

Recognizing the Uncertified: Public RPL Practices for North Korean Refugees in South Korea

Dae Joong Kang, Professor, Seoul National University, Seung Hyeop Lee, Doctoral Candidate, Seoul National University, South Korea

1. Introduction: Recognizing Learning Beyond Official Documentation

In recent years, the global number of forcibly displaced individuals has increased dramatically due to armed conflict, political persecution, economic crises, and climate-related disasters. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2023, the number of displaced people worldwide had reached approximately 117.3 million, including more than 43.4 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024). These individuals are often required to enter formal education systems or integrate into the labor market in their host societies. However, conventional qualification systems—predominantly based on formal education—have proven ill-equipped to accommodate such transitions. In response, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has gained attention as a public mechanism for acknowledging individuals' previous education and work experience, especially when such qualifications are no longer formally recognized in their new environments.

However, many refugees cross borders in haste to escape conflict and violence, often arriving without essential documents such as identification papers or educational records. Even when they do possess such documents, it is common for them not to be recognized by the host country's systems (Abu-Ghaida & Silva, 2021). This situation reveals the limitations of assessment practices that rely on official qualifications from the society of origin and raises questions about how to recognize the learning and experiences of migrants who lack such proof. RPL, originally developed to expand access to learning by offering an alternative to the conventional pathway of formal education, often exposes a paradox in its application to refugees and migrants: in order to gain official recognition, individuals are again required to present official documents. This contradicts the original intent of RPL, which aimed to institutionally accommodate diverse life paths and non-formal and informal learning.

UNESCO (2012), in its *Guidelines for the Recognition, Validation and Accreditation of the Outcomes of Non-formal and Informal Learning*, recommends combining formative and summative assessment approaches to reflect the diverse backgrounds of learners. Formative assessment focuses on identifying and documenting when, where, and how learning has occurred, while summative assessment aims to grant qualifications based on the learning outcomes themselves. In the case of refugees and migrants who often

face difficulties in presenting official documents, these two types of assessment can function complementarily, calling for systems that recognize individuals' experiences and competencies from multiple perspectives. From this standpoint, this article introduces the academic recognition system implemented in South Korea for North Korean refugees, who are resettled as citizens under a special legal status, as one practical example of RPL in action.

2. Context: Learning Experiences and Recognition Systems for North Korean Refugees

The issue of supporting North Korean refugees in South Korea began to receive public and institutional attention in the late 1990s. In the mid-1990s, North Korea experienced a severe famine, commonly referred to as the “Arduous March,” during which many people fled the country. In response, the South Korean government enacted the *North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act* in 1997, establishing a structured support framework (North Korean Refugees Protection and Settlement Support Act, 1997). Following this, the number of North Korean entrants increased significantly, reaching between 2,000 and 3,000 annually from the mid to late 2000s. Throughout the 2010s, over 1,000 individuals continued to arrive each year. However, since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the subsequent tightening of North Korea's border controls, the number of new arrivals has dropped sharply. As of the end of March 2025, a total of 34,352 North Korean refugees have entered South Korea, with approximately 72.1% of them being women (Ministry of Unification, 2025). This gender imbalance stems from the socio-economic transformation in North Korea after the “Arduous March,” during which women became the main agents of household survival¹.

Table 1.

North Korean Refugee Arrivals by Year

Gender	~1998	2003	2008	2013	2018	2023	2025.3	Total
Male	831	474	608	369	168	32	1	9,569
Female	116	811	2,195	1,145	969	164	37	24,783
Total	947	1,285	2,803	1,514	1137	196	38	34,352
Female %	12.2%	63.1%	78.3%	75.6%	85.2%	83.7%	97.4%	72.1%

¹ Women became primary earners because state control and surveillance were relatively less strict on them compared to men. Many women were able to disguise their identities and sustain themselves through informal jobs such as restaurant work or, in some cases, through brokered marriages in China (Jeon, Son, Song, & Sim, 2012; Nam, 2023; Kang, 2018). These circumstances suggest that many women accumulated informal and experiential forms of learning through their livelihood strategies—forms of learning that were rarely documented or institutionally recognized. However, there remain few institutional mechanisms to recognize such informal and experiential forms of learning. The Academic Background Deliberative Committee, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, allows for the recognition of learning without formal documentation, but it mainly applies to schooling—that is, to the domain of formal education.

Note. Source: Ministry of Unification (2025)

For North Korean refugees to adapt successfully to South Korean society, systematic support is required across multiple domains, including medical care, employment, financial assistance, education, and housing. According to a 2024 survey conducted by the North Korean Refugees Foundation, the areas in which refugees most reported needing support were medical care (20.1%), employment (16.2%), financial assistance (15.3%), education (13.8%), and housing (12.8%). These results indicate that educational support, alongside other areas, remains a key component in promoting the self-reliance and social integration of North Korean refugees (North Korean Refugees Foundation [Korea Hanna Foundation], 202).

Support in the field of education is particularly critical—not only in terms of providing access to learning opportunities, but also in establishing institutional procedures that recognize the educational experiences North Korean refugees have already acquired. Many refugees have completed primary, secondary, or even higher education in North Korea, but due to differences in the educational systems and curricula between the North and the South, they often face difficulties in accessing and adapting to the South Korean educational environment. To address this, the South Korean government recognizes primary and secondary-level educational attainment based on Article 98 of the *Enforcement Decree of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (1998), which pertains to individuals whose prior schooling is not officially recognized. For higher education credentials and work experience, the legal basis is found in Article 13 of the *North Korean Defectors Protection and Settlement Support Act* (1997) and Article 27 of its *Enforcement Decree* (1996). These recognition procedures serve as a key institutional mechanism for reconstructing refugees' prior learning and experience, thereby supporting their smoother integration into South Korean society. These recognition procedures were primarily established for North Korean refugees, but similar mechanisms have recently been extended to the children of migrant workers and other undocumented foreign-born students in primary and secondary schools. At the higher education level, however, although recognition is legally possible, there are no concrete procedures available for North Korean refugees or other refugee groups, such as the Academic Background Deliberative Committee, which will be discussed in Chapter 3. The academic recognition system for North Korean refugees functions not only as a means of granting admission eligibility at the primary and secondary levels, but also as a pathway into higher education and, in some cases, as a foundation for entering certain professional fields. Kim and Lee (2024) introduce cases of North Korean refugees who, by having their prior education recognized, were able to enroll in South Korean primary and secondary schools—illustrating how academic recognition can effectively expand learning opportunities. In a survey of 110 North Korean university students, the most common pathway to higher education was through the recognition of North Korean academic credentials (42.2%), followed by the qualifying examination (33%),² general high school graduation (11%), alternative school graduation (8.3%), and transfer admissions (4.6%) (Hong, 2010, as cited in Heo et al., 2013, p.16). These statistics demonstrate that academic recognition is a meaningful route for enhancing

educational access among North Korean refugees. Kang (2014) also presents cases in which individuals who had worked as doctors or teachers in North Korea partially had their education and work experience recognized under the South Korean system, enabling them to reenter professional fields after passing national certification exams. These cases suggest that academic recognition can serve as an institutional foundation for both social reintegration and occupational reentry for North Korean refugees.

3. RPL Without Official Documentation: Focusing on the Academic Background Deliberative Committee

The academic recognition system for North Korean refugees operates in various ways under a legal framework. However, as previously noted, refugees—such as those fleeing North Korea—often leave in haste due to conflict or political persecution and are therefore unable to secure official documents that prove their formal education history or qualifications. As a result, the educational experiences they have acquired in North Korea or in third countries during their migration are often difficult to have institutionally recognized. Within this context, this section examines how South Korea's academic recognition procedures address and supplement such challenges, with a particular focus on the operations of the Academic Background Deliberative Committee, which serves as a core mechanism in evaluating undocumented educational histories.

3-1. Institutional Role and Operational Structure of the Academic Background Deliberative Committee

A key mechanism for the formal recognition of North Korean refugees' educational backgrounds is the Academic Background Deliberative Committee, which operates under the jurisdiction of each Metropolitan and Provincial Office of Education. Based on Article 98-2 of the *Enforcement Decree of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (1998), the committee is tasked with reviewing and determining academic recognition and grade placement for individuals whose educational history is difficult to verify, including those from north of the Military Demarcation Line, multicultural students, foreign children, and out-of-school learners. The committee is composed of five to thirty members, including public officials responsible for multicultural education and experts in education and assessment, all of whom are appointed or commissioned by the superintendent of education.

Additionally, pursuant to Article 98-3 of the same Decree, certain schools designated by the superintendent—based on a specified proportion of enrolled students being North Korean refugees—may operate their own internal deliberative committees. These school-based committees, typically chaired by the vice-principal and composed of teachers and external experts, are authorized to evaluate and recognize students' academic backgrounds. This institutional framework provides an administrative pathway for individuals, including North Korean refugees, whose academic records are difficult to verify, enabling their integration into the South Korean education system.

3-2. A Structure for Evaluating Learning Experiences Without Official Documentation

One of the greatest challenges in formally recognizing the educational backgrounds of North Korean refugees lies in the frequent absence of official documentation, such as diplomas or academic transcripts. To address this, the South Korean government utilizes information gathered during the initial joint interrogation process—conducted by the National Intelligence Service, the Korean National Police Agency, and other relevant authorities—for verifying personal identity upon entry. Based on the educational history collected in this process, a Certificate of Academic Background is issued and used as a core document for academic recognition. This certificate is generated primarily from the individual's oral statements and serves as part of an official administrative procedure for verifying the consistency of their declared education history (Moon, 2017, pp. 105–106).

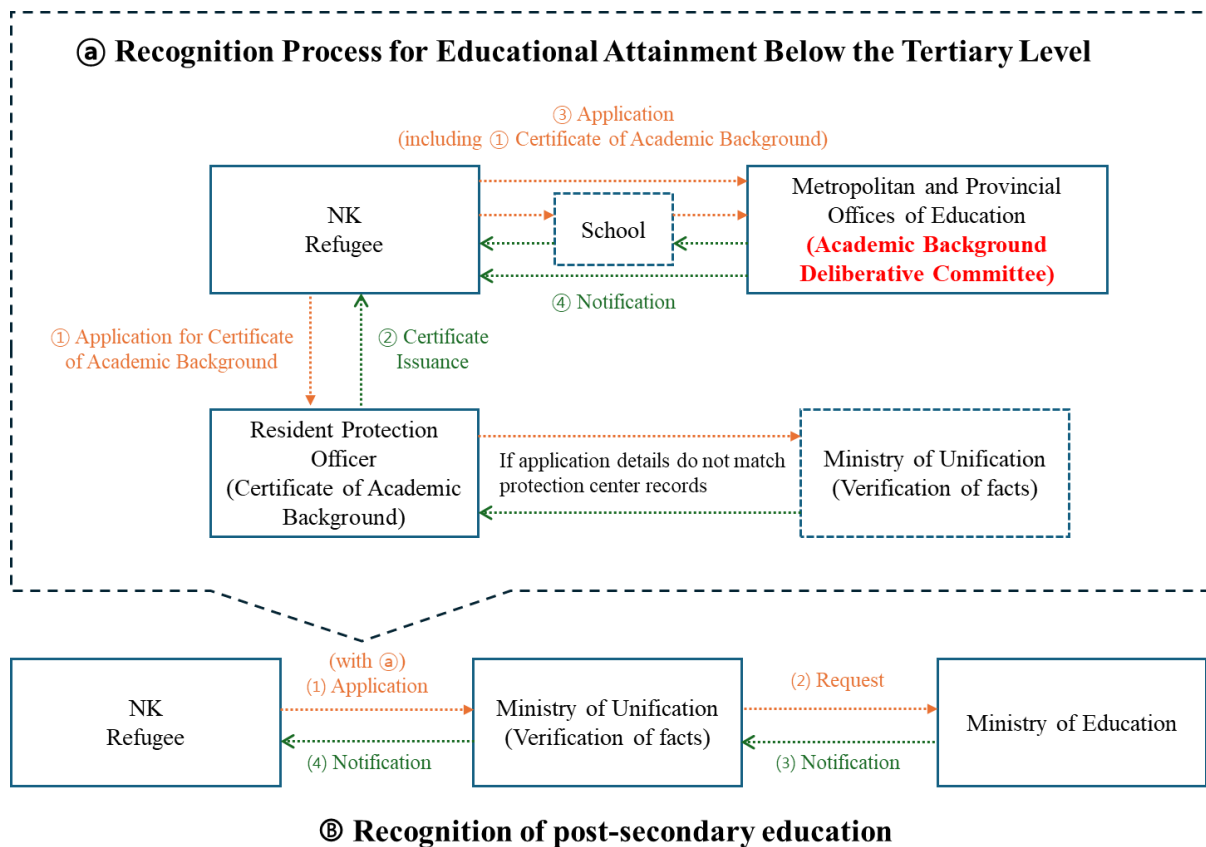
Rather than relying solely on self-reported accounts, the verification process involves repeated and detailed questioning, as well as corroboration through testimonies of other North Korean refugees. Specific memories—such as subjects taken, enrollment and graduation periods, names of teachers, and daily class schedules—are repeatedly cross-checked. Additionally, testimonies from other refugees who attended the same school or lived in the same region are used to validate the statements.³ The completed Certificate of Academic Background is then compared against the academic recognition application submitted to educational authorities, serving as a critical basis for the evaluation (Shin, 2020).

Subsequently, academic backgrounds at the elementary and secondary levels are reviewed by the Academic Background Deliberative Committees under the jurisdiction of each Provincial Office of Education. These committees assess the applicant's submitted documents, and, when necessary, incorporate the results of oral interviews or written evaluations to determine the appropriate educational level. Written evaluations utilize the academic assessment diagnostic tools developed for multicultural students. For elementary-level applicants, competencies in Korean, mathematics, and English are evaluated; for middle school applicants, the assessment extends to include social studies and science, in addition to the core subjects (NILE, 2023). This institutional mechanism, which enables formal decision-making in the absence of official documentation, represents a practical application of RPL through systematized evaluation of informal evidence.

This institutional mechanism, which enables formal decision-making in the absence of official documentation, represents a practical application of RPL through systematized evaluation of informal evidence. Figure 1 below provides an overview of the full institutional process, from the issuance of the Certificate of Academic Background to the final stage of educational recognition.

Figure 1

Institutional Process for Academic Recognition of North Korean Refugees



3-3. Institutional Flexibility and Expansion of the Academic Background Deliberation Mechanism

The Academic Background Deliberative Committee is structured in a way that enables formal decision-making even in the absence of supporting documents, making it a practical example of RPL by which accumulated learning outcomes can be publicly recognized outside of conventional schooling. This flexibility is particularly significant in cases where North Korean refugees have spent extended periods in third countries such as China. In such instances, their learning experiences often cannot be sufficiently verified through the Certificate of Academic Background alone. Under these circumstances, the committee's oral interview and written assessment procedures serve as key mechanisms for determining educational levels, thereby allowing the committee to operate flexibly. However, this very flexibility has also raised concerns about the potential inconsistency in assessment standards (Moon, 2017).

Nevertheless, the flexible structure of the Academic Background Deliberative Committee has enabled the system—originally established to recognize the academic background of North Korean refugee youth—to evolve into a mechanism applicable to a

broader range of learners whose academic records are difficult to verify, including multicultural students, foreign children, and unaccompanied youth.

This institutional shift has been supported by successive amendments to Article 98-2 of the Enforcement Decree of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1998)—originally limited to North Korean refugees—which progressively expanded its scope in 2013, 2017, and 2020. By offering an official entryway for learners unable to provide formal academic records, it exemplifies the recognition of learning outcomes that RPL seeks to promote.

4. Limitations and Implications

The Academic Background Deliberative Committee system is regarded as an example of institutional flexibility, as it enables the assessment and recognition of academic background even in the absence of official documentation. However, structural issues such as regional discrepancies have emerged in practice. Applicants with similar educational histories may receive different results depending on the composition of the committee and the evaluation criteria prioritized. For instance, Moon (2017) presents a case involving two North Korean applicants who had both dropped out after the third year of middle school. One applicant was reviewed by the Gyeonggi Office of Education, which prioritized the years of schooling completed in North Korea and determined the applicant's level as equivalent to elementary school graduation. The other, reviewed by the Daegu Office of Education, emphasized the applicant's age and determined a level equivalent to high school graduation. This case highlights a structural limitation: depending on which elements are emphasized in assessing academic competence, the outcome can vary significantly, leading to uncertainty and inequality for applicants.

Another issue lies in the central role that the certificate of academic background continues to play in the academic recognition process. This document is created based on statements and materials collected during the initial investigation conducted shortly after the individual's arrival in South Korea, and it functions as an official institutional record. However, if information is omitted or recorded incorrectly during this process, it is often difficult to amend or supplement it later. According to Shin (2020), there was a case in which a North Korean refugee requested that their academic background be corrected from "dropout from senior middle school" to "graduate," but the court dismissed the request on the grounds that the findings from the National Intelligence Service's initial investigation were considered the most objective source. This illustrates a structural paradox in which a document created to compensate for the lack of official proof ends up becoming a barrier to academic recognition.

Another limitation of the current system is the even greater difficulty of recognizing academic backgrounds at the higher education level. Unlike the primary and secondary levels, there is no deliberative mechanism, such as the Academic Background Deliberative Committee at the postsecondary level, and no formal structure exists for flexibly recognizing academic backgrounds or credits. According to a study by Kim and Lee (2024), a North Korean refugee who had studied for a period at a university in China

was unable to have their academic background recognized and was instead required to reapply for admission to a university in South Korea. In areas where an Academic Background Certificate cannot be issued—such as educational experiences in third countries—or where the Academic Background Deliberative Committee does not operate, such as at the higher education level, the recognition of academic background remains dependent on formal education records. This underscores the need to expand RPL systems to better accommodate diverse learners with undocumented learning histories.

Conclusion

The academic background recognition system for North Korean refugees, centered around the Academic Background Deliberative Committee, serves as a noteworthy example of public RPL in practice for learners lacking formal documentation of their learning, such as refugees. The system is significant in that it allows for the institutional evaluation and recognition of learning experiences accumulated by North Korean refugees through a combination of academic background certificates, oral interviews, and written assessments. While issues remain—such as inconsistencies in evaluation across regions, the exclusion of learning experiences acquired in third countries, and the absence of deliberative procedures at the higher education level—this institutional effort offers useful insights for developing RPL systems that support undocumented learners, including refugees.

RPL is founded on the principle that learning experiences outside a society's standardized educational pathways should also be recognized as socially meaningful achievements. Institutional recognition of the learning experiences of refugees without official documentation is not only a response to their unique circumstances, but also a vital practice that embodies the core philosophy of RPL—one that prioritizes actual learning experiences and outcomes over formal credentials. In this sense, the system of academic recognition for North Korean refugees, centered around the Academic Background Deliberative Committee, demonstrates the practical potential of public RPL. Its gradual expansion to include learners from increasingly diverse backgrounds illustrates not only a meaningful application of RPL for refugee populations but also offers a moment to reexamine and reaffirm the foundational philosophy of recognition itself.

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About the Authors



Dae Joong Kang

Dae Joong Kang, a professor at Seoul National University (SNU), specializes in adult learning and education. Formerly a journalist, he earned his Ph.D. in Adult Education from the University of Georgia in 2006. Kang served as a policy advisor to South Korea's Minister of Education (2006–2008) before joining SNU. His research focuses on adult and lifelong learning theories, alternative learning pathways, and life history methodology. His English-language publications have appeared in the *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, and with publishers such as Springer and Routledge. From 2021 to 2023, he served as president of the National Institute for Lifelong Education, which plays a key role in shaping South Korea's lifelong learning policies.



SeungHyeop Lee

SeungHyeop Lee is a PhD student in the Lifelong Education Program within the Department of Education at Seoul National University. His research interests focus on learning that takes place outside formal education systems and the theories that help illuminate such experiences. He has explored various forms of informal and non-formal learning, including learning that emerges in digitally expanding online spaces, the informal learning experiences of university students on campus, and humanities lectures offered outside institutional settings. He believes that paying attention to these diverse forms of learning can foster a deeper understanding of broader social voices and contribute to building a more fair and equitable society, and he hopes to grow as a researcher who examines these areas with care. Drawing on these interests, he is also exploring issues of learning recognition such as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and is preparing his dissertation on related topics.