



**Recognition of
Non-formal and Informal Learning:
Country Note for South Africa**

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RPL IN SOUTH AFRICA: THE FINDINGS OF THE OECD COUNTRY VISIT

Since 2006 the South African Qualifications Authority has overseen South Africa's participation in an initiative of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) that has investigated the recognition of non-formal learning across 22 countries and five continents. Better known as the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa, this important international comparative study has given South Africa the opportunity to benchmark its practices against countries as far afield as Australia, Canada, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Mexico and Austria, to mention but a few.

Following the completion of an initial South African Country Background Report by SAQA in 2007, a research team from the OECD visited South Africa in February 2008. The three members of the OECD team were:

- Dr Dennis Gunning: Rapporteur and Director of Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning at the Welsh Assembly Government
- Ms Joy van Kleef: Chief Executive Officer of the Canadian Institute for Recognising Learning
- Dr Patrick Werquin: OECD Project Leader

SAQA is of the view that the findings of the research team provide many valuable insights and has therefore opted to publish these for wider public dissemination. Importantly, the findings contained in this country note should be read together with the overall synthesis report that includes all 22 countries and that will be published by the OECD within the next few months.

SAQA wishes to acknowledge the OECD for undertaking this important initiative, and also thanks the South African research team for their constructive engagement with the unique context of RPL in South Africa. In particular SAQA would like to acknowledge the important contribution of the individuals and institutions in South Africa that participated in the country visit.



Samuel BA Isaacs
Chief Executive Officer

INTRODUCTION

This Country Note sets out the findings of an OECD team on an investigation of processes for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in the Republic of South Africa, taking into account a Country Background Report, other ancillary information prepared by the South African authorities, as well as the outcomes of the meetings and site visits undertaken by the OECD team in the course of a visit to South Africa between 17 and 22 February 2008.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning is now high on the policy agenda in many OECD countries. In 1996, the OECD education ministers agreed to develop strategies for "lifelong learning for all". That approach has been endorsed by ministers of labour, by ministers of social affairs and by the OECD Council at ministerial level. It is an approach whose importance may now be clearer than ever. Learning is a continuous process that takes place throughout life and in many settings. The concept of "from cradle to grave" includes formal, non-formal, and informal learning. If learning is only recognised as the outcome of formal teaching, most of what is learnt is not recognised.

From a policy point of view, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning is wholly consistent with the principle that individuals have an entitlement to recognition for the knowledge, skills and competencies developed through learning, wherever and however that learning took place. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning has the potential to be effective in widening that recognition beyond the range of knowledge, skills and competencies developed in the formal education and training systems.

The non-formal and informal approach can also be effective in attracting learners who would otherwise be unable or reluctant to enter a formal education and training institution. Learning, whether it is recognised through formal credits towards qualifications or by other means, is important in meeting the career, social and personal aspirations of individual learners. But beyond the needs of individuals, the establishment of systems of non-formal and informal learning also has the potential to enrich the social, economic and cultural well-being of the country.

An OECD project entitled *Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning* was launched in 2006 to investigate how much evidence exists on the benefits of such recognition, whether governments know enough about the impact of national policies on such recognition and under what conditions can such recognition be beneficial for all? The project has included over 20 OECD member countries and two countries with strong links to the OECD, one of which, South Africa, is the subject of this report. Subsequent to the visit described in this report, it has been confirmed that South Africa is to become a full member of the OECD.

The working methods of the project consist of desk-based research and a field visit. The desk-based research aims at providing guidance for the preparation of a country background report; developing a framework for data collection (qualitative and quantitative) and analysis. The purpose of the field visit is to deepen understanding of the country's policy context and to investigate the translation of policy into practice.

PARTICIPATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa agreed to participate in field research as the appropriate level of its participation in this OECD project. As preparation for the field visit, South Africa drafted a Country Background Report which was made available to the OECD in August 2007. The field visit by an OECD expert team then followed in February 2008 and involved a full programme of visits and meetings over a working week arranged by the host country. Annex 1 shows details of the programme and the participants in the meetings that took place. The OECD team consisted of Joy Van Kleef (Canada), Dennis Gunning (Wales - rapporteur) and Patrick Werquin (OECD); this report was prepared by the visit rapporteur with the help and support of his review team colleagues.

The OECD team wishes to record its thanks to its South African hosts for their hospitality and for the preparation of an informative and productive series of meetings and visits. Thanks also go to the policy makers, practitioners and students who contributed to the meetings with the review team in a spirit of openness and collaboration. Particular thanks are due to the staff of the South African Qualifications Authority - Emlyn Jordaan and his team for making all the in-country arrangements for the visits, Ronel Blom (now with Umalusi), James Keevy and Ben Parker for their preparation of the Country Background Report, for the collegiate approach that they adopted throughout the programme and for the many insights they provided into the social and economic context of South Africa.

The combination of the Country Background Report and this field visit report provides information on the policy intentions and practical implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning in South Africa. The two reports should be useful to policy makers and practitioners in other countries, within the OECD and beyond, as a vehicle for the development of international collaboration and as a resource from which to elicit examples of good practice.

This report on South Africa forms part of the OECD's Thematic Review of the Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning. The report should be read in conjunction with the Country Background Report provided by South Africa in preparation for the visit. The Country Background Report provides much information about the South African education and training system and its political context, as well as information on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The Report is summarised in the next section.

SUMMARY OF THE COUNTRY BACKGROUND REPORT

Demographic and economic background

South Africa has a population of nearly 50 million, of which more than 41% live in poorer rural areas, and close to 54% are 24 years of age or younger.

The Gross Domestic product (GDP) has risen from 460 billion Rand in 1980 to 661 billion Rand in 2002. On average, the economy has grown at a rate of 4.6% per year during the last four years. The budget deficit has decreased from 9.5% of Gross Domestic Product in 1993 to fractionally over 1% in 2003. Over the last five years, a high level of macro-economic stability has been achieved - this has created the capacity for the state to direct significant levels of expenditure to improve material and social conditions and confront poverty and exclusions created by apartheid.

The economically active population has grown from 11.5 million in 1995 to 15.4 million in 2002. During that period, the number of people employed in South Africa has grown from 9.5 million to 11.2 million. This represents 1.6 million new jobs. However, during the same period, the number of unemployed people grew from 1.9 million to 4.3 million - an unemployment rate in 2002 of 36%. Of those employed, about 12.5% were temporary workers and 6.4% were casual workers.

There is high unemployment amongst unskilled workers and young workers (20 to 30 age group) and a shortage of semi-skilled and high-skilled workers. In September 2002, the unemployment rate for under-30s was 49% compared to 21% for those aged over 30.

Levels of inequality in South Africa remain high, although the sharp divisions are no longer solely along racial lines. The black middle class is now larger than its white counterpart. However, the vast majority of the poor are still African and live primarily in rural areas or in areas around cities (where they are usually new migrants). South Africa is experiencing rapid urban migration especially in the 20 to 34 age group. The migration data indicate that rural areas are being left with high proportions of female-headed households, older people, young children and increasingly young female adults (15 to 19) who are mothers. Given their reliance on pensions and child grants, these households are becoming increasingly dependent and fragile. This trend is being exacerbated by HIV/AIDS increasing the number of orphans and child-headed households. Given the exigencies of rural life with its high demands on labour for survival (fetching water, wood, subsistence farming), less than 10% of people living in rural areas complete formal schooling. The situation is further exacerbated by the lack of opportunities for informal or non-formal learning.

The main driver of migration to urban areas is the desire for employment. However, many of the migrants have low levels of formal education and are unable to secure employment even though South Africa has a large number of vacancies in skilled and semi-skilled occupations. In 2006, the South African government launched the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisitions (JIPSA) to specifically address the skills shortage and the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is seen as significant in the realisation of this.

Challenges to improving material and social conditions and strengthening social cohesion include the demographic changes, rapid migration and family pressures described above and a weak national consciousness/value orientation arising from such a complex and diverse

society; from the tension between a western-oriented cosmopolitanism and African-oriented local identities and cultures; and from a weak entrepreneurial culture.

These challenges require a South African education and training system that can facilitate access to education and training opportunities for those previously excluded by apartheid and do so in a way that acknowledges South Africa's constitutional commitments to equity and redress. Although much progress has been made since the advent of democracy in 1994, there is a continuing need for national and local initiatives to tackle the related challenges of unemployment and poverty and to improve the quality and availability of education, especially for black people and for women.

The education and training context

By 2002 there were more than 33 000 established public institutions and registered independent institutions in South Africa catering for more than 13.5 million learners and employing around 350 000 educators.

In the school sector, 6.4 million learners were in primary schools, 3.5 million in secondary schools and 2.0 million in combined, intermediate and middle schools. A recent comprehensive study carried out under the auspices of the Education Labour Relations Council showed that 70% of teachers in schools had been teaching for ten years or longer and that over 80% are fully qualified.

Of the 13.5 million learners in all sectors of the education system in 2002, 86% were in public schools, 2.1% were in independent schools, 5.0% were in public higher education institutions and 3.0% were in public FET institutions. The national average learner-to-educator ratio in public schools was 33:1. Between 1995 and 2004 the total number of qualifications awarded to learners increased with an average annual growth rate of 4.3%, with the highest growth in four-year first degrees, Honours degrees and Masters degrees.

The reasons preventing more than 45 000 15-18 year olds, who had not completed matriculation and were not attending school, from continuing their education, in 1995 included financial constraints (nearly two-thirds), pregnancy (nearly three in ten females) and other reasons included family commitment, illness and distance.

South Africa has a fairly well developed school-based further education sector (covering the last three years of schooling leading to a National Senior Certificate) and a growing public and private Further Education and Training (FET) college system. Following a process of merger of public FET technical schools in 2003 and 2004, the number of institutions has been reduced from 152 technical schools to 50 large multi-sited institutions. In addition, there are over 800 private FET providers offering, in the main, specialised skills-focused programmes.

South Africa has a diverse but well developed higher education sector. Prior to 2001, there were 21 universities and 14 universities of technology. However, many of these had been established by the apartheid regime on ethnic and linguistic grounds. To redress these legacies, the government has merged institutions to create 11 universities, 5 universities of technology, 6 comprehensive institutions and 2 National Institutes for Higher Education. A comprehensive regulatory system has been put in place to improve the quality of a system that varies from excellent (with four universities in the world's top 500) to poor, with high attrition rates still prevalent amongst undergraduate students.

RPL in South Africa

In South Africa, the term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is used for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning. It is defined as the identification of learning acquired through work and other life experiences outside the formal education system. This newly identified knowledge is then used to determine potential for formal learning at an appropriate level, and to conduct comparisons of knowledge and skills against the learning outcomes required for specific qualifications.

RPL has been seen in South Africa as a key element of policy reforms relevant to the education and training system and workforce development strategies and policies. These strategies include a particular focus on redress for individuals who have been denied access to recognition or entry to education and training.

Individuals seeking such redress should be able to use RPL as a route through which to access continuing education courses and professional qualifications - for example, under-qualified adults such as teachers with some level of professional experience who want to up-skill and improve their qualifications. They may be individuals who lack the minimum requirements for entry into a formal learning programme or who are working in industries where changes to regulatory regimes have meant that a qualification has become a requirement to continue to practise.

Another possible focus of redress may occur where individuals have worked for many years and have gained experience in specific areas, but were prevented from gaining recognition for that experience. Such individuals will most likely have very low levels of formal education. The focus here may therefore be to obtain recognition through certification of the knowledge, skills and competencies achieved from prior experience, or to improve an individual's confidence in themselves and their own capacity to learn.

It is thought that the uptake of RPL is at a lower level than would have been expected, given its strategic and policy importance. This section explores the barriers to implementation of RPL.

In education and training, South Africa's National Qualification Framework (NQF) has become one of the primary vehicles for education reform and provides the context wherein the South African education and training takes place.

The NQF is the responsibility of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA); the objectives of the NQF are to:

- create an integrated national framework for learner achievements;
- facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths;
- enhance the quality of education and training;
- accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination, in education, training and development opportunities; and thereby
- contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.

These objectives aim to achieve an integrated approach based on outcomes that can be assessed for purposes of mobility, portability, progression and for redress through the recognition of prior learning. RPL is seen as a key feature of the NQF and SAQA emphasises in its guidelines on RPL that it is essentially an approach to assessment of an individual's knowledge, skills and competencies to which the normal good practice in assessment must apply, i.e. in its planning and delivery; the authenticity, currency and sufficiency of evidence; and the quality assurance of assessment judgements. The guidelines also emphasise the need for support services to be provided to potential RPL candidates, not least to address the barriers that may have prevented the individual from accessing recognition in the past.

Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) are important agents of implementation of the NQF. To be accredited by SAQA, they must provide evidence in relation to RPL policies and procedures.

However, recent monitoring of the ETQAs has shown that while all ETQAs had policies and procedures for RPL, these had still not been implemented and there still seems to be a poor understanding of RPL as a discrete activity.

There are also barriers to the widespread implementation of RPL in individual sectors. In higher education, for example, the 1997 Education White Paper (*A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*) states that the "higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities". The White Paper envisages higher education opening its doors, in the spirit of lifelong learning, to workers, professionals and adult learners whose access to higher education was thwarted in the past.

Notwithstanding these noble objectives, there remains a number of statutory regulations that inhibit the optimal development and implementation of RPL within the public and private higher education institutions. The first, the statute on admission to higher education, although encouraging "non-traditional" applicants, still requires such applicants to satisfy conditions for exemption from the normal requirements of the matriculation certificate. Therefore the application of the statute does not cover the thousands of learners who were prevented or discouraged from completing formal schooling and who may have left school at an earlier stage, for example at grade 10 or 11.

The second is the 50% "residency clause" which, although not originally intended to be used in terms of RPL, is now used to avoid awarding formal credits in higher education to learners who meet most (or all) of the requirements for a particular qualification as evidenced through the assessment of prior learning. This clause means that even if a learner meets all of the requirements for the achievement of a qualification through the recognition of his/her prior learning, that learner still has to complete 50% of the qualification with the new institution before the institution awards a qualification.

In Further Education and Training, the 1998 Act makes reference to recognition of prior learning as a means by which access to the FET band of qualifications can be gained. In the discussion of the principles underpinning the new approach to FET, the issues of redress and access are referred to explicitly. Despite this, the development of RPL policies and systems has been slowest in the public FET sector. To date, no formal policy governing RPL at FET institutions has been drafted.

Funding may also be a barrier to the widespread application of RPL programmes and services in public institutions. At present, there is no formal, systemic funding system for RPL in South Africa. In most cases, institutions fund their own RPL activities, including the development of procedures and infrastructure as needed.

In some cases, individual applicants would be expected to pay for RPL services, but in other cases the cost is carried by an employer or through sponsorships. There is no standard cost structure, as the contexts within which RPL is undertaken may be vastly different. The SAQA national policy guideline states that RPL services and assessment should not cost more than a full-time face-to-face programme, particularly if such services are integrated into the existing infrastructure and that the cost of developing RPL systems and capacity must be seen as an investment in the development of a credible lifelong learning system in South Africa.

Looking at RPL from the context of national skills development, the 1998 Skills Development Act provides for an institutional framework for the implementation of strategies to improve the skills of the South African workforce. RPL is seen as a means by which individuals could achieve recognition for learning and skills attained through work and life experiences, particularly as these people were prevented from accessing education and training by unjust educational policies of the past. Under this Act, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) were established with responsibilities that included facilitation of the development and implementation of RPL processes for the workforce in their sectors and quality assurance of the processes. SETAs are accountable to the Ministry of Labour. SETAs also function as Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) and, as such, require accreditation from SAQA. All SETAs had to develop and submit RPL policies to SAQA during their accreditation processes but despite this, fully-fledged implementation plans and projects have been developed in only a few sectors.

The National Skills Development Strategy acts and regulations could be an important source of funds through the National Skills Fund (NSF) and the levy system payable by all organisations with more than 50 employees. Such funds are only available through the SETAs; agencies and providers accountable through the Department of Education are inhibited from accessing them. To date, these funds have not been utilised for RPL to any great extent.

In summary, therefore, RPL is seen in legislation, regulations, policies, frameworks and guidelines as an important mechanism for redress and the opening up of access to lifelong learning and employment opportunities. There is a common understanding of the potential benefits of RPL but implementation of RPL remains constrained by statutes, by limits on access to funding and by continuing caution and scepticism whether such a new process as RPL can really serve as a catalyst for transformation.

Nevertheless, RPL practice can be found on a limited scale in the Higher Education and Training (HET), Further Education and Training (FET) and General Education and Training (GET) Bands and in Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), in formal institutions of learning, as well as at workplace-based education and training centres and by small private single purpose providers.

The field visit to South Africa

Purpose and programme

The field visit by the OECD team took place between 17 and 22 February 2008. The programme was designed to provide the team with opportunities to:

- discuss and explore the Country Background Report for South Africa on the recognition of Non-Formal and Informal Learning;
- gather views about recognition of non-formal learning from policy makers, quality assurance organisations, providers of education and training, and other stakeholders.
- explore the extent to which the policy purposes of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in South Africa are being carried through to implementation
- make observations based on the Country Background Report and the field visit to assist South Africa to further develop its system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning
- encourage the dissemination of practice on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning within South Africa and beyond.

In the course of the visit to South Africa, the OECD team met policy makers, RPL and adult learning experts, RPL assessors, education and training providers and adult learners. It would be difficult to construct a one-week programme that was truly representative of the scale and diversity of South Africa's peoples, cultures, geography or lifelong learning systems. The field visit did, though, enable the OECD team to develop a general understanding of the political, social and economic context of the South African education and training system and of the role of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in that system.

While the primary purpose of the activity in the field visit was to provide opportunities for the OECD team to analyse aspects of the implementation of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning processes in South Africa, the visit also served as an opportunity for practitioners and stakeholders to discuss best practice in South Africa and beyond and as a reminder of the need for professional bridges between the islands of practice that the team observed during its visits to Pretoria, Johannesburg, Bloemfontein and Cape Town.

Findings from the field visit

This section sets out the findings of the OECD team from its investigation of processes for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in South Africa, taking account of the information gleaned from the field visit and from analysis of the Country Background Report and other information supplied by the South African hosts. It is important to bear in mind the scale and scope of the field visit when reading the findings. This is not an educational research report; rather, it is a reflective view of the field team, drawing on the Country Background Report and the conversations and impressions formed during the field visit. Inevitably, conclusions were influenced by the places visited and the people spoken to; it would not have been possible in a one week visit to cover every type of institution, employment sector or key stakeholder.

The team, in its visits and discussions, described its purpose as being to hold up a mirror so that its hosts could see their system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning as others see it. This report is therefore intended as a set of external, expert observations and collegiate suggestions, not as a research paper on, or audit report of, South Africa's policy and practice. It is for the host country to consider the reflections in the mirror and to follow up the suggestions made by the field team if those suggestions are seen as helpful to the further development of recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The key issues that arose during the review team's visit fall into two key themes:

- Recognition of non-formal and informal learning for redress
- Infrastructure for recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Each of these is discussed in the sections that follow.

RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING FOR REDRESS

Summary

The recognition of non-formal and informal learning in South Africa has a strong political context, arising from the country's political legacy. The South African government, in the post-apartheid period, identified the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as having the potential to redress the discrimination suffered by racial groups who had no or limited access to education and training opportunities under the apartheid regimes.

Widespread availability of recognition of non-formal and informal learning can extend the reach of the formal education and training sector by providing a means by which individuals can access further learning and receive recognition for knowledge, skills and competencies acquired in non-formal and informal learning contexts.

Given South Africa's population demographics, including its age distribution, literacy and unemployment rates, and its skill shortages in critical areas (e.g. teaching, construction), RPL has the potential to serve the needs of both individuals and the South African labour market.

The OECD team found acceptance among stakeholders and education and training providers of the general principles and purpose of recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the role RPL can play in the promotion of lifelong learning. The visit may have been insufficient in scope, during a week, to explore a wider range of contexts in which recognition for redress is operating; the evidence available during the visit focused mainly on learners seeking access to higher education courses and on learners seeking recognition for "licence to practice" purposes, whereas the team expected to see greater use of recognition of non-formal and informal learning for unemployed and underemployed adults in the age range of 40 to 60 years.

Discussions with stakeholders

The discussions with stakeholders that focused on the application of recognition of non-formal and informal learning for access purposes gave rise to distinct categories of "redress".

These included:

- Recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a means of supporting individuals seeking access to tertiary education (undergraduate, postgraduate, and further education and training (FET)).
- Recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a means of supporting individuals who need recognition of their current knowledge, skills and competencies, for example because of changes to the regulatory requirements in the industry in which they were employed (e.g. teachers, nurses, financial advisors and police services). In such instances these individuals may need to achieve a qualification in order to continue to have access to employment in the future.
- The team's discussions on the first category took place mainly with higher education institutions in Johannesburg, Pretoria, Bloemfontein and Cape Town.
- The team's discussions on the second category related to meetings with higher education institutions (particularly in relation to the National Professional Diploma in Education), a commercial assessment provider, the South African Police Service and RPL research and policy experts.

Access to tertiary education (higher education, further education and training)

The review team discussed the application of recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a means to widen access to courses with higher education providers. Not all of the higher education providers visited, however, offer this access to undergraduate courses - some do so only for access to postgraduate courses.

Tshwane University of Technology offers this service and stated that it did so as a matter of principle, not because it needs to recruit additional students - it can fill its places through conventional access routes. This university does not generally market its RPL service, apart from a specific link to protective services employers. The university staff that the review team met support the recognition of non-formal and informal learning but have concerns about the sustainability of the service, partly because not all academic staff are equally committed or comfortable with this approach to assessment and partly because there is a lack of role models of successful practice.

The University of South Africa (UNISA), which specialises in open and distance learning, offers recognition of non-formal and informal learning for both undergraduate and postgraduate course access. Senior managers had been seconded to set up an RPL process and had made overseas visits to explore best practice elsewhere in preparation. From one candidate in 1997, the service has grown to serve between six and eight thousand people by 2008.

This includes a large cohort of teachers seeking to upgrade their professional qualifications to new norms and standards. The university charges fees for those using RPL and sees the service as self-financing; however this is in the context of an annual budget of about 8 million Rand assigned by the university for RPL. There was insufficient time in the discussions to establish to what extent fees charged to learners and employers cover all costs of the RPL service being offered. Pre-access courses for individuals who do not meet senior secondary matriculation requirements are also offered. These courses typically attract individuals aged 25 to 45 years for whom undergraduate programs were not available in the past. The review team met a large group of potential students in a pre-access portfolio course run by UNISA; these students came across as mature, ambitious and highly articulate and saw RPL as a means of gaining recognition for the knowledge, skills and competencies they had acquired through their life and work experience.

The university is developing training courses for RPL specialists which will be available by distance learning. It has also established RPL services for employers, including those seeking recognition for employees as a result of changes to regulatory requirements. In an effort to broaden access, it is introducing a new policy which will require 10% of students in all faculties to be admitted through RPL.

Despite the many positive aspects of UNISA's policy and practice, staff leading the RPL service appeared discouraged by the slowness of the national implementation of RPL, by the lower commitment to RPL among faculty staff of the university and by the professional isolation of those working with RPL.

UNISA's staff also referred to the barriers to RPL identified in the Country Report. The university's RPL service is willing to offer successful learners access to its undergraduate courses and it also offers Honours degree assessment by RPL. However, the first can not lead to the award of matriculation because of the national matriculation requirements and the second does not lead to the award of a degree because of the residency rule - so RPL on its own can offer only status, not qualifications. The extent to which the use of this residency rule by providers is a quality assurance or financial issue is discussed further in the infrastructure section of this paper.

A discussion group involving staff of three universities, UNISA, the University of Johannesburg and the University of the Witwatersrand, raised further issues about the application of RPL for access. One was that the outcome of the RPL process is generally institution-specific; that is, other universities will not accept the outcome for admission to their own undergraduate courses. Another was the issue of faculty specialist staff, who are seen generally to be reluctant to become involved in RPL processes and to prefer students who enter through more traditional routes. It was therefore seen as important that RPL students have advocacy services available to them to ensure that the evidence they present in the admissions process is not misunderstood by academics and that the students' lack of confidence does not disadvantage them in comparison to students with a track record of success in formal education settings.

The review team's visit to the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein provided further evidence of the implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning policies and practice. This university has offered RPL services for a number of years. There was extended discussion of the university's work with the National Professional Diploma in Education, in which under-qualified and unqualified teachers can gain recognition for their prior knowledge and experience as credit towards part of the Diploma.

The university offers a highly structured recognition service which builds on the level of formal education of the teacher, provides strong pastoral and academic support and has a well-designed and quality assured portfolio assessment system. There are now around 1 500 teachers per year on this course; 7 000 have experienced RPL since its inception in 2002.

This university markets its RPL service through local newspapers and industry bodies. RPL is covered within university regulations and its availability is marketed in the university's course booklets. An RPL application fee and an assessment fee are charged - the latter is half the fee of the same module delivered by conventional methods.

Fees for the National Professional Diploma in Education are subsidised by the Department of Education; the subsidy is dependent on the university maintaining a benchmark program completion rate.

The university is also involved in a project that is addressing the high attrition rate of students at the year 10 stage of education. School students can become disengaged because the curriculum offers insufficient scope for those who prefer to learn through applied and practical learning and whose likely or preferred pathway is vocational rather than directed towards higher education. Such students often need a course that develops their employability skills, such as literacy, numeracy and personal confidence, and gives them an opportunity to try out a range of employment-focused courses so that they can establish where their strengths lie. If such courses also require that the school sets up links with local further education and training providers, support services and employers, then students will be able to build the networks that will sustain them when they leave school. There was discussion of the potential of South Africa's new National Vocational Certificate for such students.

The final university visited by the review team was the University of the Western Cape in Cape Town. This university had noted that the matriculation regulations allowed Senate's Discretionary access for non-traditional students over the age of 23 to undergraduate courses providing they can demonstrate the "potential to succeed" in those courses. To this end, applicants can write admissions tests or take a Portfolio Development Course offered by the Division of Lifelong Learning to demonstrate their prior knowledge and their potential to succeed in their chosen programs of study. The university actively markets its RPL services and charges a small annual fee which is heavily subsidised by the university.

The university offers a well-structured and supportive service to prospective RPL students. It has also established a Senate Lifelong Learning Committee to support and monitor RPL issues and trends. The university also emphasises RPL in its graduation ceremonies, including awards for students and for staff.

The review team had the opportunity to discuss recognition of non-formal and informal learning with three students; one had initially seen being an RPL student as a stigma but now saw it as a source of pride. Another had left school at age 13 but had pursued learning at night school. She saw education as a way out of poverty and felt that RPL had recognised and broadened the knowledge, skills and competencies she already possessed. The third student had struggled at school but had developed his reading and numeracy skills whilst working as an estate agent; he saw RPL as a means to realise his ambition to complete a law degree and was now a second year student in the degree program. There were common characteristics among the three students. Each had left school early, each enjoys learning, even though they had had poor experience of formal education, and each is now studying in an area related to the experience they had gained from employment or voluntary work.

The discussion with students from the University of the Western Cape was followed by a focus group that also involved the University of Cape Town and Cape Peninsula University of Technology. The RPL practices of the three institutions were discussed and compared. There was a discussion of the need for a strong advisory component of the portfolio development process and of the focus, very strongly advocated by the University of the Western Cape, on the whole learner and their potential for success. The institutions also discussed the view in some institutions that RPL was something that they had to do and that there was much to do to ensure that RPL was accepted by academics. Issues that had emerged earlier in the visits, such as the level of resourcing of RPL, the extent to which institutions had data available on RPL uptake, the need for a national community of RPL practice to be encouraged, were also discussed. The final part of the visit to the University of the Western Cape involved a discussion on research into aspects of RPL policy and practice, with a particular focus on the link between effective RPL practice and the literacy level of the client and on the ways in which RPL practice can be broadened beyond the traditional portfolio approach.

The review team also visited one further education and training institution, the Tshwane South FET College and toured its project site for training in the construction trades. This initiative was established in partnership with the construction industry's Sector Education and Training Authority, CETA, and aimed to offer opportunities to young people to develop skills in that industry. The services for young people recognise that many of these clients had low levels of basic education and therefore that recognition alone will be unlikely to be enough to meet the requirements of a workplace.

Discussions with college staff and with educators in other institutions led the review team to question the extent to which FET institutions are actively using RPL as a student recruitment/access tool or as a means of accelerating learners' progress through training programs, despite FET legislation and policies emphasising the importance of RPL. Staff perceptions of the level of prior learning held by their students, a lack of human resources to facilitate RPL-based access, and employer resistance to releasing workers, were noted as factors that may inhibit RPL implementation. Given the potential of the FET system to use RPL as an accelerated approach to education and training in areas of national and local skills shortage, perceived barriers in FET institutions to the use of RPL would be worthy of further investigation if the visit team's perceptions were accurate.

The discussion with college and CETA staff focused on the roles that RPL and formal training need to play if people who are unemployed or employed in casual labour are to achieve artisanship. It was stressed that in today's labour market, technical skills alone are not enough. The learner also has to have theoretical underpinning to the skills so that he or she can deal with problems and contingencies and can deal with the increasingly technical nature of many trades in the construction industry.

Recognition of existing skills can play a very important first step in building the learners' confidence in his or her abilities and therefore help to reduce the barriers to participation in more formal learning.

There was a discussion of the views of employers in the construction industry, some of whom were said to be resistant to RPL. Some employers were reported to feel that unskilled individuals have had their chance and failed to take it so should not get a second chance; others do not want employees to develop further skills because they need a large supply of unskilled labourers.

There were also cultural issues - workplace supervisors who are themselves unqualified may feel threatened by employees who become qualified; and labourers so accustomed to subservience that they did not challenge the status quo. If the views attributed to employers in the construction industry are held more widely, there may be a need for an awareness-raising campaign for employers, so that the advantages of RPL as a tool to address national and local skills shortages can be emphasised.

The OECD team viewed the well-equipped construction training centre at the college; students were developing their skills across a wide range of regulated and non-regulated construction occupations.

Recognition in employment

The review team discussed this use of recognition of non-formal and informal learning during a number of the meetings with stakeholders, but the most detailed discussions took place with a commercial provider, with the South African Police Service and with some universities.

The universities' involvement in employment-related recognition is covered in the previous section, particularly in the context of the National Professional Diploma in Education for experienced but underqualified teachers.

The commercial provider, Prior Learning Centre, does not provide training; it is geared to the provision of assessment services, including recognition of non-formal and informal learning. The provider has a turnover of around 17 million Rand per year; it has dealt with around 25 000 candidates in five years. Recent business has included the successful winning of contracts on a competitive basis to supply recognition services to employers whose employees need to achieve qualifications to meet new regulatory requirements in the industry - examples included insurance, call centres and real estate.

The provider deals largely with candidates who can themselves pay the fees charged or whose fees are met by their employers. The provider has experienced frustrations in dealing with the national regulatory framework; for example, it has chosen not to register under the Further Education and Training Act because it sees that Act as excluding assessment-only centres - the Act's definition of "provider" is interpreted as requiring education and training to be provided.

The provider also sees barriers to engaging with 18 to 25 year olds because Umalusi was said to be willing only to register assessment-only centres that are public providers.

The provider also reported difficulties in dealing with an Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) body, which has not provided timely verification services required by the provider and has not issued certificates to successful learners. The provider has had to resort to issuing letters of confirmation to learners because their employers required assurance for the purpose of new regulatory requirements. The provider reported that the difficulties with the ETQA were raised with SAQA but has not seen any improvements in the ETQA's services.

The provider, although very commercially orientated, appears to be well geared up to the provision of large-scale RPL services. Examples of portfolios were seen, including those of the provider's own staff who are having their prior experience recognised through RPL; the portfolio system appeared to encourage both evidence collection and reflection on practice - and the provider's internal verification practice and its data collection also seemed well developed.

The visit to the South African Police Service for discussion with its staff and staff from the National Defence Force provided an opportunity to see how national government agencies are acting on government policy.

The police service uses the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a means of providing recognition for officers who have substantial experience but lack the qualifications required for promotion. RPL had been carefully piloted, starting with elements of the National Certificate in Policing and with accreditation as an assessment centre. The success of the pilot encouraged the service to widen the availability of RPL and to adapt assessments to the context of the police service. A link has been formed with UNISA, so that RPL can support officers to progress from the National Certificate in Policing to a degree in policing at the university.

The National Defence Force sees the use of RPL as an interim measure to support training and to ensure that individuals not qualified at the right level can gain those qualifications and progress in their military careers. For example, RPL is being used as a bridge into senior management development programmes for individuals who did not achieve the usual pre-requisite qualifications.

THE INFRASTRUCTURE FOR RECOGNITION OF NON-FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Summary

The infrastructure for a successful system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning includes several fundamental features:

- a clear relationship to national legislation and policy;
- stakeholder alignment with the policies;
- effective but proportionate quality assurance of the outcomes of recognition procedures;
- qualified assessors, widely-available guidance and support for practitioners and learners;
- an effective toolkit of data collection, review and evaluation approaches to ensure alignment of practice with national policy.

The review team found that there was a strong legislative and policy basis for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in South Africa, but little or no evidence of financial support for development of organisational RPL infrastructure. Organisational data collection was minimal, practitioner professional development was sporadic, and explicit quality assurance practices were difficult to discern. Practitioners provided examples of barriers that prevented recognition of non-formal and informal learning reaching its full potential. These included a lack of support for RPL among senior government department policy makers, and poor coordination across government departments. The review team identified the need for a nationally or regionally organised practitioner support network so that the sense of isolation and the low morale observed among some committed practitioners could be tackled, and bridges built between the islands of good practice that were seen.

The team heard evidence of good quality assurance practice from some individual providers but also noted concerns in relation to the regulation of the bodies that have responsibility for quality assurance. Providers commented on the variability in quality assurance practice and advocacy of RPL between different SETAs and ETQAs. Such variability of practice in, and commitment to, RPL should be the subject of attention by SAQA and other authorities with responsibility for the regulation of ETQAs and SETAs.

For review and evaluation purposes, the team also believes that greater use can be made of national data collection, for example through the National Learner Records Database, so that the extent of implementation of non-formal and informal learning can be readily evaluated, and benchmarking of data between education and training providers, between regions and between industry sectors can be encouraged.

Legislation and policies

If recognition of non-formal and informal learning is underpinned by a statutory or public policy base, it needs to be aligned to other legislation and policy in the fields of education and labour - for example to ensure that legislation or policy in related areas does not undermine or create barriers to recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The Country Background Report provides considerable detail on the legislative and policy underpinnings of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning; there is strong commitment, as expressed through documents ranging from legislation to guidance material, to the application of recognition of non-formal and informal learning for the purposes of access and redress.

Stakeholders involved in discussions with the review team were reasonably well aware of the legislative and policy underpinnings and supportive of the concept of recognition of non-formal and informal learning as an instrument of redress.

There was, however, concern among stakeholders on the extent to which the legislative and policy intent had been translated into action. The South African Qualifications Authority was recognised as having taken a lead with the publication of guidelines and in the way in which it has built recognition of non-formal and informal learning into its accreditation requirements for ETQAs.

Stakeholders were less sure about the extent to which recognition of non-formal and informal learning has advocates or "champions" in the senior echelons of the Department of Education or the Department of Labour; the OECD team had insufficient opportunity to pursue this issue further but it is cited as an area of concern in other South African policy-related publications.

A further source of concern, and a potential barrier to the success of recognition of non-formal and informal learning in meeting its policy intentions, was the continued application of matriculation regulations for admission to higher education and on the residency rule. It was not clear from the discussions with some HE providers to what extent the residency rule is a quality assurance issue or a funding issue or both. In the former, the residency rule is based on the concept of 'graduateness' and on the premise that a provider would not wish to take responsibility for awarding a qualification in which a large proportion of the learning and possibly some of the assessment had taken place elsewhere. This position is less tenable where national quality assurance systems for providers are effective because such systems will implicitly or explicitly provide parity of recognition between providers and therefore give providers confidence to accept assessment judgements made elsewhere. In the latter, the residency rule is a proxy and serves as a way in which a provider ensures that fees are earned for the traditional delivery of teaching, learning and assessment; here, RPL (and other forms of credit recognition) are seen as a risk to the provider's income stream.

The South African Police Service's use of RPL could serve as a role model for others in the government service; government departments might consider taking steps to provide their own staff with access to recognition of non-formal and informal learning for professional development and progression purposes, but also as an example of "practising what they preach".

Stakeholder alignment with the policies

Although the review team saw much evidence of commitment to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning among the providers visited and the organisations involved in discussions, views were also expressed by stakeholders on the patchiness of the implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning on a national and local scale. Concern was expressed, for example, at the variable level of support for implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning among both ETQAs and SETAs, and at the apparent unwillingness of regulatory agencies to take action to ensure compliance with accreditation criteria on recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Quality assurance

Quality assurance in a national education and training system operates across a wide range of levels. In relation to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, a number of issues were raised with the review team during its visit. These included:

- the quality of RPL processes at provider level,
- the quality of quality assurance mechanisms provided by regulatory bodies.

In the first case, quality assurance at the provider level begins with written, consistent, and transparent RPL policies and procedures; qualified assessors, clear statements of expected learning (e.g. learning outcomes), appropriate assessment methods and tools, and internal accountability mechanisms.

The review team noted that most RPL providers use portfolios as the chief method of assessing prior learning. While portfolio development often enriches an individual's sense of their own learning and capacity to learn, in addition to providing hard evidence of technical and generic knowledge, skills and competencies (e.g. critical thinking), a disadvantage can be its reliance on an individual's language and literacy skills. In most instances, portfolio assessment in tertiary education and regulated occupations demands relatively high literacy skills. As such, sole reliance on portfolios can create an unintentional barrier to learning recognition. Low levels of literacy and the fact that English may be a potential RPL candidate's second or third language was raised by several providers during the visit as a barrier to access to RPL services.

It is therefore important that providers' own quality assurance mechanisms include examination of the appropriateness of the assessment methods and tools they are using, including their fitness for the purpose and the individuals they are intended to serve, and the level of literacy they require compared with the level of literacy necessary to perform the expected outcomes (e.g. occupational tasks). This difficulty can also be mitigated by using additional methods of assessment such as demonstrations, simulations, product assessments and structured interviews to supplement, or in some cases, replace RPL's use of portfolios.

Some anecdotal evidence emerged during the field visit relating to the consistency of practice within and between higher education institutions in relation to the National Professional Diploma in Education. This key initiative includes recognition of prior learning in order to assist thousands of currently unqualified teachers to meet new employment requirements. It might be expected, therefore, that all providers of the Diploma would ensure, through their recognition processes, that these teachers demonstrate that they can reflect on, and learn from, their teaching experience, not just catalogue that experience.

The review team noted that the implementation of courses leading to the new Diploma is supported by public funding, and there are large numbers of currently unqualified teachers in South Africa who will require training and certification. Effective RPL quality assurance mechanisms will ensure that good practice in RPL is not sacrificed in the interests of processing large numbers of certifications and savings to the public purse. The scale of implementation of the Diploma, and of the public funding supporting it, places an onus on the Higher Education Quality Council and the Department of Education to ensure that RPL quality is consistent between providers of the diploma and that public funding is supporting best practice.

In the second case, one provider reported to the review team that the quality assurance and student certification services operated by an ETQA to which it is accountable were ineffective. Given that the candidates concerned in this case were undergoing recognition of non-formal and informal learning to meet new regulatory requirements in their industry, the failure to provide valid and reliable assessment procedures or to ensure that successful candidates receive their certificates could have had serious consequences for the candidate, including the loss of employment.

It is important, therefore, that ETQAs effectively operate the verification processes for which they are responsible in a way that ensures valid and reliable assessment practice among providers but which is also responsive to the timelines and practices of providers; it is also important that the ETQAs' administrative processes for data processing and issuing of certificates are effective and timely. Finally, it is important that SAQA, as the body responsible for regulating ETQAs, closely monitors the effectiveness and efficiency of ETQAs' processes and is prepared to take formal action where an ETQA's service falls below acceptable standards.

In the higher education sector, one of the criteria applied by the Higher Education Quality Council relates to the policy and practice of recognition of non-formal and informal learning in higher education institutions; the extent to which an institution complies with this criterion is assessed during institutional audits conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council. Practitioners expressed the view to the review team that the audits should go further in ensuring that recognition of non-formal and informal learning services were fully embedded in, and supported by, institutions and that the audit processes are not tolerating only lip service to this important area of national policy.

Guidance and support for practitioners and learners

There was limited opportunity to explore these issues during the field visit; nevertheless, the opportunity to meet with a large group of potential clients of recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Pretoria was very welcome. The commitment of these individuals to recognition - and to learning - as a means to personal and career fulfilment was inspiring, as was the support being provided by a higher education institution to enable those aspirations to be achieved.

Several providers visited by the review team have worked hard to produce material to attract potential clients of their services for recognition of non-formal and informal learning and material that supports those clients in the development of evidence to be assessed. The commercial assessment provider has also demonstrated commitment by encouraging its own staff to have their knowledge, skills and competencies accredited through recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

While these forms of guidance and support are commendable, the nature of the client group for which they are intended, and the most frequent form of evidence-gathering seen being used in providers by the review team - namely the use of portfolios - may lead to reinforcement of barriers to recognition of non-formal and informal learning because they assume that clients already have reasonably strong levels of literacy. The extent to which this precludes clients who might use recognition of non-formal and informal learning for redress may be worthy of investigation. Additional methods of assessment such as demonstrations and structured interviews also could be considered to supplement, or in some cases, replace RPL's use of portfolios.

Support for practitioners was discussed at a number of the meetings with the review team. It was evident that some practitioners involved in the delivery of recognition of non-formal and informal learning feel isolated and would welcome opportunities to share best practice with colleagues in other institutions. Some practitioners also feel isolated within their own institution, particularly where they perceived the senior management of the institution to lack understanding of, or to not support, the use of recognition of non-formal and informal learning for redress.

Ongoing networking and professional development for faculty, assessors, and learner advisors can make a valuable contribution to RPL quality assurance.

In the higher education context, it was also seen by some as important to the quality and status of the RPL process that the individual with responsibility for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning was a senior academic rather than a senior member of the administrative staff.

Review and evaluation

In the case of all education and training strategies and policies, it is vitally important that their success in achieving intended outcomes are the subject of regular evidence-based review and evaluation. This might be seen as particularly so in the case of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which has been extended from being an approach to assessment of knowledge, skills and competencies to being seen as a key plank of national social policy. The report of the independent review of the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa in 2002 picked up on this by noting: "Of all the expectations placed on the NQF, the aspiration for a system of recognition of prior learning (RPL) was perhaps the most significant".

One of the most basic evidence requirements for any review of the implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning is comprehensive and reliable data on the numbers of learners who have used and been successful in using the system. It might be expected that the power of SAQA's National Learners Records Database would provide such data; if it did, it would offer a powerful tool for the analysis of RPL policy and practice across the country.

SAQA should and does have a policy that the particular assessment approach used by a learner is not recorded on the learner's transcript; such a policy would not, however, be a barrier to RPL data being collected for review and evaluation purposes and accessible for these, not certification, purposes. Although it was unclear from discussions between the review team and senior SAQA officers whether such data collection was a feature of the design of the National Learners Records Database, information provided subsequent to the visit confirmed that this was the case and that there were over 26 000 achievements recorded against RPL as at the end of 2007.

This data, coupled with the discussions with education and providers during the visit, give rise to concerns at various levels.

First, it should be a feature of SAQA practice to use the National Learners Records Database to evaluate policy and practice; this requires that SAQA officers, as well as those responsible for the database, are familiar with the nature and extent of the data available to them for evaluation and research purposes.

Second, SAQA is dependent on the ETQAs for the supply of data on candidate achievement. On the evidence of the achievements recorded in the National Learners Records Database, which appear to have come from only four ETQAs (over 90% of which came from only two ETQAs), there is a lack of implementation of RPL across many ETQAs and/or a lack of data on RPL usage being supplied to SAQA by the ETQAs. This should be a serious issue for SAQA and one on which it seems appropriate for SAQA's regulatory powers to be vigorously exercised.

Third, the scale of the RPL achievements recorded on the database seems disappointingly low, in a country of over 13 million learners which has put so much policy emphasis on the use of RPL for redress. Given that policy emphasis, urgent research may be necessary so that policy makers and providers rapidly identify the reasons for the apparent gap between national policy and practice and the steps necessary to clear any barriers to implementation.

CONCLUSIONS AND ISSUES FOR THE CONSIDERATION OF SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has undergone huge social, cultural, political and economic change in a very short timeframe - the progress of the "rainbow nation" has been observed with much interest around the world. The education and training system of the country has had to change radically too so that it ceased to be an instrument of apartheid and became a pillar of the new democracy.

One of the key aspects of the transformation of the education and training system has been the link between the recognition of non-formal and informal learning and the country's efforts to redress the injustices of the previous era. That link was formed in early education and training policies of the democratic government and particularly reinforced with the setting up of the National Qualifications Framework in 1995. With such high stakes attached to recognition of non-formal and informal learning, it might be expected that the years since 1995 would have seen a strong national push for widespread development and implementation of recognition systems, built on strong national support from across the spectrum of employment, education and training.

The most recent review of the extent of implementation of recognition of non-formal and informal learning was carried out by the international team that produced the National Qualifications Framework Impact Study Report. Two reports have been published, the first in 2004 and the second in 2005. Although this was a wider review of the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework, the 2005 report makes comments on the impact of recognition of non-formal and informal learning. Its findings set a context for the participation in the OECD project and for the work of the team that conducted the field visit.

For example, in the survey commissioned for the review, a majority of respondents agreed that there was access to the NQF for those previously excluded and that RPL services were available to learners.

Nevertheless, the review notes that while progress had been made with RPL, and while there was widespread acceptance of the potential for RPL, respondents identified significant issues still to be addressed. The review concluded that, at that time: "It is also thought that there has been little progress on redress. This is largely attributable to the lack of impact of RPL."

The OECD field team had limited time available during the visit to South Africa and therefore its evidence is based on a relatively small sample of stakeholders. Nevertheless, the team concluded that the situation as reported in the Impact Study Report still applied, despite several years having passed since the evidence for that Impact Study was gathered and despite the introduction of programmes such as the Joint Initiative on Priority Skills Acquisitions (JIPSA) which is specifically designed to address skills shortages and which sees RPL as central to its objectives.

In summary, the legislative and policy-based connection between recognition of non-formal and informal learning and redress remains strong, the strength of advocacy of recognition of non-formal and informal learning by government, other stakeholders and providers is variable, and the widespread availability of high-quality, accessible recognition services has not reached many for whom it was intended, particularly individuals who in the past did not have access to quality education and occupational training but who do have knowledge, skills and competencies acquired through years of work and other life experience. The review team found commendable practice in individual providers - "islands of good practice" - but was concerned to find that practitioners were isolated.

Therefore, one of the most pressing needs, in the view of the review team, is to provide financial support for new and fledgling institutional RPL services and to build bridges between the islands of practice by the setting up, with funding support, of a national practitioners' network. Such a network - which must encourage the coming together of practitioners from all sectors and all types of provider - can be a way in which to share practice, plan nationwide awareness campaigns, commission and discuss research and develop links with practitioners in other countries. The future of the recognition of non-formal and informal learning as a key contributor to redress and to widening access to education and training requires that South Africa is seen to value the work of those providers and practitioners enough to make a serious investment so the islands of practice can become a powerful and collaborative national network.

Another of the most pressing needs relates to the public Further Education and Training Colleges - the "forgotten sector", as one stakeholder described them. The potential of the FET Colleges to make the connection in the communities they serve between RPL and skills for employment is crucial if RPL is to fulfil its redress objectives; the need for further development of the RPL capacity of the FET sector is discussed further below.

The OECD team also concluded that, despite the limited time available to gather evidence, there were issues that had arisen during its meetings that needed to be given further consideration at national level - either because these were real issues for the future success of RPL or because misperceptions existed among practitioners which might require to be addressed through communication channels.

First, the impact of the statutory and sectoral barriers to recognition of non-formal and informal learning requires further investigation. These included the 50% residency rule, the interpretation of senior secondary matriculation requirements, the application of Umalusi's rules on assessment centres and the lack of inter-university recognition.

Second, priorities for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning might need to be clarified. The policy link between RPL for redress and access is well-established but, if the visits to practitioners were representative of RPL practice, there may be a disconnection between the intentions of the policy and its implementation. The review team found evidence of RPL's use for access to, and progression in, higher education and for those in employment who have to meet new regulatory requirements - but the team was surprised that there was little evidence of systematic use of RPL as a means for recognition of knowledge, skills and competencies towards employment for those who are unemployed or in informal or casual labour.

Given the low levels of formal education and the high rate of unemployment among workers under the age of 30 years (48%), younger members of this potential client group require a developmental approach to recognising their prior learning and a willingness by educators to consider their potential for formal learning and employability as well and their current knowledge, skills and competencies. It will require a national effort to develop new approaches to recruitment, funding and provider practice to make serious inroads into reducing the poverty and raising to productivity of such a client group. However, good practice has taken root in such programs as the access program of the University of the Western Cape and the national teacher certification project at the University of the Free State. Models from these initiatives could be developed and applied in other universities and, with modifications, in FET institutions. Older members of this potential client group have similar needs but may have more and richer sources of prior learning from which to draw, despite their lack of formal education. They are a potential source of semi-skilled and skilled labour in areas of worker shortage.

For both of these groups, RPL may well be provided in association with a programme of learning - in such a case, RPL can provide learners with the confidence in their existing knowledge, skills and competencies to enable them to tackle additional education and training. The new National Vocational Certificate has potential to be used here if flexible assessment approaches such as RPL can be incorporated in its delivery.

The public Further Education and Training Colleges should be at the heart of such a national effort if they are to be seen as "skills for employment" hubs of their regions.

If the public FET Colleges are to act in this way, and to be able to use RPL as one of the most important services offered to the people of their communities, they must establish formal infrastructures which could include such elements as dedicated staff, community liaison, internal committees, faculty development strategies, and monitoring processes. In this way, young and older workers can re-enter the system either through employment or education that leads relatively quickly to employment. The OECD team had relatively little opportunity to explore the capacity of the FET College system during its visit but it drew the inference from its meetings that the FET system is not yet ready to play such a role. To enable this development, the South African government will need to give priority to the further development of the FET Colleges to ensure that they can offer the range of services, including RPL, expected of public institutions in support of their communities. This may require reconsideration of national priorities for funding - an issue that is further discussed later.

On a different issue of prioritisation, the team saw evidence of the use of RPL to provide an alternative form of recognition for individuals who did not complete their senior secondary matriculation requirements. No secondary schools were included in the visit programme, although a number of stakeholders raised the issue of low rates of retention and completion in secondary schools. Given that some young people of school age may be unable to stay at school for social or economic rather than educational reasons, it might be possible to set up a system of recognition of non-formal and informal learning while these young people are still of school age so that they have a better chance of becoming committed learners. This may be a role that the schools themselves could adopt - or it may be better focused on the FET Colleges as part of their "skills for employment" role.

Third, there is a need for a concerted effort among national bodies (HEQC, SETAs, ETQAs, SAQA, Umalusi, the Departments of Education and Labour, national employer organisations, trade unions) to provide high-level advocacy for recognition of non-formal and informal learning and to ensure that their policies and practice are aligned behind it. With the wealth of talent working within these bodies, and with the willingness to work collaboratively, the goodwill and expectations around RPL can be translated into reality. Part of that concerted effort needs to focus on the apparent divide between RPL policy and its implementation; if this is not addressed, new initiatives will not have the impact that they should. As an example, the national JIPSA programme introduced in 2006 has RPL as a key element of its aim to tackle skill shortages - yet this programme was not mentioned in any of the meetings with providers, suggesting that it may not yet have reached a necessary level of awareness among those who are likely to be central to its success.

As part of such a collaborative effort a review of the funding for RPL practice should be undertaken. The scale of activity required to support the establishment of institutional infrastructures (particularly in the FET Colleges), to develop appropriate assessment methods and tools, and to conduct RPL professional development is unlikely to be able to be paid for from fees charged to learners or from the budgets of providers.

Consideration should be given to ways in which to support a step-change in the scale of recognition of non-formal and informal learning, especially for those who are outside the formal education system and unemployed or in casual or informal employment. This might mean that national bodies need to agree on the use of ring-fenced funding, perhaps drawn from the national employment levy, or other innovative approaches such as tax credits.

Discussion is needed on the setting up of a national centre for RPL practitioners, as argued earlier in this paper, to share best practice, offer support, commission research and establish links with RPL practitioners in other countries. National funding for such a centre, as part of a concerted national drive to raise the profile and uptake of RPL, would be a very strong signal to existing practitioners that their expertise is valued.

Fourth, and finally, the credibility of RPL rests on the quality of its outcomes. There is a need for SAQA to ensure that the bodies which it regulates are required to deliver on commitments to RPL and to comply with regulatory requirements. SAQA needs to review both its data collection requirements, to ensure that ETQAs are supplying data on RPL achievements, and to be brave in the application of its regulatory powers to ETQAs which are not complying with their obligations towards RPL policy and, especially, implementation.

A number of the issues raised in this section may require the commissioning of urgent research, as discussed earlier in this report. One topic of research might be the possible barriers that sit between national policy on RPL and its widespread implementation. A second topic might be the development of RPL tools and techniques appropriate to potential client groups whose formal education has been limited but who have the potential, perhaps through a combination of RPL and formal learning, to become recognised as artisans; this research would need to have a strong applied focus and to involve the public FET colleges as key partners.

TOWARDS TRANSFORMATION OF RPL

The OECD team believes very strongly that there is the potential among the RPL practitioners and among national bodies in South Africa to build a powerful, national momentum that would transform RPL from a sleeping giant into a major force in the national education and training system. Given the long-standing policy connection that has been made between RPL and redress, the people of South Africa would be entitled to expect that more would already have been achieved by the combined efforts of everyone involved in education policy and practice.

If the necessary momentum is now to be generated with appropriate urgency, existing RPL practitioners must be networked so that they can learn, gain confidence and grow together. But practitioners alone cannot provide that national momentum; they need to have sufficient human resources and to be supported by national bodies - ministries, regulatory bodies, quality assurance bodies and industry bodies - working together to ensure that the infrastructure, funding and advocacy required for the transformation of RPL is in place.

The OECD team wishes South Africa well in its efforts to bring about that transformation.

ANNEX 1 - PROGRAMME OF THE OECD FIELD TEAM VISIT

17 - 22 February 2008

Date **Sunday 17 February**
Location Birdwood Guest House, Pretoria
Meeting Introduction to South Africa and the review task
Participants Prof Shirley Walters (SAQA Chairperson)
Mr Samuel Isaacs (SAQA Executive Officer)
Mr Joe Samuels (SAQA Deputy Executive Officer)
Prof Ben Parker (SAQA Research Director)
Dr James Keevy (SAQA Deputy Director)

Date **Monday 17 February**
Location SAQA offices, Arcadia Street, Hatfield, Pretoria
Meeting Briefing for OECD field team by senior SAQA officers
Participants Samuel Isaacs, CEO, SAQA
Dr James Keevy (SAQA)
Dr Ronel Blom (Umalusi)

Date **Monday 18 February**
Location Tshwane University of Technology, Pretoria
Meeting Discussion of university's RPL processes
Participants Mr Fanie du Plooy (Director Student Services)
Mr Michael Matshooni (Deputy Registrar)
Mr Christo Blom (Head Lecturer Safety and Security)
Dr Josiah Munda (Head Lecturer Engineering)
Ms Annie Kleyn (RPL Advisor)

Date **Monday 18 February**
Location South African Police Service offices, Church Street, Pretoria
Meeting Discussion of SAPS and National Defence Forces RPL processes
South African Police Services Commissioner Van Eck
Director Mbekela
Captain Sibiyi
Senior Superintendents Botha, Tobias and Hertzog
Superintendents Tlatlotse and Hollard
South African National Defence Forces Colonel Van der Walt (Research)
Lieutenant Colonel Vermaak (Research and Development, War College)
Lieutenant Latgoe (Special Forces Skills)

Date **Tuesday 19 February**
Location University of South Africa (Unisa), Florida campus
Meeting Discussion of UNISA's RPL services
Participants Dr Elizabeth Smit
Ms Marici Snyman
Ms Lisa Janakk
Ms Susan Harman
Ms Grete Kriel
Mr Ike Hlongwane

Date **Tuesday 19 February**
Location University of South Africa (UNISA), Florida campus
Meeting Focus group discussion of RPL services in
Higher Education
Participants UNISA Dr Elizabeth Smit
University of Johannesburg Dr Litha Beekman
University of the Witwatersrand Mr Kamal Jogibhia

Date **Tuesday 19 February**
Location Johannesburg
Meeting Discussion of Prior Learning Centre RPL services
Participants Dr Karen Deller, CEO, PLC
PLC staff members and RPL candidates

Date **Wednesday 20 February**
Location Tshwane South FET College, Atteridgeville Campus,
Pretoria
Meeting Discussion of college's RPL services in construction
industries
Participants Construction Sector Education and
Training Authority (CETA)
Mr Jan Borman
Tshwane South FET College
Ms Rachel Ntsimane (Deputy CEO)
Ms Susan Motsipi (Campus Manager)
Mr Piet Venter (Marketer/Programme Coordinator)
Ms Margaret Cramer (Marketing)
Mr Eric Ledwaba (Building Construction)

Date **Monday 18 February**
Location SAQA offices, Arcadia Street, Hatfield, Pretoria
Meeting Focus group to discuss interim findings of field visit
Participants Samuel Isaacs, CEO,
Dr James Keevy (SAQA)
Dr Ronel Blom (Umalusi)

Date **Wednesday 20 February**
Location UNISA, Pretoria campus
Meeting Meeting with students attending a Unisa pre-access portfolio course
Participants Ms Marici Snyman and students

Date **Thursday 21 February**
Location University of the Free State, Vista campus,
Bloemfontein
Meeting Free State Higher Education Consortium (University of the Free State) visit and discussion
Participants Ms Tersia Kuhne (Centre Manager)
Ms Elri van Zyl (RPLCoordinator)
Dr Barry Huysamen
(National Professional Diploma in Education Coordinator)
Prof Strydom (Open and distance learning coordinator)

Date **Friday 22 February**
Location University of the Western Cape, Belville, Cape Town
Meeting Discussion of university's RPL services and meeting with RPL students
Participants Mr Alan Ralphs
Prof Shirley Walters
Ms Gabiba Mokadam
RPL students

Date **Friday 22 February**
Location University of the Western Cape, Belville, Cape Town
Meeting Focus group - University of the Western Cape, University of Cape Town and Cape Peninsula University of Technology
Participants University of the Western Cape
- Mr Alan Ralphs, Prof Shirley Walters, Ms Gabiba Mokadam
University of Cape Town
- Dr Linda Cooper
Cape Peninsula University of Technology
- Ms Frederika Masasa

Date **Friday 22 February**
Location HSRC, Plein Street, Cape Town
Meeting Discussion of research on RPL
Participants Dr Mignonne Breier, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

ANNEX 2 - OECD REVIEW TEAM

Dennis Gunning (Rapporteur)

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