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Determinant of Employees' Decisions to Pursue Master's Degrees through Recognition of Prior Learning: A Systematic Literature Review from a Public Administration Perspective

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Abstract
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) can convert experiential and workplacelearning into recognised academic value, but an RPL policy alone does not ensure uptake. This systematic literature review identifiel the determinants shaping employes'decisions to pursue master's-level study through RPL and interprets them from a public adminstration perspective. Following PRISMA 2020 procedures, 99 record from a document reference set were audited; after removing duplicates, 90 unique records were screened, 24 reports were assesed in full, and 20 peer-reeviewed articles publised between 2016 and August 2026 were retained for synthesis. Thematic synthesis identified four interacting domains: individual and learner readinness, employment and career incentive, institutional and procedureal accessibility, and policy and governance conditions. Across these domains, the review identifies an awareness-access-uptake gap in which weak informations, uncertain recognition of experiential learning, administrative burden, inconsistent guidence, and fragmented governance interrupt progressions from policy availability to RPL use and postgraduate participations. The review contributes to public administation by reframing postgraduate RPL as a multilevel implementation and service-acces problem.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning, Employee Decision, Master's Education, Public Administration, Systematic Review

INTRODUCTION

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has gained importance as a mechanism to widen access to higher education and support lifelong learning by formally recognising knowledge, skills, and competencies zacquired through employment and non-fpormal learning (Andersson et al., 2013; Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). For working adults, RPL offers an alternative pathway to higher education that reduces the mismatch between occupational experience and

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conventional academic entry requirement. Its relevance is particulary evident at the postgraduate level, where applicant often hold substantial professional experience that conventional admission requirement do not fully capture (Hlongwane, 2019a, Snyman & van den Berg, 2022).

Although RPL research has expanded considerably, it remains fragmented across conceptual, pedagogical, institutional, and policy deminsions, examining the nature of recognised knowledge (Cooper & Harris, 2013; de Graaff, 2014), implementation constraints (Cooper et al., 2017), and national policy environment (Raciti et al., 2024), but rarely why employees choose RPL as a pathway to postgraduate study. This distinction matters because policy availability does not necessarily translate into uptake. The postgraduate context is particulary under-integrated: the experiences of student and academics in graduate RPL admission remain under-investigated (Snyman & van den Berg, 2022), and research on graduate-level prior learning assessment highlights both is potential to facilitate access and persistent institutional challenges in assessment and transition (Morris & Rust, 2020; Brenner et al., 2022). Existing research has rarely integrated the individual, employment, institutional, and policy determinants that jointly shape an employee's decision to pursue a master degree through RPL.

This gap is also significant for public administration. RPL is not merely an assessment mechanism but an implementation arragement throught which policy is translated into applicant-facing access, depending on regulatory coherence, institutional capacity, administrative procedure, information accessibility, and the credibility of recognition decisions (Maurer, 2019; Singh & Ehlers, 2019; Werquin, 2012a, 2021b). These features connct RPL to core public- administation between formal entitlement and subtantive burden, procedural fairness, and the distinction between formal entiltlement and subtantive access. The policy question is therefore not whether an RPL pathway exists, but whether eligible employees can understand, trust, navigate, and benefit from it.

Accodingly, the pricipal research gap is the absence of a systematic synthesis that place employees' decisions to pursue master's- level study through RPL at the centre of analisys while explaining the institutional and governance conditions that shape those decitions. This review's novelty lies in connecting four previously dispersed strands individual, employment, institutional, and policy-governance factors into a single implementation pathway from policy availability to uptake. It therefore aims to identify and synthesise the determinants influencing employees' decition to pursue master's degrees throught RPL and to interpret them from a public administration perspective, asking; (RQI) which individual, employment, institutional, and policy-governance determinants shape this decision; (RQ2) how do these determinants interact across levels; and (RQ3) what do these interactions imply for public administration and equitable access to postgraduate education? The review develops an integrative framework to guide future empirical testing and the design of more accessible, credible RPL pathways.

RESEARCH METHOD

Design, Scope and Protocol

This systematic litearture review was conducted with reference to PRISMA 2020 (page et al., 2021a, 2021b). The evidence base combined a previously identified seed set of studies with an author-compiled supplementary reference set; the review was therefore treated as a structured, auditable reference-set review rather than a full muti-database search reconstruction. Three questions guided the synthesis: which individual, employment, institutional, and ppolicy governance factors shape employees' decisions to use RPL for postgraduate access or progression; how these factors interact across levels; and whats these interactions imply for public administration and substantive access to postgraduate pathways.

Eligibility Criteria

Eligibility was organised around population, phenomenon, context, outcomes, publication type, and period, summarised in Table 1. Eligible populations were employed adults, workers, proffesionals, or RPL applicants; the phenomenon of interest was recognition, validation, accreditation, or assesment of prior experential or non-formal learning; the principal context was postgraduate higher educations, with vocational or national-policy studies retained only where they offered transferable mechanisms; and eligible outcomes included awareness, motivation, legitimacy, barriers , facilitators , accesibility, implementation, and uptake. The synthesis included peer-reviewed English-language journals article published from 1 January 2016 to 31 August 2026; earlier seminal publications were used only for conceptual background in the introductions and were not treated as included evidence.

Table 1. Eligibility criteria for the systematic review

Domain	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Population	Employee, workers, proffesionals, employed adult learners, or RPL applicants with relevant work experience	Schools pupils; unemployed populations without a transferable RPL mechanism; conventional students with no experiential-learning component
Phenomenon	RPL, prior learning asessment, accreditation of prior experiential learning, validation of prior learning, or an equivalent process	Ordinary credits transfer, admission based only on formal qualifications, or workplace leraning without recognition or assessment
Context	Higher education and master's or postgraduate pathways; policy and vocational systmes when directly informative	Context with no defensible connection to employee decisions, postgraduate acces, or RPL implementation
Outcomes	Decisions determinants, awareness , value, legitimacy, barriers, facilitators, access, uptake, participation, or implementation	Descriptive programme accounts without a decision, acces, uptake, or implementations finding
Publication	Peer-reviewed journal article in English with sufficient analytic detail	Editorial, book review, thesis, conference abstract, non-peer-reviewed report, or inaccessible full text
Period	1 January 2016 to 31 August 2026	Published before 2016 or after August 2026

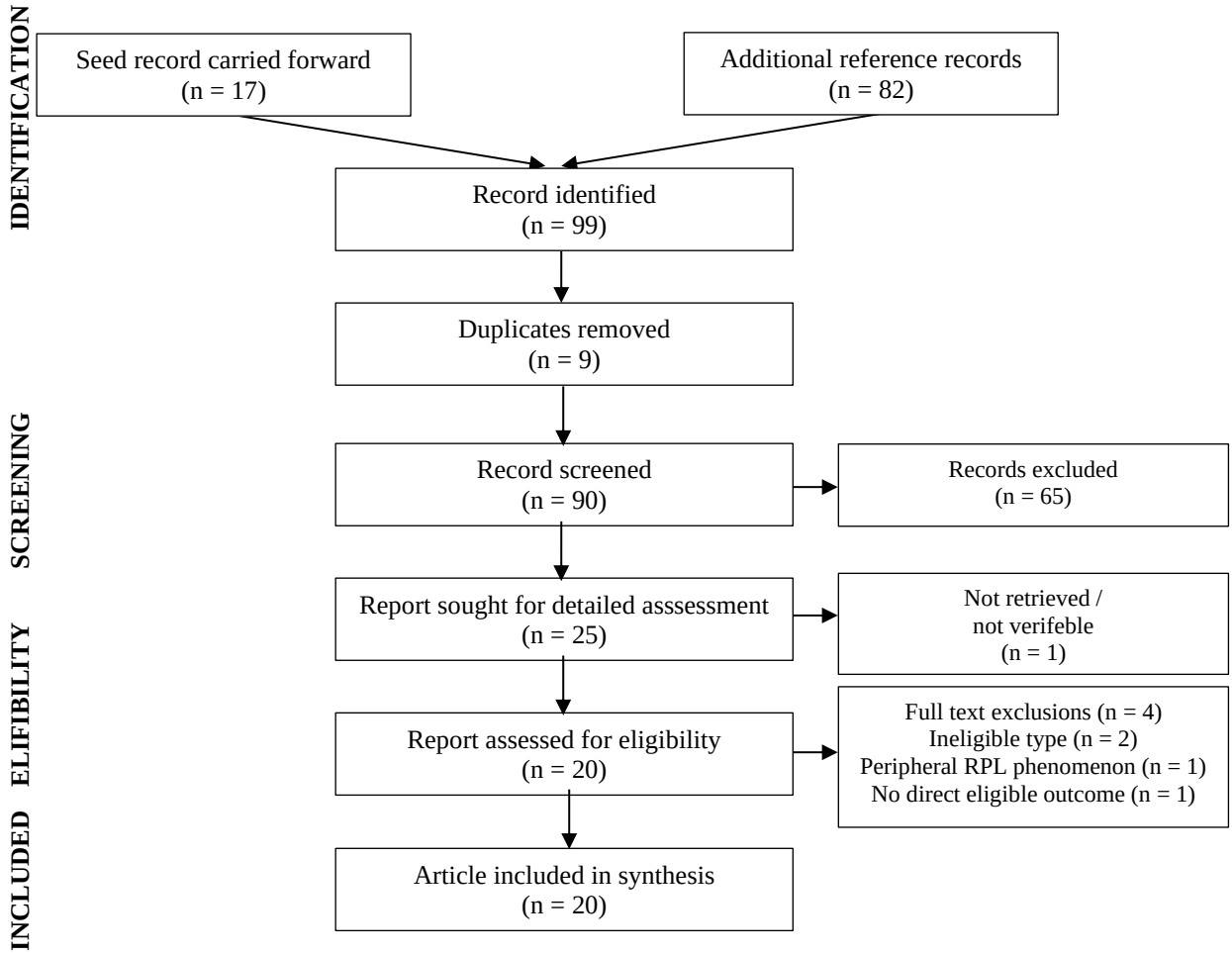
Informations Sources, Search Strategy, and Study Selection

Two candidate sets were combined and audited against the eligibility criteria: 17 seed studies carried forward from an earlier review stage and 82 references compiled by the author throught Google Scholar and supplementary searching using the concept blocks ("recognition of prior learning" OR "prior learning assessment " OR APEL OR RPL) AND (employee* OR worker* OR "adult learner*") AND (mater* OR postgraduate OR "higher education") AND (decision* OR motivation* OR barrier* OR acces* OR uptake OR governance). Studies were not required to contain every block verbatim their abstract clearly addressed a transferable RPL access or implementation mechanism, and bibliographic details for the final included articles were verified againts journals or publisher records.

As summarised in Figure 1, the 99 combined records were reduced to 90 after removing nine duplicates; 65 were excluded at title-and-abstract screening, leaving 25 report sought for detailed assessment. One 2026 item could not be verified with sufficient bibliographic detail,

leaving 24 reports assessed in full; four were excluded (two ineligible publications types, one peripheral RPL phenomenon, and one conceptual discussion without a directly eligible outcome), yielding 20 peer-reviewed journal articles for synthesis.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for the systematic review of determinants of employees' decisions to pursue master's degrees through Recognition of Prior Learning



Included Studies

The finals synthesis set comprised 20 peer-reviewed journal article (Table 2): sixteen retained from the seed set after removing one non-RPL postgraduate-employment article; and four added from the supplementary set: Browning (2020), Alves et al. (2020), Galloway and Edwards (2017), and Miguel et al. (2016). We intentionally differentiated the included evidence by evidential role: direct or near-direct studies examined RPL users, graduate access, or employed applicants, while institutional and policy studies explained mechanism shaping awareness, accessibility, legitimacy, or uptake.

Table 2. Characteristics of the 20 studies included in the synthesis

Study	Country/ context	Domain(s)	Methodology	Principal finding
Miguel et al. (2016	Portugal	Individual/ learner	Mixed-method participant study	Recognition altered how adults perceived learning and its educational value
Synman & van den Berg (2018)	South Africa	Individual/ learner	Narartive analysis	Learning histories and personal attributes shape recognition readiness
Galloway & Edwards (2017)	United Kingdom	Employment/ career	Collaborative practice/ reflections study	Formal qualification expectations create demand to recognise existing expertise
Cooper, Ralphs, & Harris (2017)	South Africa	Institutional	Comparative/practice-based analysis	Inclusive intentions can be weakened by instutional and pedagogical constraints
Hlongwane (2019a)	South Africa	Institutional policy/ governance	Survey + document analysis	Institutional compliance and operational capacity shape implementation
Hlongwane (2019b)	South Africa	Institutional	Survey + document analysis	RPL use remained low despite institutional commitment to access
Singh & Ehlers (2019)	Denmark and India	Policy/ governance	Comparative policy analysis	Stakeholder involvement, ownership, and policy instruments shape implementation
Maurer (2019)	Switzerland	Policy/ governance	Historical-institutionalis analysis	Institutional structures and actor coalitions constrain RPL expansion
Alves et al. (2020)	Brazil, Portugal, Germany	Policy/ governance	Comparative document analysis	RPL policies reflect district historical, political and organisational context
Browning (2020)	Canada	Institutional	University case study	Invisibility, inconsistent understanding and roadblocks weaken implementation
Morris & Rust (2020)	United States	Institutional	Analytical review of graduate PLA	Graduate PLA remains uncommon despite potential demand among non-traditional learners
Maurer (2021)	LMIC/VET systems	Policy governance	Document and plicy analysis	Transferred recognition models may not fit local qualification and labour-market systems
Werquin (2021a)	International	Policy/ governance	Comparative conceptual-policy analysis	Unadapted policy transfer can undermine implementation and legitimacy

Study	Country/ context	Domain(s)	Methodology	Principal finding
Werquin (2021b)	France	Employment/ career; policy/ governance	Policy and participation-data analysis	Readness, guidance, scheduling, and occupational constraints affect participation
Brenner et al. (2022)	South Africa	Individual/ learner; institutional	Exploratory qualitative case study	Assessmen6t can function as a pedagogical bridge into postgraduate study
Snyman & van den Berg (2022)	South Africa	Individual/ learner; institutional	Interpretive qualitative case study	Applicant-academic interaction and preparedness shape graduate RPL access.
Baumeler et al. (2023)	Switzerland	Institutional	Qualitative comparative case studies	Organisational policies and gatekeeper agency produce variation in RPL practice
Raciti et al. (2024)	International	Institutional (review evidence)	Systematic literature review	Implementation varies across policies processes, institutions and stakeholder experience
Brown & Pokorny (2026)	England, UK	Employment/ career	Neo-institutional analysis	RPL can reduce duplication when employers require formal degree credentials
Parenzee & Ramharose (2026)	South Africa	Institutional; policy/ governance	Practitioner – informed qualitative study	Compliance-driven implementation can weaken applicant-centred access and support

Critical Appraisal and data Extraction

Because the corpus combined qualitative studies, survey, policy analysis, organisational case studies , conceptual-policy articles, and a systematic review, appraisal focused on four design-sensitive criteria: clarirty of the research aim, tranparancy of the evidence base, appropriateness of the analytic approach, and dirrectness to the review question. No single quality score was applied across heterogeneous design; instead, the extraction matrix recorded evidential role and directness, and synthesis claims were weighted toward studies that directly examined RPL participant, graduate access, or institutional implementation.

Data Synthesis and Public-Adminstration Analysis

Heterogenity im design, setting and outcome precluded statistical meta-analysis. Findings were synthesised thematically into four domains: individual and learner, employment and career, institutional ad process, and policy and governance determinants, and coded for how these domains interact across the sequence from policy availability to awareness, perceived legitimacy, institutional accesibility, uptake and postgraduate participation. The public-administration interpretation focused on implementation capacity, administrative burden, procedural fairness, plicy alignment, stakeholder coordination, and the distination between formal entitlement and subtantive access.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The 20 included articles show that employees' use of RPL for postgraduate progression cannot be reduced to a single motivational variable; participation depends on four interacting domains: individual and learner readiness, employment and career incentives, institutional and procedural accesibility, and policy and governance conditions. Direct evidences on master's-level RPL remains limited, so claims are stated most strongly where graduate of employed RPL participant where graduate or employed RPL participants were examined, and more cautiously where the evidence concern tranferable institutional or policy mechanisms.

Individual and Learner Determinants

The first theme concerns whether employees can recognise their experiences as learning and present it in an evaluable form. Snyman and van de Berg (2018) show that RPL candidates bring distinctive learning histories and trajectories that shape the recognition process, and Miguel et al. (2016) provide participant-level evidence that formal recognition can alter how adults value learning accumulated outside formal education, together suggesting that perceived legitimacy of one's own experiential learning is an important precursor to uptake. Readiness is not simply a function of tenure: employees must identify relevant learning, connect it to qualification expectations, and assemble evidence that can be judged academically. Brenner et al. (2022) show, in a postgraduate South of African context, that RPL assesment can act as a pedagogical bridge between workplace experience and academic study, while Snyman and van den Berg (2022) show that graduate admission through RPL is shaped by applicationt-academic interaction and the support available during the process.

The resulting mechanism can be described as perceived experiental convertibility — the employee's judgement that prior learning can be translated into credible academic evidence. Where applicants doubt that their experience will be recognised, policy availability alone is unlikely to generate an application; where recognition processes help applicants interpret and document their learning, the pathway becomes more credible and navigable. For public administration, this theme highlights the difference between formal eligibility and usable access: a policy may state that experience is recognisable, but subtantive access depends on clear information, understandable evidentiary standars, and suffcient support to convert experience into an assessable claim.

Employment and Career Determinants

The second theme concerns the occupational value of a formal qualification and the cost of pursuing it while employed. Brown and Pokorny (2026) provide the clearest direct evidence: mature employees may already perform at a high level yet face employer requirements for a degree, creating a gap between occupational competence and recognised credentials that RPL can narrow by acknowledging competence already developed through work. Galloway and Edwards (2017) show a comparable mechanism among experienced adult educators lacking a formal teaching qualification, illustrating how professional or organisational expectations create demand for recognition; Werquin (2021b) adds that even where an established system exists, scheduling difficulty, uncertain returns, and insufficient guidance can reduce participation.

The employment mechanism is therefore conditional: a qualification must offer enough perceived career or organisational value to justify the administrative and time cost of recognition and study. RPL becomes attractive when it shortens duplication, legitimises existing expertise, or satisfies credential requirements, and unattractive when the pathway is complex, uncertain, or difficult to combine with employment. For public administration, this links RPL to workforce development and human-capital utilisation: the key policy question is not simply whether employees are motivated to study, but wether recognition pathways make the expected professional return visible and attainable.

Institutional and RPL Process Determinants

The third theme concerns how institutional design converts formal RPL entitlement into a usable sevice. Cooper et al. (2017) identify tensions between RPL's inclusive purpose and the constraints created during implematation, and Browning (2020) similarly reports gaps in faculty understanding and institutional roadblocks at a Canadian university, indicating that formal policy can coexist with weak organisational visibility. Procedural accessbility depends on information, advisng, evidence requirements, assessment credibility, and transtion support. Hlongwane (2019a, 2019b) show that South Afracan institutions can express commitment to access while still displaying low RPL use, and Morris and Rust (2020) show that graduatelevel PLA in the United States remains uncommon despite a growing population of nontraditional graduate learners.

Institutional variation is reinforced by organisational discretion. Baumeler et al. (2023) show that institutions offering similar progammers can regulate and justify RPL differently, and Raciti et al. (2024) confirm, at the review level, that practice varies substantially across settings. Parenzee and Rambharose (2026) sharpen this by showing how compliance-oriented implementation can undermine RPL's transformative intent when professional autonomy and applicant-centred practice are weak. The institutional pathway can be summarised as information and advising → evidence preparation → credible assessment → admission decision → transition support, with administrative burden at any stage reducing subtansive accessibility.

Policy and Governance Determinants

The fourth theme concerns the governance environment in wich RPL is authorised and implemented. Singh and Ehlers (2019) show, comparing Denmark and India, that implementation depends on stakeholder involement, ownership, and an appropriate mix of policy instruments, while Maurer (2019) shows that institutional arrangments and actor coalitions can constrain expansion even when RPL as a policy technology that can be copied whitout adaptation: Maurer (2021) shows how recognition models diffuse into lower- and middleincome vocational systems through development cooperation, Werquin (2021a) argues that policy mimicking can reproduce formal architecture without the conditions needed for implementation, and Alves et al. (2020) show that RPL initiatives in Brazil, Portugal, and Germany are embedded in distinct historical and organisational contexts.

A related governance problem is the gap between policy maturity and participation Werquin (2021b) documents declining participation in France despite a long-established system, identifying readiness, guidance, access, and scheduling as persistent challenges. For public administration, these studies position RPL as multilevel governance arrangement rather than a stand-alone university procedure: policy credibility depends on vertical alignment between national rules and institutional practice, and on horizontal coordination among universities, employers, professional bodies, and quality-assurance actors.

Cross-Cutting Finding: The Awareness-Access-Uptake Gap

Across the four themes, the principal integrative finding is an awareness-access-uptake gap: formal policy availability is necessary but insufficient. Employess must know that RPL exists, see their experiential learning as legitimate, perceive a worthwhile return, and encounter understandable, manage procedures. This sequence — policy availability → awareness → perceived legitimacy and value → institutional accessibility → RPL uptake → postgraduate participation — is an analytical framework rather than a causal model already tested at every stage; the included studies identify interruptionsn at different points,from limited institutional visibility (Browning, 2020) to gaps between inclusive intent and

implementation (Cooper et al., 2017), low utilisation despite formal access (Hlongwane, 2019b), and readiness and scheduling barries even in mature systems (Wequin, 2021b).

This review's novelty lies in linking these previously dispersed mechanisms to employee decision-making about postgraduate RPL: individual readiness affects whether experience is seen as convertible into academic value, employment conditions affect expected returns and participation costs, institutions determine whether the pathway is navigable, and governance arrangements shape consistency and legitimacy. This moves beyond a supply-side view of RPL provision toward a multilevel explanation of why formal availability may not result in uptake, contributing to public-administration scholarship by treating RPL as an implementaion and service-access problem one that directs attention to whether information reaches intended users,whether procedures create avoidable administrative burden, and whether coordination across authorities, institutions, and employers produces substantive rather than merely formal access.

Limitations and Research Agenda

This riview has four limitations. Direct evidence on employed applicants using RPL specifically for master's-level admission remains limited, so serveral mechanisms are inferred from adjacent graduate, adult-learning, institutional, or policy contexts. The corpus was reconstructed from a documented 17-study seed set and an 82-record supplementary reference set rather than from complete dated exports of multiple bibliographic databases, so the review is transparent and auditable but not exhaustive. The evidence is also georgraphically concentrated, especially in South Africa and Europe, limiting transferability, and the heterogeneous designs do not support casual claims. Future research should test the awareness-access-uptake sequence using comparative institutional studies, employee surveys, administrative process data, and longitudinal tracking from emquiry to enrolment.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

This review concludes that employess' decisions to pursue master's-level education through RPL cannot be explained by individual motivation alone. Participation emerges from interection among four domains: the perceived convertibility of experiential learning into academic evidence, the expected career value and feasibility of study while employed, the accessibility and credibility of institutional procedures, and the coherence of policy and govermance arrangements. Twenty peer-reviewed articles published between 2016 and August 2026 support this multilevel interpretation.

The principal conceptual contribution is the awareness-access-uptake gap,which explains how an inclusive policy can fail to produce participation whe employess are unaware of the pathway, doubt the legitimacy of their prior learning,encounter burdensome administrative procedures,or see insufficient professional return. For public administration, postgraduate RPL should therefore be understood as an implementation, coordination, and service-access arrangement, and the proposed framework should be tested empirically before making strong casual claims.

Recommendation

Building on this framework, universities and public authorities should monitor the RPL pathway from enquiry to eneolment, provide accessible pre-application guidance, and use transparent assessment standards. They should also strengthen assessor and adviser capability, coordinate employer and professional-body involvement, and support academic transition for admitted candidates. Future empirical work should prioritise testing the awareness—access—uptake sequence in specific national and institutional settings before generalising it as a casual

model.

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