

Recognition of prior learning in professional education from an organisational perspective*

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* The Version of record of this Manuscript has been published and is available in the International Journal of Lifelong Education 02.02.2023

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02601370.2023.2177759>

Recognition of prior learning in professional education from an organisational perspective

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is often said to facilitate lifelong learning and takes place when already acquired learning outcomes are officially valued. The education system is a central arena of RPL, allowing facilitated access to or shortening of study programmes. This paper explores RPL practices in Switzerland. We ask the following research question: How do professional education institutions regulate, practice, and justify RPL? We start from the premise that RPL practices in higher education institutions are shaped by national RPL policies, professional bodies, and the nature of the respective labour markets. However, within these framework conditions, higher education institutions also create their own organisational policies, thereby promoting or hindering RPL. In addition, the study programme's knowledge domain and the responsible persons' pedagogic agency, shaped by their pedagogic concepts and individual attitudes, are also guiding factors. To answer our research question, we conducted qualitative comparative case studies and compared RPL practices of professional education institutions that offer study programmes for hospitality management and social education. Our results show that organisations offering the same professional study programmes regulate, practice, and justify RPL differently, indicating the importance of the organisational gatekeepers' pedagogic agency.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning, higher education, professional education, vocational education and training, organisation

Introduction

In view of rapid technological and economic changes, lifelong learning has gained in importance. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is said to facilitate lifelong learning (Andersson et al., 2013; European Commission, 2001, 2009). Advantages of RPL are claimed at two different levels. For individuals, RPL is said to enable social and economic integration and open new opportunities for further education and career progression and mobility. For society as a whole, RPL can leverage existing potential to alleviate skilled worker shortages (Klingovsky & Schmid, 2018). Recognition of prior learning refers to an individual having already achieved learning outcomes during the course of life, which are then (publicly)

accepted, accredited, and somehow valued (Bohlinger, 2017). Learning outcomes may include previously received formal qualifications and certificates, as well as competencies acquired in a non-formal (such as continuous education) or informal (such as life and work experience) learning context.

The education system is a central arena of RPL, which can facilitate access to or shorten study programmes, especially in vocational education and training, secondary adult education, and tertiary education (Andersson et al., 2013). On the one hand, RPL may create students who do not fully meet the formal admission requirements for being admitted to the study programme. On the other hand, RPL can lead to students being exempted from parts of their studies, possibly even shortening the duration of their education (Castle & Attwood, 2001).

It is assumed to be easier to implement RPL in vocational and professional programmes than in academic ones because of their greater proximity to fields of practice (Harris & Wihak, 2017), because they also integrate work experience as a kind of informal learning. Still, professional programmes—although practically oriented—are themselves very heterogeneous, and little research has, to date, studied the differences between them in regards to RPL implementation. This paper addresses this research gap. It explores the RPL practices of professional education institutions in Switzerland and investigates the following research question: how do professional education institutions regulate, practise, and justify RPL? Professional education institutions in Switzerland offer study programmes at a tertiary education level, such as nursing, social education, business administration, and hospitality management. They are a particularly interesting object of study because their students are adults who often already have considerable learning experience.

Based on the current state of research (Cooper & Harris, 2013; Cooper et al., 2017; Harris & Wihak, 2017; Maurer, 2019; Pitman & Vidovich, 2013), we start from the premise

that RPL in higher education institutions always take place within distinct organisational environments that are shaped by national RPL policies, professional bodies, and the nature of the labour market. However, within this environments, higher education institutions also have room to manoeuvre and create their own organisational policy and culture, which can either promote or hinder RPL. In addition, the study programme's knowledge domain and pedagogic agency of the persons responsible for RPL are also guiding factors.

To answer our research question, we opted for qualitative comparative case studies. In total, we compared four professional education institutions, two of which offer the same study programmes (hospitality management and social education). This research design allowed us to compare RPL practices within the same professional fields and analyse the complex interplay between the organisational policy and culture and the individual RPL gatekeepers' influence.

The results point to the importance of individual attitudes and pedagogic concepts of the gatekeepers. Since the organizations studied have a lot of freedom in implementing RPL, it seems to matter who oversees evaluating and recognizing prior learning. Even within study programmes that assign the same degrees and qualify for the same professional profiles, different RPL practices can be identified based on the pedagogic agency of the respective gatekeepers.

Conceptual framework

Distinct organisational environments

All organisations—including higher education institutions—are situated in organisational environments shaped by regulatory frameworks. National RPL policies matter because they formulate the legal framework within which RPL takes place. Furthermore, professional bodies also define certain rules for their professional field as they may regulate and oversee,

for example, the formal curricula and the competency levels of the qualifiers, and participate in accreditation boards (Muller, 2009). As Cooper et al. (2017, p. 708) state, “Regulatory and professional bodies play a central role in the processes of recontextualization in some jurisdictions making it hard (or sometimes impossible) for an institution to offer RPL.” These requirements can be more or less binding. As Wheelahan et al. (2002, p. 41) state, it is only when organisations are “required to report, count, are funded, and held accountable for RPL that it starts to matter.”

Furthermore, the nature of the labour market also influences RPL implementation (Cooper et al., 2017). In highly regulated labour markets, it is more difficult to develop work experience at a certain level that is later creditable through RPL. The opposite is true in more open and less regulated labour market segments. In these fields, there is a correspondingly larger supply of potential RPL candidates.

Labour market demand is also central for RPL. A scarcity of available jobs after studying reduces RPL (Cooper & Harris, 2013). Contrarily, if there is a high shortage of skilled workers in a labour market segment and employees in these areas are expected to have acquired at least a formal vocational qualification, RPL will be in greater demand. This contrasts with other areas where access to employment is possible without a corresponding vocational qualification (Maurer, 2021).

Organisational culture and policy

Research indicates that organisational cultures and policies are also at play when it comes to RPL. From this point of view, RPL is not conceived of as an objective act of measuring learning outcomes because, “far from being an epistemological assessment of prior learning, universities also consider their organisational identity and status when considering what informal or non-formal learning will be accepted” (Pitman & Vidovich, 2013, p. 501).

Therefore, what “objectively” counts as prior learning might differ from one institution to the

other. As Andersson et al. (2013, p. 408) aptly state, “There are always discourses at play that position some knowledge and learning as valuable while excluding other forms of knowledge.”

Recognition of prior learning might be interpreted and enacted primarily for the organisation’s benefit instead of the student’s. Ultimately, RPL can also be seen as a normative threat to the status of a higher education institution. Rejecting RPL—and therefore underlining a certain exclusivity of access for students—reinforces their organisational habitus and higher status within the field of higher education. Recognition of prior learning can therefore be subjected to the organisations’ strategic positionings. This results in a stronger maintenance of boundaries and the exclusion of candidates seeking access with the help of RPL (Cooper & Harris, 2013).

Another reason influencing RPL implementation lies in organisational capacity (Cooper & Harris, 2013). If more study places are available than are in demand, RPL can be a way to fill vacancies. On the contrary, if there are more candidates meeting the formal entry requirements than there are study places, then RPL practices may be negatively impacted. Furthermore, both forms of RPL can have different effects. While RPL that facilitates access can increase the overall number of students (and thus also the fees and possibly the subsidies), dispensations from the study programme may lead to a reduction in organisational income (Castle & Attwood, 2001).

Knowledge domain and pedagogic agency

Research also addressed the question of whether the nature of the knowledge domain has an impact on the feasibility of RPL. Scholars argue that RPL implementation measures are, among others, influenced by “deeper, epistemological constraints” (Cooper & Harris, 2013, p. 448). Bernstein (2000) distinguishes between vertical and horizontal structures of knowledge. From his point of view, the natural sciences exemplify a hierarchical knowledge

structure. Here, the knowledge structure combines knowledge at lower levels and across an expanding range of phenomena towards more and more general propositions. Given this kind of cumulative vertical structure, natural sciences tend to have strong boundaries and be less permeable to, for example, everyday knowledge. Social and human sciences, however, exemplify horizontal knowledge structures. Their internal structure and knowledge development follow a segmental logic. They have weaker boundaries and are therefore more adapt to RPL.

When it comes to professional education, the demands of the world of work come to the fore. In contrast to traditional professions such as medicine, architecture, or engineering, newer professions such as tourism, business studies, and information sciences are characterised by weaker professional identities, less clear foundational disciplines, and greater proximity to application (Muller, 2009), which, ultimately, can facilitate RPL. Gamble (2009) further argues that professional curricula are based on two forms of knowledge: conceptual knowledge and empirical everyday knowledge (experience or practice). Curricula display different combinations of these two forms, which, in turn, are related to different epistemological perspectives on the relationship between knowledge and practice.

Although the kind of knowledge structure may affect the feasibility of RPL, it does not determine the actual implementation practices of RPL because educational content needs to be transformed into curricula and translated into specific pedagogic concepts. Therefore, just as important is the exercise of the pedagogic agency of the responsible persons (Cooper & Harris, 2013; Cooper et al., 2017), which means they can interpret the framework conditions in a creative way and act accordingly. For example, since the curriculum is not entirely determined by the knowledge structure, both during the curriculum's development and in designing pedagogic interventions for the classroom, the content to be taught is

recontextualised. Bernstein (2000, p. 30) argues that these processes open up a space he calls the “discursive gap.” Here, curriculum designers exercise pedagogic agency, which is influenced by “the curriculum developer’s ideas around the purpose of education, his/her notions of an ideal learner and assumptions of how learning best takes place.” (Cooper & Harris, 2013, p. 453). Regulations on RPL, too, can be interpreted in a creative way, which might result in different RPL practices.

Pedagogic concepts influence pedagogic agency. If the responsible persons are convinced that a cohort model of teaching and learning is beneficial for learning success, “so they have to take all of the coursework together - and there is huge value in the classroom setting and the interchange” (Harris & Wihak, 2017, p. 706), this negatively affects the feasibility of RPL as some students may not be dispensed from certain study contents, precisely because they have extensive learning experience.

Research further shows that, even when knowledge conditions are otherwise unfavourable, there are niches that are accessible to RPL (Harris & Wihak, 2017). Pedagogic content can be interpreted more or less openly for RPL. It follows that “it matters *who* is in charge of evaluating and recognizing prior learning” (Maurer, 2019, p. 667). Therefore, the responsible people’s individual attitudes towards RPL also influence their pedagogic agency. If they are committed to RPL, they can play an important role in their organisations by designing curricula and pedagogical interventions that support RPL. But the opposite can also be true: “academics and managers opposed to RPL on epistemological or pedagogical grounds may act as powerful gatekeepers in relation to access by those whose knowledge bases are primarily experiential and/or work-based” (Cooper & Harris, 2013, p. 461). Due to their individual attitudes, these gatekeepers may establish significant barriers to RPL practice in their organisations (Cooper et al., 2017).

Professional education institutions and RPL in Switzerland

Professional education institutions

Since we are interested in RPL practices in professional study programmes, we focus on professional education institutions in Switzerland. Originally integrated into the field of continuing vocational education, these organisations were newly positioned as higher education institutions at the tertiary level due to a revision of the Vocational and Professional Education and Training Act in 2002 (Kuhn, 2016; Suter et al., 2020). One specific feature is that these higher education institutions do not require a baccalaureate for admission, unlike universities. Their professional study programmes are primarily intended as further studies for people holding a vocational certificate. Today, study programmes are available for around 450 different professions, such as nursing, business management, social education, mechanical engineering, business processes, and hospitality management (State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation, 2019). There are a total of 172 professional education institutions in Switzerland, which are publicly or privately funded. Professional study programmes usually require a certain amount of professional experience and can be attended full- or part-time. In total, two thirds of the study programmes are offered on a part-time basis (B.S.S, 2021).

The professional education institutions are an important tertiary education pathway, especially for people with a vocational qualification at the upper-secondary level. Since Switzerland has a pronounced dual vocational education and training system with more than 60% of young people entering vocational education and training after obligatory schooling, the professional study programmes are in high demand. Since 2010, there has been a 33% increase in the number of obtained degrees (B.S.S, 2021). Furthermore, they are primarily aimed at young professionals who wish to develop their careers. In 2019, the professional

education institutions awarded a total of 9,700 diplomas (BFS, 2020), which is more than one tenth of the qualifications at the entire tertiary level in Switzerland.

Since studies at professional education institutions are usually only taken after a few years of work experience, the average age of students is higher when compared to those at universities (BFS, 2019). This indicates that a significant proportion of adult learners already enter the organisations with acquired competences that are likely to be relevant for RPL procedures.

National requirements regarding RPL

In Switzerland, the Federal Act on Vocational and Professional Education and Training stipulates that experience or skills gained outside of the usual formal education and training pathways shall also be recognised, where appropriate (Fedlex, 2022). Professional study programmes come under 42 national framework curricula, and various actors are involved in governing the professional education institutions. For each profession, the respective professional organisation, together with the professional education institutions, defines the qualification requirements, such as the professional profile, the educational content, and its duration as well as the coordination of the school-based and practical components. The national public administration approves these framework curricula. Unlike the universities, professional education institutions are not accredited as organisations since only the individual study programmes are recognised. Therefore, they must adhere to the specifications of the respective framework curricula. Furthermore, it is mandatory that these framework curricula are reviewed every seven years and adapted to the new realities of the labour market, if necessary (B.S.S, 2021).

While possible forms and the basic process of RPL for the initial vocational training sector are described at the Swiss national level and are well-established (Maurer, 2019, 2021, 2022; Salini & Salzmann, 2020; Staatssekretariat für Bildung, Forschung und Innovation,

2018), they are less defined at the tertiary level. Although there are specifications in the national framework curricula, they leave the individual organisations much room to manoeuvre. In conclusion, professional education institutions have a great deal of leeway in implementing RPL.

Research design

Since there has been little research regarding RPL practices in professional education institutions, we explore our research question by using qualitative comparative case studies (Palmberger & Gingrich, 2014; Patton, 2015). Case study research aims to conduct in-depth analysis and focusses on understanding processes from the participants' perspectives (Harrison et al., 2017). Qualitative comparison is, therefore, based on a small number of purposefully selected cases (Palmberger & Gingrich, 2014).

We opted for a comparative case study design based on a maximum variation sample (Patton, 2015), regarding RPL practices within the same professional field. This sampling strategy makes it possible to identify the diversity in the research topic. By comparing the implementation of RPL in the same professional study programmes, we hold constant, on the one hand, the knowledge domain and, on the other hand, the factors of influence on the organisational environment that are identified in the state of research, such as the regulation of national policy and professional bodies, the nature of the labour market, and labour market demand. This allows us to focus specifically on organisational policy and the pedagogic agency of the organisational gatekeepers.

To select the individual professional education institutions for our maximum variation sampling, we proceeded as follows. First, we identified the largest study programmes per subject area (BFS, 2018), which were business processes, hospitality management, business administration, nursing, and social education. Since we assumed, from the presented state of research showing that individual organisations have different RPL practices, we wanted to

examine two school-internal implementations per each study programme. To reflect a wide range of organisational conditions, the selection of individual organisations was further guided by a high degree of heterogeneity in terms of language region, size, and funding mode. In total, we collected data for ten professional education institutions, each two of them offering one of the five study programmes. Among these, we finally selected those that showed comparatively large differences regarding their RPL practice and justification: hospitality management and social education.

Typically, case studies use various data sources (Harrison et al., 2017) (see overview of our data sources in table 1). First, we conducted document analysis of the national framework curricula in order to identify the national requirements, which was followed by document analysis of the websites and RPL documents of the selected organisations to analyse the respective codified organisational policies. Finally, we performed semi-structured expert interviews (Bogner et al., 2009) with school principals and study programme leaders to identify organisational RPL practices and the individual attitudes and pedagogical concepts of the gatekeepers, who justified their practices. The interview guideline included the following topics: RPL practices within the organisation, motives for RPL, and developments, innovations, and challenges in this field. The interviews lasted between 42 and 113 minutes.

Table 1. Data collection

Professional study programme	Data 1 Organisational environment; document analysis	Cases	Data 2 Codified organisational rules; document analysis	Data 3 RPL practices and justification; expert interviews
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Hospitality management	National framework curricula	Organisation 1	Internal regulations	Interview (42') with school principal
		Organisation 2	Internal regulations	Interview (59') with school principal and study programme leader
Social education	National framework curricula	Organisation 1	Internal regulations	Interview (113') with study programme leader
		Organisation 2	Internal regulations	Interview (52') with school principal and study programme leader

The audio recordings were fully transcribed and thematic coding was performed with the help of NVivo software. Regarding analysis, we coded along the identified sensitising concepts (Kelle & Kluge, 2010), according to the extant literature. However, we were also attentive to further categories that emerged from the data (Roulston, 2014).

In the following, we first discuss the results of the two cases that offer hospitality management. Then, we present the results of the two cases offering social education study programmes. Finally, we will compare the results across the cases and draw conclusions.

Hospitality management

The national framework curricula on hospitality management (Trägerschaft RPL HF Hotellerie und Gastronomie, 2011) stipulates that hospitality managers independently run businesses in the hotel and catering industry. As management staff, they have in-depth

knowledge of the hotel business, catering, business administration, and business management.

The framework curriculum specifies topics in business administration, accommodation, and gastronomy. Other general competences taught are a special sensitivity to intercultural and gender-specific issues, sustainable use of resources, responsibility for the safety and health of guests and employees, language skills, and basic knowledge of the tourism industry. The framework curriculum further states that supervised internships comprise at least 20% of the study programme and a maximum of 45% of the learning hours.

The nationally defined entry requirements are very openly formulated. The prerequisite is an upper secondary certificate (vocational education and training or baccalaureate), and foreign-language students must provide proof of proficiency in the language of instruction before entering the school. The framework curriculum further stipulates that the individual schools decide how relevant vocational education, foreign qualifications, and competences acquired elsewhere are credited.

In the following, we compare the RPL practices between two professional education institutions that offer the study programme for hospitality management. The following table provides an overview of the two cases.

Table 2. Comparison of two professional education institutions offering the study programme for “hospitality management”

Cases	Internal regulations	RPL practices	Justifications
Organisation 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published • Many dispensation options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL for admission: rare 	Focus on the individuum: a certificate proves that competences are already

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL for dispensation: frequent 	acquired, students should not waste their time
Organisation 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Published • Fewer dispensation options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL for admission: rare • RPL for dispensation: rare 	Focus on the group: Cohort teaching model, interprofessional peer learning; despite having a certificate, students should cultivate their competences further on

RPL regulations and practices

Both cases differ in terms of their RPL regulations and practices. While organisation 1 actively welcomes RPL, organisation 2 does not promote RPL. These differences are primarily evident in the options for dispensation from individual study contents, since the national admission requirements are formulated so broadly that there are hardly any RPLs at both cases during admission.

These differences are already visible at the level of the internal RPL rules.

Organisation 1 provides numerous possibilities for dispensation: depending on the content of vocational education and training, dispensations are possible from whole semesters and internships as well as from language and IT classes proven by continuous education certificates. In contrast, organisation 2 is much more reserved. Here, the study regulations indicate clearly reduced options for dispensations (such as from language classes and participation in accounting courses).

The following example illustrates the different RPL practices of the two cases. The interviewees both refer to the example of a student who has completed the vocational training to be a cook. In organisation 1, students can indicate at the time of enrolment whether they have learned an occupation that entitles them to shorten their studies. A cook is then exempted from the semester of kitchen production and the cooking internship, which shortens the study time and reduces the tuition fees. In organisation 2, though, even if someone is already a cook, they still have to attend class. Although they do not need to complete the cooking internship, they must attend another internship that does not lead to a reduction in the overall study time or tuition fees.

Another example, which illustrates the differences in the RPL practices, is the crediting of existing language certificates. While in organisation 1, language certificates are asked for at enrolment and automatically lead to a dispensation from the respective language course, they are not proactively recognised in organisation 2. In organization 2, they do not ask the future students during the admission process if they already have a language certificate. Students must contact the English teacher themselves and ask for dispensation.

Justifications

The underlying individual attitudes of the interviewed gatekeepers indicate why those differences exist. The person in charge in organisation 1, with comparatively more dispensation options, has an individual view. She recalls as follows:

Well, ever since I remember, it's been like saying a cook certainly doesn't need to go into the kitchen again. It's like out of logic... so it would be kind of wasted time.

She is convinced that a certificate proves that a student has already acquired the necessary competences in the field and should better devote themselves to other subjects. She justifies this RPL procedure as follows:

If someone can already do something or has already learned something, why do they have to do it again? I think the students can really use this time for other things and devote themselves to other shortcomings.

In contrast, those responsible in organisation 2 have different opinions. Their pedagogical concept focuses on a cohort teaching model with interprofessional peer learning. They are convinced that a student who has already acquired extensive competences in one area needs to be present in the class in order to lead the other students. Such a student is assigned the informal role of assistant teacher. The director of organisation 2 argues:

If somebody has a vocational training certificate as a cook, we try to make him do the practical exercises here, too. Because the discourse is clear. Who has a certificate as a cook, when he is in the kitchen, he pulls the other students. Those who don't know the difference between a potato and a carrot, they come from high school. Similar, who has done accounting in business school, when he is in accounting class, he is the one who helps, who stimulates the others.

With regards to the differences in recognising language certificates, the interviewees in organisation 2 are convinced that students should continue to attend classes despite having a certificate, as they should cultivate their competences. The following justification is provided for the non-active dispensation from language courses:

Because one of the things we insist on, even if you can be exempted, maintaining a language could still be an important thing for your training, so we don't insist on asking for dispensations.

Comparison

Although the two cases offer the same professional study programmes for hospitality management, which are based on the same national framework curriculum and award the same degree, different organisational RPL practices can be identified. While organisation 1 actively promotes RPL and offers numerous dispensation opportunities, organisation 2 is

comparatively reserved. The comparison between the two schools points to the different individual attitudes of the responsible persons.

Here, gatekeepers with two different pedagogical concepts oppose each other. On the one hand, we identified a conviction that places the individual with his or her existing competences at the centre. They should not waste time in their educational career learning or repeating what they already know. In this perspective, existing certificates are assigned a high value and are seen as proof that students already possess the required competences.

In contrast, we identified a pedagogical concept that does not focus on the individual, but instead focuses on the group. Here, a high value is ascribed to joint interprofessional learning. Thus, in particular, students who already have proven competences in the offered subjects should participate in classes so that the others can learn from them. Existing certificates (e.g., in language) are also valued differently. They are not seen as proving that competences have been definitively acquired. Rather, students should continue to maintain and deepen existing competences by participating in classes.

While the attitude that places the individual at the centre and ascribes a high value to existing certificates is favourable for RPL, the focus on peer learning and the attitude that existing certificates do not prove that competences have been acquired definitively is a hindrance.

Social education

Social educators work in social institutions (such as shelters, penal institutions, school social education, and youth work) (berufsberatung.ch, 2022; SPAS & Savoirsocial, 2015). They help people in difficult life situations to cope with and organise their everyday lives and leisure time. They hold discussions with relatives and institutions and manage social organisations.

Competences are taught in the study programme, such as joint planning and development of socio-educational work, accompaniment and support in everyday and transitional situations, development of one’s own professional identity, process analysis and documentation, work in a professional environment, and participation in developing the organisation. The study programme can be attended full-time with internships or part-time with a minimum of 50% employment in the professional field.

The entry requirements are vocational education and training, baccalaureate, or an equivalent qualification. Further, practical experience in the field of social education is needed. In addition, all prospective students must pass an aptitude test at the professional education institution, assessing their suitability for the profession, motivation, and probability of passing the study programme. Furthermore, students must prove that they do not have a criminal record that is incompatible with the chosen profession.

The framework curriculum further stipulates that the individual organisations are entitled to recognise qualifications and competences that were already acquired, without giving more precise details. In the following, we compare RPL between two professional education institutions that offer the study programme on social education. The following table provides an overview.

Table 3. Comparison of two professional education institutions offering a study programme on “social education”

Cases	Internal regulations	RPL practices	Justifications
Organisation 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partially published 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RPL for admission: frequent 	Understanding for people attempting a new start; focusing on personality development; students

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many dispensation options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL for dispensation: frequent 	should not feel demotivated and that they are wasting time if they have to re-learn something that they already know
Organisation 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not published • Fewer dispensation options 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPL for admission: rare • RPL for dispensation: rare 	Delegation of responsibility to the national framework curriculum and official guidelines

RPL regulations and practices

Again, both cases have different RPL regulations. In organisation 1, most RPL rules are published on the webpage and thus accessible to prospective students. During the registration process, students can apply for the relevant exemptions. Contrarily, in organisation 2, RPL options are not publicly available. The responsible persons state, however, that candidates are informed during the application procedure.

The RPL practices of the two cases differ significantly. While organisation 1 frequently carries out RPL for both admissions and dispensations, this is comparatively rare at organisation 2. The following example regarding admission of people holding foreign diplomas illustrates these differences. According to the framework curriculum, foreign diplomas can be equivalent qualifications to a Swiss vocational education and training certificate or baccalaureate, but are not specified in more detail. In organisation 1, the person in charge decides whether to admit these persons. He usually accepts foreign secondary

school diplomas and university visits for admission, as well as from refugees or asylum seekers who have been provisionally admitted to Switzerland:

We are generous. I know my way around quite well, I myself graduated in the USA and speak a relatively large number of foreign languages....I can judge foreign diplomas quite well. We just do that based on the diploma. We don't make a big deal out of it,...but simply say, yes, it's relatively clear that this person has already studied abroad. This is often the case with refugees or asylum seekers who are temporarily admitted to Switzerland. Then the assessment is usually positive, simply from my point of view.

He justifies his broad admission policy with the mandatory two-and-a-half-hour aptitude test conducted at his organisation which, in his eyes, decides whether someone is really suited for the profession or not. As he elaborates:

So, we are really generous in admission because we have a selective aptitude test. For us, our own test is similar in value to a baccalaureate. We do a good job of checking what level of performance people bring with them.

The practice is different at organisation 2, although it also conducts a compulsory aptitude test. Here, the people in charge explain that admission with foreign diplomas is very rare:

All those foreign diplomas! That's a headache we're facing. We don't really have an answer for the moment. These equivalences! If I hear a baccalaureate has been done in Morocco in Arabic, I don't know what it's worth. We are regularly confronted with this kind of situation. We don't know if the foreign qualifications allow us to admit someone to our study programme.

They always contact the Federal Office, who is responsible for recognising foreign qualifications at the national level. However, it is often the case that they cannot clarify the value of the foreign diplomas. If this is the case, the organisation contacts the candidates and informs them that they must obtain proof of equivalence themselves in order to secure admission.

Another example illustrates the different practices with regards to dispensations. As the national framework curriculum stipulates, only persons with a specific vocational education in the social field can attend the study programme shortened by 1 year. In contrast to organisation 2, organisation 1 also admits persons with a different vocational qualification and has developed a detailed point system that credits formal, non-formal, and informal learning experiences. If at least 23 out of 30 points are achieved, people with other vocational qualifications can also attend the shortened study programme. Credit is given for many different types of learning experiences indicated in the curriculum vitae, such as other vocational qualifications in the educational, social, or health fields; paid employment; management tasks; involvement in research projects; further training; parenting tasks; voluntary work; housekeeping; involvement in camps or projects with collective accommodation; experience in the social field, and life experience and coping.

Justifications

The gatekeepers of the two cases differ in their individual attitudes. The person responsible for RPL at organisation 1 refers to his professional background:

I myself am a social worker, not a social educator, and as a social worker I have a somewhat softer heart. Basically, I have full understanding for people who are trying a new start. I myself did an internship in the counselling centre for people released from prison ages ago.

According to his statements, he was in charge of defining the extensive RPL practices in his organisation. The most important thing for him is to provide the labour market with qualified personnel in the easiest way possible, so that students do not have to re-learn something that they already know. For him, personality development during study is central. This should receive focus so that future professionals are secure when they are challenged in difficult

situations in professional practice. Other subjects should be credited so that the students reach their goal faster:

Because I know that it is really tiring for the motivation of the people concerned to complete a four-year study programme and during half of the time, they would say, 'I already know that, and it is dead time for me.'

In contrast, when asked why they do not offer more crediting options, those responsible at organisation 2 delegate their responsibility to the national framework curriculum and refer to its specifications:

There is not much reference to the recognition of prior learning. I mean, it is not very valued from the point of view of the framework curriculum. And we are still obliged to follow the curriculum.

Comparison

This comparison also shows clear differences. While organisation 1 applies RPL widely regarding access to the study program as well as dispensations from it, the options in organisation 2 are very limited. These differences are clearly evident in admitting persons with foreign diplomas. The gatekeeper in organisation 1 decides for himself, and as a former social worker, he shows great understanding for people who are trying to make a new start. He generously admits people with foreign diplomas and justifies this with the school's own aptitude test, which is supposed to reliably determine whether someone is actually suited for the profession or not. A high value is attributed to this test and the person in charge even compares it to a baccalaureate. In addition, the person in charge has also developed a sophisticated point system that allows him to give credit for other formal qualifications, non-formal and informal learning experiences, and to grant dispensations on this basis.

Organisation 2 is much more restrictive here. For candidates with foreign diplomas, the responsible national office is always consulted first. If no decision can be made here

regarding equivalence, the candidates must take care of the corresponding proof themselves. Only then are they admitted to take the aptitude test. The gatekeepers' approach is characterised by a behaviour that is strongly oriented towards official guidelines.

These two examples clearly show the differences in the way that pedagogic agency is practised. While the person in charge at organisation 1 enlarges his scope of action regarding RPL, the persons in charge at organisation 2 point to the unspecified framework curriculum as a justification for why RPL is hardly ever carried out. The gatekeepers' personal attitudes can, therefore, strongly influence RPL practices in their organisations.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper examined the research question of how professional education institutions regulate, practice, and justify RPL. To answer our research question, we conducted qualitative comparative case studies based on a maximum variation sampling and compared RPL practices of professional education institutions that offer study programmes for hospitality management and social education. This research strategy allowed us to hold the organisational environment constant (such as the regulation of the national policy and professional bodies, the nature of the labour market, and labour market demand) as well as the knowledge structure, and enabled us to focus specifically on organisational regulations, practices, and justifications of RPL.

Our results show that organisations that offer the same professional study programmes, train their students for the same professional profile, and cater for the same labour market needs, regulate, practice, and justify RPL very differently. The analysis of our interviews indicates that organisational gatekeepers—the people who are responsible for decision-making with regards to RPL during admission and dispensation—conduct their pedagogic agency differently, resulting in heterogeneous organisational practices. The gatekeepers interpret the RPL guidelines of the national framework curricula differently.

Their interpretation is influenced by their pedagogical concepts (purpose of education, the notion of the ideal professional, and assumptions of how learning best takes place) and individual attitudes towards RPL. Both elements serve to justify their heterogeneous practices.

Our analysis further shows that there are good reasons both for and against RPL. Conducive to RPL is the attitude that a certificate signifies that a person has the verified competences or that students should not waste time learning something they already know. Obstacles to RPL are, for instance, pedagogical concepts in which students are supposed to learn interprofessionally from the experience and expertise of other students or the conviction that students should continue to cultivate certain competencies despite a proven track record. Both lines of argumentation for or against RPL are understandable and point to the fact that RPL is also a pedagogical practice based on a specific worldview and favours certain pedagogic attitudes.

In the end, heterogeneous RPL practices lead to unequal treatment of students with non-linear educational pathways. They can be rejected by one professional education institution but admitted to another, even though both organisations train for the same professional qualification. Potential students cannot always be aware of this heterogeneity, as, in the cases we studied, not all RPL regulations were publicly available. However, even if RPL regulations are published, students do not necessarily know what practice the school follows, since the execution of the regulations is in the hands of gatekeepers who are very diverse in their attitudes. Our study's findings call for future research on the central role of organisational gatekeepers and their pedagogic agency.

Furthermore, what are possible implications for practice? On the one hand, it seems important to create transparency about the organisational RPL practices towards potential students so that they can make an informed study choice. On the other hand, exchanges

between organisational gatekeepers in similar organisations with different practices can initiate reflection processes and shared learning so that existing RPL practices can be questioned.

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