

Credit Accumulation Transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning: Bridging the Gap Between Policy and Practice

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is widely promoted in international education agendas as a key strategy for advancing access, equity, and learner mobility within lifelong learning systems. UNESCO's lifelong learning framework, Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), and the African Union's education strategies all emphasize flexible learning pathways, skills recognition, and inclusive qualification frameworks. Despite these policy commitments, RPL practice in many contexts continues to focus primarily on non-formal and informal learning, with limited integration of formal learning through Credit Accumulation and Transfer Systems (CATS). This study investigates the extent to which CATS is leveraged as a pathway for RPL certification in Kenya's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, offering lessons relevant to national and regional systems pursuing SDG 4 targets and AU lifelong learning aspirations. Anchored in Constructivism and Lifelong Learning theories, the study adopts a descriptive research design involving a survey of 1,000 RPL practitioners across 28 national polytechnics and an interview with the Director of the RPL Delivery Unit. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS, while qualitative findings were thematically analyzed. Findings reveal a persistent gap between policy and practice, with CATS not systematically applied during RPL assessment and certification processes. This limits learner progression, mobility, and the optimal recognition of prior formal learning. The study argues that stronger alignment between policy frameworks and institutional practice is essential for realizing UNESCO, SDG 4, and AU objectives related to inclusive, flexible, and lifelong learning systems. Policy and practice recommendations are proposed to strengthen the effective integration of CATS within RPL frameworks across diverse educational contexts.

Keywords: RPL, CATS, lifelong learning, labour mobility, TVET

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Despite the establishment of the Kenya Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (KCATs) under the Kenya National Qualifications Authority framework and the provisions of the Kenya National Qualifications Framework Act No. 22 of 2014, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practice in Kenya continues to focus predominantly on the certification of non-formal and informal learning, with limited consideration of formal learning achievements already acquired by learners (KNQF Act, 2014). This creates duplication, wastage of prior competencies, and weak integration of accumulated credits within qualification pathways (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2025).

Although KCATs was designed to facilitate progression, entry, re-entry, transfer, and exit across qualification levels, courses, and institutions, preliminary studies indicate that its application in RPL assessment and certification remains inadequate. Consequently, learners with existing competencies may not fully benefit from credit transfer opportunities, thereby limiting flexibility, lifelong learning, mobility, and efficient progression within the education and training system.

Further, the absence of effective integration between KCATs and RPL practices undermines the realization of constructivist and lifelong learning principles that advocate recognition, validation, and continuous development of previously acquired knowledge and skills (Oduor & Kilonzo, 2024). While policies supporting RPL and KCATs exist, there is insufficient empirical evidence on the extent to which KCATs is being leveraged as a pathway for RPL certification in Kenyan national polytechnics and the challenges hindering its implementation.

Therefore, this study sought to examine the extent to which KCATs contributes to RPL certification in Kenya, identify gaps limiting its effective utilization, and propose strategies for strengthening KCATs as a pathway for Recognition of Prior Learning assessment and certification.

Literature Review

In view of recent austerity measures in global budgets and skills shortages in high income countries, TVETs (technical vocational education and training institutions) should be viewed as labour mobility hubs. This improves employment outcomes for trainees while filling critical labour gaps in destination countries (Dempster & Ricou, 2026).

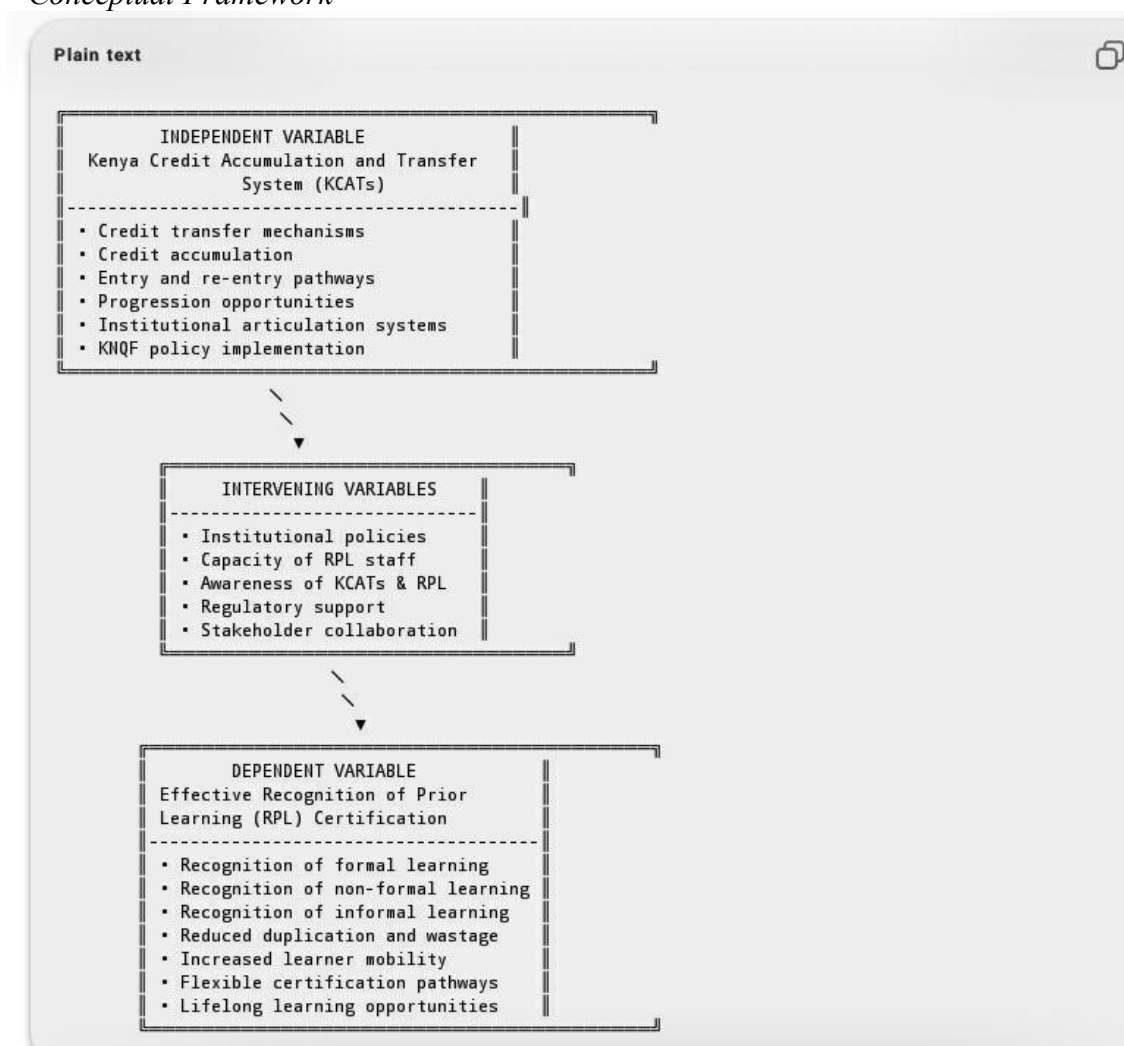
Aligning training content and quality to employer needs and recognizing qualifications through mutual recognition processes as well as international certification should result in increased TVET placement rates, improved institutional quality and expanded opportunities for disadvantaged groups including refugees.

UNESCO and CESA (Continental Education Strategy for Africa) encourage countries to establish qualification frameworks that improve credibility, visibility and competitiveness of qualifications so that skills acquired in one institution can be recognized globally and workers can move from one sector to another without repeating training. Credit Accumulation Transfer allows accumulation of learning over time, transfer of credits between programs and movement between institutions and qualification levels.

The resulting multiple pathways to acquisition of skills and competencies mean that learning is not by any means linear and happens even outside of classrooms. Skills acquired through work experience can be recognized and workers can re-enter training at various stages of life (ILO, 2021). Vertical, horizontal and diagonal mobility enhances workforce productivity and skills become a professional passport with competencies that can be transferred to various settings. RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning), KCATS and qualification frameworks are key instruments in linking TVET to global labour mobility.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



While KCATS influences the effectiveness of RPL assessment and certification, institutional and policy-related factors either strengthen or weaken this relationship.

Objectives

The study interrogated whether RPL practice fully leverages Credit Accumulation Transfer as an avenue for RPL Assessment and Certification.

Specific Objectives

1. To assess the contribution made by KCATs in RPL Assessment and Certification.
2. To identify existing gaps in the use of KCATs as a pathway to RPL Certification.
3. To make recommendations on how best to leverage KCATs in RPL Assessment and Certification.

Statement of Hypothesis

Availability of Policy, Standards, Guidelines and requirements does not significantly predict the implementation of RPL Assessment and Certification.

Significance of the Study

This study will inform policy review and implementation and also make a valuable contribution to academic knowledge about research on Technical Vocational Education.

Methodology

Descriptive Research Design was used to examine the extent to which institutions offering RPL Assessment and Certification employ KCATs during their assessments. Out of a total 2930 Accredited TVET Institutions, stratified sampling was used to select 28 National Polytechnics and simple random sampling was used to select 1000 trained RPL Practitioners. Structured Questionnaires and Key Informant Interviews were used to collect data. Data was analysed and presented as percentages. Regression analysis was used to test the hypothesis. The researcher obtained consent from respondents and maintained confidentiality.

Testing the Hypothesis

The regression analysis shows a strong and statistically significant relationship between Availability and the dependent variable RPL Implementation.

Model Summary Interpretation

R	0.86	Indicates a very strong positive relationship between Availability and Implementation
R ²	0.75	Availability explains 75% of the variation in implementation
Adjusted R ²	0.72	After adjusting for sample size, the model still explains 72% of the variation
Standard Error	20.12	Average prediction error of the model

An R value of 0.86 shows a strong positive correlation between Availability of Standards and requirements and implementation of RPL Assessment and Certification. The R² value of 0.75 means that Availability of Standards and requirements accounts for 75% of the changes in implementation, while the remaining 25% may be explained by other factors not included in the model.

ANOVA Interpretation

Statistic	Value
F	32.44
p-value	< .001

The ANOVA test was used to check whether the regression model is statistically significant. Since the p-value is less than 0.001, which is below the common significance level of 0.05: The regression model is statistically significant. Availability significantly predicts implementation. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(1,11) = 32.44$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that availability significantly predicts implementation.

The regression equation is as follows:

$$Y = 7.74 + 1.07X. \quad (1)$$

Where:

Y = implementation

X = availability

Statistic	Value
B	7.74
P	0.44

When Availability is zero, implementation would be predicted at 7.74. However, the intercept is not statistically significant because $p = 0.44 > 0.05$.

Availability Variable

B	1.07
Beta	0.86
T	5.7
P	< .001

A one-unit increase in Availability leads to a 1.07 unit increase in implementation. The standardized beta coefficient of 0.86 indicates a very strong positive effect. Since $p < .001$, Availability significantly influences implementation.

Availability had a positive and statistically significant effect on implementation ($\beta = 0.86$, $t = 5.7$, $p < 0.001$). A unit increase in availability resulted in a 1.07 increase in implementation.

For Availability:

Lower bound = 0.66

Upper bound = 1.49

Because the confidence interval does not include zero, the effect of Availability is statistically significant. Residuals are centered close to zero. Standardized residuals range between -1.47 and 2.22 , which are within acceptable limits. This suggests there are no serious outliers and the regression assumptions are reasonably met.

The regression analysis revealed that Availability of Policy, Standards, Guidelines and Requirements significantly influences implementation of RPL assessment and certification.

The model explained 75% of the variation in implementation ($R^2 = 0.75$). The relationship was strong and positive ($R = 0.86$), and the regression model was statistically significant, $F(1,11) = 32.44$, $p < 0.001$. Availability was found to be a significant predictor of implementation ($\beta = 0.86$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 1
Regression Analysis Coefficients

Predictor	B	β (Beta)	t	p-value	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper	Interpretation
Constant (Intercept)	7.74	–	–	0.44	–	–	When Availability is zero, Implementation is predicted to be 7.74. The intercept is not statistically significant.
Availability of Policies, Standards, Guidelines and Requirements	1.07	0.86	5.70	< 0.001	0.66	1.49	A one-unit increase in Availability leads to a 1.07-unit increase in Implementation. Availability significantly predicts Implementation.

Table 2
Challenges Cited by RPL Practitioners

Rank	Challenge	Frequency
1	Regulatory and accreditation challenges	65
2	Lack of awareness	62
3	Negative public perception	61
4	Changing industries and technology	54
4	Weak linkage between industry and RPL assessment centers	54
6	Lack of coordination between stakeholders	46
7	Lack of partners to support RPL implementation	44
7	Lack of qualified practitioners	44
9	Limited knowledge on KCATs and RPL	26

The table presents the major challenges cited by RPL practitioners during the survey. The findings indicate that regulatory and accreditation challenges were the most frequently cited challenge, reported by 65 percent of the respondents. This suggests that policy, legal frameworks, and accreditation procedures remain significant barriers to effective implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The second most cited challenge was lack of awareness with 62 percent of the respondents, indicating that many stakeholders still have limited understanding of RPL processes, benefits, and opportunities. Similarly, negative public perception was also identified as a major issue by 61 percent of the respondents, showing that misconceptions and skepticism about RPL continue to affect its acceptance.

Other notable challenges included; changing industries and technology and weak linkage between industry and RPL assessment centers, each cited by 54 percent of the respondents. This implies that rapid technological changes and inadequate collaboration with industry hinder alignment of RPL practices with labour market demands. Lack of coordination between stakeholders was reported by 46 percent of the respondents, highlighting gaps in collaboration among institutions, industry players, and regulatory bodies. Lack of partners to support RPL implementation and lack of qualified practitioners were each cited by 44 percent of the respondents, suggesting inadequate human and institutional capacity for successful implementation. The least cited challenge was limited knowledge on KCATs and RPL, reported by 26 percent of the respondents. Although comparatively lower, the finding still indicates the need for continued sensitization and capacity building on the Kenya Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (KCATs) and RPL practices.

Overall, the findings reveal that RPL implementation is affected by a combination of regulatory, institutional, technological, and awareness-related challenges. The study therefore underscores the need for stronger policy frameworks, stakeholder coordination, public sensitization, industry partnerships, and practitioner training to enhance effective implementation of RPL and KCATs.

Key Findings

1. The implementation of the Kenya Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (KCATs) has enhanced flexibility within the education and training sector by supporting credit transfer, progression, entry, re-entry, and exit across qualification levels and institutions. This has promoted learner mobility and strengthened lifelong learning pathways.
2. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has mainly been practiced as a mechanism for certifying non-formal and informal learning, with limited integration of competencies acquired through formal learning and work experience. As a result, opportunities for holistic recognition of learner achievement remain underutilized.
3. Existing policies and legal frameworks such as the Kenya National Qualifications Framework (KNQF) Act No. 22 of 2014 provide a strong foundation for KCATs and RPL implementation. However, gaps still exist between policy provisions and actual institutional practice.
4. The study established that many institutions face challenges in operationalizing KCATs and RPL due to inadequate awareness, limited institutional capacity, insufficient assessor training, and lack of harmonized implementation guidelines.
5. Stakeholders acknowledged that KCATs and RPL contribute significantly to reducing duplication of learning, minimizing wastage of skills and knowledge, and improving access, equity, and employability within the education and training sector.

6. The findings further revealed that limited public sensitization and misconceptions surrounding RPL continue to affect its acceptance and uptake among learners, employers, and institutions.

Conclusions

1. KCATs and RPL are critical mechanisms for promoting lifelong learning, learner progression, inclusivity, and workforce development within Kenya's technical education and training system.
2. Effective integration of KCATs and RPL can bridge the gap between policy and practice by ensuring that knowledge, skills, and competencies acquired through formal, non-formal, and informal learning are recognized and valued equally.
3. Despite the existence of supportive policy frameworks, implementation remains uneven across institutions due to inadequate structures, limited technical capacity, and insufficient stakeholder engagement.
4. Strengthening collaboration among regulatory bodies, training institutions, industry stakeholders, and policymakers is essential for successful and sustainable implementation of KCATs and RPL practices.
5. The integration of KCATs with RPL has the potential to improve access to qualifications, support career progression, enhance employability, and contribute to national and global lifelong learning agendas such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the African Union Agenda 2063.

Recommendations

1. The government and relevant regulatory agencies should develop clear operational guidelines and standardized procedures to support effective implementation of KCATs and RPL across all institutions.
2. Institutions should strengthen capacity building through continuous training of assessors, coordinators, and institutional staff involved in KCATs and RPL processes.
3. Awareness creation and sensitization programs should be enhanced to improve understanding, acceptance, and uptake of KCATs and RPL among learners, employers, industries, and training providers.
4. Institutions should establish dedicated RPL and KCATs coordination structures to facilitate assessment, credit transfer, learner guidance, documentation, and quality assurance.
5. Greater collaboration between industry and training institutions should be encouraged to ensure that assessment and certification processes reflect workplace competencies and labor market needs.
6. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be strengthened to track progress, identify implementation challenges, and ensure continuous improvement of KCATs and RPL practices.
7. Further research should be conducted on the impact of KCATs and RPL on employability, learner mobility, access to education, and national skills development.

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