus on company-based training; moreover, they had few or only very limited funds of their own to carry out larger projects (see e.g. ILO, 1962; Otto, 1970).

A second phase was characterised by a withdrawal of key multilateral development actors from VET, beginning around 1990. A decisive factor here was the change in strategy of the World Bank, which, primarily due to an evaluation questioning the effectiveness of its support for diversified secondary education, now increasingly focused on financing basic education (Mundy, 2002; World Bank, 1991). However, the Bank’s change in strategy was undoubtedly also due to the fact that its development economists were no longer willing to rely on the trickle-down effect of economic growth and began to advocate fighting poverty more directly (World Bank, 1990). As large parts of the population in many LMICs still had no access to primary education, it seemed sensible to focus on basic education rather than (upper secondary) VET. At the global level, this change helped to launch the UN’s campaign for Education for All of the United Nations (United Nations, 1990) and also paved the way for making universal access to basic education one of the Millennium Development Goals (United Nations General Assembly, 2000). Clearly, both global strategies would influence the priorities of not only many governments in LMICs but also many multilateral and bilateral donors. Yet, donor support to VET was, of course, not entirely phased out. Among the multilateral development actors, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) became one of the most important supporters of VET, while among the bilateral donors, Germany, which had been providing financial and technical support to VET in partner countries since the mid-1950s, continued to be important in this field, too (Heitmann, 2018). At the same time, some LMICs remained strongly committed to VET, even without the corresponding funds from their key donors (for South Asia see e.g. Maurer, 2012), and also some bilateral donors continued to support VET in partner countries, one of the most important of them being Germany (Heitmann, 2018).

The third phase is characterised by the renaissance of VET in international cooperation, becoming particularly accentuated in the context of the financial and economic crisis after 2007, when policymakers all over the world, not only in development cooperation, became more interested in VET, assuming it could help to lower the growing rates of youth unemployment. Thus, in contrast to earlier decades, when donors considered VET primarily as a means to increase economic development, the attitude now was that it was an important field of public policy that could contribute to poverty reduction. At the same time, the involvement of the private sector in the governance, design and implementation of VET became even more important than in previous decades, which was also reflected in the growing orientation towards competencies relevant to the labour market. In order to strengthen VET offers so that they would contribute to poverty reduction whilst remaining oriented towards the needs of the labour market, development cooperation increasingly used what McGrath (2012) called the VET policy toolkit, which also included RPL.

Although this renaissance is a key topic in the research literature (cf. Allais, 2012; McGrath, 2012), little evidence is available of how this came about, and this article is in no position to systematically answer this question either. Certainly, the financial and economic crisis after 2007 was a critical moment that strongly contributed to the revival of interest in VET (Andrews, 2012).
However, the review of the relevant policy documents and the analysis of developments in individual LMICs suggest that this return of VET was not only a direct result of this historical situation – but was made possible by various actors.

Firstly, some multilateral development actors who had continued to be financially involved in VET after 1990 (despite the withdrawal of the World Bank) began to slowly increase their activities in the sector, already in the early years of the new millennium. These notably included the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which continued to have a strong presence in VET in Asian LMICs, and contributed to the establishment of the first NQFs in LMICs, for example, in Sri Lanka (Asian Development Bank, 2008). Both in its policy papers (ADB, 2004; ADB, 2009) and concrete projects, the ADB focused on broadening access to VET and improving the access of individuals to employment and income to improve their livelihoods.

Secondly, the European Commission also emerged as a key actor in development cooperation, complementing and sometimes overlapping and even challenging the cooperation activities of EU member countries (Holland and Doidge, 2012; Lister, 1998) and strongly supporting large VET projects, for example, in Bangladesh (Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh, 2006).

Thirdly, financially less influential development actors also contributed to the renaissance, such as the ILO, which had long been committed to promoting VET, but had few resources of its own, and thus recognised the opportunities that would again arise for it through increased interest in VET. An example of the ILO’s commitment to VET was its Recommendation on Human Resources Development of 2004, which already referred to most of the approaches and instruments that McGrath (2012) would later call the VET policy toolkit (ILO, 2004).

Fourthly, bilateral donors from countries with strong dual VET systems, such as the German and Swiss development cooperation agencies, were now in a renewed position to foreground their expertise in this field and to increase funding for it (BMZ, 2012; SDC, 2008). The change in objectives could be clearly seen among these donors, for whom VET had played a central role since the 1960s: no longer was VET understood primarily as a contribution to economic development and the promotion of an entrepreneurial middle class (see e.g. BMZ, 1969; Jäger et al., 2016; SDC, 1994). The objective now was to improve access to employment and income for the poorest.

This strong socio-political view of VET was also reaffirmed in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) declaration, especially in its target 4.3, which aims to achieve equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education by 2030 (United Nations, 2015).

The global diffusion of RPL

Before we turn to the uptake of RPL in development cooperation, it is important to define this approach in some more detail and to then look at its early developments and its subsequent diffusion throughout the world.

There are many definitions of RPL (see e.g. Andersson, 2008; Annen, 2012; Bohlinger, 2017). In line with a common understanding of it, RPL shall here be defined as 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: 3). RPL is used in different parts and at different levels of education systems (increasingly also in higher education, for example), but the focus of this contribution is on VET, where the approach is most established.
In the first phase, the ‘pioneering phase’, RPL established itself in several early adopting countries. In the literature, the first such schemes often referred to are US-American programmes for war veterans in the Second World War, who expected an easier reintegration into the labour market through recognition of previous work experience (Bohlinger, 2017: 590). If, however, allowing candidates with appropriate experience to sit an examination without doing the required preparatory courses also counts as a form of RPL, then earlier schemes, such as those that developed in Germany in the course of the establishment of their formal VET systems, undoubtedly also belong to the phenomenon of RPL (Annen and Schreiber, 2011).

Two pioneering countries would, however, have a much stronger impact on the global career of RPL. The first of these was France, where RPL schemes were developed from the 1980s onwards to informally document work experience (Joras and Ravier, 1993). Subsequently and mainly to promote equity, «Validation des acquis de l’expérience » (VAE) was developed as a principle to be used throughout the entire French education system, so that, today, individuals with the relevant experience have a right to undergo RPL and can access virtually any officially listed vocationally or professionally oriented qualification (including at the level of higher education) through relevant schemes (Breton, 2017; Mathou, 2019; Werquin, 2021). Yet, the fact that RPL is now part of the VET policy toolkit is due much more to another pioneering country – Australia, which underwent comprehensive reforms in the 1990s. As part of these reforms, VET was consistently oriented towards competencies that could be summarised in training packages and assigned to the levels of a newly established qualifications framework. RPL then made it possible to have individual competencies or entire training packages recognised on the basis of proven and documented work experience (Cameron, 2011; Doddrell, 2002). These Australian reforms were important because they integrated the critical elements of what McGrath (2012) called the VET policy toolkit, most notably the clear competence orientation and the NQF-approach, which were both designed to also support RPL.

In the second phase, the ‘policy attraction phase’, several countries introduced RPL schemes modelled explicitly on the schemes of pioneering countries. One of the most notable examples in this phase is the case of post-apartheid South Africa, which aligned its comprehensive VET reform with the core ideas of the Australian reforms, and promoted RPL accordingly, in particular as a way to validate the work experience of black workers (Allais, 2003; Kraak, 2004). Key stakeholders in this reform, such as the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa), which had a counterpart in Australia, were well acquainted with the Australian VET reform, and, on this basis, supported similar policy changes in South Africa (Allais, 2003). Due to the high socio-political expectations associated with RPL in this country and the major challenges of implementation, South Africa’s experience has been widely discussed in the literature (Cooper, 2014; Harris, 1999). Another case in this phase of cross-national policy attraction would include Switzerland, where promoters of RPL explicitly referred to the experiences of France and managed to lobby for similar reforms, initially at the cantonal level only (mainly in the country’s Francophone part), later also at the national level (Maurer, 2019).

Both in the case of the early adopters (pioneering phase) and in the case of the countries that were imitating the reforms of pioneers (policy attraction phase), actors, mainly national-level ones, were pressing for RPL, as they considered it to be an effective tool to address challenges emerging in the context of the overall expansion of educational systems. The fact that a growing number of individuals has access to formal education (including at upper secondary and higher education levels), and that qualifications play an important role in the labour market, places individuals who lack such qualifications (but potentially have relevant work experience) at a considerable disadvantage. This
creates pressure on policy makers to address such difficulties by, amongst other things, introducing RPL schemes (Maurer, 2021).

In the third phase, the ‘global standard phase’, RPL became an element of the global VET policy toolkit (McGrath, 2012), a global standard promoted by internationally active organisations. Of particular importance was the European Union, which, from the mid-1990s, emphasised the importance of lifelong learning among its member countries (European Commission, 1994). The resulting ‘Memorandum on Lifelong Learning’ (European Commission, 2000) and ‘Copenhagen Declaration’ made qualifications frameworks and the recognition of qualifications and skills key elements of the union’s education and training strategy, very much in line with the Australian VET reforms of the 1990s (European Commission, 2002). The EU subsequently produced a number of recommendations for member countries on how to design and implement RPL schemes (Council of the European Union, 2012). While Australia had been the first country to include RPL in its overarching VET reform agenda, linking it to competence-based training and the NQF, the EU was the first multilateral actor to link RPL to VET reforms more generally. This would give advocates of RPL considerable leverage to promote it, with the help of Cedefop, not only in the union’s member countries but also with the support of the European Training Foundation (ETF), among countries bordering the EU and in developing and transition countries in other parts of the world (Cedefop, 2015). Increasingly, and as part of the ‘global standard phase’, RPL would now also become a key concept to be used in development cooperation.

**Uptake of RPL in development cooperation**

RPL has become a recognised element of the VET policy toolkit, evolving in the context of the renaissance of VET in development cooperation (see *VET in the international development cooperation discourse* above). From a development perspective, the attractiveness of the concept mainly lies in its promise to improve access to VET qualifications and employment and income, especially for poorer people with little formal education but work experience, being very much in line also with target 4.3 of the SDGs, which aims for ‘equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education’ (United Nations, 2015).

Accordingly, today, virtually every LMIC that receives some form of development aid supporting VET has taken up RPL to some degree, be it only by adopting vague policy declarations, or much more concretely by designing and implementing schemes and instruments (see e.g. UIL, 2021). In contrast to the countries that designed their RPL schemes in the pioneering and policy attraction phases, national-level actors in LMICs played a comparatively small role in initiating RPL in their countries; it was international actors that played the main role. In the following sections, this international influence will be examined more closely, with regard to the categories formulated by Jakobi (2009: 476). Due to its central position in the international RPL discourse, the focus here will be on the ILO.

**The role of the International Labour Organization**

The ILO is the international organisation that has been most systematically concerned with questions of VET globally for the past several decades, yet it has received surprisingly little scholarly attention.

Unlike UNESCO, the ILO is not primarily an organisation focused on education issues, but aims to improve labour rights and social justice globally (Maul, 2007; Standing, 2010; Thomas and Turnbull, 2018). This is also the context of its commitment to VET, especially its efforts to improve
working conditions in the informal labour sector, which explains why it has long been more interested in promoting work-based forms of learning than, for example, the World Bank (the most central donor in the field of VET until the early 1990s). The ILO is undoubtedly one of the organisations that not only contributed to the renaissance of VET in development cooperation, but was able to further expand its influence among development actors due to its expertise, including in the field of RPL.

In terms of the categories formulated by Jakobi (2009: 476), the ILO was able to assert its influence firstly through its efforts towards standardisation. The RPL concept was first prominently taken up by the ILO at the International Labour Conference of 2000, whose constituents expressed the view that persons ‘should have the opportunity to have [their] experiences and skills [...] assessed, recognized and certified’, and that ‘[p]rogrammes to compensate for skill deficits by individuals through increased access to education and training should be made available as part of recognition of prior learning programmes’ (ILO, 2000). While this declaration had only declaratory value, the aforementioned recommendation on ‘Human Resources Development’ of 2004 was already more binding. It suggested that member countries should develop NQFs, which would also help to ‘facilitate the recognition of prior learning and previously acquired skills, competencies and experience’ (ILO, 2004). According to the recommendation, RPL was also important for migrant workers. No binding convention has been formulated dealing with RPL. Yet, on the basis of the declaration of 2000, and the recommendation of 2004, informal standards and numerous guidelines were developed, and further resources were committed to the development of RPL in practice (ILO, 2018; Lange and Baier-D’Orazio, 2020).

The ILO has also been involved in RPL through coordination work, for example, in promoting exchanges between experts from member countries. However, this was often primarily concerned with the dissemination of the guidelines and other resources already discussed above, and for the purpose of affirming the global standards. There was little in the way of critical comparison of policies and their implementation at country level, and also little reflection on the actual difficulties that many countries increasingly encountered in the implementation of RPL schemes. There was no acknowledgement of the resistance to the promotion of new recognition programmes (especially those giving access to established vocational qualifications), or the fact that qualifications at the lowest skill levels (to which RPL often gave access) offered little added value in the labour market. Particularly problematic were the numerous presentations on the recognition of competencies of migrant workers, which in no way reflected the complexity at the level of implementation (ILO, 2020; ILO, 2007). It is also interesting to compare this with the ILO’s discussion in the area of the NQF, which was much more differentiated, and transparently addressed actual difficulties in the sense of monitoring (cf. Allais, 2010).

Finally, the ILO has also been able to contribute to the global dissemination of RPL through another form of influence described by Jakobi (2009): technical assistance to multi- or bilateral donor agency projects. In some cases, such as the TVET Reform Project in Bangladesh, funded by the European Commission from 2007 onwards (Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh, 2006), this support to RPL did not consist of stand-alone measures for such schemes; rather, it was embedded in comprehensive reforms of VET systems, which were ultimately strongly oriented towards the global VET policy toolkit (McGrath, 2012) and focused in particular on the development of NQFs. In other cases, however, the ILO was explicitly mandated to provide technical assistance on RPL. For example, the ILO was involved in the development of regional RPL guidelines developed under the Decent Work Programme of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (SADC, 2013).
The role of further development actors

The commitment of the ILO alone would not have been sufficient for the diffusion of RPL in LMICs, in particular as it lacks the necessary funding to implement projects in partner countries. Such funding – another critical dimension of the influence of international organisations, according to Jakobi (2009) – has mostly come from multi- and bilateral donors. One of the donors that has played a major role in the diffusion of RPL in LMICs is the European Commission (EC), which has become one of the world’s largest providers of official development assistance (ODA) (Dearden, 2008). The above-mentioned TVET Reform Project in Bangladesh (Delegation of the European Commission to Bangladesh, 2006; Maurer and Morshed, 2021) was one of the first of a series of larger EC VET projects in LMICs dedicated to promoting the VET policy toolkit, which includes RPL. RPL was also mentioned in the EU’s development cooperation strategy, as a means to improve access to education and then employment and income (e.g. European Commission, 2014). This provided the basis for further engagement in this area. While, in the case of Bangladesh, the EU relied on the technical expertise of the ILO, for countries neighbouring the EU it has often worked through the ETF (see above). Particularly in the case of candidate countries in South-Eastern Europe, such reforms in education policy are strongly linked to the process of integration into the EU, where RPL has become an important element of education and training policy (e.g. ETF and Adult Education Centre, 2017).

Another critical donor was the ADB, whose role in the renaissance of VET in development cooperation was already mentioned above. While it had been one of the earliest promoters of NQF in Asia, it started to link those to RPL particularly in the years after the world financial crisis (with migrant workers in mind) in countries such as Cambodia and Laos (ADB, 2010; ADB, 2014). In comparison, the World Bank has continued to be much more reticent: while it does, in fact, support projects with RPL components in individual cases (e.g. World Bank, 2017), it has been more committed to the structural development of formal VET (especially at the level of upper secondary education) and less to improving its accessibility (World Bank, 2011).

Besides multilateral donors, bilateral ones also engage in RPL. Given the high importance of validation in France, the French Development Organisation (AFD) started to be a key promoter of RPL, particularly in Francophone Africa. A closer look at its approach to RPL, which is also followed by smaller bilateral donors from Europe (e.g. the Danish and the Swiss development agencies), suggests that it differs somewhat from the approach of the Anglo-Saxon development actors, in particular because it does not link RPL to NQFs. The reason for this is that the recognition of informally acquired competencies has a long tradition for these European donors, predating the evolution of the more recent VET policy toolkit with a competence-based NQF at its core. In fact, such European donors have tried to strengthen and innovate informal training in many West African countries for many decades, building on apprenticeships in the craft sector, for instance. One approach has been to formalise such training, by introducing non-formal qualifications that can be acquired at least in part through informal training (SDC, 2017; Walther, 2011). The global diffusion of RPL is an opportunity for these donors to emphasise the relevance of such efforts.

Finally, UNESCO, long one of the leading multilateral actors in global education development (Heyneman, 2011; Mundy, 1999), is also among the promoters of RPL. Like the ILO, it belongs to the UN specialised agencies and lacks substantive funding to implement RPL activities at the level of partner countries. Accordingly, UNESCO tries to promote the dissemination of RPL through three types of activity, namely standard setting, monitoring and technical assistance (cf. Jakobi, 2009), but not to the same extent and with the same impact as the ILO.
In terms of *standardisation*, UNESCO has pointed out the great importance of RPL for improving the permeability of education systems, and has also developed its own RPL guidelines (UNESCO, 2012a; UNESCO, 2012b). In terms of *coordination*, UNESCO operates a Global Observatory dedicated to RPL, in which RPL policies and the concrete initiatives of different countries, including LMICs, are displayed (Singh, 2015; UIL, 2013), somewhat similarly to the European inventory on validation by Cedefop (Cedefop et al., 2018). At a more regional level, UNESCO launched a VET Expert Platform that facilitates policy dialogue with, and technical assistance to, French-speaking countries in Northern and Sub-Saharan Africa (IIPE-UNESCO 2021). RPL is an important topic being discussed in this context. Through this platform, UNESCO also provides direct technical support for the development and implementation of RPL schemes, for example, in Mauritania (MESFTP, 2020).

**Challenges in the development and implementation of RPL in LMICs**

While it has become clear from the previous sections that RPL has gained a lot of importance in development cooperation, it would be relevant at this point to be able to talk about the impact of such efforts in LMICs. Unfortunately, there is insufficient empirical evidence to do this. Only the case of South Africa has been comparatively well studied (Cooper et al., 2017; Harris, 1999), and the few case studies of the experiences of specific LMICs (e.g. India and Bangladesh) do not report on the overall impact of RPL approaches in those countries (Maurer and Morshed, 2021; Rothboeck et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the following section will attempt to shed some light on the challenges of developing and implementing RPL in LMICs, by drawing on the above-mentioned case studies and experiences of RPL in OECD countries.

**Challenge 1: Not all actors support the goal of improved permeability**

While the global discourse on RPL recognises that access to educational qualifications is a privilege, there is too little discussion of the fact that improving permeability is often opposed by those who benefit from exclusive access. It can be observed that actors tied to existing educational qualifications (such as schools or graduates) are often critical of RPL, unless they are provided with incentives (e.g. financial rewards to schools for implementing RPL) (Aarkrog and Wahlgren, 2015; Cooper and Harris, 2013; Maurer, 2019). As the case of South Africa in particular shows, trade union support is also not necessarily forthcoming (Cooper, 2014). This means there is a danger (repeatedly identified in the comparative education literature) of an abstract national policy discourse oriented towards global values and approaches becoming decoupled from the actual implementation process, where many actors oppose RPL policy (Nagel and Snyder, 1989; Zapp, 2019). One such example is the case of Bangladesh, where established actors in VET have been able to ensure that only very few individuals can undergo RPL in a way that would actually improve their position in the education system and in the labour market (Maurer and Morshed, 2021).

**Challenge 2: Design of RPL instruments is technically demanding**

In many OECD countries, RPL instruments have been established with the aim of objectively evaluating work experience and the competencies developed therefrom (e.g. Annen, 2012; Fejes and Andersson, 2009). In LMICs, such instruments have sparked some interest (e.g. portfolio procedures), but have not been widely taken up. Skills tests, however, have become more common in LMICs. But they generally only provide access to lower-level qualifications with a heavy
emphasis on practical skills. In countries where such qualifications do not yet exist, new, more practically-oriented qualifications have been developed, partly to provide opportunities for RPL. However, it often takes time for such qualifications to become established in the education system and in the labour market. These difficulties are not only evident in developing contexts such as Bangladesh (Maurer and Morshed, 2021), but also in OECD countries (Maurer, 2021). In addition, there is a risk that policymakers may see RPL as a popular way to improve access to qualifications by lowering requirements, which may actually undermine the reputation of existing qualifications (and thus of VET as a whole).

**Challenge 3: The added value of recognition is often limited**

In RPL schemes, competencies are recognised in order to, on the one hand, improve access to further education and training, and on the other, facilitate access to the labour market. There can be challenges in both areas. For example, access to further education often requires comprehensive general education (usually lower secondary level). In such cases, precisely those for whom RPL schemes are designed do not progress beyond this threshold (see e.g. Maurer and Morshed, 2021).

The added value of the qualification on the labour market is also not necessarily given, because VET qualifications are, in many LMICs, not very well established. Recruitment and promotion decisions (for instance in crafts and industry) are often not taken on the basis of an assessment of work experience or qualifications (Allais, 2015; Campbell, 2012). Accordingly, the promotion of RPL should focus on sectors in which qualifications actually offer added value. For example, it would be conceivable to recognise the work experience of returning migrants who have worked in the health sectors of other countries, and on this basis could obtain a qualification in this professional field more quickly.

**Discussion and conclusions**

RPL has become a component of the global VET policy toolkit. Its global adoption can best be understood as a process of policy diffusion, which is characterised by different stages – a ‘pioneering stage’ of early adopting countries, a ‘policy attraction phase’ in which the model developed by the pioneers is taken up by other countries, and a ‘global standard phase’, in which the model is decontextualised and countries worldwide are expected to adopt it. The dissemination of RPL in the context of development cooperation took place in this third phase of the diffusion process, when RPL became a global standard. This global diffusion is comparable to that of NQFs, which have received much attention in the literature (Allais, 2014; Young, 2003), and to which RPL schemes are often tied.

This paper adopts an actor-centred perspective on this diffusion process. Because its focus is on development cooperation, it emphasises the central role of some development actors, labelled as lenders in some of the comparative education literature, who supported the diffusion of RPL through activities in different fields (cf. Jakobi, 2009). The article assumes that these actors orient themselves to given institutional arrangements are interest-oriented and at the same time act in concrete historical situations.

RPL established itself in international cooperation at a moment when VET was experiencing a renaissance in this policy area, especially following the world financial crisis of 2007. In contrast to earlier decades, it was now hoped that VET would contribute less to economic development and more to poverty reduction, especially with a view to providing the poorest with better access to employment and income. In such a moment, key development actors considered RPL a particularly
important instrument; in fact, it virtually represents the current global VET development discourse and its emphasis on expanding access to VET qualifications.

In such a moment, those actors that are able to suggest such instruments and provide the necessary technical expertise to design and implement them play key roles. Our analysis suggests that the ILO played a critical role in this regard, contributing through the means of standard setting, coordination and technical assistance (Jakobi, 2009) to the design and global diffusion of a set of key instruments, including RPL, that promised to address the newly egalitarian objectives of VET policy making in development cooperation. A further critical role was played by the European Commission, which had started to promote RPL both as a part of European education and training policy, and also in its role as a donor in development cooperation. Other multi- and bilateral donors (including ADB, AFD and SDC) also facilitated the implementation of RPL schemes in various LMICs. All these external actors hailed RPL for its theoretical relevance to educational policy – without being able to refer to proven effects in specific countries, let alone to effects in the development context. In this respect, the diffusion of RPL is comparable to that of NQFs.

National-level actors are, of course, particularly important in the implementation of RPL. Implementation has not received much attention in the research literature, and is not at the core of this paper. Yet, evidence from Bangladesh, for instance (Maurer and Morshed, 2021), suggests that the rapid diffusion of RPL in development cooperation may lead to considerable decoupling of national-level policies (aligned with the global-level policy toolkit) from the realities of implementation. Consideration of the challenges noted above – and the fact that RPL originated in contexts where VET qualifications were key to labour market access – may help policymakers tailor RPL policies to specific local contexts to improve the chances of effective implementation. In any event, much more research on the implementation and effects of RPL in LMICs is critically important.

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