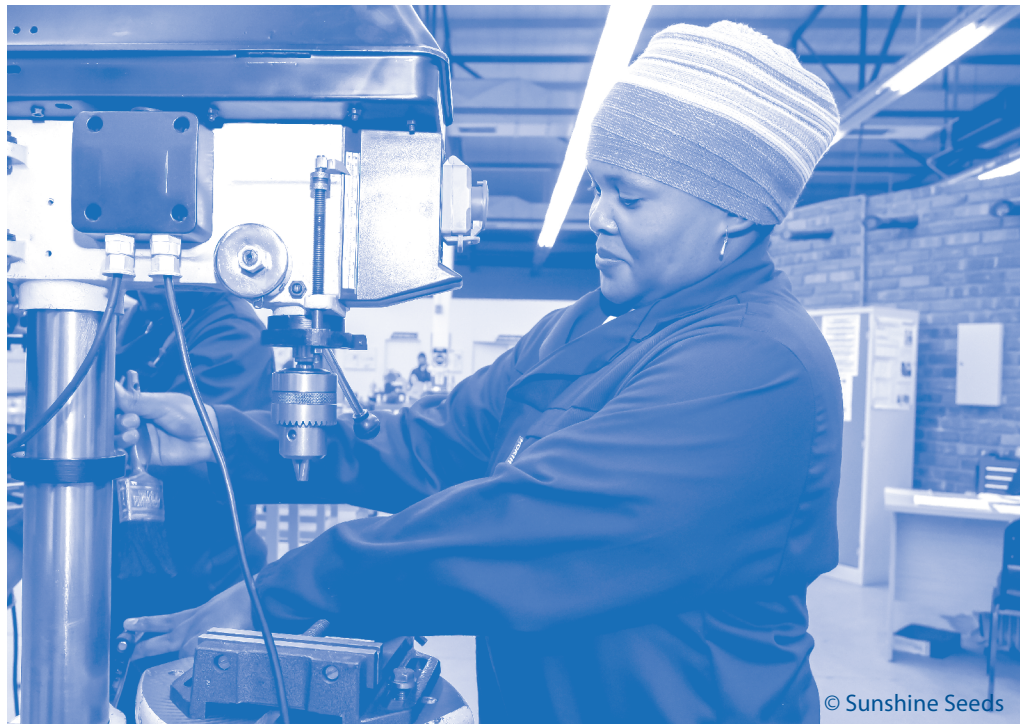


Inclusion beyond borders: What is needed to recognize, validate and accredit the prior learning of migrants and refugees?

The recognition, validation and accreditation (RVA) of all forms of learning outcomes can help individuals to pursue flexible lifelong learning pathways, facilitating their access to a broader range of working and learning opportunities. In this sense, RVA can be used as a tool to support inclusion and empowerment for all. Recognizing the prior learning of migrants and refugees from diverse backgrounds can also support the professional, social and cultural integration of such individuals in host societies. Such inclusive processes can therefore result in socio-economic gains and socio-cultural benefits for individuals and for society as a whole.

This policy brief provides insights regarding four principal areas of action for policy-makers and other key stakeholders who seek to build RVA systems that cater to the needs of migrants and refugees as distinct groups. It highlights the importance of developing an integrated national policy approach that supports sustainable implementation of RVA practices inclusive of newcomers from different walks of life. It also looks at establishing



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a clear, shared vision for a comprehensive RVA system that is inclusive of both migrants and refugees, reflected in key building blocks. It explores the creation of quality processes to assess the skills, competencies and potential of individuals from diverse backgrounds accurately and professionally, through flexible, accessible practices. Finally, it evaluates how RVA outreach and counselling mechanisms that cater to both migrants and refugees can be incorporated.

The state of RVA for migrants and refugees

RVA refers to the recognition, validation and accreditation of formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes. It is defined as 'a practice that makes visible and values the full range of competences (knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that individuals have obtained through various means in different phases and contexts of their lives' (UIL, 2012).

By accounting for prior learning outcomes, RVA fosters the pursuit of lifelong learning for all, while laying the groundwork for upskilling and reskilling opportunities. Crucially, RVA systems can be tools for the inclusion of all learner groups, including migrants and refugees.

Countries around the world face significant challenges and opportunities in response to increased migration and displacement. In its *World Migration Report 2024*, the International Organization for Migration estimated that there were some 281 million international migrants, based on United Nations figures (McAuliffe and Ocho, 2024).

Moreover, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that, at the end of 2022, there were 35.3 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023). This had risen to 36.4 million by mid-2023, which marked an increase of 1.1 million people (UNHCR, 2024).

In this context, diverse groups of migrants and refugees continue to face distinct difficulties in accessing education, opportunities for skills development, and employment in their host countries. Indeed, some migrants might engage in voluntary movement and benefit from special visa or training programmes, as they seek to work or study abroad. Even so, they can still face difficulties in getting their prior learning valued in new host countries, where their qualifications go unrecognized, information on RVA processes remains opaque and assessment is only available in languages unfamiliar to them. Refugees may also face these difficulties in seeking to continue their lifelong learning journeys through RVA. Additionally, they can encounter many other obstacles

Box 1: Recognition, validation and accreditation

Recognition is a process of granting official status to learning outcomes and/or competences, which can lead to the acknowledgement of their value in society.

Validation is the confirmation by an officially approved body that learning outcomes or competences acquired by an individual have been assessed against reference points or standards through pre-defined assessment methodologies.

Accreditation is a process by which an officially approved body, on the basis of assessment of learning outcomes and/or competences according to different purposes and methods, awards qualifications (certificates, diplomas or titles), or grants equivalences, credit units or exemptions, or issues documents such as portfolios of competences. In some cases, the term accreditation applies to the evaluation of the quality of an institution or a programme as a whole.

Source: UIL, 2012, p. 8.

that compound broader challenges, including high costs, lengthy processes and a lack of documentation illustrating formal learning outcomes, in some cases.

Therefore, robust, inclusive and accessible RVA systems and practices continue to be important for ensuring all groups, including people on the move, either voluntarily or as refugees, have access to opportunities for lifelong learning that build on their prior knowledge and skills.

However, many countries face difficulties in establishing RVA mechanisms that account for the specific needs of new arrivals (UIL, 2024; UNESCO, 2016; UIL, forthcoming). While there are some promising practices already in place, a significant gap still exists between legislation on RVA and its implementation in different arenas, including schools, universities and places of work. Indeed, in many countries there is no dedicated public policy to promote RVA and ensure it is translated into effective tools, especially where migrants and/or refu-

gees are concerned (UIL, 2024; UIL, forthcoming). It is also worth noting that most available research on RVA for migrants or refugees pertains to European contexts (UIL, 2024; Souto-Otero and Villalba-García, 2015; Murphy, 2019).

Despite these challenges, some encouraging efforts have been advanced in countries around the world (UIL, 2024; UIL, forthcoming). These offer a source of hope and inspiration for UNESCO Member States seeking to promote RVA for all.

Why promote RVA for migrants and refugees?

When embedded into lifelong learning systems, RVA as a tool for inclusion can lead to multiple positive outcomes for individuals and society at large (UIL, 2018). At an individual level, it can empower people through the recognition of their abilities and prepare them to engage actively in education and work (Duvekot and Valdés-Cotera, 2019). In addition, accessible RVA is valuable for society insofar as it

permits the identification and utilization of existing skills and competencies that learners possess. This can address socio-economic challenges, such as unemployment and retaining a skilled labour force. RVA can also support the cultural integration and social inclusion of groups such as migrants and refugees, by opening doors to a host of relevant work and learning opportunities. Ultimately, it can assist countries in promoting the ‘professional and educational advancement of citizens and improving the transparency, relevance and quality of their qualifications and assessment systems’ (Singh, 2018, p. 36).

Refugees, in particular, can benefit from RVA. They often lack official documentation demonstrating their educational or professional qualifications after fleeing their home countries in times of conflict or emergency (Macauley, et al., 2023; UIL, 2024). In some cases, they may also have missed out on formal schooling or experienced significant disruption. However, in new host countries, refugees are often not able to work or study until their prior learning is recognized, validated or accredited, especially in cases where they live in refugee camps. In this context, RVA can play an important role in accelerating processes and paving the way to a brighter future for beneficiaries, through the recognition of what they already know and can do. This makes RVA particularly relevant to countries in the Arab States region hosting Syrian refugees, for instance (UIL, forthcoming).

Beyond this, migrant workers may struggle to get their existing competencies recognized by employers in new host countries, which can lead to institutional blockages and potential skills mismatches. RVA can support them in their labour market transitions. For example, related processes offer ample scope to facilitate the movement of low-skilled economic migrants in Asia and the Pacific as they seek employment beyond borders. This can be achieved by showing individuals the value of non-formal and informal learning outcomes they have already acquired, which can be relevant to accessing work opportunities

abroad, including in in-demand sectors (UIL, forthcoming). Moreover, in the face of ageing populations in many countries, RVA can help to harness migration as a solution to filling labour shortages in a strategic, efficient manner. For example, in many countries, recognition of prior learning in the growing care sector could lead to higher wages and greater job security, particularly for domestic workers.

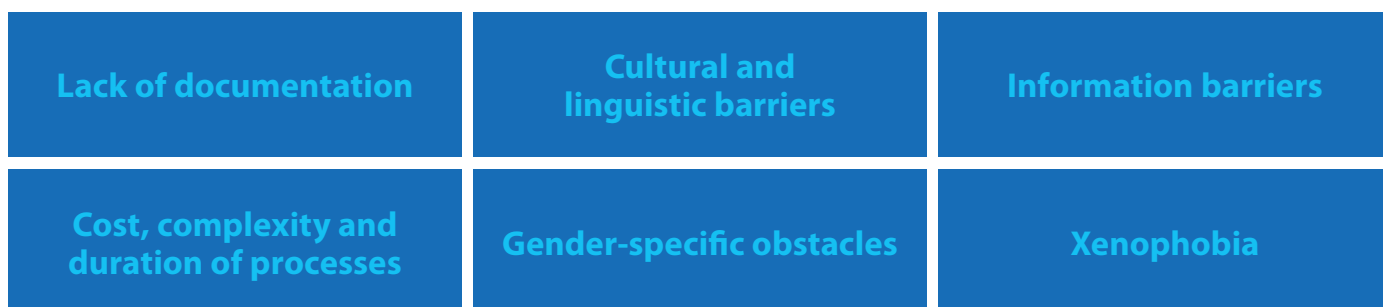
NEW ARRIVALS MAY FACE INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS THAT CAN LIMIT THE RECOGNITION, VALIDATION AND ACCREDITATION OF THEIR PRIOR LEARNING IN HOST COUNTRIES.

Finally, even high-income, high-skilled professionals can face difficulties in getting their ‘unfamiliar’ qualifications recognized by prospective employers or education institutions beyond borders, meaning inclusive RVA systems are often crucial to promoting learner mobility among newcomers from diverse backgrounds.

Despite this, new arrivals may face institutional and structural barriers that can limit the recognition, validation and accreditation of their prior learning in host countries (see *Figure 1*). This can, in turn, restrict their access to education and training opportunities and curb their labour market mobility.

Cultural and linguistic barriers that complicate assessment and access to information on RVA processes may stand in the way of individuals getting their competencies recognized (UIL, forthcoming). The negative psychological impact and trauma experienced by refugees, in particular, can act as a barrier (ibid.). Other significant challenges include difficulties in accessing information on existing RVA tools and the sometimes costly, complex and time-consuming nature of related processes, which can compound difficulties, especially

Figure 1: Barriers to recognition, validation and accreditation

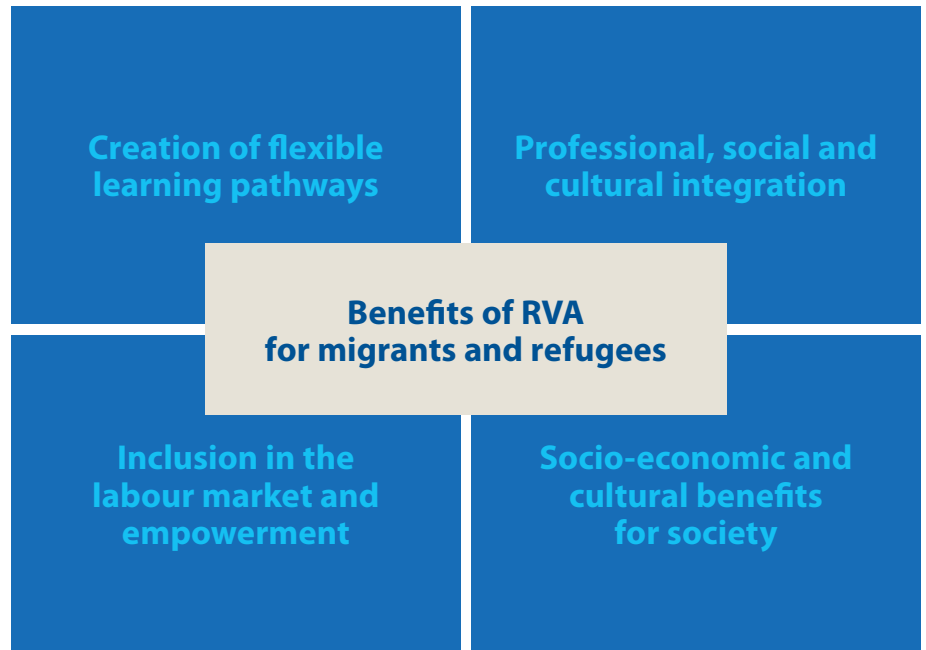


for refugees and migrants from low socio-economic backgrounds (ibid.). There are also gender-specific obstacles, such as family and domestic responsibilities, that disproportionately impact the ability of low-income women to access RVA services. Finally, xenophobia against foreigners can impede access to RVA and the completion of such processes. These barriers can exacerbate other exclusionary elements, widening the socio-economic gap between migrant and native populations and disempowering individuals.

Addressing the systemic challenges and barriers to access facing migrants and refugees when developing, implementing and strengthening RVA policies and practices can contribute to the creation of systems that are accessible to all. This, in turn, caters to newcomers from diverse backgrounds, helping individuals to pursue flexible lifelong learning pathways. This is particularly relevant in pressing situations, such as the migration of Venezuelans to other countries in the region, in which people with different profiles require, through the RVA of their existing competencies, tailored support to continue their journeys as lifelong learners in new host countries (UIL, forthcoming).

RVA is more than just a technical process. Rather, it can be used as a means of empowerment for all, particularly in the face of increased global mobility. Indeed, RVA can provide a rare source of inclusion in the otherwise limited or closed-off educational, socio-economic, political and cultural spheres in which refugees and some groups of migrants often find themselves (see *Figure 2*).

Figure 2: Benefits of RVA for migrants and refugees



Who is involved?

A range of stakeholders is involved in the recognition, validation and accreditation of prior learning possessed by migrants and refugees. These include schools, higher education and vocational education and training institutions, governmental actors, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, employers, trade unions and learners themselves (Duvekot and Valdés-Cotera, 2019; UIL, 2024). Crucially, **learners** – including migrants and refugees – can support the development, implementation and ongoing improvement of RVA processes by providing their input and feedback. An in-depth exploration of the role these groups typically play can be found in UIL's *Skillsets in Transit* literature review (UIL, 2024).

On the ground, assessors, jury members, administrative staff, guidance and counselling personnel and learners themselves all facilitate the direct implementation of RVA.

Assessors are charged with conducting assessment procedures that consider an individual's prior learning against a yardstick of relevant measures. Where migrants and refugees are beneficiaries of RVA, assessors may be trained in intercultural competencies and combatting bias. They might also be proficient in candidates' native languages, to promote efficient, accessible and inclusive processes.

Jury members may also be actively involved in assessment, insofar as they typically perform portfolio evaluation and validation, as well as conduct interviews (Mathou, 2019). They may also watch presentations delivered by candidates (ibid). Jury members can be teachers, trainers, or professionals in a particular labour market sector, among other things (ibid). Their role in evaluating portfolios is particularly valuable for certain refugee and low-skilled migrant beneficiaries insofar as such formats allow learners with little formal education, but with some non-formal and informal learning outcomes, to illustrate their existing competencies in an effective manner.

Administrative staff are typically charged with receiving documentation – including candidate applications to engage in RVA processes – and conducting administrative checks (ibid).

Guidance and counselling personnel may offer information and advice to candidates prior to applying for a specific RVA process, during the process itself and following its completion (ibid). Career counsellors, for example, play a particularly crucial role in offering advice on next steps following a candidate's attainment of RVA results, and supporting beneficiaries in finding work or educational opportunities to pursue in light of their existing competencies.

Finally, beyond their role in enhancing how RVA works by offering input and feedback, learners actively engage in guidance, documentation, assessment and certification processes to get their prior learning recognized, validated or accredited (UIL, 2018).

How can RVA for migrants and refugees be made a reality?

Through its research project on RVA for migrants and refugees, UIL has identified four areas where action can foster the development of accessible, effective and inclusive RVA systems that make a sustainable contribution to ensuring lifelong learning for all. The following recommendations are synthesized from the project's respective publications, which have helped to build a comprehensive picture of promising practices already in place around the world.

Countries across the globe have a wide range of approaches to migration. Their reception of asylum seekers and refugees also varies. No two contexts are the same. When reading the actions below, a country's migration policy context should act as the basis for implementing the recommendations, as appropriate.

Action area 1: Develop integrated national policy approaches that are inclusive of migrants and refugees.

An integrated national policy approach can support the sustainable implementation of inclusive RVA practices by considering the integration of RVA systems with other policy areas, and their alignment with regional and/or international labour mobility initiatives. Such approaches should be informed by appropriate data collection and multi-stakeholder engagement.

Integrate established RVA systems with migration and education pathways. National-level policies and legislation for employment, education and training, migration and socio-economic development should directly speak to, and be integrated with, RVA policies and practices. Countries can promote inclusive, flexible learning pathways and broaden access to education and training systems by making specific reference to migrants and refugees from diverse backgrounds in RVA policies, embedding references to RVA in migration and education policies and integrating target-group-orientated inclusion strategies in established RVA systems. In doing so, countries may enhance migrant and refugee engagement with educational and professional spheres, as well as with society in general.

Align national-level RVA policy with regional and international labour mobility initiatives. National-level RVA mechanisms should align with regional and global skills recognition initiatives targeting migrant workers. These include qualification reference frameworks, skills passports, mutual recognition systems, occupational reference frameworks and transnational funding projects. This alignment can facilitate the recognition of skills and competencies migrant workers possess, allowing individuals to maximize their potential, access a wider range of education and employment opportunities and make an active contribution to society.

Practice evidence-based policy-making and comprehensive data collection for an integrated approach. RVA policy-making should be grounded in data and research. This requires the up-to-date collection, analysis, evaluation and dissemination of data on areas such as skills needs, migration trends and the profiles of newcomers entering a given host country. Data should also be collected and shared on the actual or potential socio-economic contribution of migrants and refugees to society. This may help combat negative stereotypes of low-skilled migrants and refugees, and garner broader support for the development of RVA systems that are inclusive of all individuals. It may also encourage individuals to engage in RVA, by highlighting the value they can bring to a new host country in terms of labour market prospects. The collection and dissemination of data to maximise its quality and efficacy may involve multiple stakeholders, including research institutes, government departments, civil society representatives, private sector groups, training providers, international organizations, migration bodies and organizations directly supporting refugees and migrants.

Ensure collaborative multi-stakeholder buy-in at all stages. Multi-stakeholder cooperation is key to achieving effective RVA outcomes that ensure the needs of all candidates are met. Given the complexity of migration, as both an individual and societal concern, stakeholders in distinct arenas – including education and training, labour markets, politics and economics – must be identified, their roles defined, and their responsibilities established. Collaboration between stakeholders on RVA policy design, implementation and quality assurance is also vital for the development of effective and inclusive processes. This includes, among others, stakeholders at different levels of government, representatives from civil society, employers, training providers, higher education institutions, research institutions, beneficiaries, migration bodies and organizations directly supporting refugees. Involving newcomers with diverse backgrounds in the development and implementation of RVA processes can be instrumental in addressing barriers and in ensuring systems work for all candidates in practice.

Action area 2: Establish a clear, shared vision for a comprehensive RVA system that is inclusive of migrants and refugees.

To develop, maintain and strengthen sustainable and inclusive RVA systems, a shared national vision of RVA should be established. Key building blocks should reflect this vision. One of the ways to build an inclusive system is through the development of a robust legal framework that supports RVA for national citizens, as well as for diverse groups of migrants and refugees. This can prevent institutional blockages and encourage employers, trade unions, civil society representatives and authorities to work together to embed RVA mechanisms and practices into the labour market and education and training sectors.

Establish a sustainable, competency-based RVA system within a national qualifications framework.

RVA systems should align with and be integrated into national qualifications frameworks to enable the horizontal, vertical and diagonal mobility of learners across different qualification levels, facilitate RVA portability and scale up and encourage lifelong learning. This can also strengthen the application of regional and/or occupational reference frameworks. RVA systems should be competency-based, with opportunities for flexible assessment approaches underpinning the recognition of learning outcomes acquired in informal and non-formal settings.

Promote the value of formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes. Formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes should all be seen as valuable. This underpins effective RVA implementation. It also empowers individuals who are likely to have more non-formal and informal learning experiences than formal education to further their learning and work pathways. For inclusive RVA mechanisms to become a reality it is crucial to ensure laws, institutions and stakeholders agree that formal, non-formal and informal learning outcomes are all valuable.

Develop a sustainable funding model. Establishing a sustainable national RVA system requires the development of ongoing, equitable and transparent cost-sharing models that fund RVA and its support programmes. Such models promote accessibility and effectiveness by relieving individuals of the high costs often associated with related processes. This can be particularly important for newcomers from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Implement sustainable quality assurance mechanisms. Ensuring robust quality assurance mechanisms are in place for RVA processes is fundamental to promoting optimum outcomes for all. Regular monitoring and evaluation activities should be conducted in line with an established quality framework.

Action area 3: Create quality RVA assessments that are accessible to migrants and refugees.

Assessments are a key part of RVA processes. They should accurately and professionally assess the skills, competencies and potential of individuals from diverse backgrounds through flexible, accessible practices. Assessment should, in turn, help determine the future employment and education and training trajectories individuals may pursue.

Develop flexible, culturally informed and accessible assessment practices. Practices should be flexible and individualized, using a range of methods and tools to support formative, summative and reflective assessment. Assessments should be culturally sensitive, gender sensitive and adapted to the linguistic needs of learners. Crucially, they should be accessible to all. Ensuring accessibility might include, among other things, the development of alternative assessment methods catering for the needs of illiterate learners, or the use of digital tools. Adaptability ensures that assessment design is appropriate for the skills and learning that are being considered, and that it caters to the needs of heterogeneous learner groups.

Embed quality assurance mechanisms to monitor assessments and assessors. For the assessment of skills, competencies and knowledge to be trusted and transparent, both assessment methods and practitioners should be regularly monitored. In this respect, monitoring and quality assurance mechanisms should be developed. Assessors and validation practitioners should be certified and trained in intercultural competencies, biases, language skills and knowledge of international qualifications frameworks and education systems.

Link RVA assessments directly to the labour market. RVA processes and tools, including assessments, should be validated and moderated by industry experts to ensure that RVA outcomes are relevant, easily understood and valued by employers. Strengthening the link between skills and competency assessments and the labour market facilitates transitions into employment and access to upskilling and/or reskilling opportunities. This can be particularly relevant for newcomers seeking to enter or re-enter the labour market.

Action area 4: Incorporate RVA outreach and counselling that caters to migrants and refugees.

For RVA to be effective in supporting target groups such as migrants and refugees to access education and training and employment opportunities in host countries, processes should be supplemented with awareness-raising activities, pre- and post-RVA career guidance and skills gap identification.

Promote targeted RVA outreach for migrants and refugees. Up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive information about existing RVA tools and services should be disseminated. Targeted campaigns may be used to engage with vulnerable and hard-to-reach groups, such as refugees. It is crucial to ensure campaigns reach locations refugees typically frequent, including refugee camps and local support centres. Economic migrants with diverse skill levels may also benefit from related information sharing on employment service websites, or on the social media pages of actively hiring companies. Awareness-raising activities may, additionally, target sub-groups within migrant or refugee communities such as youth and women. RVA information provision should be tailored accordingly, with a focus on expanded and equitable access.

Provide pre- and post-RVA career guidance and counselling. Accessible, accurate and individualized pre- and post-RVA counselling and guidance should be available to inform and support learners throughout RVA processes. This is especially important for those who may be unaware of RVA services, or who face language and administrative barriers to accessing RVA. Guidance and counselling should speak to the needs of individuals. The advice offered will likely look different for a newcomer in possession of formal qualifications seeking to upskill in a new host country than it will for someone with no evidence of formal learning outcomes to date. Adaptable services may address complications such as childcare responsibilities that could impede women, in particular, from pursuing RVA processes. Support services should also facilitate learner agency and help determine next steps for individuals according to their competencies and needs.

Incorporate skills gap identification and training. RVA systems should include programmes and personnel that can support the development of individual learning plans based on the recognition of existing skills, as well as the identification of skills gaps. Where relevant, learners should then be provided with skills gap training to better align their skills, competencies and knowledge with their education and employment needs.

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