

Measuring Democracy in Design for Migrant and Refugee Skills Recognition

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Democracy in Design

Democracy in action places the individual at the center and emphasizes human agency over social structures (Hodgson in Tan, 2014). The recognition of prior (RPL) also known as validation of prior learning (VPL), recognition, validation, and accreditation (RVA), and many other names promotes democracy in action. As highlighted in the conference VPL Biennale concept paper, the process of validation has the power to challenge existing systems and dominate practices that are key to its success. To truly bring democracy to life through RPL, it is essential for each candidate to act. In this way, RPL serves as a powerful tool for individuals to realize and assert their human agency, influencing social structures like occupation, education, and social status.

Human-centered RPL design, as opposed to system-centered design, places the individual at the heart and seeks to deeply understand the needs, behaviors, and experiences of RPL candidates. Human-centered RPL policy, processes, tools, and support will prioritize a positive RPL experience that aligns with candidates' needs and empowers them to take charge of their earning and learning journeys. We can design skills recognition policy, systems, and practices for democracy in action. Using a human-centered design approach, we prioritize RPL as a tool for individual empowerment. Empowered individuals know their skills, the value of their skills, and ways to advocate for their skills towards betterment in their learning, earning, and being.

The Global Guidelines for the Recognition of Skills for Migrant and Refugee People

Over the course of five years, I have applied a human-centered design approach to develop the success factors necessary for the RPL of migrant and refugee individuals, as well as an evaluative framework. These success factors are informed by research¹ with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning², my master's research, *The RPL candidate—a neglected stakeholder* (Carr, 2019), current research for my Doctor of Philosophy, and many years of consulting as a skills recognition expert.

Four principles form their foundation, developed through the lens of candidate experience:

1. Candidates' interest has primacy in that the outcome or 'impact' of RPL processes is to have a positive effect on individuals that is envisaged to empower them in their learning, earning, and being worlds.

2. What has worked and what has not for candidates seeking recognition for informal and non-formal learning informs the success factors in skills recognition policy, systems, and practice.
3. The need for optimal skill utilization and social cohesion, though not always in equal measure, drives nations' attempts to establish recognition systems.
4. Qualifications improve individual employability and agency in the labor market, as well as when seeking further education.

Success factors are categorized into four areas: policy, practice, system needs, and wraparound support. Together, they form the Global Guidelines for the Recognition of Skills for Migrant and Refugee People. An evaluative framework titled the *SkillsCrossing Evaluator* is a methodological approach to using the Guidelines as a good practice standard against which to evaluate RPL programs and initiatives. The Evaluator can be adapted to measure different foci of RPL programs and initiatives, including, as this article will demonstrate, the democracy in the design of RPL programs and initiatives. The Guidelines and Evaluator acknowledge the fact that the existence of RPL in and of itself does not promote democracy in action but is holistically dependent on the existence of policies, systems, practices, and support mechanisms, that promote and enable the strengthening of individuals to take charge of their learning, earning, and being worlds. This paper asserts that validation, in and of itself, is not democracy in action but is dependent on the *way* validation transpires and whether an individual's experience is empowering. This paper further asserts that the *way* validation transpires can be assured via skills recognition design at policy, system, and practice levels.

This article will share how the Evaluator is used to evaluate the democracy in the design of two international skills recognition projects in which I was engaged to design. The two case studies are:

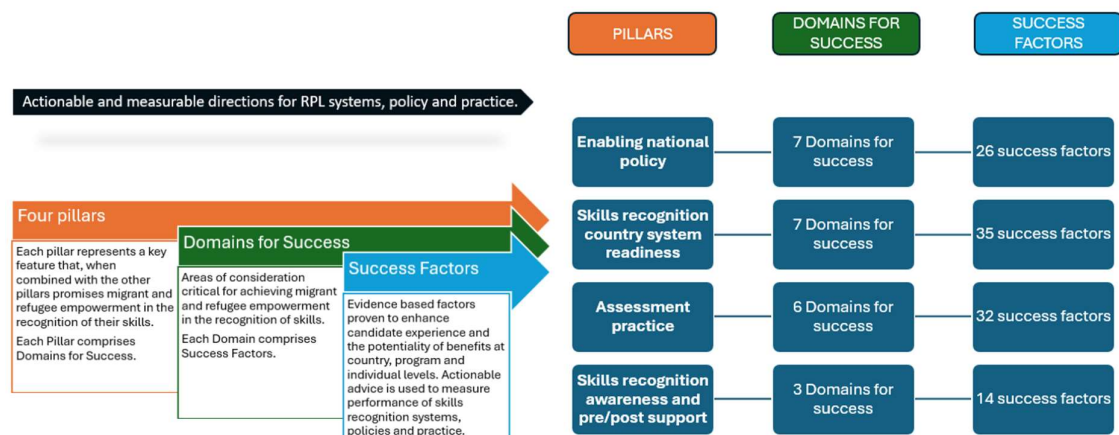
1. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Skills Verification Program (SVP) for skilled migrants.
2. Armenia's national plan for recognizing the skills of refugees from Nagorno Karabakh (NK) (the plan).

But first, let's delve deeper into the structure of the Guidelines.

The Guidelines (see Figure 1) consist of four pillars, each with several domains for success. Each domain for success contains a number of success factors.

Figure 1

Global Guidelines for the Recognition of Skills for Migrant and Refugee People



The Guideline's Pillars

Each pillar represents a key feature that, when combined with other pillars, promises migrant and refugee empowerment through the recognition of their skills. Each pillar comprises domains for success. There are four pillars, *Enabling national policy*, *Country system readiness*, *Assessment practice*, and *Awareness and pre/post support*.

Enabling National Policy

This pillar focuses on recommendations and directions for governments and stakeholders involved in designing, implementing, and evaluating skills recognition systems to ensure that policy enables an effective and coherent system.

Country System Readiness

This pillar is about guidance, directions, and recommendations for all stakeholders to assess national systems' readiness for efficient and effective skills recognition implementation. Nations' approach to RPL always reflects its starting point. Starting points will always reflect the primary initial purpose for RPL. What problem is it trying to solve? For instance, is it aiming to enhance social cohesion or optimize the utility of skills?

Assessment Practice

This pillar enables guidance and practice recommendations for assessment in a manner that empowers migrants and refugees in their learning, earning, and being journeys.

Awareness and Pre/post Support

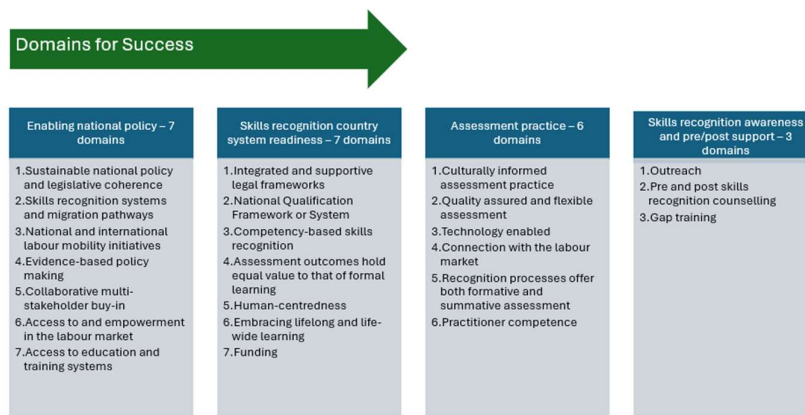
This final pillar reflects on strategies and recommendations to improve awareness, provide counseling, and design gap training³ tailored to the needs of migrants and refugees.

The Guideline's Domains for Success

Each pillar contains between three and seven domains for success (see Figure 2). Domains for Success are areas of consideration that are critical for achieving migrant and refugee empowerment in recognition of their skills.

Figure 2

Guidelines Domains for Success



Evidence-based factors and actionable advice, proven to enhance candidate experience and potential benefits at country, program, and individual levels, are known as success

factors. The Evaluator uses these success factors to evaluate the performance of skills recognition systems, policies, and practices.

I will now provide a brief overview of each international skills recognition project, followed by a breakdown of how I used the Evaluator to assess each one.

Project 1 – Skills Verification Program (SVP) Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is seeing unprecedented nation-building activity because it seeks to diversify its economy and reduce its reliance on oil, as outlined in the nation's Vision 2030. Projects like Neom, which aims to transform 10,200 square miles of desert into an innovative futuristic city, and the Red Sea Project, which is building a resort covering 50 islands and 34,000 square miles of mainland, are among the twenty giga-projects⁴ that require skills. However, like many other countries, the Kingdom is experiencing a shortage of skilled labor. The SVP seeks to improve local productivity⁵ by ensuring all foreign workers pass a skills test to obtain a work visa.

The program's objectives (see Figure 3) are to raise the quality of skills in Saudi Arabia's labor market through the verification of employment skills abroad before entering the Kingdom. The Kingdom aims to become a global leader in meeting labor market skills needs. They plan to reduce what they term 'financial waste'; that is, resources used to bring in unskilled people from abroad for the intended Saudi occupation. Prior to the SVP, employers faced significant influxes of unqualified workers, leading to suboptimal production levels.

Figure 3

SVP Goals and Beneficiaries



Beneficiaries of the program (see Figure 3) are said to be employers and test centers. Accredited test centers conduct tests to assess each potential migrant's skills against the Kingdom's occupational standards. The test is about three hours long and consists of both a practical and a theoretical part. Test centers are in migrant-sending countries and usually leverage in-country TVET systems and infrastructure. Strong bilateral government-to-government relationships form the foundation of the SVP. The program contributes to the Kingdom's Vision 2030—to enhance productivity in Saudi Arabia's labor market. The skills recognition program design shows little consideration of individuals (see Figure 3) as beneficiaries; however, that is not to say there are no benefits for individuals such as enhancing professional credibility, having a quality assured method to skills recognition processes, access to employment in the Kingdom that is commensurate with migrants' skills, career growth, better job security due to enhanced employer trust, higher remuneration, and no risk of repatriation due to unregulated migration.

Global/regional guidelines and frameworks produced by the International Labor Organization (ILO), International Organization for Standardization (ISO), European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), European Quality Assurance Framework for TVET, International Organization Migration (IOM), UNESCO, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) serve as benchmarks for the design of the quality assurance framework.

The program has been running⁶ for 18 months, with hundreds of test centers accredited and tens of thousands of tests conducted. Five national governments participate in the SVP, with three expected to join in the next 12 months. The SVP is focusing on 37 occupations⁷ at International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) level two. In the hope of attracting more skilled workers, the Kingdom has made fundamental changes to migrant workers' rights, such as the right for some to switch occupations and leave the country without employers' consent. The Saudi Vision 2030, purportedly human-centered (Saudi French Business Council [CAFS], 2024) underpins the SVP.

How the SVP is publicly marketed by respective countries' skills ministries provides insight into the overall priority for human well-being and agency of its citizens heading abroad as skilled migrants. Often overlooked, is the massive contribution of migrants to their home countries in remittances. Over time, remittances, the money migrants send home to family, contribute to the home country's economic and social development. Sending governments have an economic interest in sending skilled migrants, and they balance this with the need to ensure their well-being. A brief analysis of public facing outreach by each migrant sending country follows.

In Bangladesh, the Bureau of Manpower Employment and Training represents the SVP country partner. The Bureau's portfolio prioritizes enhancing overseas employment opportunities, fostering skill development, improving welfare, and ensuring the safe migration of migrant workers. Remittances account for 4.7% of Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (World Bank, n.d.a).

In Pakistan, the National Vocational & Technical Training Commission represents the SVP country partner. They see the SVP as a step towards the Kingdom providing training in Pakistan to align worker skills with Saudi Arabia's labor market needs. Personal remittances account for a substantial 8.1% of GDP (World Bank, n.d.b).

In Sri Lanka, the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission represents the SVP country partner, and their responsibility is to enhance the quality of employment for Sri Lankans in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Personal remittances accounted for 5.1% of Sri Lanka's GDP (World Bank, n.d.c).

The India International Skill Center Network, belonging to the National Skills Development Corporation (NSDC), is SVP's country partner. India aims to be the Skills Capital of the World, providing a high-quality skills workforce especially to nations that are suffering from an aging or declining national population.

NSDC actively seeks global partnerships with governments and businesses to achieve the following objectives:

1. promoting global mobility,
2. strengthening the Indian skilling ecosystem, and
3. sharing knowledge with other developing and developed economies.

Personal remittances accounted for 3.3% of India's GDP (Word Bank, n.d.d).

India is training workers with the skills required by the Kingdom's local labor market⁸. India hopes that this will benefit workers with improved knowledge and skills, higher wages, and assistance in regulating irregular migration, in addition to helping them secure more desirable employment.

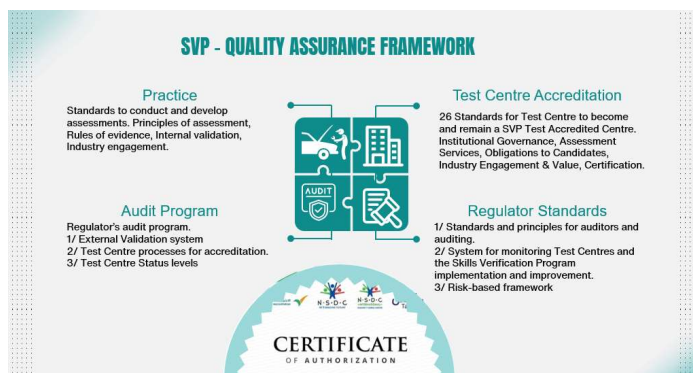
The SVP Quality Assurance Framework

The design of the SVP Quality Assurance (QA) Framework (see Figure 4) provided three levels of quality assurance for the SVP implementation: assessment practice, test center accreditation and conduct, and regulator conduct.

1. Assessment practice—three standards. The Principles of Assessment: Flexibility, Fairness, Validity, and Reliability, along with the Rules of Evidence: Sufficiency, Authenticity, and Currency, regulate the practice of assessment. Practice must be internally validated, and industry must be engaged in the assessment design.
2. Standards for Test Center Accreditation – 26 standards cover institutional governance, assessment activity, obligations to candidates, impartiality, industry engagement, and certification. Usually, the skills ministry of the migrant sending country oversees the accrediting body. Regulator Standards for Auditing. The KSA has the overarching regulatory responsibility. The Regulator Standards include the following:
 - a. Regulator Standards – 15 standards, from competence of auditors to rules for sampling to external validation of assessment.
 - b. The audit program includes audit principles, audit schedule, accreditation activities and status types, audit types, and regulator responses.

Figure 4

SVP Quality Assurance Framework



Project 2 – Armenia's plan for recognizing the skills of refugees from Nagorno Karabakh

Following the escalation of the decades-long conflict and the mass displacement of over 100,000 people United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], n.d.) from NK into Armenia in October last year, the Minister of Education, Science, Culture, and Sport (MoESCS), sent a letter to the UNESCO Director-General. Armenia requested UNESCO to intervene in support of education for these displaced people. In response, UNESCO sent an emergency fact-finding mission to Armenia. I joined this mission to assess the urgent education needs of the displaced community through meetings with national authorities, UN agencies, civil society organizations, donors, schools, and other partners. As a result, an action plan was designed to match the skills of refugee people with commensurate jobs, guide individuals to formal and non-formal training that

addresses skills gaps⁹ and in the longer term, assist in strengthening Armenia's Technical and Vocational Education and Training [TVET] systems.

Supporting 50 thousand working-aged people into decent jobs commensurate with existing skills and preferences broadly involves three stages:

1. Matching: The European Skills, Competencies, Qualifications, and Occupations (ESCO) skills taxonomy, translated and contextualized for Armenia's labor market, serves as a benchmark for individuals' self-assessment of their existing skills. The plan outlines how technology can be used to match people's self-assessed skills with online job and training offerings.
2. Career guidance: Armenia has a strong, quality-assured career counseling workforce. The Armenian Government's Career Guidance and Capacity Development Center trained and supported career counselors, and it has received international recognition for excellence from the European Training Foundation for excellence. Refugee people will require assistance and direction in self-evaluating their skills. The intended output for this stage is an individual skills-profile and a job offer commensurate with their skills and preferences. Career guidance services personnel may require upskilling to effectively use a skills taxonomy as a tool for integrating career information and providing career guidance to refugee adults.
3. Course offerings: Connect with credible online and face-to-face course offerings to fill skills gaps towards preferred jobs.

Figure 5

KSA SVP Domain and Pillar

Pillar	Domain #.1	Domain #.2	Domain #.3	Domain #.4	Domain #.5	Domain #.6	Domain #.7	
1 Enabling national policy	Sustainable national policy and legislative coherence	Recognition systems & migration pathways	National & international labour mobility initiatives	Evidence-based policy making	Collaborative multi-stakeholder buy-in	Access to and empowerment in the labour market	Access to education and training systems	PILLAR SCORE = 42% (2.5/6 Domains for Success evident)
Domains for Success scores	NA	1	0	0.5	0.5	0.5	0	
		All success factors evident	Zero success factors evident	3 of 5 success factors evident	3 of 5 success factors evident	1 of 4 success factors evident	Zero success factors evident	
2 Country systems' readiness	Integrated and supportive legal frameworks	NQF or System	Competency based	Outcomes hold equal value to that of formal learning	Humanistic orientation	Embracing lifelong & life wide learning	Funding	PILLAR SCORE = 43% (3/7 Domains for Success evident)
Domains for Success scores	1	0	0.5	0	0.5	0	1	
	6 of 7 success factors evident	Zero success factors evident	3 of 6 success factors evident	Zero success factors evident	1 of 4 success factors evident	Zero success factors evident	5 of 6 success factors evident	
3 Assessment practice	Culturally informed	Quality assured & flexible	Tech enabled	Connection with labour market	Formative & summative	Competent practitioner		PILLAR SCORE = 66% (4/6 Domains for Success evident)
Domains for Success scores	1	1	0	1	0	1		
	All 5 success factors evident	8 of 9 success factors evident	Zero success factors evident	All 2 success factors evident	Zero success factors evident	All 6 success factors evident		
4 Awareness & pre-post support	Outreach	Pre & post counselling	Gap training					PILLAR SCORE = 33% (1/3 Domains for Success evident) No success factors evident = 0 Success factors evident but crucial ones neglected = .5 Some success factors evident including crucial ones = 1
Domains for Success scores	1	0	0					
	All 3 success factors evident	Zero of 7 success factors evident	Zero of 4 success factors evident					

At the same time, UNESCO will continue its support with system-strengthening around RPL. It is foreseen that individuals' skills profiles, generated from the technology powered skills self-assessment and in-country work experience, can act as evidence to support RPL applications for those who wish to further their education and training. A new VET law, emphasizing work-based learning and enhancing the appeal of vocational education, has made it possible to recognize informal learning towards formal credentials, a feature not previously available.

Applying the Evaluator to measure the Democracy in Design Methodology

The design of both the SVP and Armenia's plan was evaluated to ascertain whether they consider the Guideline's success factors and, if so, to what extent. My involvement in the creation of both the SVP and plan provided me with valuable insight into the design details.

First, I selected only domains for success that are relevant to this specific evaluation, meaning they align with the context of each initiative and directly or indirectly contribute to individual empowerment. In this case, only one domain for success was not relevant for the SVP. All remaining domains for success contribute directly or indirectly to individual empowerment.

Second, each initiative's design is scanned to see if it considers the actionable advice outlined in each success factor. For example, does Armenia's skills recognition plan consider gap training, and how does that consideration measure up against the advice outlined in the success factors? Each domain for success receives a score that indicates the existence of success factors; this is known as the domain score. I add the domain scores, assign a percentage of possible points to each pillar, and generate a radar chart. The following section provides further details on the scoring methodology.

Domain Scores

Domains for success may contain anywhere from three to nine success factors. Since some success factors are more important than others in meeting the domain for success, I apply the following scoring protocol:

- If there were no clear success factors in the design, the domain for success received '0' points.
- I awarded the domain for success a '0.5' point if the design clearly demonstrated some success factors but overlooked crucial ones.
- If some success factors, including the crucial ones, were evident, a score of '1' point was assigned to the domain for success.

Each domain receives a score based on the total points (see Figure 5).

Pillar Scores

I added domain scores and converted them to a percentage of possible points. Figure 5 illustrates the scoring for the SVP. The top row shows the domain scores for the areas within the 'enabling national policy' pillar. The domain scores, after subtracting one domain for success that is deemed irrelevant to the SVP initiative, total 2.5 out of the 6 available points, resulting in a conversion percentage of 42. And so, the 'enabling national policy' pillar receives a score of 42%.

In practice, the evaluation generates a full report on each domain score. A short evaluation summary follows to demonstrate how the evaluator can highlight strengths and weaknesses in relation to the purpose of the evaluation.

Evaluation summary

It is important to note that this evaluation is about the design of both initiatives, not the implementation. The SVP-participating countries must operate within the developed quality assurance framework, but implementation may differ. For example, each country may provide differing levels or wrap-around support. Similarly, despite its theoretical acceptance, the Armenian plan remains yet to be implemented.

The SVP (Blue Frame)

The SVP evaluation, illustrated by the blue frame (see Figure 6), highlights that skilled migrants are not fully empowered in learning or earning. The SVP does not consider career advice or gap training, generating a low score for the pillar *Awareness and pre-post support* nor utilize the formal education and training system generating low scores on the pillars, *Enabling national policy* and *Country systems' readiness*. Additionally, the program does not consider how a credential may improve job prospects and further education offerings on return. Notwithstanding, it is yet to be seen if SVP participation alone may improve job prospects in the country of origin on return.

Empowering aspects of the SVP are that candidates receive quality assured assessment that is fair, flexible, reliable, impartial, and allows for appeals. Additionally, the mandate for Test Centers to collect and respond to candidate feedback gives candidates a voice.

The SVP could be improved by the provision of a competency statement with clear learning outcomes and avenues for RPL on return to the country of origin, perhaps through open badges with rich skill descriptors.

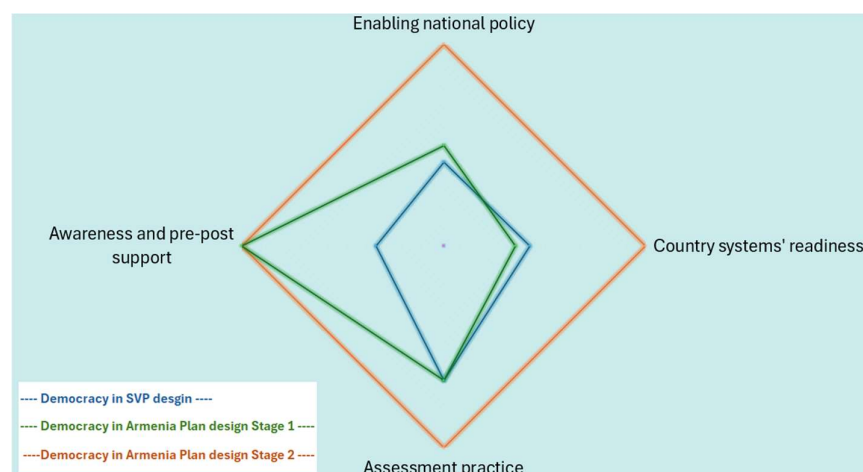
On a positive note, the SVP enhances the VET systems of migrant sending countries by providing resources for the onboarding of regulators and the training of auditors in partner countries. One could view this as a democratic outcome at the country level, as countries experience enhanced capacity and reduced reliance on donor agencies.

Armenia - before enabling legislation (Green Frame)

The Armenian plan evaluation, illustrated by the green frame (see Figure 6) highlights that individuals cannot use skills recognition to gain formal credentials, except for small pockets of pilots in specific occupations. This resulted in a low score for the *System readiness* pillar. The sole form of assessment is self-assessment, which lacks external validation or verification, resulting in a medium score for the *Assessment practice* pillar. Skill recognition is mainly designed to match refugee people with decent job opportunities and to identify skills gaps. However, regulated and licensed professions are not accessible for NK people, impacting the score for the pillar, *National policy*. Refugee people can access career counseling and education and training, and many participating international donor agencies, and not-for-profit organizations are active in regional and remote locations where refugee people are settling. This generates a high score for the pillar *Awareness and pre-post support*.

Figure 6

Armenia Evaluation Plan



Armenia – after enabling legislation (orange frame)

The orange frame illustrates the evaluation once the enabling legislation (the New Vet Law) has been passed. The graph clearly demonstrates that once skills recognition can be used to gain access and credit into formal education and training, then individuals are empowered in both their earning and learning worlds, and the plan can claim democracy in design!

Conclusion

The RPL can be a powerful tool that empowers individuals to assert their human agency over their learning, earning, and being worlds. However, to truly bring democracy to life through RPL, enabling policies, systems, practices, and support mechanisms must exist. Furthermore, these policies, systems, practices, and support must be designed with the individual at the center. The Global Guidelines for the Recognition of Skills for Migrant and Refugee People and their underpinning principles provide an excellent benchmark because they have been designed using a human-centered approach prioritizing the opportunity for individuals to take charge of their earning and learning through RPL.

This paper has shown how the SkillsCrossing Evaluator was applied to review the democracy in the design of two case studies, the KSA SVP and Armenia's national plan for recognizing the skills of refugees from Nagorno Karabakh. This exercise demonstrates the need for a holistic scrutiny of RPL to fully realize its democratic potential. Many aspects within policy, systems, practice, and support mechanisms influence how individuals experience RPL, and this impacts its effect on individuals and the resultant agency realized (or not).

To further the utility of the SkillsCrossing Evaluator, consultation has commenced to investigate the applicability of composite indicators for the evaluative process. Composite indicators are mathematical aggregation of a set of individual indicators that measure multi-dimensional concepts but usually have no common units of measurement. The utility of composite indicators is usually to compare country performance; however, it is foreseen that composite indicators for the Guidelines will be more helpful for nations internal deliberations towards ensuring all pillars are considered and addressed for an effective, efficient, coherent, and human centered recognition system for refugees and migrants. Poorly constructed composite indicators can send misleading policy messages. Its intended construction will not aggregate pillar scores into a single indicator, mitigating, in part, the common drawback of composite indicators being used to draw simplistic analytical or policy conclusions and neglecting the fact that each pillar has equal primacy and cannot exist without each other. For example, strong *Enabling national policy* does not compensate weak *Assessment practice*.

Consultation will validate success factors, inspect for omissions and outliers, validate the aggregation of success factors into domains for success and domains for success into pillars, confirm crucial success factors, develop standardized approaches for differing evaluation purposes, decide on the consideration of maturity of national education/training systems, inspect for links to other indicators, check for overly dominate success factors and inspect success factor relationships.

¹ See appendix 1 for a list of literature reviewed.

² UIL's acknowledgement of my contribution to research that underpins the course 'Skillsets in Transit: Recognizing prior learning and refugees'
<https://learninghub UIL.unesco.org/mod/resource/view.php?id=4226>

³ Gap training is additional training that the candidate requires to fill the portion of a qualification that comprises skills and knowledge that the candidate has not yet demonstrated.

⁴ For more on the KSA's Vision 2030 [المشاريع \(vision2030.gov.sa\)](https://www.vision2030.gov.sa)

⁵ A study conducted by the KSA's Human Resources and Social Development Ministry found that businesses that employed certified workers were 15% more productive than businesses that did not. [Healthcare human resource development in Saudi Arabia: emerging challenges and opportunities—a critical review | Public Health Reviews | Full Text \(biomedcentral.com\)](#)

⁶ At time of writing October 2024.

⁷ List of occupations sought by the SVP [Home Page | PACC](#)

⁸ Muslim Mirror [Saudi Arabia's SVP \(Skill Verification Program\) soon to be launched in New Delhi and Mumbai - Muslim Mirror](#)

⁹ Gap training may be provided by on-the-job training or TVET programs.

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Appendix I: Multi-national literature review

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Bringing extensive international experience in TVET policy, quality assurance, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Deb specializes in driving impactful change in skills recognition. With a track record spanning UNESCO, government engagements, and ISO certifications, Deb has shaped policies and frameworks globally. Her expertise in TVET technical design, professional development, and research underscores a commitment to lifelong learning and inclusion. Adept at bridging academia and practice, Deb has contributed significantly to skills recognition and migration initiatives. Deb's passionate about leveraging RPL for social justice and labor market efficiency on any scale.