



The holistic perspective of Recognition, Validation and Accreditation

RVA as a global term for the assessment of prior learning outcomes

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RVA as an umbrella term

The *Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA)* of skills and competences is key for the establishment and facilitation of flexible pathways between formal and non-formal educational settings, as well as between education, training and work. RVA, by building on someone's already acquired competences and skills, gives individuals an incentive to continue to learn, empowers them and enables them to become more active in the labour market and in society in general. RVA can create a more levelled playing field in education and training for all, and has, for instance, proven to be key to enabling all its citizens in continuing and/or strengthening their education and learning pathways as well as their career development.

Across the globe, there is an enormous variety of terms available for utilising personal prior learning outcomes. It depends on the national learning culture, the main objectives and the division of responsibilities which meaning is given to the term for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) in a country or world region. Logically, RVA may take many forms, procedures and applications. This is logical because RVA can be used within any given context, a wide range of objectives, from personal certification to an integrated HRD approach, from individual career training to inclusion of target groups, from sectoral training policy to rock-solid civil effect, etc.

In order to see the wood for the trees, this overview of national terminology aims at creating some clarity in the potential application of RVA across the globe in a wide variety of national and regional contexts.

Defining RVA

RVA

UNESCO uses the acronym 'RVA' to refer to the **Recognition, Validation and Accreditation** of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning as a key lever for making lifelong learning a reality.² It makes visible and values the amount of invisible knowledge, skills and competences that individuals have obtained through various means and in different phases of their lives. Increased transparency of these learning outcomes may significantly improve individuals' self-esteem and well-being, motivate them to further learning and strengthen their labour market position. RVA may help to integrate broader sections of the population into the learning process, build inclusive societies, and make better use of existing human resources.

Recognition, Validation and Accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning outcomes is defined as 'a practice that makes visible and values the full range of competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that individuals have obtained in various contexts, and through various means in different phases of their lives'.³

The terms 'recognition, validation and accreditation' are used because they underpin the linkage of non-formal and informal learning to formal learning as well as the transfer of (competences) knowledge, skills and competences derived from work, family and leisure activities to mainstream education systems:

- **Recognition** is a process of granting official status to learning outcomes and/or competences, which can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society.
- **Validation** is the confirmation by an approved body that learning outcomes or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies.
- **Accreditation** is a process by which an approved body, on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes and/or competences according to different purposes and methods, award qualifications (certificates, diploma or titles), or grant equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issue documents such as

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In his thesis he examined the impact of RVA on the shifting learning paradigm from top-down, education-steered learning to bottom-up steered, personalised learning.

2 UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) (2012). *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*. Hamburg, UIL.

3 Ibidem.

portfolios of competences and badges or micro-credentials. In some cases, the term accreditation applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a programme as a whole.

Interpreting RVA

The diversity in national terms for RVA is centred around one or more of the three terms that are incorporated in UNESCO's holistic interpretation of RVA:

*RVA's
triple
meaning*

- **Recognition** focuses primarily on the identification and recognition of the competences that someone might have obtained in any period in his/her life and in any kind of learning environment. In this context the portfolio consists of all personal learning experiences. Only after collecting all the relevant, personal competences together with their proof, a choice is made by the person. In this way the personal ambitions are better articulated and depending on the personal goal a specific choice for the kind of accreditation or validation is made. Recognition, therefore is more personal steered and might involve not only summative but also formative goals.
- **Validation** goes a step further than accreditation and recognition since it means a validation (or valuation) of prior learning measured against any learning objective and not just formalized standards; it can cover for instance also a validation for the sole aim of self-validation or justification of an activity. Validation therefore is covering both the formalised, top-down orientation of accreditation as well as the bottom-up process of recognition. In this sense it's the most holistic approach to all forms of 'valuing' prior learning outcomes.
- **Accreditation** is favoured by authorities, social partners and schools because this term mainly focuses on the summative effects of recognizing and assessing prior learning. The most important element in accreditation is the assessment of the competences that are collected in a portfolio with the goal of getting exemptions or a diploma. The portfolio is in this context mainly a showcase of only the competences that matter for the standard itself; all the other personal competences are irrelevant. The choice for a specific standard is in practice more steered by the availability of an actual standard than by a free, personal choice. This is because most of the times a school - as the keeper of the standard(s) - tends to look more to the best chance of success when measured against any given standard than to the best match of a standard and personal ambitions. So, in effect, accreditation is mainly steered by qualification standards, which shows that accreditation is strongly steered by schools/education.

*Is RVA
holistic?*

RVA and the holistic approach

RVA is an important – even decisive – enabler in the shifting learning paradigm from the analytical, mass-learning oriented and quality-controlled paradigm to a more holistic, personalised, tailored and quality-assured paradigm.

The holistic character of RVA consists of the learner working both inside and outside the learning system on providing self-constructed or supervised evidence of prior learning outcomes in order to achieve any new, desired learning outcomes.⁴

The learner can choose from different learning pathways, which can also be combined: the classical, school-based learning pathway, the work-based learning approach and the self-directed learning-path. In all routes, validation and learning can be used at different moments and interlinked in the learning process. In short, the holistic process in which 'RVA' is an enabler of lifelong learning, is bottom-up (learner-steered), divergent and focused on creating personal choices in the learning process; the assessment of learning is focused on trust in one's prior (and upcoming) experiences as input for achieving new learning experiences or outcomes. The current, more analytical process however is top-down (system-steered), convergent and focused on making system-friendly choices in the learning process; the analytic assessment is focused on checking the learning outcomes achieved and therewith more focused on control.

*National
terminology*

National terms

Whatever the term used for RVA on a national level, in all contexts RVA as an umbrella-term is key to:

- Utilise lifelong learning as a means to enhance a learning culture for all.
- Create shared ownership of the learning processes.

4 Duvekot, R.C. (2016). *Leren Waarderen. Een studie van EVC en gepersonaliseerd leren. Proefschrift*. Houten, CL3S. [thesis Valuing Learning. A study of VPL and personalised learning] <http://cl3s.com/leren-waarderen-download/>
Duvekot, R.C. & Doorlag, K., Dialogical Validation in Dutch Teacher Training. In: Duvekot, R.C., Karttunen, A., Noack, M. & Van den Brande, L. (2020). *Making Policy Work. Validation of Prior Learning for Education and the Labour Market*. Houten/Gütersloh, EC-VPL/Bertelsmann Stiftung, pp. 269-278.

- Prevent unnecessary learning by learners.
- Target desired learning outcomes.

All in all, RVA puts the learner in her/his own strengths and on a personal development-path, targets effectively 'my desired learning', helps me create a dialogue or trialogue between me and a learning supplier and/or the employer/principal, and shifts the learning process from quality-control to quality-trust.

The table below presents an overview of the diversity in terms used for the meaning given for RVA in a national context. All terms relate to one or more of the interpretations given to UNESCO's RVA-concept. In this sense, RVA functions as a global, generic standard for countries to fill in their own, nationally contextualized standard for recognising, validating and accrediting people's prior, personal learning outcomes achieved in formal, non-formal and informal settings.

National terms for Recognition, Accreditation and Validation of Prior Learning			
Term	Acronym	Focus	Origin
Accreditation of Prior Learning	APL	Accreditation	United Kingdom
Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning	APEL	Accreditation	United Kingdom
Anerkennung von Lernergebnisse	AvL	Accreditation	Germany
Anerkennung von Kompetenzen	AvK	Accreditation	Germany
Erkenning van Verworven Competenties	EVC	Validation	Netherlands, Flanders
Erkenning van Verworven Kwalificaties	EVK	Accreditation	Netherlands, Flanders
Prior Learning Assessment	PLA	Accreditation	United States of America
Prior Learning Assessment & Recognition	PLAR	Validation	Canada
Reconocimiento de Aprendizajes Previos	RAP	Accreditation	Chile (UNAB)
Reconocimiento y Certificación de Aprendizajes Previos para la Prosecución de Estudios	RCA	Accreditation	Chile
Reconocimiento, Evaluación y Acreditación de Competencias	REAC	Accreditation	Spain, Latin America (Spanish speaking)
Recognition of Prior Learning	RPL	Recognition	United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa
Recognition of Prior Learning Outcomes	RPLO	Accreditation	United Kingdom
Recognition, Validation and Accreditation	RVA	[holistic]	UNESCO, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning
Reconhecimento, Validação e Certificação de Competências	RVCC	Recognition, Accreditation	Portugal, Brazil
Validação da Aprendizagem Prévia	VAP	Accreditation	Brazil
Validación de Competencias	VdC	Accreditation	Bolivia
Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience	VAE	Validation	Africa (French speaking countries), France, Switzerland, Wallonia
Validation des Acquis Professionnels	VAP	Validation	France, Wallonia

Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning	VNIL	Validation	Cedefop, European Universities Continuing Education Network (EUCEN)
Validation of Prior Learning	VPL	Validation	universal: https://vplbiennale.org
Valuation of Prior Learning Experiences	VPLE	Validation	universal: https://ec-vpl.nl
Validierung von Lernergebnissen	VvL	Accreditation	Austria

The CL3S Series publish opinions, articles, research, policy-papers, etc. on every imaginable aspect of learning strategies in which the systematics of Recognition, Validation & Accreditation (RVA) plays an empowering role for the people on the planet.

The series is published by the Centre for Lifelong Learning Services (CL3S) (<https://cl3s.nl>). CL3S's mission is creating 'learning opportunities' for all people. Recognising, validating and accrediting one's prior learning plays a primary role in raising 'the voice of the self' for engaging in further (lifelong) learning. Lifelong learning is a decisive instrument for realising and enforcing personal ownership of learning for the sake of stimulating and strengthening learning as a means for employability, inclusion, empowerment, qualification and/or citizenship.