



THE SOUTH AFRICAN QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

*National Policy for the Implementation
of the Recognition of Prior Learning*



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Postnet Suite 248
Private Bag X06
Waterkloof
0145

Helpdesk: +27 (0) 86 010 3188

Facsimile: +27 (0) 12 431 5039

Website: www.saqa.org.za

E-mail: saqainfo@saqa.org.za

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Foreword

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act 67 of 2008 mandates the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to develop, after consultation with the Quality Councils, a national policy for the recognition of prior learning (RPL).

This revised RPL policy is grounded in extensive stakeholder consultation. SAQA initially developed the policy for RPL in 2002, and criteria and guidelines for RPL in 2003. Both of these documents have been used widely and remain in use, but need to be updated to align the policies with the NQF Act 67 of 2008 that replaced the SAQA Act 58 of 1995.

This revised RPL policy has been developed with support from the SAQA RPL Reference Group, which includes staff representatives from the Quality Councils (a full list of members of the Reference Group is provided at the end of the policy). Broader consultation with all nominees for the SAQA RPL Reference Group and organised labour also took place in the form of a workshop on 6 July 2012. The policy was made available for public comment between 1 October and 15 November 2012 during which period substantial comments were received from all sectors of the education and training system. After considering the advice of the RPL Reference Group, and after consultation with the QCs, the policy was approved by the SAQA Board on 15 March 2013.

We trust that through this policy it will be possible to work collectively towards demonstrably changing the lives of RPL candidates, including workers and learners of all ages, unemployed people and other marginalised groups, as important beneficiaries of RPL services.

Joe Samuels
Chief Executive Officer

National Policy for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning

Purpose

1. This revised National Policy for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) provides for the implementation of RPL within the context of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act 67 of 2008.

Preamble

2. This RPL Policy replaces the policy document *Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African NQF* developed in 2002 by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) within the Context of the SAQA Act (Act 58 of 1995).
3. The Policy is located within the broader context of the Human Resource Development Strategy and the National Skills Development Strategy, as well as a consideration of the National Development Plan 2030.
4. The Policy builds on the strengths of the *Recognition of Prior Learning in the Context of the South African NQF* developed by SAQA in 2002, as well as on new insights gained from on-going practice and research. It establishes the basic core principles and priorities for RPL as part of the further development and implementation of the NQF in South Africa.
5. This policy seeks to position RPL in relation to the overarching principles and priorities of the NQF in South Africa.
6. The implementation of this National RPL Policy will be achieved by:
 - a. Advancing a comprehensive, quality-assured and resource-driven approach to optimise the delivery of RPL services and programmes, including RPL assessments
 - b. Ensuring quality assurance and benchmarking of RPL overseen by SAQA and the three Quality Councils: the Council on Higher Education (CHE), Umalusi: Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO)
 - c. Recognising that barriers to implementation, such as: limited incentives; lack of resources to develop and sustain services at affordable prices; lack of trained RPL personnel; inadequate supporting systems such as administrative systems that are unable to grant credits for part qualifications and admission systems without robust alternative access routes; and institutional resistance and lack of capacity must be addressed
 - d. Recognising different kinds of RPL and purposes for RPL in relation to different contexts and classifications of knowledge, skills, competencies, qualifications and part qualifications in the national learning system
 - e. Providing for national co-ordination to assist the Quality Councils, institutions of learning, and RPL practitioners to deal with barriers, accessing funding, building capacity, advocacy and marketing, and expanding RPL provisioning in a comprehensive RPL system.

Objectives

7. The objectives of this National Policy for the implementation of RPL are to:
 - a. Provide for further development and implementation of RPL, including its resourcing, effective delivery and quality assurance

- b. Develop shared understanding of RPL within a broader lifelong learning context
- c. Provide an expanded scope for a holistic model and approach to RPL
- d. Set and enable the formulation of sector criteria and institutional RPL policies in line with this National Policy
- e. Provide the basis for national guidelines and priorities for implementing RPL, and for effective monitoring and evaluation of the practices against these priorities
- f. Enable potential candidates to attain recognition of the appropriate knowledge and skills required for personal development and the employment market
- g. Recognise the roles and functions of employers, public and private providers, and RPL practitioners in the provision of RPL across the education and training system
- h. Enable the national coordination of RPL by SAQA that will focus on research, support, advocacy and the mainstreaming of RPL.

Scope

- 8. This revised RPL Policy provides for the role of SAQA in co-ordinating the development of RPL policies and practices across all sub-frameworks of the NQF, in co-operation with the three Quality Councils, education institutions and skills development providers, workplaces and other assessment sites, recognised professional bodies, and RPL practitioners.
- 9. This Policy applies to:
 - a. Quality Councils, education institutions and skills development providers, work places, recognised professional bodies, RPL practitioners and RPL candidates
 - b. All qualifications, part qualifications and professional designations registered on the NQF and offered in South Africa
 - c. The specific context of each Quality Council and its sub-framework must be considered in the interpretation of this Policy.

Glossary of terms

- 10. “Advanced standing” means the status granted to a learner for admission to studies at a higher level than the learner’s prior formal studies would have allowed, including exemption where applicable.
- 11. “Credit accumulation” means the totalling of credits required to complete a qualification or a part qualification.
- 12. “Credit transfer” means the vertical, horizontal or diagonal relocation of credits towards a qualification or part qualification on the same or different level, usually between different programmes, departments or institutions.
- 13. “Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) system” means an arrangement whereby the diverse features of both credit accumulation and credit transfer are combined to facilitate lifelong learning and access to the workplace.
- 14. “Formal learning” means learning that occurs in an organised and structured education and training environment and that is explicitly designated as such. Formal learning leads to the awarding of a qualification or part qualification registered on the NQF.

15. “Informal learning” means learning that results from daily activities related to paid or unpaid work, family or community life, or leisure, including incidental learning.
16. “Learning programme” means a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that leads to a qualification.
17. “Lifelong learning” means learning that takes place in all contexts in life from a life-wide, life-deep and lifelong perspective. It includes learning behaviours and obtaining knowledge, understanding, attitudes, values and competences for personal growth, social and economic well-being, democratic citizenship, cultural identity and employability.
18. “National Qualifications Framework (NQF)” means a comprehensive system approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Training for the classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications.
19. “NQF Act” means the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act No. 67 of 2008.
20. “Non-formal learning” means planned educational interventions that are not intended to lead to awarding of qualifications or part qualifications.
21. “Part qualification” means an assessed unit of learning that is registered as part of a qualification.
22. “Provider” means an entity that offers any learning programme that leads to a qualification or part qualification registered on the NQF.
23. “Professional body” means any body of expert practitioners in an occupational field, and includes an occupational body.
24. “Professional designation” means a title or status conferred by a professional body in recognition of a person’s expertise and/or right to practice in an occupational field.
25. “Qualification” means a registered national qualification.
26. “Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)” means 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.
27. “Resourcing of RPL” means the direct and indirect physical, infrastructural, human and financial capacity needed to build and maintain a mainstream and sustainable national RPL system.
28. “RPL practitioner” means a person that functions in one or more aspects of RPL provision, including policy development, advising, portfolio course design and facilitation, assessment and moderation, administration, monitoring and evaluation, research and development.

Understandings of the Recognition of Prior Learning in South Africa

29. The idea of RPL is aligned to main elements of South African national policy discourse since 1994: transformation; accreditation; lifelong learning; and the NQF.
30. The RPL process is a multi-dimensional one. It is a process through which non-formal learning and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or workplace. RPL processes can include guidance and counselling, and extended preparation for assessment.

31. Assessment, an integral feature of all forms of RPL, does not exist in isolation from a range of other strategies that allow for different sources of knowledge and forms of learning to be compared and judged.
32. RPL is multi-contextual. How it takes place differs from one context to another. RPL may be developed and implemented differently for the purposes of personal development, further learning and advancement in the workplace, and recognition within the three Sub-frameworks of the NQF. Furthermore, it may be conducted by a variety of methods using a combination of teaching-learning, mentoring and/or assessment approaches, as appropriate. The purposes and contexts determine the practices and outcomes of RPL in each case.
33. RPL may be carried out at any level of learning and at any NQF level.
34. There are two main forms of RPL which reflect the different purposes and the different processes within which RPL takes place:
 - a. *RPL for access*: To provide an alternative access route into a programme of learning for those who do not meet the formal entry requirements for admission. RPL for access applies to learning programmes offered by an accredited institution of further learning (including a post-school institution and an adult learning centre) or workplace-based training provider
 - b. *RPL for credits*: To provide for the awarding of credits for, or towards, a qualification or part qualification registered on the NQF
 - c. In both cases, RPL processes may take place at a diagnostic, formative or summative point, or in-curriculum to create opportunities for advanced standing or recognition in the workplace.
35. The following principles are important elements of a holistic approach to RPL:
 - a. The focus is on what has been learned and not on the status of the institution, organisation or place where the learning was obtained
 - b. Credit is awarded for knowledge and skills acquired through experience and not for experience alone
 - c. Prior learning is made explicit through assessment and/or other methods that engage the intrinsic development of knowledge, skills and competencies acquired
 - d. Candidate guidance and support, the preparation of evidence and the development of an appropriate combination of further teaching and learning, mentoring and assessment approaches are core to RPL practice.

Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the National Qualifications Framework in South Africa

36. The NQF in South Africa is a comprehensive system approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Training for the classification, co-ordination, registration, and publication of articulated and quality-assured national qualifications and part qualifications. It was established under the SAQA Act (Act 58 of 1995). It continues under the NQF Act (Act 67 of 2008), which came into effect on 1 June 2009.
37. The objectives of the NQF are to:
 - a. Create a single integrated national framework for learning achievements
 - b. Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within, education, training and career paths

- c. Enhance the quality of education and training
 - d. Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities.
38. The objectives of the NQF are designed to contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large.
39. SAQA and the QCs must seek to achieve the objectives of the NQF by:
- a. Developing, fostering and maintaining an integrated and transparent national framework for the recognition of learning achievements
 - b. Ensuring that South African qualifications meet appropriate criteria, determined by the Minister as contemplated in Section 8 of the NQF Act (Act 67 of 2008), and are internationally comparable
 - c. Ensuring that South African Qualifications are of an acceptable quality.
40. SAQA is mandated to oversee the further development and implementation of the NQF. In advancing the NQF objectives, SAQA embraces inclusivity and social justice, diversity, and environmental sustainability. The NQF Act (Act 67 of 2008) gives SAQA a specific mandate for RPL in realising the NQF objectives. SAQA will coordinate RPL on a national basis in accordance with this Policy which has been developed after consultation with the Quality Councils.
41. The NQF, as an integrated framework overseen by SAQA is made up of three co-ordinated sub-frameworks, each overseen by a Quality Council that needs to provide for RPL:
- a. Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework(HEQSF) overseen by the Council on Higher Education
 - b. General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework(GFETQSF) overseen by Umalusi
 - c. Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) overseen by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations.
42. In terms of Section 13[h] of the NQF Act (Act 67 of 2008) SAQA is required, after consultation with the Quality Councils, to develop and implement Policy and Criteria for Assessment, RPL and Credit Accumulation and Transfer.
43. Qualifications and part qualifications registered on the NQF may be awarded in whole or in part through RPL. Processes followed must be credible, quality assured and consistent with accepted and approved principles, criteria and regulations of SAQA, the relevant Quality Council and the institution concerned. In this connection, qualifications and part qualifications registered on the NQF must include provision for alternative entry-level requirements so that candidates can be admitted to study towards the qualification, or part qualification, through RPL.
44. No distinction, other than that required for data analysis, must be made between records of learner credits and achievements for qualifications and/or part qualifications awarded as a result of RPL processes and those obtained via conventional means.
45. Providers must record data relating to RPL achievements and submit it to SAQA through the relevant Quality Council. This is currently required for the purposes of monitoring access and redress indicators over time. This data must be maintained under strict conditions of confidentiality, and may not be shared with any individuals not directly involved in the recording of the data.

Policy priorities for RPL

46. Resourcing of RPL:

- a. Resourcing of RPL denotes the direct and indirect physical, infrastructural, human and financial capacity needed to build and sustain RPL programmes and services within the national learning system
- b. Resources and opportunities must be provided for equitable access to RPL programmes and services in a manner that is consistent with government's commitment to redress imbalances that still exist in our greatly unequal society and specifically in the labour market
- c. Government and other forms of subsidisation must be identified by SAQA to ensure the provision of RPL programmes and services, for the development of context-specific RPL instruments, and for bursaries to support RPL candidates
- d. Given the considerable extent and importance of work being done in the private provision of RPL in the country, RPL provision in the private sector needs to be further encouraged
- e. SAQA should develop guidelines for consistent and fair costing of RPL programmes and services in both the private and public sectors
- f. SAQA should investigate and promote ways to incentivise the sharing of facilities, staff and expertise across the RPL system and education and training institutions through a mix of strategies.

47. Effective delivery of RPL:

- a. Delivery of RPL should take cognisance of lessons learned to date, in research and practice
- b. A focus on RPL for returning-to-learning youth and adults needs to be encouraged and resourced in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders in the labour market and the national learning system
- c. RPL in the workplace and in educational institutions needs to be expanded with targets set
- d. RPL as a tool for transformation should benefit all languages, not only the dominant languages. Mechanisms should be put in place to accommodate such individuals to ensure effective delivery.

48. Quality assurance of RPL:

- a. Quality assurance of RPL is manifested by the establishment of, and adherence to, policies, standards, processes, and associated practices
- b. Standardised practices must grow within sectors, as a single approach does not necessarily work across different contexts
- c. The concept of quality in RPL must adhere to generally agreed quality assurance principles, including qualified personnel, fitness for purpose, transparency, and fair outcomes
- d. Quality assurance of RPL must be undertaken with the explicit intention to protect the integrity of the processes and outcomes concerned.

49. National co-ordination of RPL:

- a. National co-ordination of RPL in South Africa involves a collaborative state- and stakeholder-driven approach to RPL through which the interests and RPL needs of workers, as well as of industry, public and private providers, civil society, organised labour, the unemployed and the State are considered
- b. In the absence of a dedicated body to perform the national coordination of RPL, SAQA will undertake this function, provided it is adequately resourced for this purpose
- c. National coordination of RPL must take place in the following areas:

- i. *Research*: Conduct, co-ordinate and disseminate RPL-related research and information across all sectors and levels in the system
 - ii. *Professionalisation*: Initiate and encourage the training and continuing professional development of RPL practices and practitioners, and guide and support the professionalisation of RPL practices within the education and training system
 - iii. *Strategic projects*: Identify and initiate strategic RPL projects the focus areas of which will include a major industrial sector, the public sector, sector-specific centres, and community education and training that effect systemic shifts and address systemic barriers in order to enable artisan development, career development and capacity-building projects in general
 - iv. *Support and advice*: Oversee and ensure the dissemination of best local and international RPL practice, including successful models, toolkits and guidelines
 - v. *Monitoring and evaluation*: Conduct formative, ongoing, and summative monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of RPL policy
 - vi. *Advocacy and marketing*: Conduct and facilitate activities that promote the public perception of RPL, including a biennial conference on RPL, inclusive of a full range of RPL practitioners and researchers, and learner representation.
- d. SAQA will coordinate a Sub-committee on RPL to advise the SAQA Board and contribute to improved national coordination of RPL activities and practices indicated in clauses (b) and (c) above
 - e. The Sub-committee on RPL will report to the Chief Executive Officers' Committee comprising of the CEOs of SAQA, the Quality Councils and the members the Interdepartmental NQF Steering Committee
 - f. The Sub-committee on RPL could consist of representatives from the Department of Higher Education and Training, SAQA, the Quality Councils, the National Artisan Moderating Body (NAMB), the National Economic Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC), RPL practitioners and researchers, public and private providers, professional bodies, organised labour and other stakeholders.

Responsibilities for the implementation of RPL

50. Responsibilities of SAQA:

- a. Develop national policy and criteria, after consultation with the Quality Councils, for RPL
- b. Co-ordinate the Sub-frameworks of the NQF, including the alignment of Sub-framework policies on RPL, and articulation across the system
- c. Recognise professional bodies and register professional designations that meet the SAQA *Policy and Criteria for the Recognition of Professional Bodies and the Registration of Professional Designations (2012)*, including the specification of an RPL route as an integral requirement for attainment of the professional body's professional designations
- d. Oversee the national coordination of RPL, including RPL-related research as required for the further implementation and development of the NQF, professionalisation of RPL practices and practitioners, strategic RPL projects, support and advice, monitoring and evaluation, and advocacy and marketing of RPL.

51. Responsibilities of the Quality Councils:

- a. Develop a policy on RPL for their sectors, taking into account the relevant national SAQA policies, and the broader context of their specific Sub-frameworks and related policies

- b. Monitor and evaluate the implementation of RPL within the specific Sub-framework they oversee, including the development and implementation of standardised approaches where appropriate
 - c. Collaborate with SAQA, NAMB, the Sector Education and Training Authorities, and other role players to advance the development of RPL in their sectors
 - d. Foster close working relationships with professional bodies in and across the sub-frameworks where appropriate, to facilitate RPL
 - e. Facilitate and monitor enabling agreements to increase RPL provisioning in their sectors
 - f. Support and monitor the training of RPL advisors, facilitators, assessors, moderators, and administrators in their sectors
 - g. Monitor providers that offer RPL in their sectors, in accordance with criteria established for this purpose
 - h. Ensure consistency in the application of RPL policies by providers and delegated bodies in their sectors (where relevant)
 - i. Support the co-ordinated development of generic RPL toolkits and instruments relevant to the particular context for their sectors, wherever appropriate and possible
 - j. Monitor the RPL admission rates of providers and make this information public in an appropriate format, while maintaining the strictest confidentiality with respect to individual candidates and individual institutions
 - k. Ensure that no distinction, other than for data analysis, is made between qualifications awarded through conventional and RPL routes
 - l. Develop and maintain an information management system that is compatible with the National Learners Records Database (NLRD) and other relevant government information management systems, and submit the relevant data to SAQA
 - m. Conduct and oversee RPL-related research in the Sub-framework sector in collaboration with SAQA.
52. Responsibilities of education institutions and skills development providers:
- a. Seek accreditation by the relevant Quality Council(s)
 - b. In the case of private education providers that offer qualifications and part qualifications located in the Higher Education and General and Further Education and Training Sub-frameworks, registration with either the Department of Higher Education and Training or the Department of Basic Education, respectively, is also required ¹
 - c. Progressively develop and enhance capacity to implement RPL in accordance with this policy and the specific RPL policy of the Sub-framework(s) within which their qualifications are offered
 - d. Collaborate with SAQA, NAMB and the Quality Councils to advance the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of RPL
 - e. Ensure that they have the necessary staff capacity to deliver quality RPL services and programmes
 - f. Ensure effective planning and funding for RPL administrative and logistical systems to support all programmes and services
 - g. Put systems and procedures in place to incentivise and support the registration and continuing professional development of RPL practitioners

¹ At the time of the finalisation of this policy, private skills development providers that offer qualifications and part qualifications in the trade and occupational sector must be accredited by the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations, but are not required to be registered (see the Joint Communiqué issued by the Department of Higher Education and Training, SAQA and the Quality Councils in August 2012). This interim registration measure will be reviewed.

- h. Provide advice, counseling and support services to assist RPL candidates prior to, during, and after RPL processes
 - i. Establish an appeal process for RPL candidates to engage with RPL-related judgements
 - j. Ensure an equitable fee structure for all RPL programmes and services including those programmes and services that involve the assessment of experiential learning for credit against existing formal qualifications or part qualifications
 - k. Develop an information management system that meets the requirements of the relevant Quality Council, the NLRD, and other relevant government information management systems.
53. Responsibilities of recognised professional bodies:
- a. Comply with the national SAQA *Policy and Criteria for the Recognition of Professional Bodies and the Registration of Professional Designations* (2012)
 - b. Include an RPL route as an integral requirement for attainments of its professional designations as stipulated in the SAQA *Policy and Criteria for the Recognition of Professional Bodies and the Registration of Professional Designations* (2012)
 - c. Collaborate with SAQA, the Quality Councils and the relevant providers to incentivise and advance quality RPL provisioning in the sector
 - d. Progressively develop and enhance its capacity to initiate and support RPL provision in accordance with this policy.
54. Responsibilities of RPL practitioners:
- a. Adhere to the requirements as set out in this policy and as determined by the relevant bodies and governance structures, which may include a Quality Council, a workplace and a professional body
 - b. Meet professional requirements, including the participation in continuing professional development activities, to be developed and agreed with the community of RPL practitioners, relevant bodies and governance structures through the national coordination of RPL as set out in this policy.
55. Responsibilities of RPL candidates:
- a. Accept co-responsibility as an equal partner in the RPL process
 - b. Expect to be treated without unfair discrimination
 - c. Respect the processes and procedures of institutions and workplaces.

Transitional arrangements

56. The *Criteria and guidelines for the implementation of RPL* developed in 2004 by SAQA will be replaced by new guidelines as soon as these have been developed.
57. This Policy comes into effect on the date of its publication in the Government Gazette. It replaces the policy document *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the Context of the South African NQF* developed in 2002 by SAQA.

List of acronyms

CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CHE	Council on Higher Education
GFETQSF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-framework
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-framework
NAMB	National Artisan Moderation Body
NEDLAC	National Economic Development and Labour Council
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OQSF	Occupational Qualifications Sub-framework
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority

Members of the SAQA RPL Reference Group

Prof Ben Anderson	Da Vinci Institute
Dr Ronel Blom	Higher Education South Africa
Ms Deonita Damons	Knowledge Quest
Mr David Dodge	Electricity Supply Commission
Mr Abie Dunn	Sandown Motor Holdings
Mr Varish Ganpath	Prodigy Business Services
Prof Nqabomzi Gawe	Durban University of Technology
Ms Inger Marrian	Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority
Mr Isaac Masita	Congress of South African Trade Unions
Dr Luke Mlilo	Council on Higher Education
Ms Malebo Mogopodi	National Union of Mineworkers
Dr Julia Motaung	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
Mr Vijayen Naidoo	Umalusi
Mr Nigel Prinsloo	Further Education and Training Institute
Mr Alan Ralphs	University of the Western Cape
Prof Rob Sieborger	University of Cape Town
Dr Elizabeth Smith	University of South Africa
Dr John van der Merwe	North West University



Telephone: 012 431 5000

Facsimile: 012 431 5147

Helpdesk: 086 010 3188

Website: www.saqa.org.za

Email: saqainfo@saqa.org.za