

Comparing Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education Contexts: The Case of Korea and Turkey

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Abstract

70-90% of individuals' daily learning takes place in informal learning environments like home, job or communities (Latchem, 2013, p.1). As Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) provides new opportunities in formal education contexts by highlighting the importance of knowledge and learning acquired from online informal and non-formal learning environments, the supremacy of formal education has started to be challenged lately. Although varying in higher education field throughout the world in terms of its online implications, as in the rise of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OER) movement, RPL has been an important part of higher education policy for a long time with a rising interest. Besides, regarding the fact that social networks support various learning types as well as innovative educational practices, their potentials in informal and non-formal learning have come into focus (Lucas and Moreira, 2009). Recently, many worldwide organizations, commissions and enterprises have made emphasis on the RPL.

With this in mind, the purpose of this study is to compare the RPL in Korean and Turkish higher education context and degrees to which RPL is accomplished. Moreover, the study will review the related key implementation issues deriving from the concerns in higher education and propose possible solutions within the scope of RPL.

Key Words: Recognition of prior learning, online informal and non-formal learning, credit transfer, prior learning assessment and recognition, Turkish Higher Education, Korean Higher Education

Introduction

Thanks to the rapid advances in Internet and Communications Technology (ICT) the environments through which people learn have shown a tremendous increase as a result of which access to information has been much easier than ever before. The developments in ICT have become visible in education just like in the other disciplines. Parallel with this,

individuals are increasingly using non-formal online environments to improve their knowledge and skills. When we look at the historical process, it is not wrong to say that individuals have taken an active role in individual learning as never before. Also, non-formal learning resources and tools are rapidly growing, especially in online environments (Bonk, 2009, p.3). Today, with the emergence of Open Educational Resources (OERs), Open Course Wares (OCW) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) learning seems to take place in non-formal and informal environments compared to the past. As an example, through the use of voice recognition technology, for the first time throughout the human history online information has become available for those who are illiterate. This will certainly drop the age of starting to learn from online environments. Finally, according to some studies, 70-90% of individuals' daily learning occurs in non-formal settings such as home, workplace or social communities (Latchem, 2013, p.1).

There is an increasing perception that learning from experiences in a variety of informal or non-formal settings, including work life and the community, should be recognized and valued more in particular in educational institutions (Castle and Atwood, 2001, p.61). Although the contribution of these type of learning in non-formal and informal environments leads to individual development and consequently to societal development, it can be seen that the influence of traditional education structure dominates recognition of the learning that takes place in non-formal and informal environments. Here, what we confront is transferring and recognizing the learning that takes place in non-formal environments such as daily life, workplace and social environments. Especially in higher education, individuals encounter problems in recognition of their learning in non-formal and informal environments, main reasons of which can be as follows (Werquin, 2010, p. 21):

- Few studies on the impact of learning in non-formal settings on learners and / or higher education institutions
- Inadequate criteria for recognition of prior learning
- Validity and reliability concerns regarding the recognition of prior learning

For several years, the RPL has been implemented in some parts of the world and although these practices vary over time, European Union and Scandinavian countries are said to be active while Malaysia, China and some sub-Saharan African countries are in the initial stage of the implementation of RPL (Harris and Wihak, 2011, p. 14). When we look at the practices in the world, the RPL is manifested itself in the third sector, which can be defined as non-

profit structures established by individuals oriented towards a common goal to provide collective services in situations where the education system, business life and the public sector are inadequate (Andersson et al., 2013, p. 405).

Within the scope of this study, the following research questions will be addressed in this study:

- What are the similarities and differences in the higher educational contexts of Turkey and South Korea?
- What are the country-specific policies and practices in terms of RPL?
- To what extent RPL can be implemented into the higher educational contexts of these countries?

Turkish Higher Education Context

In Turkey, RPL, is addressed within the process initiated in Bologna Declaration in 19 June 1999 by the education ministers from 29 countries which targets creating a common European Higher Education Area through the involvement of European countries. Although Turkey is a member of European Higher Education Area, and the recognition of prior learning is the main means to promote lifelong learning in Turkey, there has been little or no improvements with this regard mainly due to the legislation's not allowing recognition of informal and non-formal learning officially (Demir, 2009; Lafont and Pariat, 2012). However, especially after 2012 there has been some structural implementations in the national education system with regards to RPL and since 2015 there is a RPL practitioner higher education institution in Turkey.

Korean Higher Education Context

In many studies, no country seems to be as strong as South Korea in terms of undertaking liability in lifelong learning becoming a state policy (Choi and Schied, p. 67). The Korean Qualifications Framework (KQF) was created by the Korean Research Institute for Vocational Education and Training (KRIVET) in 2003. KQF highlights "an integrated system of levels common to academic and vocational qualifications" (UNESCO, 2014). This framework highlights and integrated system of levels which are common for both academic and vocational qualifications. The Ministry of Employment and Labour (MOEL 2010a, 2010b) has worked on making advances to develop the National Qualification Standards (NCS) and improve the quality of the learning outcomes based on the learning outcomes. With regards to the student numbers, there is a huge gap between vocational and academic qualifications in

such a way that a very high value on academic qualifications is attached which constitutes a sharp separation between academic and vocational qualifications (Seung II Na, 2012, p. 156).

Methodology

This study was based on relevant literature and policy documents from online databases like Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, Science Direct, Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) and Web of Science to explore the RPL policies and practices in South Korea and Turkey. Prior learning, recognition of prior learning, lifelong learning, higher education, non-formal and informal learning were the keywords to search on these databases. The research was conducted under three main domains: context, content and comparison which were inspired by a similar search by Boahin et. al (2014, p.845) in which competency-based practices of 2 countries are compared to suggest pathways for other countries. Under contextual analysis, some similar and different aspects in both country's higher education settings that may have possible effects on recognition of prior learning implementations are studied. Under the content analysis domain, the relevant literature has been extensively examined to provide an in-depth view on country-specific RPL policies, practices, and the results of these practices as well as the involvement of other stakeholders and assessment procedures. Within comparative analysis, the similarities and differences in the practices and to what extent RPL can be implemented into the both of the current educational systems were analyzed. The result of the analysis was used to reach a verdict to support the utilization of RPL in South Korea and Turkey.

Contextual Analysis

At the national level in Turkey, Recognition of Prior Learning emerges in work life similar to other countries. Especially at the tertiary level, within the scope of RPL, no concrete steps have been taken in terms of legislative regulations. However, within the act numbered 2547 which include regulations for higher education in Turkey, section b under item 44 allows university boards to take practical steps with regards to recognition of prior learning. In this respect, analyzing the current situation in higher education in Turkey, except for a state university, no other higher education institutions are seen to practice RPL except for compulsory courses. Although some information about RPL is available on the Web Pages of higher education institutions in Turkey, it is seen that expected actions have not been taken with this regard.

In Korea, the interest for recognition of prior learning in South Korea stems from socio-economic developments such as demographic changes and emerging knowledge-based economy (Lee et. al., 2010). Although the Republic of Korea has Korea Qualification Framework (KFA, National Qualification Framework in Republic of Korea), and launched a nation-wide RPL framework neither a tangible process exists nor RPL has associated with KFA (Duvekot and Halba, 2014, p. 24). The South Korean government is closely involved in the Recognition of Prior Learning to establish a link between work life and learning and to increase the role of lifelong learning in higher education institutions (Kang et al., 2014, p. 79). Especially in main policy objectives the RPL is stated under the aims of KFA and NCS as follows (UNESCO, 2014):

- to strengthen the competitiveness of companies and the nation by recognizing informal learning;
- to link the identification, assessment and recognition of non-formal and informal learning to technical and vocational qualifications (Jeong-Yoon, 2012);
- to raise the perceived value of informal and non-formal learning by improving their quality with reference to the criteria and standards in the KQF and NCS.

Content Analysis

In Turkey at the tertiary education level, there exists only one practitioner higher education institution. The board of this institution issued a senatorial resolution based on the 2547 numbered higher education code (section b, article 44) which enables universities to act as autonomous bodies in making decisions on RPL. This higher education institution practices RPL mainly under 3 ways. The first one is, exemption exams for the learning gained through personal interests. Individuals who have specialties in the fields which have correspondent in the higher education curriculum have the opportunity to gain credit by this way. The second practice is recognizing the work place experiences through portfolios and/or exemption exams. By doing so, an individual from working class can be awarded some credits for the curriculum of the intended program. The last one is acknowledging the certificates obtained from accredited or recognized institutions.

However, as many similar practitioner institutions in Europe, there are some limitations on practicing this RPL process decided by the board of institution. The first one is, a learner can apply for courses which have 15 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) credit in total. This limits the courses generally with a number of 3 courses in total. Secondly, for BA programs a minimum of 65 points out of 100; for MA programs a minimum of 75

points out of 100 must be taken. From the interviews held with management it became clear that the success rate in the exemption exams is not so high. Thirdly, these courses are awarded credit but not counted towards Grade point average (GPA), which can be violated by the students who want to have higher grade for the courses which they already have expertise.

Demir (2018) suggests that if higher education institutions are skilled in assessing the outcomes in their formal system, this will certainly strengthen their hands in the recognizing the non-formal and informal learning. In other words, if they know what and how they are assessing in their formal structure, in the beginning similar assessment methods and criteria can be used in RPL process. Of course, these methods and criteria will need to be modified to fit in RPL contexts. The verification of this suggestion can be seen for the practitioner institution in which program, course and unit/topic level outcomes are aligned with the exam questions. This alignment is made visible on a campus-wide software thanks to which learning competencies become observable.

Mechanisms for RPL in Korea are being developed in conjunction with the Korean Qualifications Framework (KQF) and National Competency Standards (NCS) and efforts are being made to re-organize the national qualifications system so that individuals can acquire credits on a proficiency and university degree through the Academic Credit Bank System (ACBS) in which about 500 educational bodies take part (UNESCO, 2014). There has also been an RPL-professional training program in South Korea, whose aim is to create a learning community that provides the participants with the necessary competences and promotes further expertise and practical understanding (Kang et al., 2014, p. 88)

Regarding the practice of RPL in Korea, it won't be wrong to state that RPL is on the set and several higher education institutions are engaging RPL even if this is on a pilot study phase. Through the Erasmus Multilateral Project titled "AllinHE" – Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education, a study was conducted on the North Korean refugees who had to leave their country and were not able to bring any documentation regarding to their prior formal experience in their country. South Korean government adopted a policy to validate which is mainly based on a summative-validation of formal learning (Duvekot and Halba, 2014, p. 24). However, from this experience an alternative way of validation of non-formal and informal learning can be established for refugees.

Comparison Analysis

Although Turkey and South Korea differs geopolitically and population demographics, it won't be wrong to state that these two countries have some common cultural aspect in terms of education. To begin with, in both countries education is perceived as one of the most important must-have properties for employment. In Korea, this results in a sharp separation between academic and vocational qualifications (UNESCO, 2014). Especially, regarding the higher education institutions this will certainly cause a challenge mainly because the outcomes that should be assessed will be different. Also to assess the outcomes of the learning occurring in non-formal and informal contexts, new assessment procedures which may not exist currently will need to be practiced. However, this challenge can be overcome by adapting effective training strategies for RPL professionals. Secondly, both countries attach great importance to lifelong learning in their government and educational policies. This will certainly ease the RPL process which will require governmental support in creating RPL policies. Thirdly, both countries had to receive immigrants who might need to be adapted to the educational system. Including those individuals who have an educational or training background from where they came to their new living spaces is crucial and this can be achieved by effective RPL strategies.

Discussion and conclusion

The higher education institutions in both country may offer a pathway to for the individuals who practiced learning in non-formal and informal environments through RPL. It is important to establish practical units to implement RPL in higher education institutions; but what is more important is the fact that the professional staff deemed to be employed in this unit must have knowledge and skills in RPL processes. These professional's responsibility will include acting like mentors, assessors and advisors to maintain the RPL process (Conrad and Wardrop, 2010). Also, the training of RPL professionals in both country's educational context is of great importance since the RPL process is in its beginning phase. Another important point that should be taken into consideration is involving all stakeholders into the RPL processes as much as possible. These stakeholders include but not limited to the learners, policy makers, ministry of education, educational institutions and industrial organizations and third sector which consists of volunteer bodies that offer free learning environments mainly for personal and professional development. As an example, when an industrial organization or third sector

organizes an event for personal or professional development of individuals, it should contact with the regional higher education institution and collaborate on crediting the participation to this event. This collaboration can be based on aligning the outcomes of the event with the learning outcomes of a program in the regional higher education institution.

Furthermore, latest technological utilities such as block chain technology can be benefitted to track the learning that takes place in non-formal and informal learning environments. With its distributed validating structure, it's nearly impossible to distort the data in block chains and this feature can be used for creating reliable personal e-portfolios through which learning occurring on non-formal and informal environments can become visible.

In both countries RPL can be practiced for the following cases:

- Working class who want to pursue their higher education.
- Immigrants who have an educational/training background where they come from and want to validate it,
- Individuals from disadvantaged groups who couldn't start or continue their education
- Learners who go through a learning process from non-formal and informal environments and want to validate their learning,
- Vocational education training students who want to transfer to higher education

To conclude, with the rapid advances in technology individuals are able to access any information both for personal and professional development, which results in a paradigm shift in education. Unlike as in the past times, higher education institutions are not the ultimate source of education and this should be seen as a threat for these institutions. However, this threat can be changed into an opportunity by utilizing RPL processes. Although these processes bring some challenges, these challenges can be overcome by effective training of RPL professionals and strong partnerships between the two countries especially through sharing experiences.

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