

Case Study: Comparing the Concept of RPL with Japan's Initiatives

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Abstract

As lifelong learning gains importance in a rapidly changing society, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has emerged as a key framework for validating competencies acquired through formal, non-formal, and informal learning. International organizations such as UNESCO and the European Union (EU) have issued guidelines to support its implementation, and RPL is actively promoted in ASEAN countries. However, Japan has shown limited interest in adopting the international RPL framework, largely due to its unique employment practices. Instead, the Japanese government has introduced several initiatives that share conceptual similarities with RPL. As employment mobility increases and industrial structures evolve, the visibility and validation of prior learning are becoming more critical for both individuals and employers. Against this backdrop, this paper examines Japan's existing and emerging approaches to skill recognition, analyzes their conceptual proximity with the international RPL framework, and discusses the challenges and opportunities.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); Japan; Skill Validation; Lifelong Learning; Employment Mobility; Career Development

1. Introduction

In today's rapidly changing world, recognizing individuals' lifelong learning—acquired through both formal education and informal experiences—has become increasingly important. The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) serves as a key mechanism to validate existing knowledge and competencies, thereby facilitating access to career advancement and further educational opportunities.

While many countries, international organizations, and regional bodies, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the EU, have actively promoted RPL systems, Japan has taken a somewhat distinct approach, shaped by its unique employment practices. Traditional Japanese employment systems have placed limited emphasis on formally recognizing employees' skills, which, in turn, has prevented the development of a strong culture of lifelong learning. This, however, is gradually changing, driven by technological advancements and shifts in the labor market. Therefore, the need to make competencies more visible and to promote lifelong learning is becoming increasingly important. This paper examines the current state of RPL in Japan, analyzes the governmental strategies implemented thus far, and explores potential future directions in light of the ongoing transformation of the nation's employment landscape.

2. Definition and role of RPL

According to the ILO (2023), the term “recognition of prior learning” (RPL) should be understood as a process, undertaken by qualified personnel, of identifying, documenting, assessing and certifying a person's competencies, acquired through formal, non-formal or informal learning, based on established qualification standards. RPL is also referred to as “validation of informal and non-formal learning.”

RPL is increasingly seen as a key mechanism for promoting social inclusion, particularly by enhancing the employability of socially disadvantaged groups and immigrants through the formal recognition of experiential learning. At the same time, RPL can foster lifelong learning by broadening access to higher education and helping to bridge the skills gap in societies undergoing rapid transformation.

3. Process of RPL

The internationally agreed concept of the RPL process has four key components: Identification, Documentation, Assessment, and Certification.

Identification refers to recognizing the learning outcomes—such as knowledge, skills, and other competencies—acquired by individuals through non-formal and informal learning. Documentation involves recording individual's learning into a portfolio, which typically includes a CV and work history. Assessment refers to the evaluation of these learning outcomes against specific reference points and/or standards. Finally, certification involves awarding a formal qualification or partial qualification. Throughout this process, National Qualification Frameworks (NQFs) are recommended to be used as frameworks (Cedefop 2023; ILO 2015).

4. Case Study: Comparison Between Japanese Practices and the Concept of RPL

This case study examines how Japan's employment and skill development practices align with the internationally recognized RPL framework. Rather than assuming a direct alignment, the analysis explores points of convergence and divergence. The discussion is structured into two parts. The first examines employment practices and skill recognition mechanisms in Japan prior to 2000, while the second focuses on shifts in the employment landscape since 2000 and the corresponding policy responses. Through this comparative lens, the study seeks to uncover structural and cultural factors that have shaped Japan's approach to skill recognition, explore the similarities and differences in relation to RPL principles, and draw insights for the potential future integration of RPL into national workforce development strategies.

4.1 Employment Practices in Japan Before 2000 and Initiatives by the Government and Private Sector

In Japan, RPL has not traditionally been a central element of the national policy. Several structural and cultural factors contribute to this situation.

A key factor is the high enrollment and completion rates in upper secondary education. For instance, as of 2020, Japan's high enrollment rate stood at 98.8%, with a dropout rate of only 1.1% (MEXT 2021, 2023). Since high school completion is the primary prerequisite for entering higher education, and the vast majority meet this criterion, the demand for alternative educational pathways has remained limited.

Another factor is Japan's traditional employment practices, which have historically diminished the need for formal RPL systems. These practices include regular hiring of new graduates, long-term employment, and seniority-based promotion and wage structures.

Regular hiring of new graduates refers to the widespread practice where large corporations recruit university students during their final year, with employment commencing immediately after graduation.

Long-term employment denotes the norm where employees, once hired, typically remain with the same organization until reaching the mandatory retirement age.

The **seniority-based promotion and wage system** is one in which wages rise with employees' age and length of service, rather than on demonstrated competencies or qualifications.

Under these norms, job roles are often loosely defined, granting employers considerable discretion over work assignments, locations, and schedules. Consequently, specific skills and formal qualifications have played a minor role in recruitment or promotion decisions. Instead, companies assumed primary responsibility for employee training. On-the-job

training (OJT) is widely practiced, and many firms also invest in off-the-job training (Off-JT). Some companies have even established in-house training schools to cultivate workforce capabilities.

However, efforts to visualize and formalize skills have been promoted in certain sectors, particularly in construction and manufacturing. The **National Trade Skill Test**, established in 1959, serves as a national certification system that assesses and certifies workers' competencies across 133 occupational categories.

In addition, some enterprises have developed their own in-house qualification systems to facilitate the acquisition of company-specific practical skills. These initiatives have received government support through the **System to Certify In-house Trade Skills Tests**, under which the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare certifies examinations conducted by employers or employer organizations that meet designated criteria.

However, these mechanisms have shown limited success in facilitating labor market mobility or aligning workers' competencies to job requirements. Rather, they have functioned mainly as internal tools for promotion and productivity enhancement within specific industries and enterprises.

4.2 Changes in the Employment Environment since 2000 and Government Initiatives

Since the early 2000s, Japan's employment landscape has undergone notable transformations, driven by rapid shifts in industrial structure and labor law reforms, which

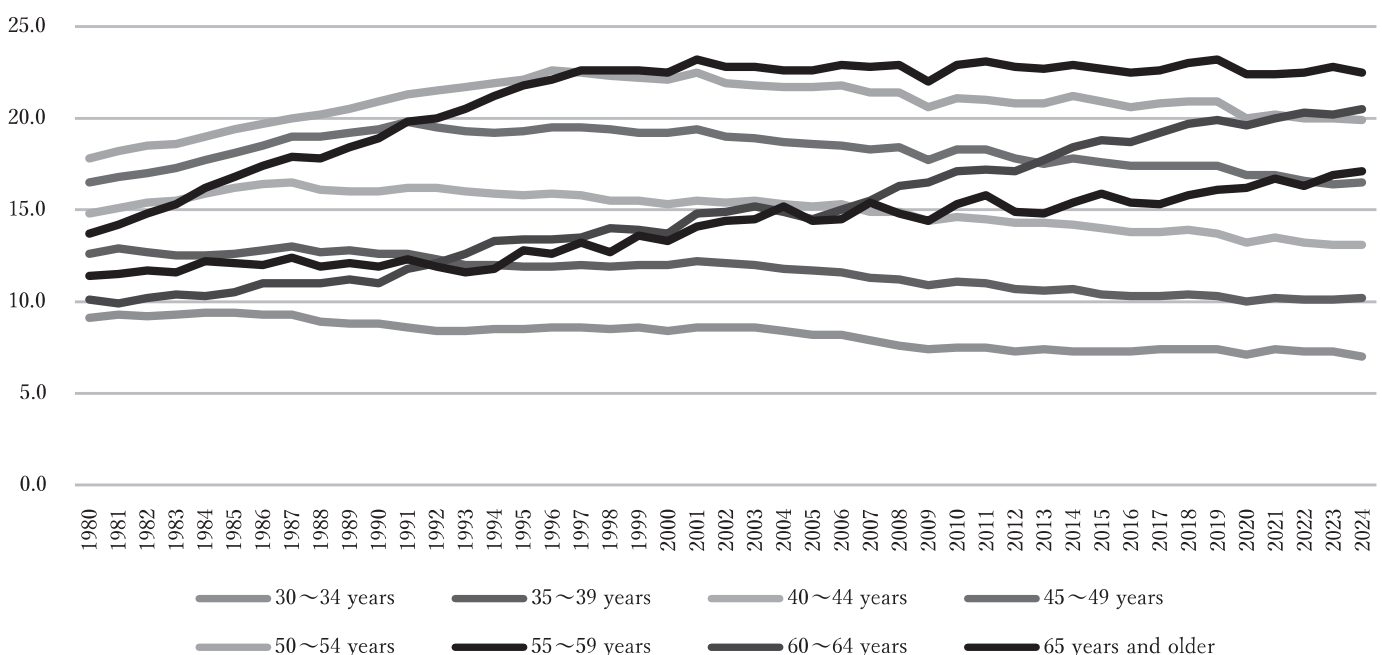


Figure1: The average years of continuous employment by age group (male)

Adapted from Graphical Overview of Long-Term Labour Statistics, by Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2024, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/wp/hakusyo/roudou/24/backdata/01-02-05.html>

have contributed to greater labor market mobility. As Figure 1 illustrates, average job tenure has notably declined, particularly among younger male workers.

At the same time, as Figure 2 shows, the proportion of non-regular workers—such as part-time and temporary employees—has steadily increased.

In this context, individuals' ability to effectively articulate and demonstrate skills and competencies has become increasingly critical. The rise of non-regular employment has also underscored the need to establish mechanisms that support career development and ensure fair and transparent assessment of workers' skills. This approach helps employers make informed decisions about recruitment and promotion.

In response to these challenges, the Japanese government has introduced a range of policy measures to enhance skill visibility and recognition. While a comprehensive review of all such initiatives is beyond the scope of this discussion, the three measures are particularly noteworthy.

1) Vocational Ability Evaluation Standards

These standards provide a structured framework for categorizing and systematizing 'knowledge,' 'techniques and skills,' and 'job performance' across four proficiency levels. They are designed to support corporate practices in recruitment, promotion, and human resource development and are also utilized in career counseling and the design of assessment systems. The standards encompass a broad spectrum of occupational fields, including 56 industries and 9 clerical roles such as accounting and human resources.

2) Job Card System

The Job Card System aims to enhance the visibility of individual competencies by enabling job seekers and workers to document their skills, qualifications, educational background, work experience, and other relevant competencies. The system facilitates more efficient job matching through API integration with private recruitment agencies. Although career



Figure2 : Number of workers by employment type (Ten thousand)

Adapted from White Paper on the Labour Economy 2023 (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2023).
<https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/wp/hakusyo/roudou/24/backdata/01-02-05.html>

counseling is recommended when creating a job card, it is not mandatory.

3) Credit Recognition for Practical Skills Acquired through Work Experience

This initiative allows universities offering vocational programs to formally recognize practical skills acquired through prior work experience. By exempting individuals from coursework that covers competencies already acquired, the system promotes both economic and time efficiency in educational attainment. While some rules have been established regarding what information should be used to recognize credits, the establishment of specific standards is left to each university.

5. Comparison with the Concept of RPL

From a comparative perspective, Japan's recent initiatives demonstrate partial alignment with key elements of the internationally recognized RPL framework. Specifically, the Credit Recognition System for practical skills acquired through work experience in university vocational programs most closely reflects RPL's core principles of recognizing and accrediting experiential learning.

Moreover, all three contemporary measures—the Vocational Ability Evaluation Standards, the Job Card System, and the Credit Recognition System—share a common objective, i.e., to standardize and make visible the competencies individuals have developed through diverse learning experiences. These efforts contribute to career development and facilitate more effective alignment between workers' skills and employment opportunities.

However, several notable differences remain. Japan lacks a comprehensive, integrated system for validating a broad spectrum of skills and competencies through flexible and inclusive methods. While the Vocational Ability Evaluation Standards offer a structured framework, there is no national mechanism for assessing job seekers' skills against these standards. Furthermore, the Job Card System does not require the involvement of qualified personnel in its preparation, and there is no provision for awarding formal qualifications based solely on prior learning. Finally, none of these initiatives is fully incorporated into Japan's newly developed National Qualifications Framework, limiting their potential for systemic coherence and international comparability.

6. Discussion

Drawing on the preceding analysis, three key implications emerge for Japan's policy development.

First, while the National Trade Skill Test has long played a central role in certifying occupational skills, increasing labor market mobility underscores the need for third-party

mechanisms to recognize a broader, more diverse range of competencies acquired through formal, non-formal, and informal learning. Such mechanisms would contribute to more effective career development and enable smoother transitions within and across sectors.

Second, Japan must consider integrating existing skill recognition mechanisms into the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). In European contexts, NQFs have shown promising results in translating individual competencies into formal qualifications, thereby enhancing transparency and comparability across education and employment systems. Although Japan has recently established its own NQF, its societal acceptance and operational implementation remain limited. Particularly in sectors with high demand for foreign labor, it is essential to integrate existing instruments—such as the National Trade Skill Test and Vocational Ability Evaluation Standards—into the NQF. Doing so would strengthen the coherence of Japan’s qualifications system and better align it with international standards.

Third, in spite of the broader scope of this issue, it is important to harmonize and reorganize labor and educational strategies. As discussed above, numerous policies have been introduced in response to specific needs at different time points. However, this fragmented approach has created a complex, difficult-to-navigate landscape. The NQF can serve as a basis for Japan to establish a system that makes competencies visible—not only those acquired through formal education, but also through training, work experience, and other forms of non-formal and informal learning. Such a system would help streamline labor and educational strategies, enabling a more efficient and coherent approach to skill recognition while promoting lifelong learning and fostering social inclusion.

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