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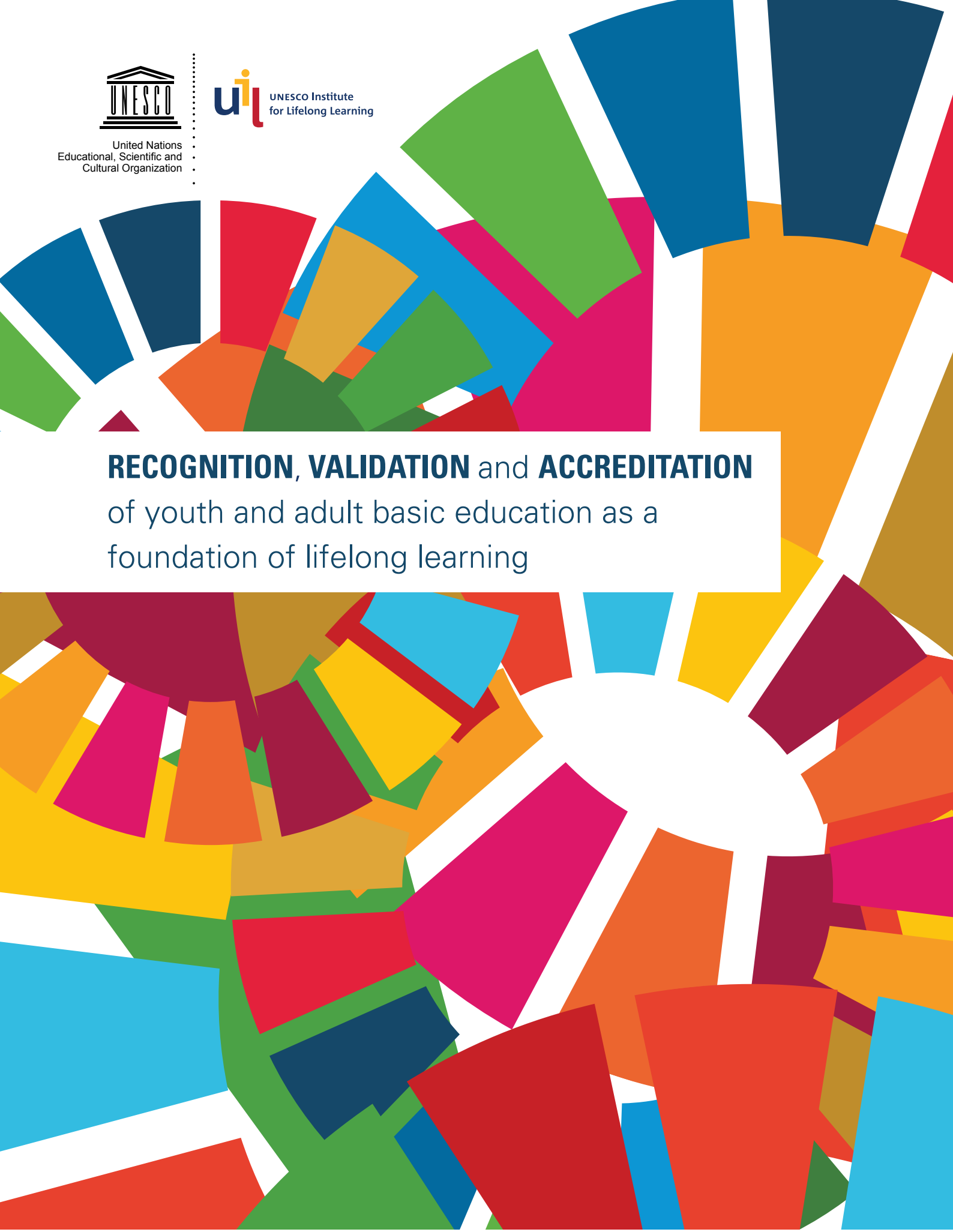
UNESCO Institute
for Lifelong Learning

RECOGNITION, **VALIDATION** and **ACCREDITATION**

of youth and adult basic education as a foundation of lifelong learning



Education 2030

RECOGNITION, **VALIDATION** and **ACCREDITATION** of youth and adult basic education as a foundation of lifelong learning

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The UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL) undertakes research, capacity-building, networking and publication on lifelong learning with a focus on adult and continuing education, literacy and non-formal basic education. Its publications are a valuable resource for education researchers, planners, policy-makers and practitioners.

Design by Christiane Marwecki

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FOREWORD

Basic education is not only a right of individuals; it is essential if societies and economies are to thrive and become sustainable in challenging times. But how can this be achieved when so many people have never had an opportunity to benefit from education and so many others leave the initial phase of education without attaining the level of proficiency in literacy and numeracy needed to participate fully in society? How can young people and adults acquire the competences they need in order to cope with the challenges life is certain to throw at them? The scale of the problem is large yet qualifications systems in many societies still limit their focus to qualifications acquired formally. As a result, a large part of individuals' learning remains unrecognized, in particular the learning of those excluded from formal education. In addition, many systems do not offer opportunities for young people and adults to re-engage in learning pathways that have been interrupted. This can result in a significant loss of human potential.

The non-formal and informal learning of young people and adults should be made visible and valued. Systems should be in place to ensure it is recognized, assessed and accredited. This has been acknowledged in a number of important policy documents, frameworks and guidelines, which set the scene for the current report.

Since 2005, UNESCO has advocated the importance of the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning for youth and adults (Singh, 2015). More recently, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL), in partnership with UNESCO's Section of Partnerships, Cooperation and Research, has undertaken a number of comprehensive analyses of policy and practice in this area. These studies have highlighted the need to focus on the RVA of youth and adult basic education. Globally, the scale of need is enormous. But there remain significant challenges in integrating RVA of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning at the basic education level into existing RVA systems and in enabling young people and adults without basic education to complete such processes successfully.

In 2015, UNESCO's Section of Partnerships, Cooperation and Research began a study[1] on the RVA of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning within the framework of 'Rethinking Learning in a Complex World', a programme funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). This programme aims to strengthen UNESCO's observatory function in education and to contribute to the global debate on foundational principles that can guide education policy and practice for the future. As part of this, UNESCO HQ and UIL established an international expert working group to examine policies, systems and practical approaches for the RVA of non-formal and basic education. This was supported by a literature review and recent studies which focus on levels of basic education among youth and adults required as a foundation for lifelong learning.

This report summarizes the research and discussion of the expert group, drawing on three meetings held by UNESCO in 2016, as well as a literature review. It focuses on three themes – principles, policy and practice – and provides examples of how the issue is being approached across the world. It offers 12 conclusions based on the evidence gathered and proposes a number of key messages for stakeholders in Member States. The aim is to support Member States to improve and recalibrate their approaches to the RVA of non-formal and basic education so that young people and adults who have already been let down by the formal education system are not failed again.

David Atchoarena
Director, UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

1 This research project relates to Expected Result 11 of UNESCO's Medium-Term Plan for 2014–2017 (37 C/5): 'The future education agenda and global education policies are shaped drawing on UNESCO's research and foresight studies.' It is also related to two results of UIL's Medium-Term Strategy 2014–2021 under the Lifelong Learning Policies and Strategies (LLPS) and Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) programmes.

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Today's complex and fast-changing world makes it necessary for individuals to acquire and develop competences (knowledge, skills and attitudes) through all forms of learning to cope with the various challenges life presents. However, national qualifications systems in many societies still limit their focus to qualifications acquired in formal educational institutions. As a result, a large part of individuals' learning remains unrecognized, in particular the learning of those excluded from formal education opportunities. Many people's motivation and confidence to continue learning is not effectively encouraged; and, where such motivation exists, access is very often not enabled. This leads to a significant under-utilization of human talent and resources. The learning outcomes that young people and adults acquire in the course of their lives in non-formal and informal settings need to be made visible, assessed and accredited, as has been recognized in a number of important policy reports, frameworks and guidelines.

The Belém Framework for Action, adopted by 144 delegations of UNESCO Member States in 2009, called on UNESCO 'to develop guidelines on all learning outcomes, including those acquired through non-formal and informal learning, so that these may be recognized and validated' (UIL, 2010, p. 9).

The subsequent *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (UIL, 2012) were developed through a participatory process involving consultation with Member States in order to reflect their diverse experiences and needs. These guidelines acknowledged the need to 'provide special support through flexible arrangements for early school-leavers, adults with special learning needs, people and workers with low levels of education and those excluded from the labour market' (UIL, 2012, p. 5).

The *Recommendation on Adult Learning and Education*, adopted by the UNESCO General Conference in November 2015, establishes that 'learning outcomes from participation in non-formal and informal adult learning and education should be recognized, validated and accredited as having equivalent values to those granted by formal education (for example, through National Qualifications Frameworks) to allow for continuing education and access to the labour market, without facing discrimination barriers' (UNESCO and UIL, 2016, p. 13).

Rethinking Education: Towards a global common good? posits that the recognition and validation of knowledge and competences acquired through multiple learning pathways are part of a lifelong learning framework (UNESCO, 2015*b*). The report reinforces the critical role of lifelong and life-wide learning in adapting to new employment patterns and increased labour market and geographical mobility. It argues that the operationalization of open and flexible lifelong learning systems depends on mechanisms for the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of knowledge and competencies across educational and working spaces. This is because the competences we need throughout life are continually changing, which demands multiple learning pathways and recognition that learning is a 'continuum' in which formal education overlaps and interacts with informal and non-formal forms of learning.

Furthermore, the question of proficiency levels in literacy and numeracy and successful completion of basic education has been highlighted in the *Education 2030 Framework for Action for the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 4*. This urges that 'by 2030, all young people and adults across the world should have achieved relevant and recognized proficiency levels in functional literacy and numeracy skills that are equivalent to levels achieved at successful completion of basic education' (UNESCO, 2015*a*, p. 20).

The current study builds on this work. It draws on the above-mentioned studies and an extensive literature review to examine policies, systems and practical approaches to the RVA of non-formal and basic education.

1.2 Project rationale and aims

The rationale for this work is three-fold. First, the scale of need is significant and increasing in the context of globalization, a process characterized by a blurring of boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal learning. Changes in the global education landscape have meant 'growing recognition of the importance and relevance of learning outside formal institutions' and a move towards 'mixed, diverse and complex learning landscapes in which formal, non-formal and informal learning occur through a variety of educational institutions and third-party providers' (UNESCO, 2015*b*, p. 48). This calls for 'a more fluid approach to learning as a continuum, in which schooling and formal education institutions interact more closely with other less formalized educational experiences from early childhood throughout life' (ibid.).

Second, although there has been some progress in the development of RVA policy and practice since 2009, much of the progress has been at higher and technical education levels. There is an evident need for more work on recognizing non-formal and informal learning, particularly at the basic education level.

Third, this aspect of RVA is under-researched and, consequently, not consistently well understood. This gap in our understanding needs to be addressed, not least because it has important messages for the development of effective, innovative whole-system approaches to RVA (Singh, 2015, p. 3).

1.2.1 Rationale for the project

Worldwide, hundreds of millions of young people and adults have not had the opportunity to acquire foundational skills through sufficient basic schooling of adequate quality. Higher numbers still do not have a formally recognized qualification, which limits their career chances at work as well as their access to further education opportunities (UNESCO, 2016).

Globally, in 2015, there were an estimated 781 million adults who could not read or write a simple sentence. However, the level of need is not equally distributed across the world and there is a correlation between literacy levels and early school-leaving and lack of access to basic education. The problem is most acute in **sub-Saharan Africa** and **South/West Asia** (UNESCO, 2015*c*). In Asia-Pacific, 456 million adults remain without reading and writing skills (UIL, 2016). Elsewhere, a survey of adult literacy and education programmes conducted in **Latin America and the Caribbean** by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) in 2013 showed that, with a few exceptions (**Cayman Islands**, **Trinidad and Tobago**, **Chile** and **Peru**), in the majority of the countries less than 40 per cent of the adult population has completed secondary (basic) education (UIS, 2013).

The problem is acute, even in the Global North. In **Europe**, for example, close to 70 million youths and adults lack basic reading and writing skills.[2] More cannot use numbers or digital tools properly in everyday life. Without these skills, they are at high risk of poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. On average, around one-quarter of Europeans in the 25–64 age group do not have an upper-secondary education qualification. In some countries, the share is over 40 per cent and as high as 57 per cent (European Commission, 2016).

The OECD reports that low skills are found in all countries across the globe, and that these low skills pose serious problems for individuals trying to cope with work and life in modern societies where demand for literacy skills is on the increase (OECD, 2013). These skills should not be thought of simply as those that cater directly to the needs of the labour market (what might be described, narrowly, as 'employability' skills). As the third *Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (*GRALE 3*) makes clear, adult learning and education that 'meet personal, social, political or cultural needs can be a key pathway to developing … employability and productivity in the labour market' (UIL, 2016, p. 88). As *GRALE 3* also notes, low levels of basic education and skills can be a barrier not

2 The results from the second round of the PIAAC survey covering 33 countries (out of which seven are not from the Western Europe and North America region) show similar trends: in almost all countries, a sizable proportion of adults (18.5 per cent on average) have poor reading skills and poor numeracy skills (22.7 per cent on average), and around one in four adults has no or only limited experience with computers (OECD, 2016).

only to employment but also to self-fulfilment and full participation in social, civic and community life (ibid., p. 107).

Surveys indicate a discrepancy between qualification level and actual competence, as defined by the OECD. Many people with low skills hold upper-secondary education certificates. On the other hand, there are also those with few formal qualifications who demonstrate higher competences. Such surveys thus indicate a discrepancy between qualification level and the competence measured in a survey. Drawing consequences from these surveys, Schuetze and Casey (2006) argue that mechanisms of assessment and recognition are necessary because we need to recognize life-wide learning and potential of learning rather than focusing simply on qualifications or the reputation of certain institutions. 'Therefore, assessing and recognising knowledge that has not been learned in and certified by the formal education system is a major conceptual as well as practical problem' (Schuetze and Casey, 2006, quoted in Singh, 2015, p. 19).

Almost three-quarters (71 per cent) of the 139 Member States that responded to *GRALE 3* reported that they have a policy framework to recognize, validate and accredit informal and non-formal learning (UIL, 2016). Much of the progress in developing approaches to RVA in non-formal learning, however, had been at tertiary level in vocational training and in higher education. Since the publication of the 2012 *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*, there have been other significant reports that address the need for more and better approaches to RVA in education, though non-formal and basic education have, overall, continued to be neglected (Singh, 2015). Nevertheless, UNESCO felt that lessons could be learned from the progress made to date to develop strategies for RVA in basic education and to ensure its integration into existing systems. The ultimate aim must be the development of coherent approaches which encompass formal and non-formal learning pathways at all levels of education, so that these can be integrated into coherent systems.

1.2.2 Approach and aims

The international expert group comprised representatives from nine Member States across five regions (**Africa**, **Arab States**, **Asia-Pacific**, **Europe-North America** and **Latin America-Caribbean**), with staff from the UNESCO Education Sector and UIL, and specialist research consultants. The group met three times in 2016 to:

- analyse existing policies and strategies, as reported in the relevant literature;
- review available research on existing systems and approaches in different regions;
- assess how RVA mechanisms for basic education operate (trends, challenges and emerging practice);
- identify research gaps and areas of further research;
- synthesize findings and formulate preliminary policy recommendations.

The ultimate aim was to come up with an approach that would enable disadvantaged young people and adults to have the learning, competences and work experience they have acquired in various contexts made visible and recognized, starting from the lowest levels of basic education, through sensitive policies, operational systems and support mechanisms.

1.3 Research questions

The following questions guided the research project. For the purposes of this report, they are organized under two thematic headings: *policy* and *practice*.

Policy

- What are the driving forces behind a growing interest in RVA policies and mechanisms? Who benefits? How well do these policies respond to the (variety of) needs of disadvantaged youth and adults?
- To what extent do existing national policies include provisions for the recognition, validation and accreditation of informal and non-formal learning at a basic level?
- How can learning among the most disadvantaged population groups be better integrated into lifelong learning strategies?

- How are RVA policies addressing the learning needs of out-of-school populations which have completed a basic literacy programme?

Practice

- How does RVA work in practice? Which systems and mechanisms are in place? How inclusive are their ways of operating? How can they be implemented on a larger scale?
- What lessons can be learned from the use of RVA in other sub-sectors?
- How well do equivalency programmes function with regard to the provision of recognized qualifications? How can they make better use of RVA mechanisms?
- How do RVA strategies enable progression in education and the attainment of recognized qualifications?
- What kind of qualifications and certificates are provided to learners of non-formal basic education programmes? What is their 'value' in society and in the labour market, as well as for the individual?
- Which pedagogical approaches and tools are used to establish equivalency between formal and non-formal pathways and how is quality of teaching and learning assured?
- Which pedagogical approaches and support mechanisms in RVA can help non-literate and 'under-schooled' young people and adults engage/re-engage in learning?
- What role do career counselling and guidance services in RVA play in encouraging participation and retention among disadvantaged population groups, including those in rural areas?
- Are there any alternative approaches that show how RVA can provide an effective bottom-up approach to engaging learners at the basic level in lifelong learning that (also) leads to recognized certificates?

PRINCIPLES

2.1 Lifelong learning

Understanding the concept of lifelong learning is essential if we are to fully appreciate the rationale for and potential of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Lifelong learning has been adopted as the guiding principle with which to frame the contribution of education to sustainable development. Sustainable Development Goal 4 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development enjoins Member States to '[e]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UNESCO, 2015*a*).

This renewed emphasis on lifelong learning acknowledges that the right to education is not bound to a specific age (childhood and adolescence) but 'begins at birth and continues throughout life' (UNESCO, 2015*b*, p. 9), that learning transcends schooling and formal settings, and that learners – and their needs and aspirations – are at the centre of education processes.

All age groups, including adults and young people, should have lifelong opportunities to learn and continue learning. While learning is an absolute necessity for everyone, it is particularly important for disadvantaged individuals and groups who have been excluded from, or failed to acquire, basic competencies through formal schooling. The vision of lifelong learning supports the idea of building bridges between different components, actors, institutions, processes, life spheres and life phases to develop holistically designed learning systems.

Such an approach requires the development of RVA systems. Operationalizing lifelong learning opportunities involves 'multiple and flexible learning pathways and entry points and re-entry points at all ages and all educational levels, strengthened links between formal and non-formal structures, and recognition, validation and accreditation of the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through non-formal and informal education' (UNESCO, 2015*a*, p. 33).

The *life-wide* learning approach entails acknowledgement of the fact that individuals, regardless of their formal educational level, have developed knowledge, skills, attitudes and values with which to navigate the complexity of everyday life, and that these competences are valuable in themselves. The reasons for people not completing the cycle of compulsory education in their younger years can be complex and varied, including structural and systemic obstacles to accessing educational opportunities. It is also the case that migrants and displaced populations very often cannot produce a certificate of basic education in their host countries or, if they can, the certification is not recognized.

2.2 Formal, non-formal, and informal learning

The distinctions between formal, non-formal and informal learning are explained in the *Glossary*. However, it is also worth pointing out, in the context of this report, that, in practice, these three types of learning form part of a continuum. In the Global North, a sharp distinction between formal and non-formal learning has provided a way of exemplifying the divide between accredited and non-accredited learning. In the Global South, on the other hand, non-formal learning is often nationally organized, and, in some cases, is the best option for youth and adults who have missed out on basic education (Singh, 2015, p. 37). Informal learning is critical in all settings (including workplaces) but is often the most challenging form to recognize, validate and accredit when it occurs in isolation from other forms of learning.

2.3 Basic education

Sometimes described as 'fundamental', 'elementary' or 'primary/secondary' education, basic education consists of at least nine years (ISCED[3] 2), progressively extending to 12 years (ISCED 3), is free and compulsory, and prepares the learner for further education and an active life and citizenship. Equivalent basic education is offered for youth and adults who did not have the opportunity or possibility to receive or complete basic education at the appropriate age. The Convention against Discrimination in Education encourages, through methods such as RVA, 'the education of persons who have not received any primary education or who have not completed the entire primary education course and the continuation of their education on the basis of individual capacity' (UNESCO, 1960, Article 4).

2.4 Competence and learning outcomes

RVA of all forms of learning outcome is defined as 'a practice that makes visible and valued 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' (UIL, 2012, p. 8). Competence is a central concept in RVA, and includes cognitive (knowledge), functional (application of knowledge), personal (behaviour) and ethical (principles guiding behaviour) components (UNESCO, 2013, p. 12).
The term is often linked with the labour market and vocational training (e.g. Cedefop, 2008). A more holistic definition encompasses the domains of learning, labour and life. A competence is a broad description of personal performance in a variety of activities and is *not always directly linked to learning*. A specific personal competence might cover several learning outcomes in a programme.

Learning outcomes are best defined as 'achievements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do as a result of a learning process' (UIL, 2012, p. 8). A learning outcome is a description of the information, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values, skills, competencies or behaviours an individual is expected to master upon successful completion of an educational programme (UIS, 2012).

2.5 The UNESCO principles for RVA

The *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (UIL, 2012) propose the following six principles. Each has implications for the policy and practice of RVA of youth and adult basic education.

2.5.1 Ensuring equity and inclusiveness in access to learning opportunities

The right to access has implications for policies concerning entitlements to basic education (especially in countries where the goal of universal basic education has not been reached). Access for those people who have been excluded from basic education or feel stigmatized by non-completion requires targeted approaches and support mechanisms, such as information, advice and guidance, which is critical at all phases of the RVA process though particularly at the start. It is essential to keep in mind that people have not only a right to learn but a right to learn in a way that is suited to their needs. Acknowledgement that learning outcomes should be 'made visible and valued' implies a need for equivalency frameworks between formal and non-formal basic education (UIL, 2012, p. 14).

2.5.2 Promoting the equal value of learning outcomes of formal, non-formal and informal learning

Equivalency between different types of learning outcome is important. There are, however, challenges concerning the articulation of these outcomes, particularly in contexts where there is an established system dominated by formal educational approaches. This issue is even more acute in the arena of basic education where formal approaches predominate.

2.5.3 Ensuring the centrality of individuals in the RVA process

In addition, participation should be voluntary and not mandated (through, for example, sanctions to welfare benefits). The policy and practice implications for the RVA of basic education concern the involvement of the learner at all stages of the process: from co-design to

3 The International Standard Classification of Education: http://uis.unesco.org/sites/default/files/documents/international-standard-classification-of-education-isced-2011-en.pdf

implementation. Such an approach involves the integration of non-formal pedagogies into the RVA process.

2.5.4 Improving flexibility and openness of formal education and training

Integrating non-formal and informal approaches to basic education into existing RVA systems will require those systems to change and adapt.

2.5.5 Promoting quality assurance in the entire RVA process

Qualification systems should ensure the criteria and procedures for assessing and validating the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning are of a high quality. This has implications for how policy is evaluated at a national level, including international benchmarking, and how high-quality local implementation is 'relevant, reliable, fair and transparent' (UIL, 2012, p. 4).

2.5.6 Strengthening partnerships among all stakeholders

The challenge for policy-makers is to instil a culture of shared responsibility for the 'design … implementation and evaluation of the RVA system' (ibid.). At the practice level, this implies multi-agency working, collaboration and pooling of budgets across policy areas and stakeholders.

POLICY

3.1 Driving forces and beneficiaries

The European Commission (2016), OECD (2013) and UNESCO (Singh, 2015) have stressed that, on many occasions, it is public authorities that support and enable RVA processes for basic education. In **Latin America**, **Europe** and **some countries in Asia**, such as **Indonesia** and **India**, it is predominantly government that initiates projects and programmes aimed at the inclusion of target groups, addressing lack of educational provision, skills mismatches, or encouraging participation. Likewise, the predominant driving force behind the development of RVA policies for non-formal and informal learning, in general, are governments (either at a national or sub-national level). Social partners and regional stakeholders also play a key role in articulating the needs of excluded and vulnerable groups. However, economic drivers tend to dominate in most instances and shape the approach adopted by national governments.

There are three types of beneficiaries of RVA processes: the state (through social cohesion, economic growth, increased tax revenue, decreased costs and/or unrest); industry (through a reduction in skills gaps, mismatches and shortages); and the individual (through individual advancement, participation, recognition and emancipation). However, it would be naïve to assume that these benefits are always complementary. As with any educational endeavour, RVA policies for non-formal and informal learning could, and some would argue *should*, result in individuals challenging the system, or campaigning for employment rights that would provide perceived 'disbenefits' to employers (for example, facing rising wage costs).

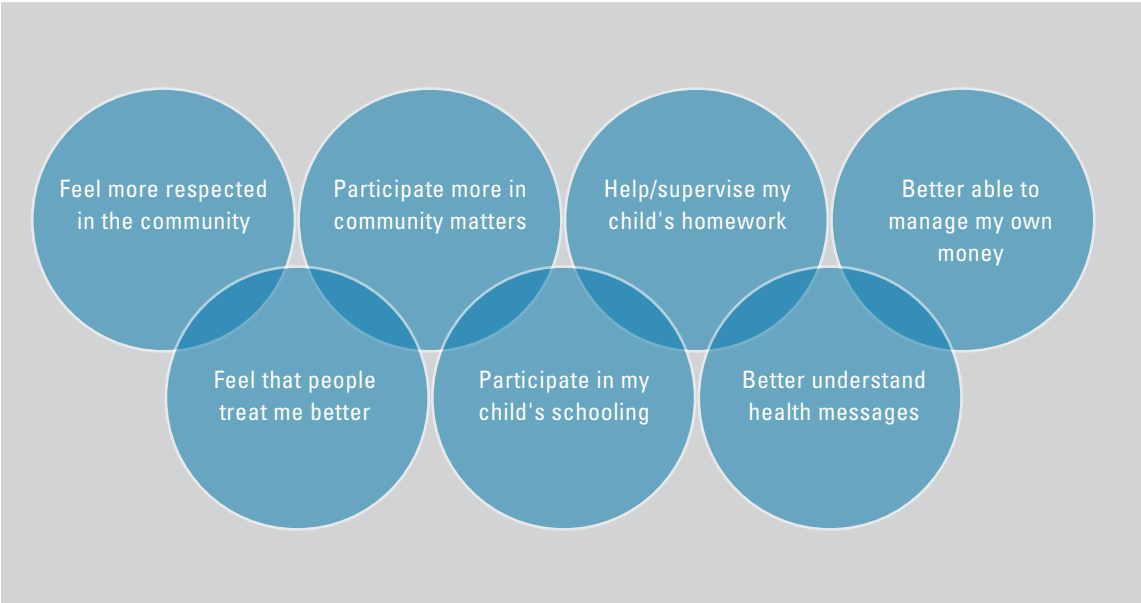
In some countries, national-steered initiatives are concentrated in regional centres for linking people's prior learning experiences to national standards on ISCED levels 1–3 (**India**, **Indonesia**, **Portugal**, **Canada**). For individuals, there is no evidence of the 'Matthew effect'[4] in cases where RVA initiatives are publicly funded. Private learning systems tend to be too expensive (in financial and opportunity costs) for many disadvantaged groups to make use of, although some regional organizations enable access to privately run initiatives. Generally speaking, however, where RVA policies include an element of targeting, disadvantaged groups have a fair chance of accessing provision. For example, in **South Africa**, the life-wide range of benefits to individuals have been found to include the following (see *Figure 1*):

- Feel more respected in the community
- Feel that people treat me better
- Participate more in community matters
- Participate in my child's schooling
- Help/supervise my child's homework
- Better understand health messages
- Better able to manage my own money
- Better able to solve my own problems
- Would like to carry on learning
- Started to earn

(McKay, 2016)

4 The 'Matthew effect' of accumulated advantage is a phenomenon sometimes summarized by the adage that 'the rich get richer and the poor get poorer'. In educational terms, those who have the most education to date tend to access more.

Figure 1 Range of benefits reported in South Africa



Source: Adapted from McKay, 2016

South Africa, **India**, **Indonesia**, **Mexico**, **Canada** and several countries in Europe provide examples of both social and economic leverage for adopting RVA as an instrument for acknowledging and enabling lifelong learning. Other countries, such as **Senegal**, **Benin**, **Brazil** and **Chile**, exemplify a national learning culture that is implicitly open to incorporating people's learning experiences regardless of the learning environment (school, work, leisure, family) into formal learning strategies.

3.2 Legislative frameworks

At the outset, it is worth noting the diversity of legislative environments that support the development of RVA for basic education. The first of these is the distinction between those countries that have national legal frameworks for RVA (such as **Norway**, **Finland** and **Denmark**) and those that have less formal or ad hoc arrangements (Singh, 2015, p. 48). Countries in the **Economic Community of West African States** (ECOWAS), for example, report the challenges of tackling fragmentation in the overarching education system. A fragmented education system not only results in relatively high numbers of early school leavers without basic education or literacy skills, but also does not provide the infrastructure to address this through recognizing skills gained in the informal economy (Boukary, 2016*a*). A third category comprises those Member States with devolved, federal or localized systems. In such instances, for example in the **USA**, there may be high levels of RVA activity without any national legislative imperative. This means that recognition is also possible without legislative basis and raises the important question as to 'whether countries with a uniform policy and legislation on RVA are more likely to develop systems of RVA than is the case where such legislation is absent' (Singh, 2015, p. 60).

Singh (2015) also draws a distinction that is critical to the present report: that between legislative arrangements in the Global North and the Global South. In the North, and particularly in **Europe**, RVA legislation is commonly integrated into an overarching lifelong learning strategy that seeks to incorporate non-formal and informal learning at all levels (Ebner and Oliveira, 2016). In the South, however, such 'strategies deliver *access* to non-formal *provision* for early school-leavers as a second chance to enter the education system, rather than making RVA a right through the *assessment and validation* of the competences and learning that adults and youth already possess' (Singh, 2015, p. 61). For example, **Uruguay**'s lifelong learning policy[5] aims to broaden the education system to include non-formal learning, with a special emphasis

5 General Education Law No. 18.437, 12 December 2008

on the education of youth and adults not having completed basic education. By taking prior learning experiences into account and incorporating them into learning programmes that are not necessarily linked to formal education, potential participants are stimulated to acquire basic education certification.

Box 1 France – The right to validate experiential learning outcomes

France provides a good example of a comprehensive strategy. In France, La Validation des Acquis de l'Expérience (VAE), or Validation of Experiential Learning Outcomes, was introduced in 2002 to address key issues: securing professional pathways for low-qualified youth; promoting the importance of the diploma for accessing the workplace/society; and acting on the low impact of continuing education on qualification. The Law for 'Social Modernisation' established VAE as a right for every citizen. Legislators placed professional experience on the same level as training and education for obtaining a diploma or a certification.

In **France**, the strong legal base for RVA gives the right to individuals to have their formal, informal and non-formal acquired experiences validated free of charge. Such a right also exists in **Canada** and **Norway** where people can have non-formal and informal learning recognized (Gouvernement du Québec, 2002; Ure, 2015). In the **Netherlands**, job-seekers can get access to RVA once their application is approved by the national jobs agency (Duvekot, 2016). In the **United Arab Emirates**, a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Charter guarantees the mutual recognition of the outcomes of RVA processes by all registered training providers (UAE, 2016*a*).

In several **European countries**, **Canada**, **USA**, **South Africa**, **Australia** and **New Zealand**, among others, learning achievements acquired non-formally or informally can be used to obtain a formal qualification and/or to get access to qualification programmes with or without exemptions. These links may have been established in a systematic way also for implementation in policies concerning youth and adult basic education. At an occupational level, policies supporting the RVA of basic education are administered through the cooperation of government with sector organizations, trade unions and employers, in **Russia** and **India** and in several countries in **Latin America**.

3.3 Qualifications frameworks

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) can be regarded as both a support and a hindrance in integrating the RVA of non-formal and informal learning into an existing system. Where NQFs exist they tend to be dominated by a discourse of skills valuable to the economy or the workplace. Therefore, there is an understandable desire to create equivalence with existing standards or defined labour market competences. Where NQFs are being developed alongside an awareness of the importance of the RVA of non-formal and informal learning, there may be the opportunity to develop standards attuned to life-wide learning, including the vocational skills agenda.

In some countries, linking RVA and qualifications frameworks takes the shape of a national system of occupational standards (**Russia**) or an occupational qualifications framework linked to the NQF (**South Africa**), evolving out of the need for skills recognition of low-skilled people (Braňka, 2016). In **Brazil**, this need for certification is mostly required at secondary education level for occupations that usually attract less well educated people; answering this need is a challenge since the Brazilian labour market still operates with high levels of informality and many job applicants have difficulties in proving their past experiences and in passing basic tests in mathematics, writing and oral communication (ibid.).

The **United Arab Emirates**' programme for RVA of basic youth and adult education is defined in the *UAE Code of RPL Practices and Principles* (UAE, 2016*a*). Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is considered a comprehensive system that supports a rigid and quality-assured assessment and recognition process for prior learning obtained through various learning environments. The system is referred to in the *Qualifications Framework for the Emirates Handbook* and is sustained by an RPL Charter that organizes and facilitates the mutual recognition of RPL assessment processes undertaken by registered

providers. This programme is developed as a priority of the National Qualifications Authority (NQA), which leads national policy for RPL within the national qualifications framework.

There is much variety in supporting RVA by NQFs or other forms of qualifications systems across the globe, especially facilitating learning and recognition outside of formal education. In **India**, the government regards the recognition of prior learning as a possible step to enhance the employability, mobility and income of those unorganized sector workers who have acquired and honed their skills on the job, mostly under the guidance of more experienced peers. Prior learning outcomes are linked to India's National Skills Qualifications Framework (Braňka, 2016).

In **Indonesia**, RVA is a method for validation for all parties involved in the process (RVA candidates, adult learners and government) as part of the national policy to address – among other things – the high rate of drop-out in (basic) education (Hasbi, 2016). In **Uruguay**, the National Programme for Education and Employment (PNET) set up regional Education Centres for Training and Production (CECAP) for adults and youth who have not completed basic secondary education (UNESCO, 2015*f*).

3.4 Access, targeting and responsiveness

Where they exist, a common characteristic of lifelong learning policies is targeting (increasingly scarce) resources at those most in need. In this way, RVA can be seen as a means in itself of enabling access for those currently excluded from the education system. Although targeting people with low basic education is at the forefront of many national initiatives in this field, it should be noted that national qualifications frameworks do not, in themselves, generate RVA mechanisms (Dyson and Keating, 2005).

In addition, RVA can be targeted at groups such as those individuals who did not complete a cycle of basic education. A targeted approach goes some way to addressing the particular needs, motivations and concerns of certain groups. The risk is that in designing high-level policies, countries adopt a one-dimensional approach, regarding all those without a basic education as a homogenous group. In other words, both the principles of 'equality of access' (*2.5.1*) and the 'centrality of the learner' (*2.5.3*) need to be adhered to *at the policy level*.

Box 2 Morocco – Targeting RVA for basic education levels

In **Morocco**, under the authority of the Agence Nationale de Lutte contre l'Analphabétisme (ANLCA) and the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training, a literacy programme certification system was introduced in 2016 (Centre d'évaluation des acquis), targeting candidates aged 15 years and over who have participated in a literacy programme or as self-learners. The creation of a national coordination body with the participation of all stakeholders concerned with RVA served to identify mechanisms and laws facilitating RVA for literacy programmes. Among the desired outcomes, the development of bridges and pathways between literacy programmes and qualifying training programmes is a top priority. (Maroc, 2016)

However, there were relatively few examples of policies that enable adults and young people without a basic education to access an engagement approach tailored to their particular needs. In the **Netherlands**, the International Women's Centre (IVC) in Den Helder provides an example of RVA for empowering and further developing specific target groups for social inclusion. The aim is to assist migrant women in acknowledging and documenting their personal skills and competences for the sake of empowerment and to find their way in Dutch society (Duvekot, 2016).

In **Mexico**, the Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos (INEA) has developed programmes as part of its work on literacy, social exclusion and indigenous peoples. Here, RVA is articulated with a focus on special certification based on acquired knowledge areas (language/communication, mathematics, sciences) as well as life- and work-related interests that may be equivalent to primary or secondary education level within sector standards. It was piloted initially in municipalities where there were high numbers of youth and adults with literacy challenges and uncompleted basic education (Mendoza, 2016).

In a number of other countries, advocacy and mobilization of target groups is organized through: national expertise centres or agencies (**Portugal**, **Uruguay**, **Republic of Korea**); professional associations (**South Africa**, **ECOWAS countries**, **Australia**, **USA**); or regional authorities (**India**, **Canada**). The activities employed cover national media campaigns and roadshows (**India**, **Indonesia**, **South Africa**); attracting people to access information offices (**Europe**, **ECOWAS**); and hosting information sessions by schools, employers and unions (**Latin America**). For example, the government supported an awareness campaign for RVA in **India**, through radio and other media (National Institute for Open Schooling, 2012). The campaign targeted a range of socially and economically disadvantaged groups (Shah, 2016).

Further analysis needs to be done to ascertain whether *combined* targeted *and* personalized approaches are in place because of policy development or as the result of practitioners using these approaches *despite* policy interventions.

3.5 Integration and stakeholdership

Strengthening partnerships is a key underpinning principle in the development of RVA systems in general (*2.5.6*). There are a number of aspects to this at both policy and practice levels (Yang, 2015). At the policy level, it is about an awareness that a lifelong learning approach operates across government ministries as well as geographical and sectoral areas. This means that a range of public and private actors are involved in policy development alongside social partners. End-users or beneficiaries should also be involved in shaping the provision they benefit from.

In some countries, industry, businesses and employer organizations are involved in determining the content of NQFs. Arguably, this favours their interests and the outcomes they would like to see recognized, validated and accredited. However, it also means that other interests and voices are excluded at the design stage. For those without a basic education, the involvement of support agencies such as those

Box 3 Portugal – A targeted, personalized approach

The New Opportunities Initiative (NOI) was established in 2005 to address the fact that 72 per cent of adults in the labour force did not have a basic (secondary) education qualification, as defined in national law. NOI created a catalogue of qualifications and set an ambitious target for everyone to achieve upper secondary education as a minimum level of qualification. NOI developed an individualized approach to reach this goal, involving TVET, adult non-formal education, evening schools and the support of a personal tutor.

Approximately 1 million people registered for the initiative. They were recruited at companies and through trade unions and associations, and included unemployed people in the community. Following a change in government, funding was cut. This resulted in a reduction in the number of learning centres where registered people could be assisted to obtain basic education levels. A revised action plan for the RVA initiative is now focused on:

- creating a 'passport' to register individuals' educational levels;
- providing training in basic skills for the adult population in question;
- improving the image of RVA;
- creating personalized paths to learning.

One of the targets is for 50 per cent of the adult population to have obtained secondary-level school certificates by 2020. It is estimated that 25 per cent will obtain qualifications through the RVA system (Barros, 2014; Pires, 2014). This target is supported by legislation and the new QUALIFICA programme, which also aims to enlarge the existing network of learning centres from 240 to 300 QUALIFICA centres (Diário da República, 2016).

that provide information, advice and guidance is critical. Unless this is written in at the policy stage, it is relatively unlikely to happen.

National stakeholdership involves linking RVA to national qualifications and creating equivalency with formal basic education levels and aims at empowering learners to progress. In **India**, the Saakshar Bharat programme (Literate India) recognizes the importance of RVA for basic literacy. The National Institute of Open Schooling (NIOS) works closely with different provincial organizations and institutions, district literacy committees, state resource centres and Jan Shikshan Sansthans (non-formal vocational institutions for adult education) and training institutions (Shah, 2016).

Box 4 Brazil – A nationally led stakeholder approach

In Brazil, 68.8 per cent of adults (18+) have not completed basic education (92.6 million people), while 11.63 million are industrial workers who cannot find the time to study after work to complete their basic education. The New Youth and Adult Educational Project was created to address this need. The National Board approved it on the condition that its effectiveness would be proven within five years of inception. The project is based on an electronic platform so that 80 per cent of studying can be carried out online and 20 per cent face-to-face (at home, school or work). This called for restructuring of existing curricula. Legislation was enacted to support the initiative but it did not specify approaches or guidelines on implementation. A programme has been developed by Serviço Social da Indústria (SESI), an agency for industrial social service which offers youth and adult education programmes. The goal of SESI was to enrol approximately 94,500 learners by autumn 2016. The first activities included courses offered in the cafeterias of different firms. The RVA process is, at the moment, used mainly for providing (non-formal) certification (Rodrigues Viera, 2016).

PRACTICE

4.1 The RVA process and phases

Although RVA processes have been well-documented in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), there are fewer examples of practice in the field of basic education. At the time the research was carried out, during 2016, there was a noticeable gap between policy aspirations and practice on the ground. Some of this gap can be put down to an understandable time lag as new policies come into operation. Another reason, acknowledged in the research, is the additional challenge that the RVA of youth and adult basic education presents. In looking further at examples of emerging practice, the expert group also examined existing RVA processes where the RVA of basic education would be integrated as part of an overarching framework, such as an NQF and/or wider lifelong learning strategy.

In **Chile**, for example, the Chilecalifica programme encourages 'horizontal' and 'vertical' progression and provides different pathways to learners to move between non-formal (flexible) and formal learning. The National Labour Skills Certification System provides a framework for the recognition of competences, regardless of how they were acquired. Learners have to take a national assessment test. Central to the implementation of Chilecalifica are local adult education centres. Recognition is driven by certificates rather than qualifications because Chile does not have a NQF (Infante, 2016).

Box 5 United Arab Emirates – A multi-targeted, phased approach

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) facilitates access to programmes, mobility and progression within education/training and across career pathways. The primary target groups are youth and adults who have not completed their basic education, retired employees and current staff. Here, RPL is a process of assessing and recognizing an individual's prior learning, regardless of where or how the learning took place (formal, non-formal or informal settings). The project handbook states: 'RPL involves the comparison of the previous learning and experience of an individual learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification' (UAE, 2016*b*).

UAE's RPL process includes the following phases:

- Identifying what the candidate knows and can do.
- Matching the candidate's skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards.
- Assessing the candidate against those standards.
- Crediting the candidate for skills, knowledge and experience gained in all learning situations.

RVA is a process-led activity. The phases in such a process differ between systems, but they can be summarized for the purposes of this report as:

- Engagement and guidance
- Recognition and documentation
- Assessment and validation
- Accreditation and certification

4.2 Engagement and guidance

The engagement phase starts with raising awareness – with individuals, employers and social partners – that the continuum of formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences is valuable and worth recognizing. The motivations and benefits may be different, as we have seen (*3.1*), but the overall principle holds: the *equal value of learning outcomes* (*2.5.2*). Potential users of the system can be engaged in the workplace, in non-formal learning settings or via social partners working with target groups. For youth and adults without a basic education, the challenges of engagement are greater, and targeted, tailored approaches are desirable. In **Chile**, for example, this approach involves the promotion and delivery of programmes close to participants' residences. In **West Africa**, as much informal learning at work takes place in the 'informal economy' (that is, the workplace), engagement strategies need to work there.

In **Indonesia**, RVA policy follows a twin-track approach, comprising RVA embedded in courses and training programmes; and RVA for equivalency education. In both cases, government works with local and regional centres and agencies, where tutors and teachers from different sectors and schools provide guidance, assessment and learning trajectories. The two tracks differ in that the first links to formal education and the latter to non-formal; in both cases, the focus is on attaining basic education (Hasbi, 2016). The programme places strong emphasis on female participation, and the curriculum is tailored to women's everyday needs (UIL, n.d.).

At all phases of the RVA process, the provision of impartial information, advice and guidance is critical. This is particularly the case at the beginning of the process for youth and adults without a formal basic education. In such cases, there is likely to be a lack of familiarity with the potential for progression and the range of opportunities available. It will also be important for advisers not to raise expectations beyond what can be delivered. This is particularly important in countries with fragmented education and training systems.

4.3 Recognition and documentation

This phase focuses on identifying and organizing learning experiences and translating these into personal competences. The creation of a portfolio is often the starting point for documentation, although other mechanisms may be put in place. For the RVA of basic education, a wide interpretation of the portfolio concept is important, as it can create a direct link between someone's personal life experiences and the basic education level. There are three types of portfolio, each with their own form of assessing learning evidence: *dossier, development* and *personal*. The dossier-portfolio is important as it can be used to document proof for exemptions from elements of specific basic education programmes or qualifications. The strong focus on the assessment of learning, however, means this approach is rarely steered by the learner, whereas the other two examples can be.

In the **South African** context, RPL is a specific agenda to support the transformation of the education and training system (McKay, 2016). It is regarded as a means to redress past inequalities. RPL targets previously disadvantaged individuals who have been denied a formal education and acquired their skills and competences informally or non-formally. Problems of access persist, because people do not meet the minimum entry requirements for programmes offered at formal education and training institutions. The Kha Ri Gude Adult Literacy Programme (KRG) is an example of a government-steered initiative, which works on five levels: national, provincial, district, local and on-site. As an inclusive campaign, KRG targets every adult person with little or no formal education (Hanemann, 2015).

This raises the issue of pedagogy and how this links with the RVA of basic education. Working with people without the foundation of a basic education presents challenges and demands a specialized approach from professionals. As we have seen, the lack of a basic education does not necessarily mean an individual lacks literacy or other basic skills. However, there will be some correlations between people's lack of basic education and their skill levels, labour market status and relative wealth. For those living in poverty, in precarious employment or on low wages, or those with health conditions or limited access to public transport, there will be additional challenges that need to be taken into account. This is where the principle

of 'shared responsibility from design through to implementation and evaluation of the RVA system' (UIL, 2012, p. 4) is critical. Local stakeholders and sectoral and social partners are generally closer to the learner's day-to-day experience and can provide local or on-site access to RVA. Practitioner support for target groups, therefore, needs to happen at the managerial level as well as on the frontline.

4.4 Assessment and validation

During this phase, an individual's prior learning experiences are assessed and validated against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies. Assessors compare the competences of an individual against a selected reference (or 'yardstick') to the intended learning objectives. This approach helps establish an opinion on possible validation at personal, organizational, sectoral or national level in the form of certification, career advice or personal evaluation. Advice is based on the output or learning benefits to be validated.

In most respondent countries, standards for basic education (on which RVA for youth and adults is based) are part of a comprehensive national qualifications framework (NQF) or system. Standards may also be linked to occupational or sector standards, as is the case in **India**, **Indonesia** and certain African countries (**Mali**, **Benin**, **Senegal**, **Niger** and **Mauritius**). Assessment modes are based on the learning achievements or outcomes that are expected for a specific qualification at the basic education level. In **Mexico** and **South Africa**, alignment of literacy and adult basic education sectors to qualifications is expected to lead to linkages between national qualifications and RVA systems.

Assessors have a variety of techniques for reviewing and assessing documented learning experiences. These have a range of benefits in working with youth and adults without a basic education: *debate*, demonstrating communication and social skills; *declarative methods*, writing down evidence-based statements about their learning against criteria designed to support critical reflection; *interview*, allowing for commentary and clarification of understanding; *observation*, assessing behaviour in a setting (such as the candidate's workplace); *portfolio assessment*, including documents such as résumés, performance appraisals, references, photographs, drawings and digital media; *presentation*, showing candidates' ability to structure complex information and to present it to others; *simulation*, testing complex interactive skill sets in certain contexts; *tests/examinations*, responding to pre-set questions orally or in writing (Duvekot and Geerts, 2012). The challenge of such approaches is scalability, particularly in those countries where there is a high latent demand for the RVA of basic education (such as **Brazil**, **India** and **South Africa**).

In countries such as **Indonesia**, **Republic of Korea**, **India**, **Brazil** and **Mexico**, assessment, guidance and counselling are carried out by agencies appointed by central or local government. The assessment is conducted by trained assessors or instructors who also provide any further learning. Assessor expertise is critical to the success of the RVA process as a whole. Therefore, their own key competences are important. The degree to which the following competences are required depends on the assessor's precise role:

- *Reviewing*, providing an assessment of competences using a number of common competence-based assessment forms such as the portfolio, the criterion-based interview and practical simulations.
- *Observing*, linking standards to an observation.
- *Interviewing*, using specific questions and techniques to make the competences transparent and comparable (to standards).
- *Providing feedback*, indicating the results of assessment in a personalized, constructive and motivating way.
- *Written communication*, writing clear, detailed and structured assessment reports, describing competences against the required standard.
- *Technical competence*, having sufficient experience, skills and qualifications in the appropriate discipline.

(Kleef, 2012; Duvekot and Schuur, 2014).

Such approaches and competences need to be sensitive to the needs of the basic education target group in general, as well as to the needs of specific target groups within that category (for example, migrants). The link with basic

education pedagogy is important so some support for assessors, or joint work between assessors and adult educators,[6] will be required. In some cases, this could result in applying non-formal and informal learning approaches to the RVA process (such as co-design of programmes with learners). In other instances, it requires the adaptation of RVA materials and procedures to be more sensitive to the needs of target groups.

For example, in some countries, especially in **Europe** and **North America**, a frequently used interview technique within assessment methods is the STARRTT form. This is a structured way in which RVA candidates can prepare themselves for a criterion- or behaviour-based interview by describing the specific process of **S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction, **R**esult, **R**eflection, **T**heory and **T**ransfer through which they informally or non-formally acquired specific competences. This method can also be used to document oral testimonials of acquired competence and include non-verbal proof of this personal achievement. Oral documentation can, for instance, be in the form of video material, artistic impressions (paintings, photos, etc.) or peer testimonials (Sinke, 2006; Duvekot and Schuur, 2014). Such approaches may be particularly effective in working with youth and adults with low literacy levels, but may also be resource-intensive.

4.5 Accreditation and certification

Accreditation takes many forms, dependent on national context and the NQF, if there is one in place. Certification can introduce financial costs to the learner into the process and may act as a disincentive. Increasingly, new technologies are being used in all phases of the RVA process, but particularly at the accreditation and certification phase through such initiatives as Open Badges (see *Box 6*). However, it worth noting that digital access is unequal across the globe and within Member States. Those adults and youth without a basic education are less likely to be able to access the benefits of information and communication technology (ICT), so designing a system around access to ICT could have a Matthew Effect. However, the work of Mitra et al. (2005) indicates that digital technologies are not in themselves a barrier to access and may, in fact, stimulate further learning.

6 In many countries in the field of basic education, these roles are undertaken by the same individuals.

Box 6 The role of information and communication technology (ICT) in RVA

ICT is already playing a major role in education, learning and training as well as in supporting RVA policies, strategies and practices. Apart from the development of electronic portfolios, online assessment tools and diagnostic tests, an innovative means for facilitating recognition of learning outcomes for basic education is offered by the Open Badges concept.

A 'badge' is a symbol or indicator of an accomplishment, skill, quality or interest. A 'digital badge' is an online record of achievements, tracking the recipient's communities of interaction that issued the badge and the work completed to get it. Digital badges can support connected learning environments by motivating learning and signalling achievement both within communities as well as across communities and institutions.

Open Badges were created specifically for the facilitation of the RVA of informal and non-formal learning outcomes and are already in use not only in the **United States**, **Canada** and **Europe**, but in some **African** and **Asian** countries where projects are being carried out. Open Badges represent an innovative means of facilitating recognition of learning outcomes for basic education. The ADPIOS Badge Europe and Learning Agents (**Canada**) projects advocate a creative approach to the RVA of informal and non-formal learning and foster acknowledgement of the importance of recognition of informal learning (social recognition) in a lifelong learning cycle (Presant, 2016; Ravet, 2016).

Open Badges take the concept of the digital badge a step further and allow the verification of one's skills, interests and achievements through credible organizations. Because the system is based on an open standard, it is possible to combine multiple badges from different issuers to tell the complete story of one's achievements. One can display one's badges wherever one wants, online or on paper, and share them for employment, education or lifelong learning.

Open Badges enable individuals and organizations to become part of the recognition, validation and accreditation process and thus to gain (shared) ownership of it. Offering new horizons for recognition by peers and members of the community, the simplicity and the technological features of Open Badges represent a valuable asset to consider in the further development of RVA for basic education. For example, Open Badges are used in **Tanzania** to teach sexual health to adolescents. In **South Africa**, the Open Badges Work Group plans to publish a *Badging Guide*, referenced to the South African NQF. In **India**, projects are underway for the facilitation of web literacy and to connect skills to jobs.

4.6 Progression and partnership

How effectively the RVA of basic education enables educational progression is dependent on the education and training system in a given country and how effectively the various stakeholders work in partnership (Myers et al., 2009). The integrated approach in **UAE** is one that confidently asserts that RVA leads to progression. As we have seen, for example in many **African** countries, these systems are highly fragmented, so integrating RVA into education and training systems in Africa is regarded as the way forward.

Likewise, career progression is dependent on the structure of the economy. In the Global South, such economies may be highly informal. For example, the informal sector represents between 80 per cent and 95 per cent of all jobs in **West African** economies. Education and training systems are very fragmented, adding to the difficulty of engaging people through credentialism. If gaining a certificate or qualification does not carry weight in the informal economy, demand may not be stimulated (Boukary, 2016*a*). In **Iceland**, there is a 'follow-up' phase, in which counsellors visit schools and workplaces to connect participants with the right personnel. Counsellors help candidates make a plan for next steps and provide them with longitudinal feedback (Lárusdóttir, 2016). Alongside educational and career progression, it is important to use learner-centred definitions of what constitutes progression for them. This may be taking on greater responsibility in civil society, activism, campaigning, involvement in their children's education, etc.

Furthermore, there is a case for arguing that RVA may be more effective with some target groups than others. For example, some young people leave school early in order to take up opportunities in the labour market. For this group, external summative examinations can be a cost-effective way of acquiring a formal qualification for skills and competences acquired through work. However, the availability of RVA of basic education might also entail the risk of providing an incentive for people to leave formal basic education early. For youth with more complex needs, formative approaches may be a more accessible method of finding a pathway back into education, training or work. The extent to which early school-leavers are supported to undergo validation in the workplace for career progression is less clear. The data for this review suggest that countries are putting greater emphasis on RVA for low-qualified adults than for younger early school-leavers.

Box 7 Mauritius – An inclusive approach to designing learning pathways for all adults and youth

In **Mauritius**, the RVA of non-formal and informal learning of youth and adults is the entry or transition point onto the learning pathway. This approach combines a system of recognition of prior learning (RPL) to provide access (aimed at providing an alternative route into a programme of learning for those who do not satisfy the formal entry requirement for admission) and certification (aimed at awarding learners either a full qualification or part of a qualification). One of the stated benefits for learners is to ease the transition from informal and non-formal to formal learning. This is achieved by enabling the learners to value their achievements, to recognize the importance of learning through experience, and to plan for further learning and personal or career development. (Boukary, 2016*b*)

One enabling factor for effective progression is the development of partnership approaches at local or sectoral level. One such approach can be found in **India**, where manufacturing workers who have acquired their skills informally, on the job, have them accredited through a partnership of employers, learners, senior workers and accrediting bodies. Skills recognition approaches that are focused on the needs of specific sectors, occupations or groups are more effective and give a better return on investment than larger, nationwide systems. RVA for basic education works best when stakeholders are organized within a concrete and specific context. This provides a link between individual learning experiences gained to date and the need for competences at basic education levels. This type of sector-based stakeholdership, supported by national policy, gets results in countries where cooperation is organized between governments and social partners to tackle problems such as low literacy and skills gaps in the labour market (**India**, **Mexico**, **Chile**, **Ghana**, **Mali**, **Niger** and **Benin**).

The linkage of sectoral and national responsibilities as a key feature of utilizing RVA for basic education has strong relevance in **Latin American** countries. **Mexico**, for example, provides RVA opportunities through the Sistema Nacional de Competencias, which is applied only for vocational competences that are work-based and used for certification of work-related competences (Mendoza, 2016).

4.7 Quality and learner-centredness

The *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning* propose the principle of 'quality assurance in the entire RVA process' (UIL, 2012, p. 6). This means each stage of the process needs to be quality-assured, as well as being 'equality-assured' to ensure access and progression is fair, transparent and equitable. This has implications for every aspect of the RVA of basic education that has been covered in this report thus far. Policy-making needs to be quality-assured and evaluated; partnerships for progression need to have their own quality assurance systems in place; partners need to be accredited; and the delivery of RVA processes and procedures each need to be quality-assured.

Most of the research reviewed looks at quality assurance as related to the role of RVA staff (guides, advisors and assessors). Training was considered important to raising awareness of the value of personal learning experiences at basic education levels. Furthermore, the quality assurance of the RVA system depends on the clear formulation of what the expertise of RVA staff entails, how this expertise is gained and maintained, and how staff members are embedded in the system as whole.

For the RVA of basic education, the articulation of learner voice was seen as critical to high-quality delivery. In youth and adult basic education, motivation and co-design of the curriculum are more crucial to success than in other fields (such as TVET). In countries where RVA is considered a right or entitlement (**France**, **Norway**, **Netherlands**) or countries where there are strong links with occupational standards or a regional infrastructure of centres (**Latin America**, **South Africa**, **India**, **Indonesia**, **Portugal**), the learner's voice is often facilitated through guidance activities that take a 'tailored approach'.

The positive impact of learner-centred approaches becomes apparent in a variety of specific RVA objectives for participation (**Netherlands**), redress (**South Africa**), sector utilization and skills gaps (**Mexico**, **Chile**, **Brazil,** **ECOWAS** countries), eliminating mismatches between education and the labour market (**India** and **Indonesia**), and social recognition (**ECOWAS** countries, **Brazil**).

CONCLUSIONS AND KEY MESSAGES

5.1 Twelve conclusions

1. In most cases, the **RVA of youth and adult basic education is at an early stage of development.** Non-formal and informal learning for youth and adult basic education present some specific challenges to the dominant priorities for generic RVA systems. Although individuals may lack formal basic education, they might still have a range of valuable skills and competences, from basic literacy in their mother tongue to higher levels of technical competence gained in the workplace. Life-wide learning approaches recognize that people have developed knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that should be acknowledged and esteemed in themselves. Furthermore, factors such as challenging life experiences, including living in poverty, precarious employment, early marriage, forced migration or areas of conflict, need to be taken into account when designing education systems. There is no effective one-size-fits-all approach as the characteristics and impact of low levels of basic education are diverse and change over time.

2. The role of public authorities is critical to the successful integration of non-formal and informal learning at the basic level into existing RVA systems, as well as the development of new systems. As the RVA of basic education impacts across a range of policy areas – economy, social inclusion, health, welfare, civic engagement, etc. – government budgets benefit in a number of ways. This suggests that working across ministries (such as employment, education, health) would be more effective. However, this is rare.

3. Intersectoral approaches are effective. A wide range of other beneficiaries – local stakeholders, industrial sectors, employers and individuals themselves – need to work together to design and implement policy. Where strong partnerships are in place, RVA processes are more likely to benefit learners and stakeholders alike.

4. Funding matters. One of the main constraining factors limiting future development is cost. RVA is not a cost-neutral process; it requires investment from governments and other stakeholders. Where entitlements are in place for individuals, there can also be other constraining factors. Most systems do not limit access by price, although it is worth noting that there are often considerable opportunity costs for learners in undertaking the RVA of their youth and adult basic education. There are methodological problems in assessing the cost of setting up and running a system of RVA of youth and adult basic education, dependent on the level of existing infrastructure, the degree of embeddedness into learning provision and other national factors.

5. Legislative and policy frameworks are important. Where RVA in general is underpinned by a lifelong learning strategy, the conditions for the integration of the RVA of basic education as a right are more favourable. There is a diversity of approaches to legislation across the countries analysed. Some have created national legal frameworks that include entitlements and carry with them significant resourcing. European nations have benefited from transnational guidelines and initiatives designed to share good practice. In other countries, there are more ad hoc arrangements making the best of fragmented education and training systems. Whatever approach is taken, the resulting educational eco-system is important for the effective integration of the RVA of basic education.

6. The **link with national qualifications frameworks**, where they exist, is interesting for a number of reasons. On the one hand, linking RVA of youth and adult basic education with nationally ratified standards and qualifications provides opportunities for progression into formal education. On the other hand, NQFs tend to be dominated by vocational discourses and skills which leave little space for those competences that may be highly valued by learners themselves. Existing frameworks need

to be more open to a definition of competence beyond that defined by the achievement of technical skills. Although NQFs are not a necessary precondition of effective RVA of basic education, some sort of framework is required (such as competency-based curricula in adult basic education).

7. Within the context of a universal entitlement, RVA for basic education may be more effective when it is **targeted at specific cohorts** so that it addresses individual need. There are a number of ways of doing this, either through national policy instruments or local implementation by social and industrial partners. Effective targeting is dependent on the engagement and support of stakeholders, awareness-raising activities and tailored approaches that are sensitized to specific contexts.

8. Coherent and comprehensive processes are critical. RVA processes and support mechanisms differ between national and sub-national systems, although there has been some coordination across borders in, for example, parts of Europe, to facilitate the sharing of practice and geographical labour mobility. However, a number of generic steps can be identified for the successful implementation of RVA of basic education. Each step has implications for the integration of youth and adult basic education into the RVA system. For example, documentation and assessment techniques need to be adapted to meet the needs and characteristics of target groups. There are clear links here, and much to be learned from basic education pedagogies, whether these are formal or non-formal, and the need for flexible approaches.

9. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have a key role to play in the future development of RVA of basic education. For example, Open Badges were developed to facilitate the RVA of non-formal and informal learning at higher levels. The benefits are not just around cost-effectiveness and the potential for scalability; ICT present opportunities to engage with new and emerging target groups in a way that is accessible and portable across borders. However, there are concerns about equity of access and challenges around connectivity, particularly in poor, rural areas.

10. Progression is an important concept within the RVA of youth and adult basic education. However, in the Global North it is predominately defined in terms of career or labour market progression, which tends to be only one aspect of an individual's motivation. Information, advice and guidance, and educational counselling in some countries, is critical to support a process that reflects the life-stages of individuals; opportunities for further learning; and potential labour market opportunities. This is true of all learners, but, for those at the basic education stage, the support needs are more profound.

11. Quality assurance systems are important to the delivery of effective RVA in general. National qualifications frameworks are seen as delivering some aspects of this: standardization, consistency and monitoring. However, the main focus is on the support of frontline staff, particularly assessors, and their competence. For staff without direct experience of or training in basic education pedagogies, non-formal and formal, or an awareness of how informal learning works, awareness-raising will be needed. There are some instances of role specialization or division of responsibilities that have been put in place to address this need. Furthermore, those working with specific target groups, for example refugees, will need specific development and ongoing support.

12. Learner-centredness is critical on both policy and practice levels. In terms of policy and the design of approaches, learners need be listened to in terms of their previous learning experiences, their experience of the system to date, and relevant characteristics of their life experience (for example, forced migration, patterns of discrimination, cumulative disadvantage). At the practice level, the co-design of non-formal basic education is a key characteristic of provision. For consistency, RVA of basic education gained in this manner would need to be co-designed too. For example, just as non-formal learning involves the negotiation of learning outcomes between learners and practitioners, the same could be achieved in co-designing assessment techniques (with rigorous moderation).

5.2 Key policy messages

The RVA of youth and adult basic education should be embedded into lifelong learning systems. If it is not, huge numbers of youth and adults will miss out on opportunities to progress in learning, at work and in their personal lives.

Member States have committed to universal basic education (UIL, 2017). There are huge potential benefits that need to be accurately assessed so that funding can be allocated or participation incentivized through government measures. Lifelong learning policies should encourage partnership approaches across stakeholder groups at national, local, sectoral and social partner levels. Such systems should include integrated approaches to learner advice and guidance.

Integration of the RVA of youth and adult basic education into existing qualification systems and frameworks should be prioritized. Policy-making in the absence of investment in robust systems will not be enough. Where there are parallel or partial systems of non-formal basic education in place, both will need to adapt to ensure there is one mode of recognition and certification that avoids stigmatization and provides equal opportunities to progress.

More needs to be done to **integrate successful pedagogies of youth and adult basic education into the RVA process.** This includes closer links with the learning process and basic education providers, and joint work with assessors, counsellors and other RVA staff. Well-tried processes in non-formal learning, such as co-design with learners, should be encouraged.

Policy-makers should fund training and development of RVA personnel as a key quality-assurance issue. In addition, they should **stipulate and fund quality assurance and evaluative processes at each stage of the RVA process.** This includes commissioning independent evaluations of policy development and implementation.

It is important to **involve the users of the system in its design and implementation**. The learner's voice is an important concept in youth and adult basic education and needs to be applied in the context of RVA systems.

Better awareness of aspirations, expectations and needs will enable policy to keep pace with current and emerging demands and, for example, changes in the use of new technologies. ICT has a key role to play in the development of RVA of youth and adult basic education, as long as it is learner-centred.

5.3 Further research

In order to support the process of development of RVA of youth and adult basic education, some further research needs to be undertaken.

UNESCO's Observatory should continue to collect country analyses of RVA of youth and adult basic education. These provide an invaluable resource from which important lessons can be drawn in the development of integrated RVA systems. While some systems view the RVA of learning and second-chance education as a matter of social justice, others construe RVA as a necessity for adaptation to changing global markets and for certification to enter the labour market. Within this, the role of guidance and the wider benefits of RVA are important avenues for further research.

Further comparative analysis should be undertaken in those policy and practice areas that are currently under-researched: cost-benefits; the use of ICT; targeted approaches; and lessons to be learned from TVET, workplace settings and higher education. More research is needed as to how key competences gained through basic education may be captured, measured and validated.

Further mapping needs to be undertaken to identify the needs of the target populations for RVA of basic education, their needs and expectations, and their country's basic education system. This would provide a clearer understanding of the linking of RVA with non-formal basic education provision and its pedagogies.

GLOSSARY

Basic education – sometimes referred to as fundamental, elementary or primary/secondary education – consists of at least nine years and progressively extends to up to 12. It is free and compulsory, and prepares the learner for further education and an active life and citizenship, while meeting basic learning needs including learning to learn, and the acquisition of literacy, numeracy, and scientific and technological knowledge as applied to daily life. Equivalent basic education is offered to youth and adults who did not have the opportunity to receive and complete basic education at the appropriate age (UNESCO, 2009).

Recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning outcomes is 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.

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, awards qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles), or grants equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issues documents such as portfolios of competences. In some cases, 'accreditation' applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a programme as a whole.

Competences and learning outcomes
Competences indicate a satisfactory state of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes and the ability to apply them in a variety of situations.

Learning outcomes are achievements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do as a result of a learning process.

Formal, non-formal and informal learning
Formal learning takes place in education and training institutions, is recognized by relevant national authorities and leads to diplomas and qualifications. Formal learning is structured according to educational arrangements such as curricula, qualifications and teaching-learning requirements.

Non-formal learning is learning that has been acquired in addition or alternatively to formal learning. In some cases, it is also structured according to educational and training arrangements, but more flexible. It usually takes place in community settings, the workplace and through the activities of civil society organizations. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, non-formal learning can also lead to qualifications and other recognitions.

Informal learning is learning that occurs in daily life, in the family, in the workplace, in communities and through the interests and activities of individuals. Through the recognition, validation and accreditation process, competences gained in informal learning can be made visible, and can contribute to qualifications and other recognitions. In some cases, the term *experiential learning* is used to refer to informal learning that focuses on learning from experience.

Qualifications and national qualifications frameworks
Qualification refers to what an individual is qualified to do. In the *UNESCO Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning,* a qualification is an official record (certificate, diploma, degree) of learning achievement, which recognizes the results of all forms of learning, including the satisfactory performance of a set of related tasks. It can also be a condition that must be met or complied with for an individual to enter or progress in an occupation and/or for further learning.

National qualifications frameworks (NQFs) are systems of equivalences and classifications of qualifications relating to a set of nationally agreed standards/criteria developed by competent public authorities. NQFs recognize learning outcomes and competences from all forms of learning.

Equivalence
Equivalence refers to a state of being of equal value. The term is typically used to accord competences gained by a learner outside the formal education and training system equal value to those gained in the formal system.

International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED)
ISCED is the standard framework used to categorize and report cross-nationally comparable education statistics. The importance of ISCED 2011 is that it provides a framework for describing various levels of educational attainment that are significant for people seeking access to opportunities in life and further learning. The ISCED 2011 levels range from Level 0 (early childhood education) to Level 8 (doctoral or equivalent level). Levels 1–3 are considered basic education levels, comprising primary education (1st stage), lower secondary education (2nd stage) and upper secondary education (3rd stage):

- ISCED Level 1 explicates fundamental skills in literacy and numeracy and establishes a foundation for learning and understanding core areas of knowledge, personal and social development, in preparation for lower secondary education.
- ISCED Level 2 lays the foundation for lifelong learning on which education systems can systematically expand further educational opportunities for youth and adult learners.
- ISCED Level 3 involves completion of secondary education in preparation for tertiary education or to provide skills relevant to employment, or both. (UIS, 2012)

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United Nations
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Education Sector

Since its 2005 General Conference, UNESCO has supported the recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning for youth and adults and acknowledged the importance of RVA in the development of lifelong learning systems. More recently, the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, in partnership with UNESCO's Section of Partnerships, Cooperation and Research, has undertaken a number of comprehensive analyses of policy and practice in this area. These studies have highlighted the need to focus on the RVA of non-formal basic education.

Globally, the scale of need is enormous. There are significant challenges in integrating the recognition, validation and accreditation of the outcomes of non-formal and informal learning at the basic education level into existing RVA systems and in enabling young people and adults without basic education to complete such processes successfully.

This report summarizes the research and policy dialogue of an international expert group invited by UNESCO to three meetings in 2016. It focuses on three themes – principles, policy and practice – and provides examples of how the issue is being approached across the world. It offers 12 conclusions, based on the evidence considered by the expert group, and proposes a number of key messages for stakeholders in Member States, including policy-makers and the research community.