

Lifelong Learning at the Centre: the National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper analyses the case of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa, in a system where access to learning, redress, progression along learning pathways, and the integration of education and training are key. The paper has five parts. Firstly, it sketches the context for RPL in the country, outlining developments in the post-apartheid¹ integrated education and training system. Secondly, it articulates how RPL is understood in South Africa. Thirdly, it analyses the development of the RPL community in South Africa, and RPL achievements since 1995. Fourth, RPL data in the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) are considered. The paper closes with reflections on these developments and their implications for access and redress, learning pathways, and lifelong learning. An Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) study identified islands of good practice in South Africa in 2008. Accelerated development followed the National RPL Conferences of 2010, 2011 and 2014. In 2011 a measure of stakeholder agreement was achieved, regarding barriers to a national RPL system. The establishment and work of a Ministerial Task Team for RPL, to examine the barriers, and RPL Reference Group for revision of national RPL policy, followed. Between 2010 and 2015 the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) played a coordinating role, assisting individuals and organisations with strategic RPL initiatives, opening pathways through RPL for over 200,000 potential candidates. This was however unfunded work. In 2016, policy for the national coordination and funding of RPL was published by the Minister of Higher Education and Training (MHET). The way forward from the already-growing islands of good practice, to a fully operational national RPL system includes a vision and five-year implementation plan. Long-term SAQA Partnership Research into an inclusive RPL model (Cooper et al 2016), and other short-term research as part of the work of the Ministerial Task Team (Michelson, 2012; Naude and Malgas, 2012; and Werquin, 2012) undergirded all of this work.

Key words

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL); Lifelong Learning; learning pathways; access, redress, progression in education, training, development and work

1. Introduction and context

This paper analyses the case of the development of the national Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system in South Africa - a system in which lifelong learning; access and redress in education, training, development and work; and progression along learning and work pathways are of central importance. The paper has five parts. Firstly, it sketches the context in which the national RPL system emerged and continues to develop. Secondly, it

¹ Prior to 1994, public policy in South Africa was developed along racial lines, and different racial groups were segregated. There were for example, several education departments, each for a politically-defined racial group.

articulates how RPL is understood in South Africa. Thirdly, it describes the development of the RPL community in South Africa, and RPL achievements since 1995. Fourth, it presents an analysis of RPL data in the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD). The paper closes with a reflection on the implications of these developments, for access to learning, and redress, learning pathways, and lifelong learning in the country.

Socio-economic context

After 20 years of democracy, South Africa has arguably made progress in establishing a fairer society. It is also common knowledge however, that widespread poverty, inequality, and unemployment remain. The percentages of people in 2011 – the date of the last national census – with no schooling, or with some or all of primary school, were roughly half of what they were in 1996, the year in which an integrated education and training system was introduced (Statistics South Africa, 2012). While similar percentages of people across these years had some of secondary school, the percentages of people who had completed secondary school, or had some Higher Education increased about 1.5 times (*Ibid.*).

Currently, of the persons aged 20 years and older, around 5% have no schooling; a further 4% have some of primary school as their highest level of education; a further 4% have completed primary school; around a third have some of secondary school; a further third have completed secondary school; and around 14% have post-school education or training. Since the onset of democracy, given the lack of formal learning opportunities experienced by many adults under *apartheid* and in the context of its legacy, RPL has been viewed as being an essential part of learning and work pathways.

Education, training and development context

The South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1995; 2008) was the mechanism chosen to integrate the education and training system that was segregated racially under *apartheid*². From the start the NQF aimed to enhance access, redress, mobility (progression) within the system, and the quality and transparency of the system, for the benefit of all learners in the country (*Ibid.*). The impact of the NQF on understandings of, and realities in, the South African education and training system has been documented elsewhere (SAQA, 2015a; 2015b); highlights are sketched here.

Understandings and developments regarding systemic integration in education, training, development and work

In 1994-5 the education and training system in South Africa was deeply divided along demographic lines. Under the SAQA Act (RSA, 1995) the NQF was associated with radical *structural* integration across the spread of sectors making up the system. Under the NQF Act (RSA, 2008) which replaced the SAQA Act, there was further restructuring of the main education institutions, including the integration of education and training-related responsibilities through the establishment of the Departments of Basic Education (DBE), and Higher Education and Training (DHET) in 2010. While the former is responsible for Basic

² See Note 1.

Education, all post-school education and training now falls ‘under the one roof’ of Higher Education and Training.

Currently three Quality Councils, for General and Further Education and Training, Higher Education, and Occupational Qualifications respectively, oversee three coordinated NQF Sub-Frameworks³. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) has overarching oversight of the implementation and further development of the NQF, the communication, coordination, and collaboration between the main NQF partners, and articulation between the NQF Sub-Frameworks. The focus on ‘learning pathways’, ‘articulation’ and ‘articulated pathways’ within and between these sub-frameworks has intensified since 2014.

Articulation in education, training, development and work

The differing forms that articulation can take are now better-understood than was previously the case⁴. Learning pathways can involve ‘linked qualifications’ and work experience, where articulation possibilities exist in the ‘grid of qualifications’ making up the NQF, and the NQF-listed professional designations where applicable. Learning pathways can also be created via various types of inter-institutional agreements for learner progression. A third way in which learning pathways are realised is in the individual sense, where learners are supported in comprehensive and flexible ways as they follow their paths. All of these forms of articulation need state and stakeholder support, and it is acknowledged that learning pathways are aided by career advice as well as the quality of teaching and learning, and of learner achievements.

Relationships and collaboration in the integrated system for education, training, development and work

There are officially recognized mechanisms for collaboration between NQF role-players. In addition to a jointly-developed *System of Collaboration* (SAQA, 2011c; 2015c), the suite of NQF policies developed collaboratively (SAQA, 2012a; 2012b; 2013a; 2013b; 2014a; 2014b; 2017a; 2017b)⁵, the over-arching national policies for RPL and articulation (DHET, 2016; 2017), the main NQF partners serve on each other’s top decision-making structures. Extensive initiatives to build ‘relational agency’ (Edwards, 2014) are underway⁶.

Systemic quality and transparency in education and training

³ These comprise the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) overseen by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO), the Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (HEQSF) overseen by the Council on Higher Education (CHE), and the General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework (GFETQSF) overseen by Umalusi.

⁴ Long-term SAQA-Rhodes University Partnership Research into learning pathways examined the conceptualisation of learning pathways and articulation, and explored the development of pathways in emerging sectors such as that of ‘green skills’ (see Lotz-Sisitka, 2015; Lotz-Sisitka and Ramsarup, 2011, 2012, 2014; Lotz-Sisitka *et al* 2012, 2013; Ramsarup, 2014 and Ramsarup and Lotz-Sisitka, 2013)

⁵ SAQA develops the NQF policy suite in a democratic and evidence-based process, in and after consultation with the key NQF stakeholders.

⁶ An example of current relationship-building initiatives can be seen in the work of the SAQA-Durban University of Technology (DUT) Partnership Research into Articulation between Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Higher Education (Lortan *et al* 2017).

Education and training in *apartheid* South Africa were not transparent. The SAQA Act (RSA, 1995) ushered in the national system that included unit standards, learning outcomes, and assessment standards. While information about this system was universally available, the approach was widely criticized for *inter alia* ‘fragmenting learning’ and ‘de-linking curriculum content from its disciplinary bases and traditions’ (French, 2009:51, and others). The NQF Act (RSA, 2008) acknowledged the inadequacy of this approach and led to the current devolved and decentralized national quality assurance model.

Standards development and quality assurance are now the responsibilities of each of the three Quality Councils, and the differentiated approaches of each are universally recognized. Each Quality Council is responsible for the conceptual structuring of its qualifications, and for articulation between these offerings within and across the NQF Sub-Framework contexts. SAQA’s registration of the qualifications on the NQF – a process which includes assessing the extent to which the qualifications are internationally comparable – requires the benchmarking of the qualifications for quality, and the inclusion of RPL, Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), and articulation possibilities. This system aligns the quality assurance system with values expressed in the Constitution of the country (RSA, 1994).

All of these features are part of the RPL implementation context in the country.

2. What is RPL in South Africa?

RPL is defined in South African national policy as “the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed, for the purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development” (SAQA, 2015c: Clause 26). It is multi-dimensional - including the making visible, mediation, assessment and recognition of informal and non-formal learning - and usually includes guidance and counselling, preparation for assessment, and where appropriate, post-RPL top-up (gap-fill) training. While assessment is an integral feature of all RPL in the country, assessment is not treated in isolation from these other steps in the RPL processes.

RPL in South Africa is multi-contextual - it differs in purpose and form across contexts. It may be developed and implemented differently for example, for the purposes of personal development; access or advanced placement in institutions of learning; or recognition in workplaces. RPL can be carried out at any NQF level, and can lead to the granting of credit towards part of, or whole, qualifications.

Forms of RPL

In SAQA’s RPL policy, while there are essentially two forms of RPL - RPL for access to learning, and RPL for credits (SAQA, 2015c: Clause 34) - RPL has also been used for recognition in workplaces, and towards the granting of whole qualifications⁷. SAQA policy

⁷ Although this has been designed to enable the awarding of full qualifications via RPL, this is not always being implemented by institutions, who often draw on the ‘50% Rule’ to justify their requirements that learners obtain at least 50% of the qualification concerned, at the certifying institution.

for recognising professional bodies and registering professional designations in the context of the NQF (SAQA, 2012b), has also been designed to require that these bodies must provide RPL routes to obtaining their professional designations. The designations awarded by the professional bodies are traditionally on the basis of qualifications plus the required workplace experience. SAQA's policy requires that for recognition of their alignment with the National Constitution (RSA, 1994) and the NQF, they need to offer their designations via RPL. SAQA has hosted workshops to provide guidance for the 93 professional bodies recognised thus far, and several have commenced their RPL work (see also Section 4 below).

RPL principles in South Africa

RPL in South Africa is aligned to the main elements of the policy discourse since 1994, namely socio-economic transformation, lifelong learning, accreditation, and the NQF. It focuses on what has been learned and not on the status of the institution, organisation, place or context where the learning was obtained (SAQA, 2015c: Clause 35a). Credit is awarded for the knowledge and skills acquired through experience, and not for experience alone (*Ibid.*: Clause 35b). Prior learning, however obtained, is made explicit through assessment, but candidate guidance and support, including for the preparation of evidence for assessment, are integral to the processes. An appropriate mix of further teaching, support and mentoring, and a wide variety of assessment approaches are followed (*Ibid.*: Clause 35c-d).

Ministerial, SAQA, Quality Council, and institutional RPL policies

There is a 'funnel' of RPL policies at differing levels in South Africa, which are aligned or are in the process of being aligned. The Minister of Higher Education and Training (MHET) and DHET have developed and oversee the implementation of, national policy for the *coordination* and *funding* of RPL (MHET, 2016), and collaborate with SAQA and the Quality Councils for its implementation. It is intended that the RPL Coordinating Mechanism will manage funds and information, RPL-related research, the professionalization of RPL services, advice and support for RPL providers and candidates, advocacy and collaboration with the national Career Development Services located in the DHET, and the monitoring and evaluation of RPL implementation. The establishment of the Reference Group that will guide this work has not yet been signed off by the Minister, but work towards the entity has commenced within the DHET, and amongst stakeholders thus far in the form of national workshops to build shared understanding around the requirements for the entity.

SAQA, in line with its mandate and the Ministerial RPL policy develops and oversees the implementation of, national policy for the *implementation of RPL* in the three NQF Sub-Framework contexts (RSA, 2008). SAQA first developed RPL policy in 2002; this policy was revised on the basis of experience gained and research done, in 2014 (See Section 3 of this paper). SAQA is in the process of fine-tuning its policy with the new Ministerial policy for *coordinating and funding* RPL - as SAQA's role is to support the RPL Coordinating Mechanism, conduct sector-wide and across-sector RPL research, and ensure both the uploading of RPL data in the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD), and Quality Council certification of learning achievements in a way that does not discriminate against

learners who follow an 'RPL route'⁸ (MHET, 2016).

The Quality Councils develop and oversee the implementation of, NQF Sub-Framework-specific RPL policies in line with SAQA's over-arching policy (SAQA, 2015c). They ensure provider implementation and support, certify learning achievements, advocate RPL in their Sub-Framework contexts, and report to SAQA on progress made. The providers of education and training in turn develop and implement their institutional RPL policies in line with the Quality Council specifications, and report to the Quality Councils. Professional bodies are also required to provide for RPL (SAQA, 2012b).

3. The emergence of an RPL system in South Africa

Each instance of RPL provision can be seen as an activity system (Engestrom, 1987; 2001), where the RPL candidate(s) or entities are the 'subject(s)'; RPL implementation is the objective; RPL legislation, policies, procedures and instruments are the tools and the sources of the rules at play, and the RPL Coordination Mechanism, SAQA, the Quality Councils, and RPL providers and candidates, make up the 'communities of practice' involved.

RPL in South Africa 1995-2008

An Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2009) study of RPL across 18 countries positioned South Africa in a cluster of five countries at 'Stage 5 of 7' in terms of setting up a national RPL system - a stage which comprised 'islands of good RPL practices'. The study found four countries at 'Stage 6 of 7' or 'in the process of setting up national RPL systems', and no countries with 'Stage 7' fully-fledged national RPL systems (*ibid.*). South Africa was described in the study as having a vision for RPL, many practices, access for people from different backgrounds, and sporadic funding. The research report also commented that 'not all levels or sectors were open' to RPL (OECD, 2009; OECD-SAQA, 2009:23).

RPL developments in South Africa 2010-2011

At the SAQA-hosted *National RPL Workshop* in 2010 blockages and needs stemming from the first years of RPL implementation in the country were identified in relation to four key areas, namely:

- (a) sharing effective delivery models for RPL;
- (b) enhancing the quality of RPL;
- (c) developing workable funding models for RPL; and
- (d) addressing legislative and other barriers to the expansion of RPL nationally.

These needs were addressed at SAQA's 2011 *National RPL Conference: Building and expanding existing islands of excellent practice*, where there was a stream dedicated to addressing each of the categories of barriers identified (SAQA, 2011a). At the conference 52 presenters show-cased RPL work carried out between 1998 and 2010 (SAQA, 2011a). Some 37% of these initiatives directly addressed RPL in workplaces; 33% covered RPL in Higher

⁸ Certification may not state the learning route followed, whether via traditional pathways, or RPL.

Education; 4% RPL in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector; the remainder were more general. An informal scan of numbers of successful RPL candidates up to that time revealed roughly 20,000 in Higher Education and 51,000 in workplaces; RPL in eight of the then 12 scarce skills areas, and RPL in nine types of Higher Education faculties. While much had been learned about RPL in the first 15 years of South Africa's democracy, and a range of candidates had benefitted, the general view early in 2011 was that RPL had yet to deliver fully on what it promised (*Ibid.*).

One of the outputs of the conference was the *Resolution and Working Document on RPL* (SAQA, 2011b), which was endorsed by the 350 participating delegates. The ideas which it contained were then actively addressed by SAQA in its RPL policy revision process, and by the Ministerial Task Team for RPL, in its work - which is described in the next section.

RPL policy development and implementation since 2011

Several significant developments followed the *National RPL Conference* of 2011 and the dissemination of the *Working Document on RPL*. Following the SAQA recommendation, a Ministerial Task Team on RPL was appointed and conducted research into RPL legislation and policy, the status of RPL in the sub-sectors making up the NQF, funding models, and a comparison of different international RPL coordinating mechanisms (MHET, 2013a; SAQA, 2012c). SAQA played a leading role in this work. The Task Team recommended the development of a National RPL Institute, which led to the national policy for the coordination and funding of RPL (MHET, 2016).

Following SAQA's *National RPL Conference* in 2011, SAQA appointed a representative RPL Reference Group through democratic process, to assist with the revision of early RPL implementation policy (SAQA, 2002; 2004). The revised RPL policy (SAQA, 2013a; 2015c), developed by SAQA in consultation with this expert group, and including public comment, was grounded in extensive stakeholder consultation, research, and experience. This work formed part of SAQA's developmental work for the NQF policy suite, using SAQA's established participatory, collaborative, relationship-building approach. SAQA workshopped the new policy extensively early in 2014, as part of its *National RPL Conference 2014: Tried and Tested, Tools, Templates* (SAQA, 2014c), as part of its work to drive its implementation. The main aims of this conference and workshop, and the outcomes achieved, were to strengthen common understandings and working relationships for RPL, share good RPL practices, and further RPL coordination. Over 400 delegates participated, and two SAQA Bulletin volumes of case studies followed with the aim of sharing further, successful RPL practices (SAQA 2015d, 2015e).

Strategic national RPL initiatives

Between mid-2010 and mid-2015, as part of its pre-Ministerial RPL policy coordination work, SAQA undertook strategic national RPL initiatives on the basis of individuals and organisations that approached SAQA for assistance. Over 200 individuals and over 20 organisations were assisted by SAQA in this period.

The organisational (sector-wide) RPL initiatives typically commenced with clarification of the purpose of the RPL initiative, and identifying the 'matrix' of qualifications against which RPL could be conducted. Where there were gaps in the learning and work pathways making up this matrix, the necessary qualifications were developed with providers for registration on the NQF. The development of the institutional or sectoral RPL policy needed was supported. The particular RPL process required was determined, and RPL instruments developed. The initiatives were piloted before being rolled out. Some initiatives proceeded more smoothly than others; institutional politics, processes, and decision-making intervened at various points; and only some of the initiatives led to RPL candidates moving through the systems. Many of the highly successful cases have been written up (SAQA, 2015d; 2015e). The main cases are as follows.

- **Agricultural sector:** RPL for workers in the agricultural industry, especially seasonal workers (the most disenfranchised workers in the industry) – initial potential reach: 50 000 candidates.
- **Correctional Services:** RPL for offender artisans – initial potential reach: 30 000 candidates.
- **Democratic Nursing Association of South Africa (DENOSA):** Development and implementation of RPL policy for DENOSA members – initial potential reach: 3 000 candidates.
- **Department of Defence (DoD):** RPL for Military Veterans – potential reach: 10 000 candidates.
- **Department of Public Service Administration (DPSA):** Coordination of RPL in the public services sector – potentially 10 000 candidates.
- **Department of Social Development (DSD):** RPL for the professionalisation of Community Development Practitioners – potential reach of over 100,000 candidates.
- **Department of Transport (DoT):** RPL for staff in the Department of Transport - 500 candidates.
- **Education and Labour Relations Council (ELRC):** RPL for educators teaching at different levels in the system – potential reach 5 000 candidates.
- **E-TV:** RPL for E-TV staff members – potentially 500 candidates.
- **Marine Industry Association South Africa (MIASA):** RPL for artisans in the marine industry - initial potential reach 5 000 candidates.
- **National Artisan Moderating Body (NAMB):** 30 RPL pilots for artisans – initial potential reach 10 000 candidates.
- **Rand Water:** RPL for 100 artisans and 20 management staff members.
- **Road Traffic Management Corporation:** RPL for Traffic Officers - 10 000 candidates.
- **State Information Technology Agency (SITA):** RPL for internal restructuring - potentially 300 candidates.
- **South African Police Services (SAPS):** RPL for musicians in the SAPS - 400 candidates.
- **South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA):** RPL for staff, potentially available for all SAQA staff members - currently 180 people.
- **South African Sports Confederation (SASCOC):** RPL pilot to set coaching

standards – initial potential reach: 10 000 candidates.

SAQA's long-term partnership research into RPL

All SAQA's NQF policy development and implementation work takes into account evidence-based research. SAQA has a small Research Directorate which expands its capacity through long-term research partnerships. The purpose of these partnerships is to support SAQA's strategic and policy research, and research-based development, in the medium to long-term, in ways not possible under short-term contracts. The partnerships provide the research-base for NQF policy development and implementation, as well as developing NQF-related capacity in the system for education, training, development and work. In these partnerships, SAQA providers academic expertise linked to the NQF as well as funding; the research partners are required to bring specialised academic expertise in the area being researched, and their networks - the partnership research is conducted collaboratively. The SAQA-University of the Western Cape (SAQA-UWC) research towards developing an inclusive RPL model involved conducting and documenting action research into four existing successful RPL initiatives.

The four case studies focussed respectively on access to under-graduate study at UWC, access to post-graduate study at the University of Cape Town (UCT), access to RPL in workplaces, and access to Worker Education at the Workers' College. The institutional researchers involved documented and examined their own models, and surveyed their RPL candidate experiences. They used the findings to develop an inclusive RPL model which was theorised at a level of generality that enabled the application of the model across the four diverse contexts.

The findings of this research were fed directly into SAQA's RPL policy development work, and into SAQA's strategic national RPL initiatives. In addition to its being written up in peer-review paper form, and as case studies, the research has been captured in the peer-reviewed book *Crossing the lines: RPL as specialised pedagogy* (Cooper et al 2016).

4. RPL data

Since its inception, South Africa's NQF has made provision for the achievement of qualifications and part qualifications through RPL. While it was not mandatory before 2014 to supply RPL-related data to the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD) 'in the form of RPL data', some institutions did so. SAQA's (2015c) RPL policy now makes it mandatory to supply RPL data to the NLRD in specified ways for the purposes of analysis only, while at the same time preventing discrimination again those who obtain their qualifications via RPL by requiring that such information be kept confidential at all times. Whether learner achievements have been obtained via RPL of traditional routes may not be indicated on learner certificates or anywhere else.

Since 2014, SAQA has made systematic efforts to conscientise the NQF stakeholders in this respect, and to enable the RPL data loads into the NLRD. While it is known that there have been many more successful RPL cases than those recorded, to date nine of the 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs); the Council on Higher Education (CHE) via fifteen Private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs); and two of the 93 recognised professional bodies have provided RPL data. These records have been loaded into the NLRD.

RPL data from public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

SAQA research conducted in 2012 showed that 22 of the 26 public HEIs in the country had RPL policies. Of these HEI, 12 were implementing RPL using decentralised models (RPL was

implemented differently across different faculties/departments); 10 had centralised models. There was RPL in the following HEI faculties nationally: Management Science (nine); Law (nine); Economics (nine); Arts/Humanities/Social Sciences (seven); Education (six); Engineering and Technology (four); Health and Environment Sciences (two); Public Management (one); Agriculture (two).

RPL in the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) contexts

In Ministerial Task Team-related research commissioned by SAQA and made available to the Task Team as part of SAQA's support for it, the SETAs were found to be at various stages of RPL implementation, with some at policy development stage, and others having rolled out RPL for considerable numbers of candidates (Naude and Malgas, 2013). There were diverse understandings, interpretations and ways of implementing RPL across the SETAs. While weaknesses included lack of coherence and monitoring, and lack of documenting and reporting, it was clear that many SETAs had extensive knowledge and experience of RPL, and had built up strong systems, processes, implementation models and tools over the years (*Ibid.*).

RPL in the professional body contexts

It was initially not mandatory for professional bodies to provide for RPL towards professional designations under their jurisdiction. However SAQA's (2012b) Policy for Recognising a Professional Body and Registering a Professional Designation for the purposes of the NQF Act requires that in order to be recognised, a professional body must *inter alia* "Include as general requirements, experiential learning, recognition of prior learning, and/or practical experience" (*Ibid.*: Clause 42). Further, the requirement that no distinctions may be made between learning achievements acquired via RPL and those achieved through traditional routes, and that RPL data must be submitted to the NLRD for monitoring purposes (SAQA, 2015c), apply also to Professional Bodies.

The following analysis of RPL records in the NLRD focuses on the achievement of qualifications through RPL – a total of **31 861** records of achievement by **28 819** people. The achievement of unit standards not yet leading to a completed qualification is excluded from the analysis⁹.

Analysis of data in the NLRD for qualifications achieved via RPL

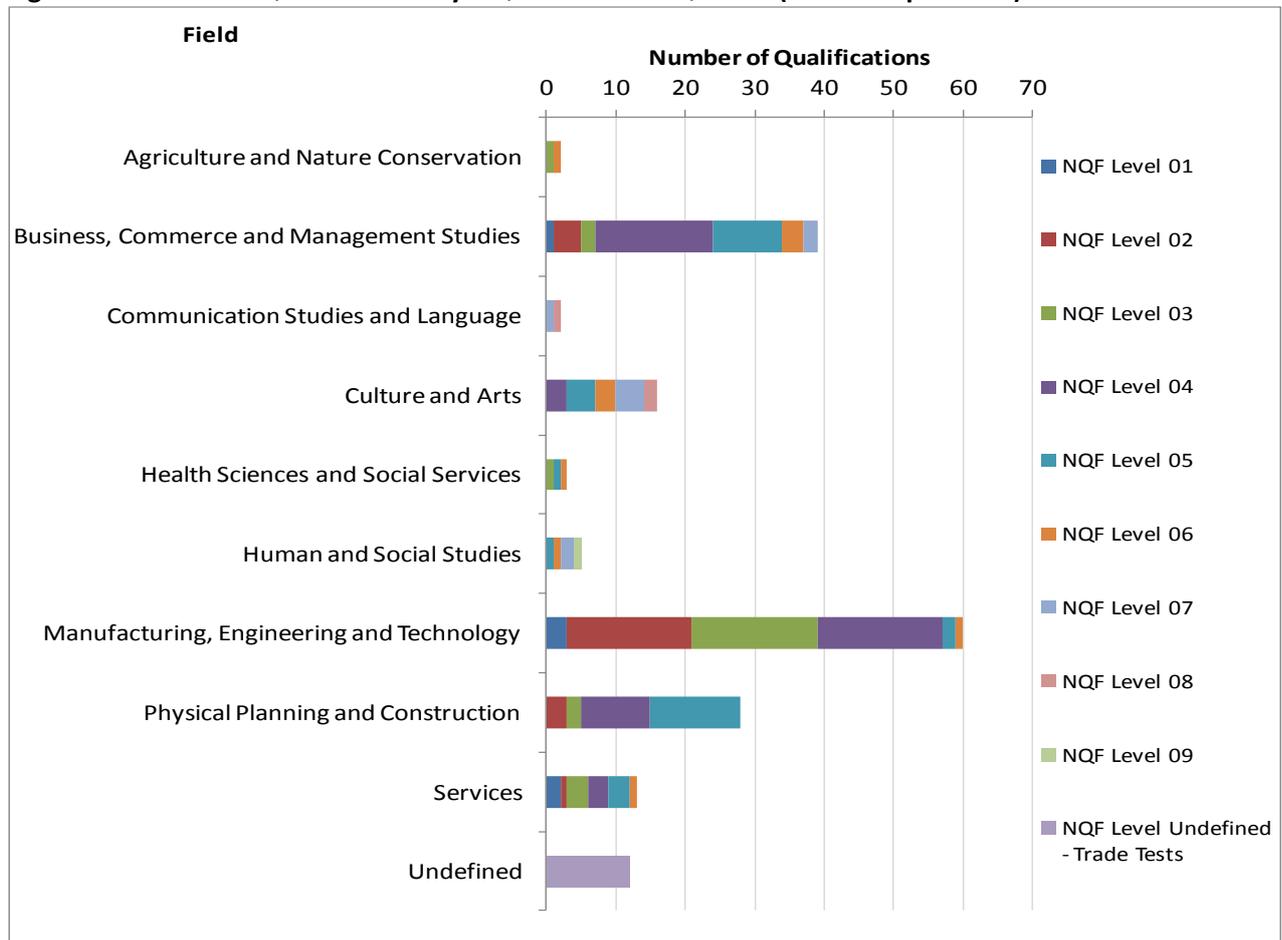
A total of **28 819 people** on the NLRD have achieved qualifications through RPL. The total number of *records of the achievement* of qualifications through RPL is **31 861** (i.e. some learners have more than one achievement via RPL).

A total of **180 different qualifications** have been achieved through RPL, as shown in Figure 1. Most of these (60 qualifications) are in the field of Manufacturing, Engineering and Technology, at NQF Levels 1 to 6, followed by 39 qualifications in the field Business, Commerce and Management Studies and 28 in the field of Physical Planning and Construction. The fields of Services, Culture and Arts, and Communication Studies and Language, and 12 Trade Test qualifications also have records of achievement of qualifications through RPL. Three qualifications in Health Sciences and Social

⁹There are records in the NLRD of 31 774 learners who have achieved unit standards via RPL, with a total of 871 538 learner-unit standard links (an average of 22 unit standards via RPL per learner).

Services, two in Agriculture and Nature Conversation, and five in Human and Social Studies now have small numbers of achievements through RPL. None of the other three NQF fields have records of achievement of qualifications through RPL.

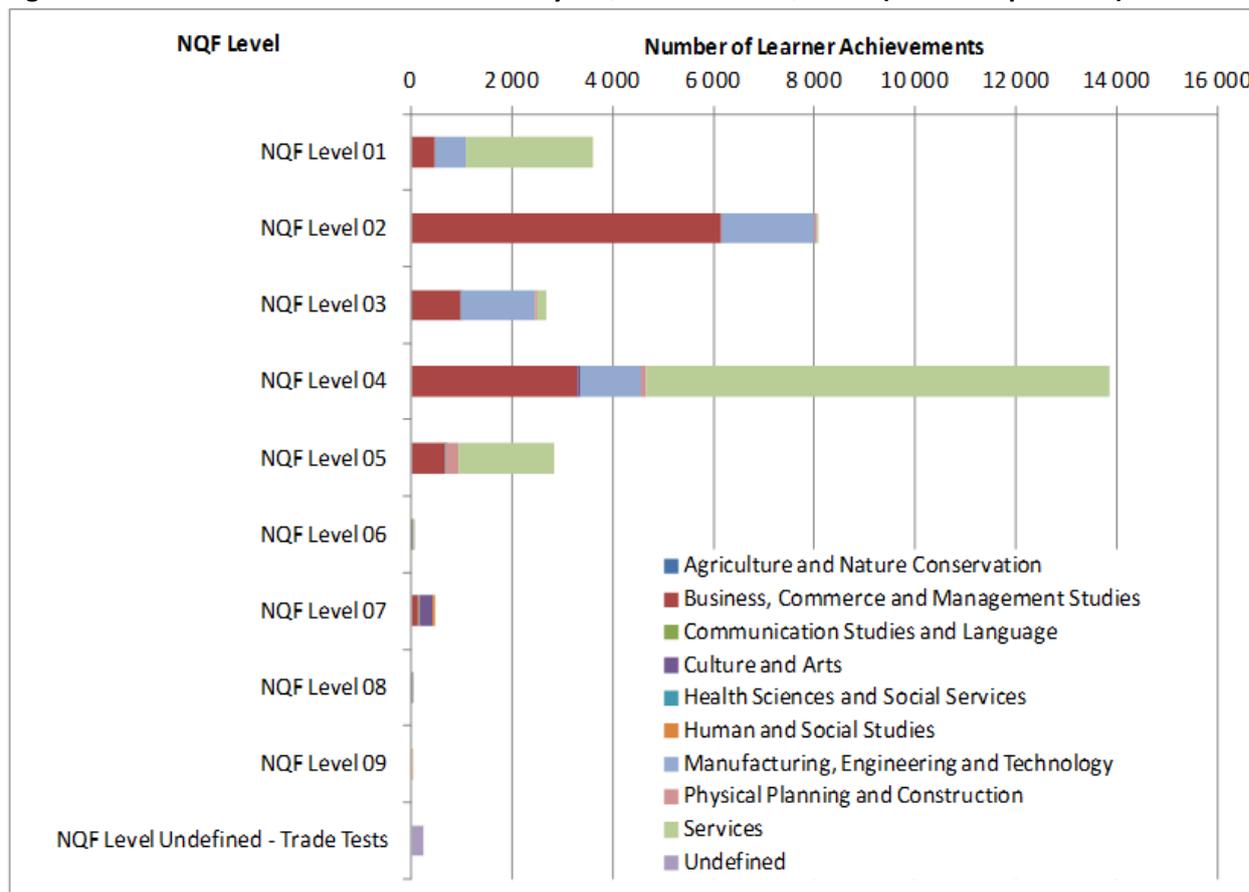
Figure 1: Number of Qualifications by NQF Level and NQF Field (as at 12 April 2017)



Although the majority of the *qualifications* achieved were in Manufacturing, Engineering and Technology, the majority of the 31 861 *achievements* were in the field of Services, mostly at NQF Levels 1 and 4, followed by Business, Commerce and Management Studies, mostly at Levels 2 and 4, as shown in Figure 2.

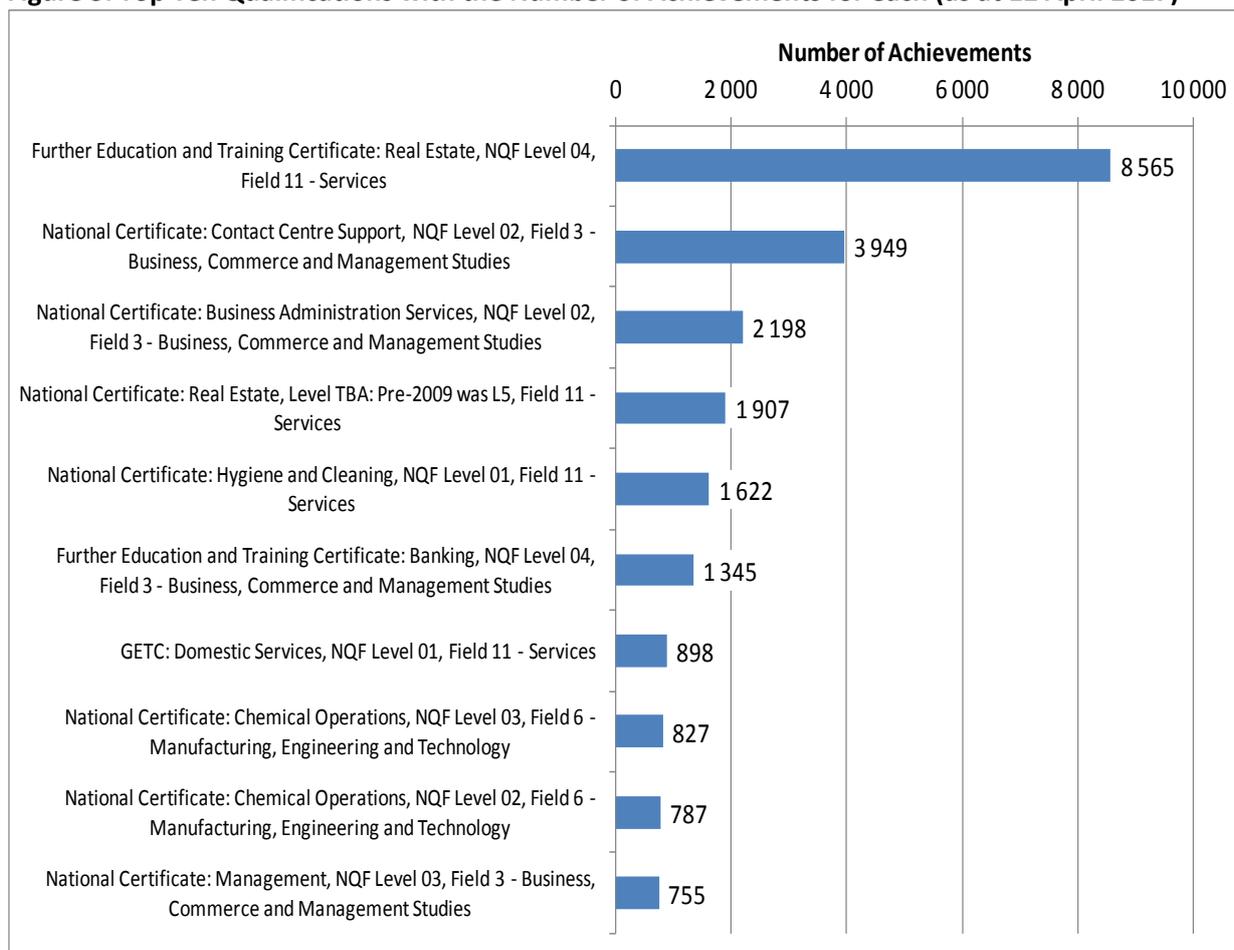
The Services Level 1 qualifications were the National Certificate: Hygiene and Cleaning and the General Education and Training Certificate: Domestic Services, while the Level 4 qualifications were the Further Education and Training Certificate: Real Estate and the National Certificate: Ladies Hairdressing. The Level 2 qualifications in Business, Commerce and Management Studies were the National Certificate: Business Administration Services, the National Certificate: new Venture Creation (SMME) and the National Certificate: Contact Centre Support, while the Level 4 qualifications were mostly Further Education and Training Certificate: Business Administration Services, National Certificate: Customer Management, Further Education and Training Certificate: Management.

Figure 2: Number of Learner Achievements by NQF Level and NQF Field (as at 12 April 2017)



The qualification with the most number of RPL achievements was the Further Education and Training Certificate: Real Estate at Level 4. The top ten qualifications that had RPL achievements against them are shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Top Ten Qualifications with the Number of Achievements for each (as at 12 April 2017)



Twelve quality assurance functionalities submitted their records of qualifications achieved via RPL (see Table 4). The number of education and training providers for which they submitted these records was 245.

Table 4: Number of Learner Achievements, and Number of associated Providers, per Quality Assurance functionality (as at 12 April 2017)

Education and Training Quality Authority	Number of Achievement Records	Number of Providers
Agricultural SETA (AgriSETA)	3	1
Bank SETA (BANKSETA)	1 827	2
Council on Higher Education (CHE)	577	15
Chemical Industry Education and Training Authority (CHIETA)	5 271	33
Energy and Water SETA (EWSETA)	100	12
Fibre Processing and Manufacturing SETA (FP&MSETA)	5	4
Local Government SETA (LG SETA)	1	1
Media, Advertising, Publishing, Printing and Packaging SETA (MAPPP SETA) ¹⁰	342	95
South African Board for People Practices (SABPP)	48	4

¹⁰ MAPPP SETA has now disbanded.

South African Pharmacy Council (SAPC)	1	1
Services SETA	23 639	67
Transport Education and Training Authority (TETA)	47	10
Total	31 861	245

While it is encouraging to know that RPL is being carried out across the NQF system, and to note the slowly increasing amounts of RPL data being submitted for uploading into the NLRD, further work is being done to encourage both broader implementation of RPL, as well as the loading into the NLRD of the records that do exist but have not yet been submitted. Loading these records would show the true extent of learner achievements via RPL in the country.

5. Reflection and concluding comments

Reflection

Looking back at RPL policy development and implementation in South Africa after 1995, it is clear that our country has followed a number of cycles of action and reflection, and has experienced extensive learning. Engestrom's (2001) idea of 'an expansive learning cycle' is but one useful concept for explaining this process.

First, 'accepted practice' was scrutinised: SAQA acknowledged that the then-used national RPL policy (SAQA, 2002; 2004) had led to 'islands of good practice' (OECD, 2009; OECD-SAQA, 2009:23) and not a 'fully-fledged national system'. Secondly, SAQA's national RPL conference in 2010 was organised to ascertain the nature of the barriers to the establishment of a national RPL system. Third, SAQA's 2011 national RPL conference attempted to 'model the new' (Engestrom, 2001) in the form of collective agreement around the principles for effective RPL delivery, and the quality assurance and funding of RPL. This agreement was visible in the form of the *RPL Working Document* (SAQA, 2011b). Fourth, the *RPL Working Document* was considered and published by SAQA, and fifth, the suggestions it contained were implemented. A Ministerial Task Team for RPL was established, and carried out an investigation into the legal barriers to an RPL system, and potential models for the coordination and funding of such a system. SAQA's policy for implementing RPL was revised in an informed way that led to wide buy-in across the system. Sixth, the Minister considered the findings in the Report of the Ministerial Task Team for RPL, and developed over-arching policy for the national coordination and funding of RPL. The National RPL Coordinating Mechanism is in the process of being set up. While these phases of action and reflection could be described in other ways, mapping them in this way shows the upward spiral of country learning as understandings of RPL theory and practice deepened in an expansive way.

There has been a groundswell of RPL developments, implementation, and communities of practice. While 80 delegates considered country learning relating to RPL in a 2008 DHET-SAQA conference, 200 participated in the 2010 national RPL conference to identify barriers, and 350 in the 2011 conference designed to workshop how to address these barriers. The closing half-day session in which the *RPL Working Document* was addressed, was attended by the highest number of delegates in the three-day event. While SAQA was advocating assistance with individual and organisational RPL (2010-2015), the numbers of individuals approaching SAQA grew from under 10 in 2010, to over 100 per year in 2014 and 2015. A steady stream of entities approached SAQA for support with sector-wide RPL initiatives. The 2014 conference, a four-day event designed to workshop SAQA's newly-revised policy for

implementing RPL, and to share successful models, was attended by well over 400 delegates.

Closing comments

RPL offers people previously and currently disadvantaged in South Africa, a chance to access and progress in the system for education, training, development and work - for their individual development as well as to participate in the community, civic, and economic aspects of life. The 'first wave' of RPL led to islands of good practice; it is imperative that the 'second wave' - of policy revision based on the experience gained; of national RPL initiatives and the support of individual RPL candidates, and of establishing the 'infrastructure' of the national RPL system - succeeds.

A five year period was visualised by SAQA for scaling up from islands of good practice to the national RPL system. There is now Ministerial policy for the coordination and funding of RPL, which also spells out the responsibilities of all the role-players concerned - in line with the vision articulated by SAQA at the 2011 *National RPL Conference: Bridging and expanding existing islands of excellent practice*. Care needs to be taken however, to locate the RPL Coordinating Mechanism in an institutional position that will afford it strategic capacity. The fact that no *new* funds have been allocated for the functioning of the RPL Coordinating Mechanism, could inhibit its implementation. Speedy action in setting up the Reference Group to guide its development is needed to prevent loss of the momentum gained regarding the development of RPL in South Africa so far. The publication of the Ministerial RPL policy in 2016 has led to an urgent need for alignment of the SAQA and Quality Council RPL policies, with it. The '50% Rule' still exists, although it has been challenged in court. The first round of this challenge was won by the institutions, but it has been appealed.

While workshops are underway to conscientise NQF communities about the National RPL Coordinating Mechanism, it needs to be staffed and capacitated as a matter of urgency. Successful models and large-scale cases exist, where effective delivery, quality assurance, and funding are addressed in feasible ways. Existing expertise needs to be concentrated in the National RPL Coordinating Mechanism, and systematic nation-wide RPL reporting needs to commence. Analysis of this reporting will show the extent to which access and redress has been accomplished via RPL. In order to achieve the further development desired, continued political will and state resources, nationally coordinated structures, relational agency and joint work by all the stakeholders involved, are needed.

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