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## Recognition of Prior Learning in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review

Prof Maria Raciti<sup>a</sup>, Dr Aaron Tham<sup>a</sup>, and Mr Joshua Dale<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

### Abstract

The aims of this research are to describe recent, global, empirical understandings of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) and to synthesise and extant knowledge in a way that assists stakeholders in uplifting the transitions to education, employment, or training. RPL matters are particularly important to current sector policy initiatives as reforms to the Australian government's approach to widening participation in higher education have helped in the development of the 2021 National Microcredentials Framework to define, standardise and consolidate RPL for Australian citizens. Furthermore, the recent 2024 Australian Universities Accord Final Report highlights the importance of RPL to facilitate lifelong learning. A systematic review guided by the PRISMA and PICO frameworks identified 65 articles published between 2013-2023, that empirically examined RPL. Using manual thematic analysis, 17 core themes were organised into five meta-themes: 1) the benefits of RPL; 2) the challenges of RPL; 3) RPL processes; 4) institutional processes; and 5) national RPL policy. This article provides timely insights to shape the future RPL research agenda as well as RPL practice and policy in Australia and beyond.

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## Practitioner Points

1. RPL benefits individuals and is a social justice tool to address educational inequity.
2. The central challenge of RPL is that the burden of evidence is placed on applicants, which is exacerbated by disciplinary and industry differences as to 'what counts' and with cross-country issues creating additional barriers for migrants, especially those from English as an Additional Language backgrounds.
3. While 'good practice' RPL processes vary across countries and institutions, there is universal agreement about the importance of a clearly articulated, step-by-step process to ensure fair and valid assessment.
4. In terms of efficient institutional RPL procedures, the overarching view is that assessment should occur in higher education institutions by assessors who are well trained, committed, competent, open minded and who possess both expert and broad knowledge.
5. Regarding national RPL policies, a multi-stakeholder, bottom-up approach to developing policy is recommended, whereby industry expectations are tabled including the appropriateness of RPL for some industries, and the development of guidelines about applicant and assessor subjectivity.

## Introduction

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) creates educational opportunities and is the key to equitable, fair and inclusive higher education. RPL enables social mobility and lifelong learning, uplifting employability, social inclusion and knowledge diversity (Pokorny, 2024). Indeed, governments worldwide are investing in the development of RPL systems to streamline and standardise processes in order to widen participation in higher education for those previously under-represented or excluded (Stephens, 2022). Central to progressing these agendas is the need to consolidate global RPL literature to better understand the current stock of knowledge. This is because there is a highly fragmented approach to RPL across the globe and, in some instances, intra-country variations (Andersson, 2021).

The accreditation of non-formal and informal learning that occurs in workplaces and everyday life is an important policy area in many countries including Australia, South Africa, Sweden and Malaysia. Since its inception in Australia in 1992, RPL has validated the skills and knowledge of those seeking career mobility, including informal learning (Hargreaves, 2006), by endorsing both formal and informal learning from employment, non-formal learning, or previous lived experiences (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). Although there is a lack of agreement as to how RPL should be defined, experts recognise that RPL is a process where individuals receive credit for knowledge and skills attained both inside and outside formal education systems, and assessors evaluate these learnings against a qualification framework (such as the Australian Qualifications Framework, or the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education Standards and Guidelines) often for credit or admission to tertiary institutions (Hargreaves, 2006).

There is a well-established and long-standing body of work across the globe that has sought to define and unpack both RPL and related constructs and approaches. In this vein, scholars note that RPL grants benefits to both individuals and society, such as enabling alternative access to formal learning, reducing time and cost sacrifices in undertaking qualifications, certifying

possession of hard and soft skills or abilities desirable to employers, increasing career mobility, self-efficacy, and motivation, and fostering economic growth (e.g., Andersson et al., 2013). Importantly, Australian literature is framed around Wheelahan et al.'s (2003) seminal report on RPL strategy, which found that the benefits of the RPL experience facilitate social inclusion for priority groups. The 2023 Australian Universities Accord Interim Report frames RPL differently, focusing on facilitating lifelong learning, indicating that a national skills passport or portal like that of other countries is needed (O'Kane et al., 2023).

Recognising RPL is not uniquely Australian, it is a practice used in many other countries to create additional pathways to both higher education and the vocational workforce (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015; Maurer, 2023). Not only has there been international interest in RPL strategy, but many nations have also come to realise the benefits of collaborating their RPL systems to standardise the ways RPL is examined. Online tools like the European Skills Profile Tool or the Chinese Credit Bank have been developed to facilitate a more standardised process for both recognising and evaluating prior learning (Naphthine et al., 2019), suggesting that there are opportunities to develop cross-national online RPL tools to improve pathways to higher education or employment.

Empirical RPL research has been sporadic over time (Figure 2) with recent research drawing on the perspectives of multiple stakeholders. For example, Dilla and Ibarra (2022) conducted interviews and focus groups with RPL-associated staff and university executives. RPL research typically focuses on undergraduate students (e.g., Snyman & van den Berg, 2022) and qualitative forms of data collection (e.g., Jordaan et al., 2018; Porkorny, 2023). No key global researchers have emerged in this area, rather there is a growing diversity of country contexts, voices and experiences with many identifying common shortcomings related to challenges with efficient and fair processes (e.g., Atesok et al., 2019; Baumeler et al., 2023) and students' awareness, articulation and evidencing of their prior knowledge (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021; Pokorny, 2024). While the stock of knowledge about RPL is growing with new country contexts, cohorts and ideas emerging, recent RPL systematic literature reviews such as Cherrstrom et al. (2022) are country-specific with a global perspective noticeably absent from the literature. Hence, this global systematic literature review is timely and needed to summarise the existing global knowledge base and identify trends, patterns, and gaps that will provide a foundation for further research.

The Australian Government recognises multiple priority groups that experience educational disadvantage and authorities have acted on recommendations over the years to foster equal access and opportunity, especially within under-represented student segments (e.g., Bradley et al., 2008; Naphthine et al., 2019). RPL is an enabler of participation among non-traditional students in vocational and higher education as well as in the workforce, reintroducing them to learning systems and lifelong learning (Hamer, 2010). However, Australian RPL has been criticised regarding the disparity in what is promised versus what is obtained, as scholars have described low uptake of RPL among certain priority groups compared to the major beneficiaries, i.e. higher socioeconomic status individuals with prior experience or success in employment, education, and training (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). Indeed, there is a body of literature that reflects the failures of current RPL practices, necessitating an interrogation of RPL literature to help identify ways to improve Australian RPL. As such, this systematic review aims to describe recent, global, empirical understandings of RPL and to synthesise and organise these understandings in a way that assists

stakeholders in uplifting the transitions to education, employment, or training in Australia and other countries around the globe.

Systematically reviewing RPL literature will help to consolidate understanding and provide much-needed clarity that will advance the above-mentioned governmental and education provider investments in developing RPL systems globally. Hence, this research aims to clarify the current global body of knowledge surrounding RPL between 2019 and 2023. A systematic literature review was conducted to answer the following five related research questions:

**Research Question 1:** *What are the benefits of RPL?*

**Research Question 2:** *What are the challenges of RPL?*

**Research Question 3:** *What are 'good practice' RPL processes?*

**Research Question 4:** *What institutional procedures improve RPL efficiency and value?*

**Research Question 5:** *What national RPL policies improve RPL efficiency and value?*

## Method

### Search Strategy

This systematic review appraises extant RPL knowledge and practice. Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) approach (Moher et al., 2009), international RPL literature was examined to extract themes. PRISMA's comprehensive nature and interdisciplinary viability (see Paz et al., 2016), including in education (see Kaushik & Verma, 2020) adds precedent and increased rigour to this review.

The study format was informed by the PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) approach which was developed in the health discipline. PICO is well-regarded as a heuristic for good study design and has been endorsed for interdisciplinary use (Brown, 2020), including in education. Therefore, the format of this review encompasses RPL stakeholders (population); identifying good practices in RPL policy and practice (intervention); approaches to RPL across time, place, and perspective (comparison and outcome); and qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methodologies (study design).

Similar to Cherrstrom et al. (2022), this review's inclusion criteria were English language, full-text, peer-reviewed journal articles reporting on empirical research published in the decade between 2013 and 2023. The exclusion criteria were non-English language research outputs, non-peer-reviewed or non-full-text journal articles, books and book chapters, conference abstracts, and papers and reports.

Eligible papers were those that investigated RPL globally in the context of it being a pathway to education, employment, or training. The literature search was undertaken in mid-February 2023 and drew from reputable databases such as EBSCO, Emerald Insight, Scopus, and Web of Science. Additional records were retrieved from Google Scholar to include a 'broad spectrum' element in the literature search. However, this introduced the risk of the bubble effect (see Curkovic, 2019), as Google Scholar uses algorithms to personalise search results, making its

output non-replicable. This risk was mitigated by increasing the number of databases and maximising their coverage.

The ten-year inclusion period allowed a balance of recency and coverage while also enabling the data to be examined chronologically. Fortuitously, this timeframe also encompassed the release of former Australian State Premier, Napthine and colleagues (2019) National Regional, Rural and Remote Tertiary Education Strategy, which built upon previous strategy reports and recommendations for redressing inequities in higher education, including Bradley et al. (2008) and Halsey et al. (2018). Napthine et al. (2019) inspired reforms to the Australian government's approach to widening participation in higher education and helped in the development of the National Microcredentials Framework: a post-COVID proposal to define, standardise and consolidate RPL for Australian citizens (Australian Government, 2021).

## **Data Collection**

RPL is named differently around the globe, and thus, the search query included a variety of terms to ensure international representation in the literature. The search string and selection parameters were determined via a careful iterative process commencing with a cursory literature search, and the development of a preliminary search string based on keywords known by the research team (who have expertise in this area), which was supplemented with those used in the captured journal articles. The research team observed that, rather than evolving over time, keywords were country-specific. For example, RPL was typically used in countries across Europe, Africa, South and North America, and Australia. Keywords such as 'accreditation of prior experiential learning' were used in Malaysia (e.g., Ooi & Eak, 2019), and 'validation of non-formal and informal learning' was used in several European countries (e.g., Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2019; Staboulis & Sytziouki, 2021).

Following the initial sweep of the literature, the authors carefully read and critiqued the captured articles and engaged in a dialogical approach to consensus-forming (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Moher et al., 2009). A shared critical table displayed key information from each article, documenting initial 'noticings' of additional keywords for the search query and potential themes. Each article was reviewed more than once and by more than one researcher as the saturation of potential themes necessitated multiple readings. This process of deriving additional keywords and early 'noticings' of themes is consistent with systematic literature reviews conducted elsewhere by others (e.g., Gernsheimer et al., 2021; Lai & Bower, 2019; Rejeb et al., 2022). This process involved fortnightly in-person and online meetings as well as 'flying minutes' spanning several months. AI software tools were not used. After a period of refinement, the final search query was:

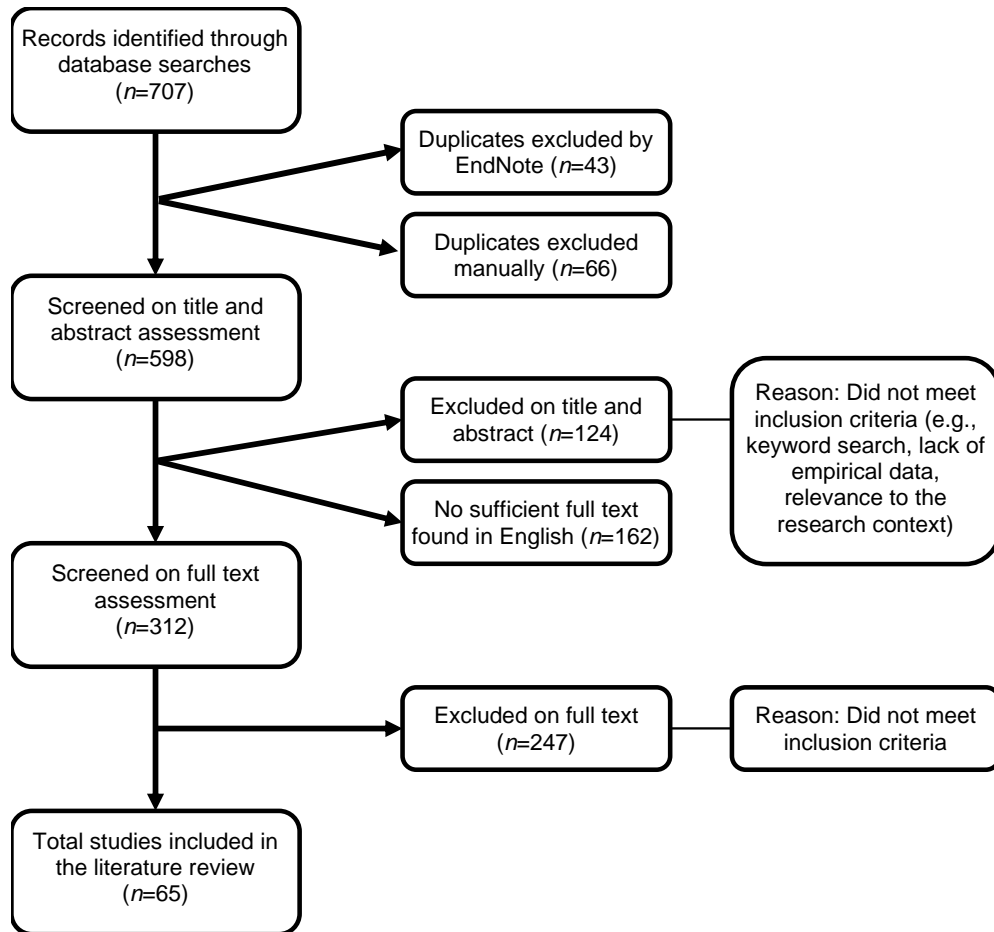
("Recognition of Prior Learning" OR "Recognition of Non-Formal Education" OR "Prior Learning Assessment Recognition" OR "Recognition and Validation of Competence") AND (NOT "Work-Integrated Learning" OR "Experiential Learning" OR "Information and Communications Technology" OR "Facial Recognition" OR "Machine Learning" OR "Computing").

This query could not entirely exclude an overlap with work-integrated learning or machine learning which contributed to a higher return rate. Considering RPL-located studies associated with assessment of prior learning (APL) and accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) are distinctive from RPL but are nevertheless relevant in its implementation and conduct, these terms

were included in the selection of articles. A limitation of the research is that, due to strict adherence to the above-mentioned final search query, no research published in languages other than English was included in the final data set.

**Figure 1**

*Literature Screening Process*



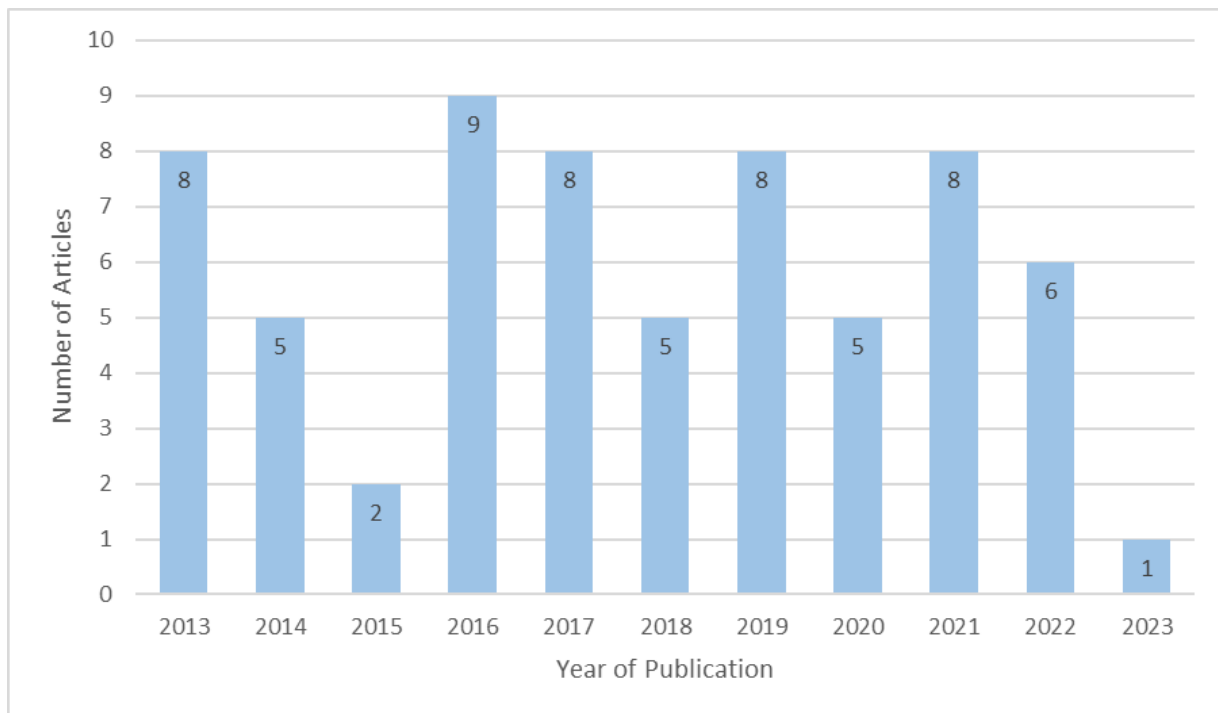
Collected records were assessed for duplicity and then eligibility according to the process outlined in Figure 1. First, using EndNote and manual evaluation, all duplicate records were identified and removed. After the exclusion of duplicate records, the literature search included 598 unique papers. Eligibility assessments were first conducted by a single researcher and then triangulated with the other two researchers. Any disagreements on article eligibility were resolved by discussion until a consensus was reached among the research team. The full-text assessment of these articles by one of the researchers yielded 65 records matching the inclusion criteria. This was a return rate of 10.9% which, while low, still allowed data saturation to be achieved. Interrater reliability checks were conducted, resulting in a 98.5% agreement rate among the three researchers.

## Analysis

Analysis of the 65 unique records (Figure 2) was completed in three phases. First, the characteristics of the studies including their choice of methodology, stakeholder perspectives and country of focus were drawn from the articles allowing for descriptive patterns to be identified. The next two phases employed manual thematic analysis using a dialogical consensus-forming approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Moher et al., 2009). The second phase involved deep thematic analysis resulting in the identification of 16 themes (see Technical Appendix). The team members independently identified patterns by noticing similarities, differences, frequency and context, creating notes and identifying words and phrases in the content to form the basis of initial inductive coding. These observations were then documented in a shared file and ongoing discussions throughout this process allowed the team to share, challenge and calibrate interpretations. Additional comparisons and reflections prompted further iterative deductive re-analysis and, in some cases, consolidation of the themes. In other instances, discussion among the research team centred on deciding on the most prominent theme present in articles where theme co-occurrence was apparent. In the last phase, the research team engaged in an iterative and pragmatic approach to organise the themes into meta-themes that aligned with the studies key research questions.

### Figure 2

*Global RPL Peer-Reviewed Empirical Journal Articles Published 2013-2023 (n = 65)*



# Results

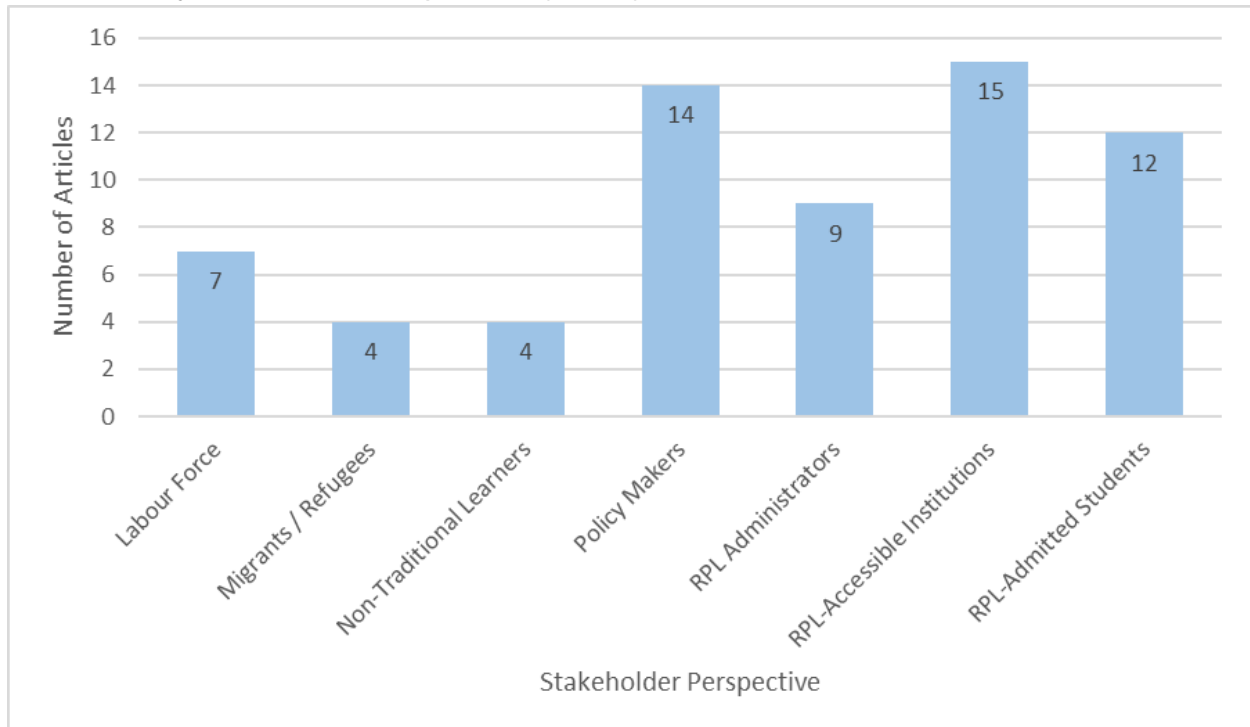
## Characteristics of Studies

The most frequently occurring methodology observed within the data was qualitative (35/65, or 53.9%), followed by mixed method (19/65, or 29.2%), and finally, quantitative (11/65, or 16.9%) approaches. This distribution of methodologies indicates that research on RPL and widening participation is predominantly centred around the exploration of lived experience.

The thematic analysis revealed a breadth of perspectives (Figure 3). The literature was contextualised around the RPL learning and certification process (36/65, or 55.4%), with findings centred around the RPL-applicant experience as well as RPL policies and processes (27/65, or 41.5%), which focused on the legislative, procedural, and operational aspects of administering RPL. A small percentage of the literature investigated RPL's impacts on the labour market (2/65, or 3.1%), including how the labour force benefits from RPL, particularly in geographical areas with skill shortages. While these perspectives and contexts often overlap, the data indicates that RPL has many faces, with each stakeholder group having a unique stake in its operation.

**Figure 3**

*Distribution by Stakeholder Perspectives (n = 65)*



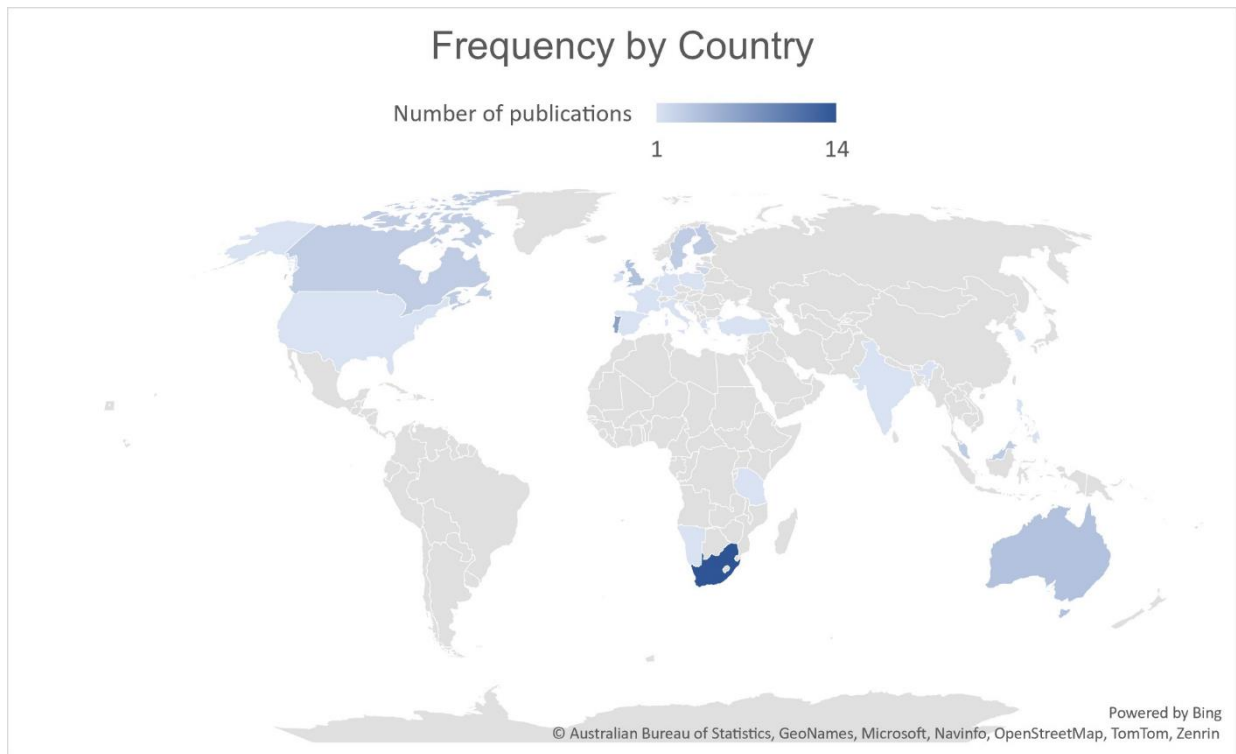
While the data only included English-language publications, no geographical restrictions were imposed upon the search, and the records represented the cultures and contexts of 27 countries across six continents (Figure 4). Although the bulk of literature was published in the Global North (42/65 or 64.6%), a sizable minority came from the Global South (23/65 or 35.4%). Among the latter, most studies were published in South Africa, which was also the most frequently observed



country among studies meeting the inclusion criteria (14/65 or 21.5%). This is due to RPL being espoused as a valuable tool in redressing the country's lasting educational disadvantage caused by Apartheid (Snyman & van den Berg, 2018). Notably, despite growing interest in RPL (Naphine et al., 2019), no publications were found to originate from China. However, this may simply be due to the English language inclusion criteria of this study.

**Figure 4**

*Distribution by Country of Publication*



**Meta-themes and Sub-themes**

Five meta-themes were identified, comprising several sub-themes (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Frequency of Meta-themes and Themes*

Meta-themes and Themes	<i>n</i>	Description
<b>Benefits</b>	<b>37</b>	The advantages associated with pursuing an RPL qualification and participating in an RPL experience.
Personal Benefits for Applicants	20	
Social Justice Benefits	15	
<b>Challenges</b>	<b>51</b>	The disadvantages associated with pursuing an RPL qualification and participating in an RPL experience.
Formal, Non-formal and Informal Learning Challenges	19	
Applicant's Personal Challenges	18	
Credibility Challenges	14	

<b>Processes</b>	<b>50</b>	
Components of the Processes	14	Good practice in the delivery of the RPL experience.
Applicants' Personal Development Processes	20	
Personalised Processes for Applicants	16	
<b>Institutional Procedures</b>	<b>41</b>	
Assessor's Positioning	17	The responsibilities of institutions offering RPL to maximise their efficiency and value.
Flexible Procedures	5	
Institutional Commitment and Investment	10	
Transparency	9	
<b>National RPL Policy</b>	<b>14</b>	
Bottom-up Stakeholder Cooperative National Policy	4	The collaborative responsibilities of institutions and external stakeholders to maximise the efficiency and value of RPL.
Industry Expectations	2	
Appropriateness	3	
Standardisation	6	

### ***Benefits (n = 37)***

The first meta-theme related to the advantages associated with pursuing an RPL qualification and participating in an RPL experience. It included two sub-themes: personal benefits for applicants (n = 20) and social justice benefits (n = 15).

#### *Personal Benefits for Applicants (n = 20)*

Participation in an RPL program was linked to a series of functional, social, and emotional personal benefits for applicants. The literature conveyed that RPL was a valuable tool for developing self-confidence and determination as well as empowering non-traditional students. Werquin (2021), Makhatsane (2020), Barros (2014), and Khalil (2020) found that RPL participation invoked a sense of pride that increased their self-esteem and confidence, which motivated students to persist in their studies. Personal growth, critical thinking, self-reflection and an improved sense of agency were also reported (e.g., Armsby, 2013; Bilon 2016; Browning, 2020; Hlongwane 2019). RPL was described as empowering and transforming (Miguel et al., 2016; Muller et al., 2017), triggering self-awareness and nurturing a sense of identity (Pokorny 2024; Snyman & van den Berb, 2018). RPL also facilitated social mobility by improving successful applicants' socioeconomic status (Bilion 2016; Lima & Guilmaraes, 2016; Rothboeck et al., 2018; Roy & Marsafawy, 2021).

#### *Social Justice Benefits (n = 15)*

RPL was identified as playing a crucial role in the pursuit of social justice, redressing past experiences of educational inequality and enabling social inclusion (Barros, 2013, 2014; Bilon, 2016; Hamer, 2013; Hlongwane, 2021). RPL helps demystify study and better prepare non-traditional students by focusing on foundational skills and baseline knowledge and teasing out hidden or marginalised knowledge (Brenner et al., 2021; Cooper & Harris, 2013; Gair, 2013). Pitman and Vidovich (2013), Stephens (2022), and Yeasmin et al. (2020) highlighted that RPL is a means of social redress and transformation as the applicant's learning is defined by their underpinning capital, extending beyond educational credentials and recognising educational inequality, disadvantage, and special needs and circumstances. As a result, inclusive academic

opportunities were provided via RPL (Hlongwane et al., 2019; Khalil, 2020; Snyman & van den Berg, 2022; Yeasmin et al., 2019).

### ***Challenges (n = 51)***

The second meta-theme identified the disadvantages associated with pursuing an RPL qualification and participating in an RPL experience. It encompassed three sub-themes: 1) formal, non-formal, and informal learning challenges (n = 19); 2) applicant's challenges (n = 18); and 3) RPL credibility challenges (n = 14).

#### *Formal, non-formal, and informal learning challenges (n = 19)*

RPL was regarded as the assessment and recognition of formal, non-formal, and informal learning experiences (Daley, 2017; Voss, 2016). Formal learning occurred in structured education systems and was credentialed, while non-formal and informal learning was uncredentialed and took many forms of experiential and practical learning, such as that which occurs in workplaces or everyday life (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015; Pitman & Vidovich, 2013; Snyman & van den Berg, 2018). While 'knowledge' was associated with formal learning, competencies and skills tended to be linked to non-formal and informal learning (Alonderienė & Sabaliauskaitė, 2018; de Graaff, 2014; Gair, 2014; Tütlys et al., 2019). Formal learning was regarded as less challenging to demonstrate and assess than non-formal learning, and non-formal learning was considered less challenging to demonstrate and assess than informal learning (e.g., Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2019). Harris and Wihak (2017) pointed out that this was further complicated by discipline-specific approaches in terms of ascertaining the relevance of knowledge, competencies and skills when RPL is being sought for admission or credit to a program. If granted, RPL could negatively affect cohort models of teaching, with the applicant missing out on valuable social integration (Harris & Wihak, 2017).

Other tensions emerging in the literature included that the benefits to the applicant need to be considered in the light of the implications for the accrediting organisation's credibility and perception of upholding standards (Browning, 2020; Day, 2016) and that RPL established outside of an academic classroom may not easily be translated to an academic classroom environment (Russouw, 2016). Roy and Marsafawy (2021) supported the involvement of national professional and regulatory bodies in guiding RPL assessment. Shaketange (2018) also encouraged national frameworks, expectations, and interventions to help address the challenge of a lack of institutional resources for RPL, with Tütlys et al. (2019) highlighting that national non-government organisations could be an effective credible source of support for applicants preparing their RPL portfolio.

#### *Applicants' Challenges (n = 18)*

Several personal challenges faced by applicants were reported in the literature. Brenner et al. (2021) noted that applicants must be able to trust that RPL is adequately preparing them for university. Similarly, Chisvert-Tarazona et al. (2019) noted several challenges for applicants with an absence of cross-country collaboration, which was problematic for migrants. They also highlighted concerns centred on the accrediting of informal learning with employers less likely to recognise RPL certification resulting in lower-paid roles and higher education institutions questioning and being sceptical of informal learning. The burden of evidence was placed on

applicants (Hamer, 2013) who accrue resource, cost, and time impositions in preparing their applications (Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017; McGreal et al., 2014) and who may feel pressured to manufacture a learning identity with RPL that may not be culturally appropriate and ignores Indigenous knowledge (Gair, 2013). For applicants with parental or caring responsibilities, the onerous RPL process and learning in general could be discouraging (Mbunda et al., 2020). Applying for RPL was typically stressful and not straightforward. Applicants were often confused and challenged by relating their prior learning to course information with high levels of subjectivity and therefore, many needed specialised support in the process of application (Mothokoa & Maritz, 2018; Muller et al. 2017; Ooi & Eak, 2019). Applicants with English as an additional language struggled to explain their competencies and could be hesitant to ask questions or seek help for fear of being judged (Udeagha et al., 2022).

#### *Credibility Challenges (n = 14)*

Challenges also emerged with the credibility of universities prioritising credentialed academic standards over student capabilities in enrolment processes (Browning, 2020). The inconsistency in how RPL is assessed and by whom such that it is deemed valid and consistent undermined the credibility of RPL and was perceived as weakening academic rigour in some disciplines (Coombridge & Alansari, 2019; Cooper & Harris, 2013; Day, 2016). Garnett and Cavaye (2015) recommended that RPL works in tandem with qualifications frameworks to ensure credibility is maintained and that tacit knowledge is made explicit in knowledge claims. Specific skills required by employers, particularly recent technological advances, mean that the industry must also perceive that the RPL granted is credible and up-to-date (Pilkinton-Pikho et al., 2019; Staboulis & Sytziouki, 2021; Stephens, 2022). Indeed, Rothboeck et al. (2018) suggested that employers should be incentivised to promote and acknowledge RPL.

#### ***RPL Processes (n = 50)***

The third meta-theme identified pertained to the RPL process, which addressed good practice in the delivery of the RPL experience. Three sub-themes emerged: 1) components of the process (n = 14); 2) applicant's personal development processes (n = 20); and 3) personalised processes for applicants (n = 16).

#### *Components of the Process (n = 14)*

RPL was universally presented as a sequenced or staged process and the intent was to ensure that valid and fair assessment and outcomes were achieved (Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015; Coombridge & Alansari, 2019; Dilla & Ibarra, 2022). The use of a formal process was not only to ensure standardisation and clarification for applicants and assessors but also administrative efficiency (Barros, 2014; Dilla & Ibarra, 2022; Hlongwane, 2017). Processes for applicants were not discussed as much as processes for the institution and evaluators and coverage of the components of the RPL process tended to centre on assessment. Aligning, for the most part, with the literature, Mikulec et al. (2022) provided a four-stage process that comprised of: a) screening and counselling; b) orientation and documentation; c) assessment; and d) certifications. Noting that an appeal process was absent from their process, Heinonen and Tuomainen (2020) recommended that candidates pass an eligibility stage in the first instance. Rothboeck et al. (2018) suggested training for potential applicants' pre-assessment as many had been at a

distance from the educational system for some time. Processes of application were reported to require participants to prepare a portfolio that included written documentation and other relevant evidence to demonstrate knowledge, competencies, and skills (Barros, 2014; Hlongwane, 2017; McGreal et al., 2014; Rossouw, 2016). Oral interviews, practical demonstrations, roleplays, performances, and conversations were non-written methods that could be required to supplement portfolios, with some articles noting the need to provide alternative ways as evidence but highlighting the burden that this might place on both assessors and applicants (e.g., Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2015; Bofelo, 2013; Day, 2016; Rossouw, 2016). The findings of Coombridge and Alansari (2019) indicated the importance of assessment by multiple evaluators, with Barros (2014) noting the need for evaluators to undergo standardised training to ensure consistency and efficiency. Heinonen and Tuomainen (2020) mentioned that evaluators must be transparent and honest about whether a learning experience demonstrates a relevant competency and Day (2016) suggested that dedicated RPL evaluator positions are needed. Little was written in the literature about the documentation evaluators completed, appeals processes, timeframes, and the certification process.

#### *Applicant's Personal Development Processes (n = 20)*

Applicant's benefits (Meta-theme #1, Table 1) were derived from RPL personal development processes. Armsby (2013) described RPL as a personal development tool, and stated the process itself inculcates a new knowledge and skill set. Preparing RPL portfolios and undergoing interviews, tests or other types of assessment required the applicant to immerse themselves into the requirements of an academic environment and link these to their honest appraisals of knowledge and skills. Bofelo (2013) described RPL as a process of integration and requires an understanding of context and transferability, with Cooper and Harris (2013) highlighting that this requires candidates to go beyond surface-level understanding. As Day (2016) suggested, this process should be supported with training for candidates to help them reflect and profile their knowledge and skills. RPL can assist in the building of candidates' professional identities by requiring reflection and finding ways to articulate and make their knowledge and skills visible (Eliasson et al., 2022; Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). This process is no easy feat, with mentorship and advice that is easily accessible and clearly explained by people that candidates trust being noted as crucial to success (Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021; Jordaan et al., 2018; Khalil, 2020; Klindt, 2021). RPL is considered the catalyst for lifelong learning and processes that require self-awareness, translation of knowledge and skills across contexts, and represents higher level learning that prepares and motivates candidates and builds self-confidence (Malatji & Maphosa: 2016; Miguel et al., 2016; Pokorny, 2024; Snyman & van den Berg, 2018; 2022).

#### *Personalised Processes for Applicants (n = 16)*

RPL processes were considered highly personalised as each candidate arrives at the process with a unique micro-history comprised of formal, non-formal, and informal learnings from a suite of contexts (Bélisle & Rioux, 2016; Day, 2016). Many of these unique life experiences have hidden knowledge and skills that are not visible on the surface, meaning that authentic engagement needs to be hardwired into RPL and 'tick box' approaches are not feasible (Pilkinton-Pikho et al., 2019; Gair, 2013; Hamer, 2013). There is no one-size-fits-all RPL process as the country and time when learning occurred and the gap between those experiences and current expectations requires personalised processes as do issues such as language barriers, career aspirations,

experiences of exclusion, fear of judgement and under-confidence among marginalised groups (Rossouw, 2016; Snyman & van den Berg, 2018; Stephens, 2022; Udeagha et al., 2022; Werquin, 2021; Yeasmin et al., 2020).

### ***Institutional procedures (n = 41)***

The fourth meta-theme pertaining to institutional procedures covered the responsibilities of institutions offering RPL to maximise their efficiency and value. Four sub-themes emerged; 1) assessors positioning (n = 17); 2) flexible admissions (n = 5); 4) institutional commitment and investment (n = 10); and 5) RPL transparency (n = 9).

#### *Assessor's Positioning (n = 17)*

Where the RPL assessment takes place and by whom were central to the positioning of this sub-theme. RPL assessment should occur in and by higher education institutions as the ideal validation provider due to the formal accreditation system of which they are part (e.g., Aarkrog & Wahlgren, 2017; Balković et al., 2017; Day, 2016; Voss, 2016). RPL assessors need to possess several qualities to ensure that RPL is fair, valid and consistent (Coombridge & Alansari, 2019) and should focus on the uniqueness of the applicant rather than the bureaucratic process (Barros, 2014; Coombridge & Alansari, 2019; Hamer, 2013; Malatji & Maphosa, 2016; Ooi & Eak, 2019). They require training, should be highly familiar with the institutional guidelines, current and historical institutional and national qualification frameworks, career paths, and employer or industry/professional standards. The literature highlighted the importance of multiple rather than single assessors for each applicant and emphasised the following qualities of good RPL assessors: committed, honest, competent, open-minded, able to consider learnings beyond the status quo, possessing both expert knowledge and broad knowledge, relatable, reliable, credible and effective communicators (e.g., Rothboeck et al., 2018; Sandberg, 2014; Sherron et al., 2021; Staboulis & Sytziouki, 2021; Stenlund, 2013; Udeagha et al., 2022).

#### *Flexible Procedures (n = 5)*

RPL should offer flexible procedures that are success-focused and assist all applicants, particularly those who are refugees or new migrants (Atesok et al., 2019; Eliasson et al., 2022). In some countries, academic structures were biased in ways that privilege the dominant culture in terms of what knowledge and skills count (Morley, 2021). These academic structures influenced the perceived legitimacy of an applicant's knowledge and skills claims and were rigid in the procedure to be followed (Harris & Wihak, 2017; Werquin, 2021). However, when done well and with flexible admissions procedures, RPL improved an academic system's inclusiveness by reducing social exclusion and empowering marginalised people (Yeasmin et al., 2020).

#### *Institutional Commitment and Investment (n = 10)*

Proper and committed implementation of a flexible and fair RPL process by higher education institutions required an ongoing allocation of resources (Makeketa & Maphalala, 2014). The benefits of RPL for individual candidates and social justice for communities and society at large were significant and required institutions to take an active role in promoting RPL to potential candidates (Hlongwane, 2019). Online RPL portals, training for applicants and assessors, time for assessors away from other academic duties, building partnerships with industry to support

RPL processes, developing assessor rubrics and different assessment methods as well as workflows to process credits all required investment from institutions (Browning, 2020; Dilla & Ibarra, 2022; Heinonen & Tuomainen, 2020; Khalil, 2020; Malatji & Maphosa, 2016; Muller et al., 2017; Rothboeck et al., 2018).

#### *Transparency (n = 9)*

The credibility of RPL was referred to frequently in the literature, mostly associated with increasing academic, employer, community, and cross-country acceptance of RPL as a legitimate process by making its purpose, benefits, legitimacy, and value transparent (Browning, 2020; Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2019; Guimarães & Mikulec, 2021; Hlongwane, 2019). RPL transparency as a sub-theme also referred to clarification for potential candidates of the legitimacy of the process and countering perceptions that it is not for them (Mbunda et al., 2020). In addition to clarifying who it is for and how and where to access it, institutions should build general awareness in schools, online, and through social networks that RPL is available to aid with entrance into careers and reduce learning journeys (Staboulis & Sytziouki, 2021; Roy & Marsafawy, 2021).

#### **National RPL Policy (n = 14)**

The final meta-theme pertaining to national RPL policy covered the collaborative responsibilities of institutions and external stakeholders to maximise the efficiency and value of RPL. Four sub-themes emerged: 1) bottom-up stakeholder cooperative national policy (n = 4); 2) industry expectations (n = 2); 3) RPL appropriateness (n = 3); and 4) RPL standardisation (n = 6).

#### *Bottom-up Stakeholder Cooperative National Policy (n = 4)*

RPL involved many stakeholders that need to be engaged and heard, such as candidates (potential, current, and past), employers, and assessors (e.g., Singh & Ehlers, 2019). The literature recommended bottom-up implementation of national RPL policy design to ensure that grassroots stakeholders, such as employers, are part of the conversation and allowed to voice their needs and concerns, as top-down implementation is likely to be met with stakeholder pushback (Mikulec et al., 2022; Singh & Ehlers, 2019). For RPL to work and be accepted as legitimate, all stakeholders in the ecosystem must be aware of and accept RPL, including industry-based regulatory bodies (Roy & Marsafawy, 2021).

#### *Industry Expectations (n = 2)*

What is learned in courses, and industry expectations must be aligned with RPL to ensure that credit does not overlook relevant knowledge and skills and that the candidate will be able to achieve their career goals and be successful in their industry of choice (Pilkinton-Pikho et al., 2019). Furthermore, Staboulis and Sytziouki (2021) explained that RPL must, by design, provide professional development opportunities for employees and job-seekers that build on all types of learning to foster career mobility, which can be achieved through close cooperation with industry.

#### *Appropriateness (n = 3)*

The appropriateness of RPL varies across industries, with some jobs more suitable for RPL than others. In such situations, the private sector should be incentivised to promote and acknowledge RPL (Rothboeck et al., 2018). Similar sentiments existed regarding academic courses, as in some

courses RPL was considered to be more appropriate than in others (Harris & Wihak, 2017). While some fields embrace and promote RPL and it is seen to help set up candidates for success, differences in universality should also be acknowledged (Cooper & Harris, 2013).

### *Standardisation (n = 6)*

RPL flexibility tends to be at the cost of standardisation, with differences in frameworks and approaches between countries, institutions, courses, and industries (Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2019; Lodigiani & Sarli, 2017). Furthermore, with a high degree of subjectivity and wide variations in approaches, training, and procedures, it is difficult to determine equivalence (Ooi & Eak, 2019; Roy & Marsafawy, 2021; Shaketange, 2018). Voss (2016) recommended that RPL require national guidelines and frameworks that are co-created with industry and other key stakeholders.

## **Discussion**

The results of this systematic literature review reveal the highly fragmented nature of RPL across the globe. Although the characteristics of RPL studies vary, the vast majority adopt the perspective of one or only a few institutions at a single point in time. While there is a general consensus on the principles of RPL, operationalising these remains largely varied across countries and among institutions within countries.

The results reveal that the benefits of RPL (RQ1) are both personal and social in that they can be used as a social justice tool to address educational inequality. Personal benefits to individuals extend beyond academic credit to include improved self-confidence, personal growth and agency (e.g., Browning, 2020; Hlongwane, 2019). Indeed, RPL is transformative for individuals, enabling non-traditional students to reauthor their lives (e.g., Miguel et al., 2016; Muller et al., 2017). The review also highlights the power of RPL as a social justice tool to redress disadvantage (e.g., Stephens, 2022). This systematic review confirms that RPL is a mechanism that can bring about the widening of participation in higher education, which is a policy priority for many countries.

The benefits of RPL are tempered by the challenges (RQ2) that are posed in evidencing non-formal and informal learning, which is further complicated by disciplinary differences (Harris & Wihak, 2017), cross-country biases and challenges for migrants (Chisvert-Tarazona et al., 2019). Crucially, when pursuing RPL, the onus of responsibility and burden of evidence is placed on applicants to demonstrate that they possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities to convince institutions of the worthiness of their learning experiences (Hamer, 2013).

'Good practice' RPL processes (RQ3) vary across countries and institutions but there is a universal recognition of the importance of a clearly articulated, step-by-step process to ensure fair and valid assessment (Dilla & Ibarra, 2022). Nonetheless, there is a notable absence of details as to evaluator criteria, appeals processes, timeframes and, when successful, RPL credit or certification processes. The lack of standardisation and transparency in RPL processes and evaluation likely results in inefficiencies and may lead to unintended consequences such as promoting 'shopping' behaviour whereby applicants may submit several RPL requests to different universities and pursue those educational opportunities where favourable outcomes are received. This ultimately constrains choice.

In terms of efficient institutional RPL procedures (RQ4), significant emphasis is placed on the assessor and where the assessment took place. The overarching sense is that assessment



should occur in higher education institutions by assessors who are well trained, committed, competent, open minded and possess both expert and broad knowledge (e.g., Udeagha et al., 2022). The absence of rubrics used in RPL literature is evident, however a strong desire for transparency and awareness of RPL for stakeholders to establish legitimacy is well supported (e.g., Mbunda et al., 2020).

Lastly, a discussion about how national RPL policies can improve RPL efficiency and value (RQ5) provides some points of reference, such as reducing subjectivities, enhancing equitable access to tertiary admissions, and transferability across institutions. However, there is no clear indication of practical ways in which governments can formulate a streamlined and standardised RPL process. The results recommend a multi-stakeholder, bottom-up approach to developing policy (e.g., Mikulec et al., 2022) and forming guidelines (e.g., Roy & Marsafawy, 2021), whereby industry expectations can be tabled (e.g., Staboulis & Sytziouki, 2021), the appropriateness of RPL for some industries discussed (e.g., Harris & Wihak, 2017) and issues such as subjectivity addressed.

This research has two primary limitations. First, the nature of the systematic review meant that the investigation was limited to the use of secondary data that met the inclusion criteria and search string. Thus, this research cannot claim to have explored those perspectives present in the excluded literature, especially those studies that have been reported in a language other than English. Secondly, this research aimed to generate global insights about RPL that could be useful to the Australian context but found only one paper focusing on research conducted in Australia. This suggests that RPL in Australia requires future empirical research as knowledge of Australian RPL is implicit and/or highly fragmented.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has explored recent, global, empirical understandings of RPL by synthesising and organising the findings of existing literature. A systematic review of 65 studies representing a variety of countries, cultures, and contexts revealed five meta-themes prevalent in RPL discourse: 1) the benefits of RPL (RQ1); 2) the challenges of RPL (RQ2); 3) 'good practice' processes (RQ3); 4) institutional processes that improve RPL efficiency and value (RQ4); and 5) national RPL policy that improve efficiency and value (RQ5). These findings can assist stakeholders in uplifting the transitions to education, employment, and training and, in doing so, maximise RPL's benefits to society.

However, marketing RPL as a path to higher education must consider the individual's actual ability, as participants require an honest evaluation of whether they are academically capable of transitioning into, and succeeding in, further study. The advice provided should be accompanied by different scenarios of a student's learning journey, such as with RPL and without, and the benefits and drawbacks of each pathway. RPL is not merely a vehicle to recognise a student's past academic or relevant work achievements, it should also be contextualised around a student's lifestyle, work, family, and other commitments to shape an optimal and desirable study environment.

The research highlights some theoretical and practical implications, particularly in terms of the Australian RPL practice as a key area of concern for future researchers. Although the findings

generated in this review can be appropriated into the Australian context, more nuanced, empirical studies are encouraged to provide an accurate assessment of the nation's approach to RPL design, execution, and opinion. The findings also indicate that RPL stakeholders must advocate for standardised evaluation criteria to recognise prior learning and integrate risk management strategies into their roles. They should also aim to increase awareness of RPL, particularly when interacting with traditionally excluded individuals.

This research sheds light on RPL as a common principle in supporting and recognising students' experiences before commencing their tertiary qualifications. The findings provide indicative evidence of a similar understanding of RPL across countries, with some points of difference related to how RPL is interpreted over time and place. In the context of the recent release of the 2024 Australian Universities Accord Final Report which calls for transformative policy to reshape Australian higher education and recognises RPL as currently problematic yet critical for the future (O'Kane et al., 2024), this systematic review prompts further conversation and debates surrounding RPL and its growing importance to higher education futures. It clearly indicates that further research is needed to discuss evolving higher education policies, processes, or practices, with findings and conclusions that are explicitly applicable to the global tertiary sector.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond resourcing for academic time at their university. The authors have produced this manuscript without artificial intelligence support.

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## Technical Appendix

**Table 1**

*Critical Table for Eligible Records (in Alphabetical Order)*

Author(s)	Year	Country	Perspective	Context
Aarkrog & Wahlgren	2015	Denmark	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Aarkrog & Wahlgren	2017	Denmark	RPL Policy and Process	Labour Force
Alonderienė & Sabaliauskaitė	2017	Lithuania	Learning and Certification	Labour Force
Armsby	2013	United Kingdom	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Atesok et al.	2019	Turkey	Learning and Certification	Migrants / Refugees
Balković et al.	2017	Croatia	Learning and Certification	Policy Makers
Barros	2014	Portugal	Learning and Certification	Policy Makers
Barros	2013	Portugal	Learning and Certification	Policy Makers
Bélisle & Rioux	2016	Canada	Learning and Certification	Non-Traditional Learners
Bilon	2016	Portugal	Learning and Certification	RPL Administrators
Bofelo	2013	South Africa	Learning and Certification	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Brenner et al.	2021	South Africa	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Browning	2020	Canada	Learning and Certification	RPL Administrators
Chisvert-Tarazona et al.	2019	Spain	Learning and Certification	Non-Traditional Learners
Coombridge & Alansari	2019	Bahrain	Learning and Certification	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Cooper & Harris	2013	South Africa	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Admitted Students
Daley	2017	United Kingdom	Learning and Certification	RPL Administrators
Day	2016	United Kingdom	RPL Policy and Process	RPL Administrators
de Graaff	2014	South Africa	RPL Policy and Process	RPL Administrators
Dilla & Ibarra	2022	Philippines	RPL Policy and Process	RPL Administrators
Eliasson et al.	2022	Sweden	Labour Market	Migrants / Refugees
Gair	2013	Australia	Learning and Certification	Policy Makers
Garnett & Cavaye	2015	Australia	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Guimarães & Mikulec	2021	Portugal	RPL Policy and Process	Policy Makers

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Context</b>
Hamer	2013	Australia	Learning and Certification	Non-Traditional Learners
Harris & Wihak	2017	Canada	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Heinonen & Tuomainen	2020	Finland	Learning and Certification	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Hlongwane	2019	South Africa	RPL Policy and Process	Policy Makers
Hlongwane	2017	South Africa	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Jordaan et al.	2018	South Africa	Learning and Certification	Labour Force
Khalil	2020	Malaysia	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Klindt	2021	Denmark	Learning and Certification	Labour Force
Lee et al.	2016	South Korea	RPL Policy and Process	Policy Makers
Lima & Guimarães	2016	Portugal	Learning and Certification	Policy Makers
Lodigiani & Sarli	2017	Italy	RPL Policy and Process	Migrants / Refugees
Makeketa & Maphalala	2014	South Africa	Labour Market	Labour Force
Malatji & Maphosa	2016	South Africa	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Mbunda et al.	2020	Tanzania	RPL Policy and Process	Labour Force
McGreal et al.	2014	International	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Miguel et al.	2016	Portugal	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Mikulec et al.	2022	Portugal	RPL Policy and Process	Policy Makers
Mothokoa & Maritz	2018	South Africa	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Muller et al.	2017	Netherlands	RPL Policy and Process	Policy Makers
Ooi & Eak	2019	Malaysia	RPL Policy and Process	RPL Administrators
Pilkinton-Pihko et al.	2019	Finland	Learning and Certification	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Pitman & Vidovich	2013	Australia	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Pokorny	2023	United Kingdom	Learning and Certification	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Rossouw	2016	South Africa	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Rothboeck et al.	2018	India	Learning and Certification	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Roy & Marsafawy	2021	Bahrain	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Context</b>
Sandberg	2014	Sweden	Learning and Certification	Policy Makers
Shaketange	2018	Namibia	RPL Policy and Process	RPL Administrators
Sherron et al.	2021	United States	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Singh & Ehlers	2019	Germany	RPL Policy and Process	Policy Makers
Snyman & van den Berg	2022	South Africa	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Snyman & van den Berg	2018	South Africa	Learning and Certification	Non-Traditional Learners
Staboulis & Sytziouki	2021	Greece	RPL Policy and Process	Policy Makers
Stenlund	2013	Sweden	RPL Policy and Process	RPL Administrators
Stephens	2022	Ireland	RPL Policy and Process	RPL-Accessible Institutions
Tan et al.	2021	Malaysia	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Tūtlys et al.	2019	Lithuania	Learning and Certification	Labour Force
Udeagha et al.	2022	South Africa	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Voss	2016	Poland	Learning and Certification	RPL-Admitted Students
Werquin	2021	France	Learning and Certification	Policy Makers
Yeasmin et al.	2020	Finland	RPL Policy and Process	Migrants / Refugees