National RPL Conference:
Bridging and expanding existing islands of excellent practice

23 – 25 February 2011

Book of abstracts and summaries
National RPL Conference: Bridging and expanding existing islands of excellent practice

23 – 25 February 2011

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## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introductory note</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acronyms</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of abstracts and summaries according to theme</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstracts and summaries</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of abstracts and summaries by author</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Foreword

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is hosting a National Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Conference Bridging and expanding existing islands of excellent practice at the Kopanong Conference Centre in Benoni 23rd to 25th February 2011 as part of a national strategy towards developing a fully–fledged RPL system in the country. This strategy includes firstly, refining and facilitating implementation of national RPL policy in collaboration with the Quality Councils, and taking into account contributions such as those made at this conference. It comprises, secondly, conducting and coordinating RPL-related research across the country. It encompasses thirdly, networking opportunities such as this conference and its Preparatory Workshop which was held in October 2010, and encouraging and supporting the development of other related networks and networking devices. The strategy includes fourthly, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Career Advice Helpline – a helpline currently based at SAQA House but soon to have nodes at a variety of institutions throughout the country. The strategy also includes the establishment of a task team and reference group to drive the process.

Access is one of the key principles of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa. RPL has been identified as an important strategy towards this. RPL has potential to address injustices inherited from apartheid. It takes differing forms and plays differing roles. It is meant to be a mechanism for recognising skills and knowledge that have traditionally been ignored or undervalued. RPL also potentially facilitates access to and articulation between, educational offerings so that individuals can move through the education and training system more easily.

Much work has already been done in the country, in terms of developing RPL policies and implementing and researching RPL. This three–day national conference aims to build on and extend existing work. The first day showcases lessons from countries with national RPL systems, and trends revealed in South African meta–studies of RPL. On the second day three breakaway streams investigate Resourcing RPL; Effective delivery models for RPL; and Quality Assurance of RPL respectively. It was clear in the October 2010 Preparatory Workshop that these were the most urgent issues to be addressed if we are to move towards the implementation of a national system. The third day allows for reporting back from these streams, creation of a communiqué based on the findings, and agreement on how to advance effective implementation of RPL in the interests of the majority of people.

We trust that the abstracts and summaries in this book, and the presentations and posters at the conference will increase common understandings of RPL, and assist further development and implementation of RPL policy by helping to narrow the gap between RPL policy and practice. We thank delegates for their contributions.

Samuel BA Isaacs
Chief Executive Officer, SAQA
February 2011
The NQF Act and the Acts associated with the three Quality Councils (RSA 2008a, b, c, d) ushered in a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) strengthened by lessons learned from the first 15 years of implementation. The original NQF objectives of integration, access, mobility and progression, quality and redress remain, and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is key for the achievement of these objectives. But what exactly is RPL?

RPL involves recognition – in various forms – of non–formal and informal learning that learners of all ages may have acquired in the course of their working lives or participation in community activities outside formal places of learning. RPL has differing purposes; a few are given here.

Firstly, workers could for instance have acquired skills in the workplace and have few or no formal qualifications and thus be barred from certain career pathways. In some cases it is possible for individuals to go through a process of assessment and preparation for testing, at the end of which this experience is recognised with an appropriate certificate.

A second example is when learners seek access to college, undergraduate or postgraduate study when they have not met all the entrance criteria of the institution of learning they wish to enter. In some of these cases learners may again go through a process of preparation (sometimes referred to as ‘portfolio development’) towards assessment of their readiness to enter these courses of study.

Third, there are those already doing certain jobs and holding positions for which they have qualifications other than those currently recognised for that work. To comply with new nationally and internationally comparable laws and criteria, these individuals may need to acquire new legal certification. There are RPL preparation and assessment processes towards this certification.

There are other examples. Importantly: RPL is not simply an assessment process – it is a series of activities involving teaching, learning, and work towards the creation of suitable portfolios of evidence or performances of the required kind.

RPL has existed in South Africa for some time now. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), most other public education and training organisations, and many private ones have RPL policies. Implementation of these policies has not always been easy or straight-­forward. In a recent Organisation for Economic Co-­operation and Development (OECD) an apt comment is made:

“South Africa has not yet gone beyond the initial stage represented by inspirational promoters of recognition, even though it has a network of excellent specialists and exhibits scattered signs of very good practice.” (OECD 2009: 68)

That there are islands of excellent practice is a very positive and commendable achievement. It is now imperative that those beginnings and developments are taken further. The rich selection of abstracts and summaries in this book are testimony that this work is already underway.

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is mandated to develop, in consultation with the Quality Councils, policy and criteria for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) (RSA 2008). The National RPL Strategy coordinated by SAQA includes first, in–depth and large–scale research into RPL, and coordination, dissemination, and use of this research. Long–term SAQA research...
partnership work with the University of the Western Cape (UWC) for a comparative study of RPL practices is part of this effort (see p.19 of this booklet).

The RPL Strategy encompasses second, networking activities such as this National RPL Conference *Bridging and expanding existing islands of excellent practice* (23–25 February 2011) and its associated Preparatory Workshop (which took place involving nearly 200 delegates, on 21st October 2010). This networking includes encouraging and supporting the formation and development of other related networks and networking devices.

A third component of the strategy is the NQF and Career Advice Helpline – part of the national Career Advisory Services hosted by SAQA. It deals with telephonic and e-mail queries and assists the public with walk-in requests.

At the Preparatory Workshop the current move towards a national RPL system with coordinated RPL networks was put into historical, social, economic, and political context. Structured breakaway groups considered RPL in Further Education and Training; Higher Education and Training; and Adult and Continuing Education and the workplace respectively. The groups identified issues to be taken forward to this Conference – issues now an integral part of the Conference programme.

The aim of this Conference is to bring together national and international RPL thought and experience, to share lessons learned from successful RPL initiatives as well as from those initiatives that have met with mixed success – towards further development of RPL in South Africa and ultimately a national RPL system in the country. We trust that you will find the event and this booklet with its rich spread of RPL-related work worthwhile.

**Dr Heidi Bolton**  
Research Director, SAQA

**References**


## Acronyms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AHELO</td>
<td>Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes</td>
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<td>ALFI</td>
<td>Adult Learner Friendly Institute</td>
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<td>ALLI</td>
<td>African Lifelong Learning Initiative</td>
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<td>APMSA</td>
<td>Association for Project Management South Africa</td>
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<td>B. Ed</td>
<td>Bachelor of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>B Tech</td>
<td>Bachelor of Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAT</td>
<td>Credit Accumulation and Transfer</td>
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<td>CBMT</td>
<td>Competency Based Modular Training</td>
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<td>CETA</td>
<td>Construction Education and Training Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHE</td>
<td>Council on Higher Education</td>
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<td>CHED</td>
<td>Centre for Higher Education Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>CIRL</td>
<td>Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning</td>
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<td>CPD</td>
<td>Continuing Professional Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>CPUT</td>
<td>Cape Peninsula University of Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>DHET</td>
<td>Department of Higher Education and Training</td>
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<tr>
<td>EAAB</td>
<td>Estate Agency Affairs Board</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECAT</td>
<td>Extended Credit Accumulation and Transfer</td>
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<td>EQF</td>
<td>European Qualifications Framework</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETA</td>
<td>Education and Training Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>ETDP SETA</td>
<td>Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<td>ETQAs</td>
<td>Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies</td>
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<td>EUC</td>
<td>European Union Commission</td>
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<td>FAIS</td>
<td>Financial Advisory of Intermediary Services Act</td>
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<td>FASSET</td>
<td>Sector Education and Training Authority for Finance, Accounting, Management Consulting and other Financial Services</td>
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<td>Further Education and Training Institute</td>
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<td>Financial Intelligence Centre Act</td>
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<td>Financial Services Board</td>
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<td>Higher Education</td>
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<td>HSRC</td>
<td>Human Sciences Research Council</td>
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<td>HWSETA</td>
<td>Health and Welfare Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<td>IALS</td>
<td>International Adult Literacy Survey</td>
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<td>IFPA</td>
<td>Institute for Public Finance and Auditing</td>
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<td>IHRG</td>
<td>Industrial Health Resource Group</td>
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<td>IPMA</td>
<td>International Project Management Association</td>
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<td>ISETT</td>
<td>Information Systems, Electronics and Telecommunications Technologies Sector</td>
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<td>ISO</td>
<td>International Standards Organization</td>
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<tr>
<td>L&amp;D</td>
<td>Learning and Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>LPP</td>
<td>Legitimate Peripheral Participation</td>
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<td>M. Ed</td>
<td>Masters of Education</td>
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<td>Acronym</td>
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<td>MerSETA</td>
<td>Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<td>Mangosuthu University of Technology</td>
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<td>NMMU</td>
<td>Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University</td>
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<tr>
<td>NPDE</td>
<td>National Professional Diploma in Education</td>
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<td>NQF</td>
<td>National Qualifications Framework</td>
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<td>NSDS</td>
<td>National Skills Development Strategy</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development</td>
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<td>PBB</td>
<td>Personal and Business Bank</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLC</td>
<td>Prior Learning Centre</td>
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<td>PLIRC</td>
<td>Prior Learning International Recognition Centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>PM 4-L-C</td>
<td>Project Management Four Level Certification</td>
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<td>QAP</td>
<td>Quality Assurance Partner</td>
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<td>QCTO</td>
<td>Quality Council for Trade and Occupations</td>
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<td>REQV</td>
<td>Relative Education Qualification Values</td>
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<td>RNFIL</td>
<td>Recognition of non-formal and informal learning</td>
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<td>RTI</td>
<td>Research Triangle Institute</td>
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<td>SADC</td>
<td>Southern African Development Community</td>
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<td>SANTED</td>
<td>South Africa Norway Tertiary Education Development</td>
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<td>SAPPI</td>
<td>South African Paper and Pulp Industry</td>
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<td>SAQA</td>
<td>South African Qualifications Authority</td>
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<td>SASSETA</td>
<td>Safety and Security Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<td>Services SETA</td>
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<td>SETA</td>
<td>Sector Education and Training Authorities</td>
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<td>SUNY</td>
<td>State University of New York</td>
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<td>SWC</td>
<td>2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup</td>
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<tr>
<td>TUT</td>
<td>Tshwane University of Technology</td>
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<td>University of Cape Town</td>
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<tr>
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<td>University of Johannesburg</td>
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<td>University of the Western Cape</td>
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<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
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<td>W&amp;R SETA</td>
<td>Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
</tr>
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<td>WITS</td>
<td>University of the Witwatersrand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WSU</td>
<td>Walter Sisulu University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of abstracts and summaries according to theme

(Items listed alphabetically by author surname within sections)

Section 1: Recognition of Prior Learning for access

Do mature adult learners need additional support compared to school leavers?
Appollis, J. (Page 13)

Building an optimally-inclusive model of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) into postgraduate pedagogy.
Cooper, L. and Jones, B. (Page 15)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices within the public Further Education and Training (FET) college sector.
Prinsloo, N. (Page 17)

Specialised pedagogy: a comparative study of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices within the changing landscape of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa.
Ralphs, A. (Page 19)

Embracing non–formal learners in the Economic and Management Environment.
Rasengane, A. and Kizito, R. (Page 23)

Self–efficacy and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
Rudman, N. (Page 24)

Experiences and lessons from the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in accessing Higher Education: the case of the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) at the University of Limpopo.
Themane, M.J. (Page 26)

Section 2: Recognition of Prior Learning for recognition/ upgrading/ en–skilling

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) intervention within the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services sector (merSETA).
Botha, E. (Page 28)

SAPPI Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) intervention: RPL in practice.
Botha, E. (Page 31)

SASOL, Sparrow and CHIETA Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) intervention: a cascade model.
Botha, E. (Page 34)

Some barriers to the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and some suggestions.
Botha, E. (Page 36)
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) requirements within Standard Bank’s Personal and Business Bank environment.
Brown, R. (Page 38)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for credit – unlocking the gate to qualifications by changing the paths followed.
Deller, K. (Page 40)

Current perceptions and challenges of Recognition of Prior Learning learnerships in a blue collar flexible staffing environment
Le Grange, J.; Tome, L.; and Botha, J. (Page 43)

The Butterfly Process: delivering Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) that makes a difference.
Lenaghan, M. (Page 45)

Understanding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the context of Organised Labour: opportunities and challenges.
Maboye, M. (Page 46)

Bell Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pilot project.
Meintjies, D. (Page 47)

Can Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) contribute to the government’s new economic development and growth path for South Africa?
Nel, J. (Page 49)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) alignment with conventional qualification and certification programmes.
Pieters, W. (Page 50)

Extended Credit Accumulation and Transfer (ECAT): Modular and Credible Coach Development and Coach Accreditation.
Shelley, M. (Page 52)

Section 3: Recognition of Prior Learning practices in depth

Evaluation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applicants’ knowledge claims towards fourth year study at a university of technology.
De Graaff-Mazaza, F. (Page 55)

Knowledge typologies and their impact on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes and articulation: findings from the SANTED research at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU).
Paxton, P. (Page 57)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as social entrepreneurial practice.
Steenekamp, S. (Page 59)
Competency conversation: a quality–focused approach to alternative assessment methods in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).
Van Kleef, J. (Page 61)

Section 4: Windows into Recognition of Prior Learning realities

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – finding a way forward.
Arnesen, J. (Page 66)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – a vehicle to help unqualified educators to attain a professional qualification.
Baleni, Z. (Page 67)

Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) input to the Recognition of prior Learning (RPL) Conference.
Bird, A. (Page 68)

Financial Services Sector Education and Training Authority (FASSET SETA) report on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in its sector.
Faustino, N. (Page 69)

A practical epistemological model to understand the unique, diverse loci (islands) of different sciences, enhance interdisciplinary and trans–disciplinary cooperation and facilitate Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for articulation.
Lemmer, J. (Page 71)

RPL practices: some experiences from the mining sector.
Mabena, V. (Page 73)

Education standardisation for the Property and Real Estate Industry.
Machanik, W. (Page 74)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Financial Regulatory environment.
Nortier, C. and Mackenzie, S. (Page 76)

Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) attempts at implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). A case study on interventions.
Sipengane, A.; Marrian I.; and Van der Merwe, T. (Page 78)

The professionalisation of the Real Estate industry – a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approach.
Stamelman, S. (Page 79)
Section 5: Towards developing Recognition of Prior Learning systems

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): in search of a valid and sustainable mechanism for South Africa. 
Blom, R. (Page 81)

Researching Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): an international agenda.
Breier, M. and Harris, J. (Page 83)

Reflecting on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) initiatives in Higher Education: what lessons can be learnt from the past decade?
Buchler, M.; Gawe, N. and Prinsloo, R. (Page 85)

Towards a framework for accrediting up to 100% of prior informal and experiential learning of public service financial managers.
Erasmus, L. and Cassim, Z. (Page 86)

Moving towards a functioning National RPL system.
Farrelly, P. (Page 89)

Challenges in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) perspectives.
Marrian, I. and Akoojee, S. (Page 91)

Revisiting the introduction of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa: fifteen years on.
Michelson, E. (Page 93)

A shift to a more critical orientation to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy and practice and its use to analyse RPL policy in the public service in South Africa.
Naidu, V. (Page 95)

A comparative and critical analysis of selected institutional Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practices.
Nkonki, V.; Chabaya, O.; Muhuro, P.; Rembe, S. and Wadesango, N. (Page 97)

A case study on Recognition of Prior Learning: reflexive practice in Continuing Education for teacher development.
Quin, J. (Page 98)

The new kid on the block has come to stay: lessons from twelve years of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) implementation at the University of South Africa (UNISA).
Smith, E. (Page 101)

Linking Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), curriculum, and curriculum development or are we trying to push the marshmallow through the keyhole?
Sutherland, L. (Page 103)

Recognition of non–formal and informal learning outcomes: theory and evidence.
Werquin, P. (Page 105)
Section 1: Recognition of Prior Learning for access
Abstract
Do mature adult learners need additional support compared to school leavers?

Jilian Appollis,
Helderberg College

In this paper I explore the proposition that candidates who gain alternate access to Higher Education via Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) need additional support once they have entered their programme of study. It would appear that in some cases successfully completing the Portfolio Development Course is not enough preparation for embarking on academic studies. The question is, what kind of student support would mature adult learners require as compared to that required by the traditional/conventional students that have just graduated from high school? The assumption behind this question is that whilst mature learners may lack some of the formal literacies that school leavers have, they may also have other attributes (knowledge, skills and experience) which could possibly account for their higher levels of motivation and success than their younger less experienced peers.

This paper provides a case study based on the experience of RPL students at Helderberg College in the Western Cape. In an attempt to answer the question, the researcher will interview current RPL students and some of the lecturers, in order to secure suggestions about the way in which the current programme can ensure that PRL candidates are equipped with skills which will help them cope with the demands of Higher Education.

This research is a qualitative study and can be strongly associated with the interpretive constructivist paradigm. Within this paradigm the ontology is based on the premise that “…reality is socially constructed....”, and the aim is to understand and interpret the meaning of a phenomenon (Mertens 1998:11). The phenomenon in this case is the perception of the RPL students (who have entered degree studies) on whether the Portfolio Development Course and submitting portfolios was enough to equip them academically for entrance into Higher Education. In an attempt to establish information on this phenomenon, it is important to discover through dialogue what the perceptions are. In addition, it will be important to understand how the RPL process as an alternative route to access Higher Education is experienced. Lecturers will also be interviewed to establish their perceptions on how RPL students cope with their studies.

Since the study has a predominantly qualitative approach, a non–probability sampling method (purposive sampling) will be used. A sample of six students will be interviewed, two from each of the three cohorts who have gained access via RPL since 2008 (In a sense it is an attempt to interview all the students who have remained in their twelve programmes). In addition the Faculty Chair of the Theology Faculty and a lecturer would also be interviewed. It is felt that this number should be representative out of a total of six full time lecturers. Lastly an interview with the facilitator of the Portfolio Development Course would add value to the study.

Semi–structured Interviews will be conducted with students who gained access to the BA (Theology) Degree via RPL to establish their perception about the process and the support provided. Open–ended questions will be used so that the researcher probes for meaning and explanation. After the interviews have been
conducted, they will be recorded, transcribed and analysed. Semi-structured interviews will also be conducted with lecturers.

Student records will be used to provide biographical information on the participants as well as information on their academic performance – permission will be obtained from the Academic Administration Committee for this purpose and all data will be treated as confidential.

Content analysis will be done using interviews. Patterns and themes will be confirmed.

Reference


For more information on this research, please contact Jilian Appollis at:
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Cell: 072 754 7602
Email: appollisj@hbc.ac.za
Abstract

Building an optimally-inclusive model of RPL into post-graduate pedagogy

Linda Cooper and Barbara Jones,
University of Cape Town

The paper describes the first phase of a study aimed at developing a model for access into post-graduate study. The study is part of a much larger, 4-year research project, funded by SAQA, entitled: “Specialised Pedagogy: A comparative study of RPL practices within the changing landscape of the NQF in South Africa”. The site of this particular study is a South African university which is research-oriented, where the scale of RPL has, to date, been small and where the majority of successful RPL applicants have been to postgraduate programmes.

The study is guided by the question: What would constitute an optimally inclusive, RPL access programme into postgraduate, vocationally/professionally-oriented studies in the context of a research-focused university, that would (a) recognise prior knowledge, which might potentially enrich existing postgraduate curricula; and (b) assess academic readiness and provide scaffolding into postgraduate research and writing practices? The study comprises three phases: the first involves a mapping of postgraduate RPL practices currently in use at the institution; a second phase will document academics’ and institutional perceptions of RPL; the third phase comprises action research, will develop and pilot an RPL programme for access into postgraduate study.

This paper focuses on the outcome of the first phase of the research: the mapping of current RPL practices that provide access into postgraduate study at the institution. The mapping process aimed to uncover the specialised pedagogic and assessment practices associated with these activities; and to develop understanding of the forms of knowledge that experienced professionals and other specialised workers bring with them, and how this might be recontextualised within postgraduate curricula.

Theoretically and methodologically, one of the study’s starting assumptions was the differentiated nature of knowledge. This concept applies as much to the differentiation of knowledge within academia disciplines, as it does between ‘academic’ and ‘experiential’ forms of knowledge. It seemed important for the study to generate a much finer understanding not only of the similarities and differences between working/professional knowledge and academic knowledge, but also the distinctions between pure and applied knowledge; between discipline-specific and cross-domain/interdisciplinary knowledge; and between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ sciences, in order to understand their implications for RPL.

For this reason the first phase of the research identified three case studies of RPL into postgraduate study at the institution. The cases are in different faculties, focused on different knowledge domains, and appear to adopt different approaches to RPL. Data gathering involved documenting oral presentations that gave an overview of RPL practices involved; in-depth interviews with lecturers and candidates; and examination of documentary sources. Key lines of questioning were:

• What is the key purpose of the RPL process in each case?
• What epistemological assumptions are made about the value of experiential knowledge?
• How does the disciplinary context lend itself to particular forms of engagement with experiential knowledge?
• What is the nature of the specialised pedagogic practices in RPL?
• What is the profile of students who gain access via RPL and what seems to determine their success or otherwise?
• What are students’ experiences of the RPL process?
• What possibilities emerged for incorporating experiential knowledge into the programme’s curriculum?

Data was analysed comparatively drawing on Bernstein’s (2000) concepts related to forms of pedagogy; forms of knowledge and evaluative rules; Lave and Wenger’s (1991) notions of boundary practices’ and ‘translation’ across communities of practice; Harris’ (2004) notions of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ boundary approaches to experiential knowledge within academic curricula; the Activity Theory concept of culturally- and historically- embedded tools of mediation (Cooper 2006); and Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of ‘learner habitus’, and emphasis on (learner and pedagogic) agency.

The goal of the project is to propose a model of RPL into postgraduate study. It attempts to capture the different forms of practice across the three cases, and make an argument as to which of these models might be ‘optimally more inclusive’ than others in particular contexts. It is intended that the project will contribute to one of the broader aims of the SAQA-funded research project, which is the development of a theoretical model for describing and analysing different forms of RPL practice.

References


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Abstract
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices within the public Further Education and Training (FET) college sector

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This project investigates Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practices in two public Further Education and Training (FET) colleges and analyses how the social justice intentions of access and redress are operationalised. The research focuses on courses in two engineering fields which purported to include RPL practices. It looks particularly at programmes leading to Learnerships, Competency Based Modular Training (CBMT) and Trade Testing. The research question asked: How do FET colleges understand and implement RPL?

A critical theory conceptual framework is applied in view of the social justice intentions of access, redress and inclusion stated in early government policies on RPL. Brookfield (2005: 7) emphasises how ‘thinking critically’ is inherently a political process. Thinking critically, he holds, is mostly defined as the process of unearthing, and then researching, the assumptions with which one operates, through taking different perspectives of familiar, taken-for-granted beliefs and behaviours into consideration. Building on a critical theoretical paradigm this research also uses Habermasian notions of “system” and “lifeworld” (Habermas 1987) and aspects of policy implementation theory to understand the relationship between RPL policy as planned and practiced.

This research is a qualitative study relying on data of first-hand experiences obtained through semi-structured interviews. It locates the data within the critical theoretical construct. A scoping exercise was done; and contact was made with targeted respondents to assess their willingness to participate in the research.

Eleven interviews were conducted with individuals comprising a provincial education department official, two Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) representatives and eight college staff members (four per college) involved in RPL. College personnel were selected by the researcher on the basis of their involvement with RPL and their teaching of programmes in the selected courses. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed; field notes on the interviews were used to supplement the transcripts.

The selection of SETAs was based on the economic sectors in which trade testing, apprenticeships and learnerships were evident at the selected FET colleges. Desktop research investigated understanding of RPL at macro (national) and micro (college) levels.

The study reveals that there are similar conceptions of RPL amongst practitioners but varying RPL practices in the colleges. It was not possible to obtain data on the extent to which learners progressed through RPL processes as there were no records of students entering via this route. Respondents explained that this situation was the case in order not to stigmatise RPL students. Interviews with RPL practitioners revealed that around 5% of the learner cohort had been engaged in some form of RPL.

Although access and redress are acknowledged as important aspirations, success in this regard is impeded by several barriers. The study found that there was limited implementation of RPL policies and where RPL
practices exist, these reflect an instrumentalist approach. Standard assessment regimes are used to assess candidates through a “pre-trade test”; certain students are allowed to progress more quickly than others through a module based on their performance. Disadvantaged students were not actively recruited for RPL purposes. RPL though seen as valuable, was not viewed in terms of redress in particular. The social justice imperative of transformative policy was therefore not really reflected in practice.

References


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Summary
Specialised pedagogy: a comparative study of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices within the changing landscape of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) in South Africa

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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was introduced to the South African education and training system as a principle closely aligned to three key elements of national policy discourse driving systems-level reforms after 1994. Firstly, as part of the political discourse of transformation, its intended role has been to redress past injustices and ensure effective access to learning for those excluded by the policies and practices of apartheid. Secondly, as part of the discourse of accreditation and lifelong learning, it potentially renders explicit and certifiable, knowledge and skills acquired experientially at work or in other contexts outside the formal education and training system. Thirdly, as part of an integrated National Qualifications Framework (NQF), it has potential to enhance flexibility in the system and articulation of its constituent parts. As such, it has potential reference to all forms of learning as well as to the development of a national credit accumulation and transfer (CAT) scheme.

The original thinking about RPL drew for its inspiration and design on the experiences of specialists and practitioners within South Africa and from around the world. Most of this experience was in Higher Education (HE) but also from applications in Vocational Education and Training (VET), trade testing, and workforce development. Its inclusion as a founding principle of the NQF raised many expectations that it would help to build an inclusive system of learning within and across the conventional boundaries of formal, non–formal and informal learning. However its implementation has proved a lot more costly and complex than was anticipated. In addition, its value in validating claims of equivalence across different knowledge domains has come under critical review.

These critiques are reflected in a growing body of experience and research which suggests that although RPL has not fully fulfilled its promise as a fast-tracking assessment device, its value as a specialised set of practices for navigating access to new learning opportunities and for engaging with the complexities of knowledge, curriculum and assessment across different learning pathways and contexts, is undeniable.

Much of the RPL research to date has been done on separate tracks as it were, most of it in the Higher Education sector, much less in the trade and occupational sectors, and very little within trade unions and community–based organisations. This SAQA–UWC research project offers a collaborative exploration of RPL practices within and across the boundaries of these sectors.

The study involves researchers at five different sites of practice. Between them they include a private company specialising in RPL practices in the trade and occupational sector; two public universities; and the Workers’ College in KwaZulu–Natal with its focus on labour studies and community education. The project allows development and testing of a framework for theorising RPL as specialised pedagogy. It explores the policy implications of working with this framework to develop practices at each site, and beyond.
The research focuses on the complex mediations of knowledge, learning and assessment inherent in the design and implementation of RPL practices within these different contexts. It also considers the institutional conditions under which some of these practices have been able to go to scale and others have not. It further includes comparative exploration of the biographical data and learning narratives of three or four of the participants at each of the sites. It is intended that this detailed qualitative work will provide a rich source of information for understanding learners’ socially located engagements in navigating their way within and across different activity systems and learning pathways.

The merits of such a study for the revision of RPL policy and frameworks lie partly in the fact that the practice is being researched across a range of different types of knowledge contexts and learning sites. They lie also in the fact that the investigation does not start with an assumption that there is a standardised currency for the comparison of knowledge and learning achievements recognised by RPL practices. Embracing this diversity is in line with the move to a differentiated but interdependent system for the registration and articulation of qualifications and standards on the NQF, a system in which RPL can potentially play a role in enhancing the articulation of different learning achievements within and across differing domains.

A brief summary of the research envisaged at each site in this comparative study is provided below.

1. A model of RPL within Vocational Education and Training (VET)

The development of an effective and inclusive model of RPL for occupationally directed qualifications is the focus of the research at this site. The project, which focuses on the knowledge and skills of employees in the Real Estate and Labour Recruitment industries, will explore the development of an RPL model that could be applied in South African workplaces under the evolving framework for the development of “fit for purpose” qualifications under the new Quality Council for Trade and Occupations (QCTO).

The project draws on previous doctoral research into RPL in the Insurance sector which highlighted the pedagogical specialisations involved in the design and implementation of workplace-based RPL assessment systems and practices (using a logic model). Methodologically it draws on these findings to develop and evaluate RPL advising and assessment tools relevant to the new qualification standards and specifications of the QCTO.

2. RPL pedagogy and access to Higher Education

This project builds on a fairly large body of research on alternative access routes into Higher Education (undergraduate study) for mature learners who do not meet the conventional entry level requirements for admission. The focus in this study is on the comparative merits and specialised pedagogies involved in the design and implementation of two common forms of this provision, namely the standardised admissions tests and the portfolio development course. The study which is based at UWC, acknowledges that current policy and the absence of state funding for RPL provision in the public universities favours the use of admissions testing over the more expensive and time consuming portfolio development course, but it sets out to explore the assumptions and implications of this position with reference to the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that these pedagogical practices afford to different constituencies of learners.
The study also provides for a comparison of the admission, retention and success rates of students admitted to the university via these different routes, with particular attention to their socio-economic and occupational backgrounds and fields of study. Recommendations arising from this study will have a bearing on the funding and provision of RPL services and programmes at public institutions in South Africa.

3. A curriculum model for access to post-graduate study

This project focuses on developing an RPL model for access to post-graduate study and in particular, to those programmes that have an applied, professional or vocational orientation. The study is based at the University of Cape Town (UCT). It builds on the notion that RPL is often most successful at post-graduate levels where curricula are professionally or vocationally oriented – such as those in Adult Education, Film and Media Studies, Management Studies, Library and Information Science, Marketing and Property Studies for example.

The aim of the project is to develop an access programme that “faces two ways”: while looking towards recognising and valuing the specialised workplace knowledge that candidates bring, it also looks towards their future courses of study to see how this prior knowledge might enrich the curricula concerned, and what scaffolding might be required to ensure their future success in postgraduate study.

This research includes a series of case studies to document, theorise and map selected existing RPL practices within UCT, as well as the perceptions of academics and institutional administrators of these practices. This work will be followed by a phase of action research, involving the development and piloting of a specialised RPL course to mediate access into particular post-graduate courses at the University.

4. RPL in the development of a trade union occupational health and safety curriculum

This project is located in the design, development and accreditation of a curriculum for the training of trade union shop stewards and educators on matters of health and safety in the workplace. The project is based at the Industrial Health Resource Group (IHRG), located in the Centre for Occupational and Environmental Health in the School of Public Health and Family Medicine at UCT.

IHRG has been involved over the last two years with a number of trade unions in developing a curriculum for the programme entitled “Working and Learning for Health and Safety”. The course is based on the IHRG premise that learning and development needs to take place through engagement (dialogue) between the experiences, needs and knowledge of workers in the workplace on one hand, and the accumulated and codified scientific knowledge of the academy on the other. The organisation is now seeking to align the course with SAQA registered unit standards for occupational health and safety.

This project explores the pedagogical implications of this approach for the further design and development of the curriculum concerned, inclusive of the RPL assessment processes, methods and tools required by learners to participate in the programme (individually and collectively) in the first instance. It also looks at the implications of meeting the accreditation standards of the QCTO, and acceptance within the UCT system.
5. Integration of RPL into the Diploma Programmes of the Workers' College

This case study is located at the Workers College in KwaZulu-Natal and specifically in the College's Diploma programmes for 'activists' from trade union and community organisations. The College has an articulation agreement with the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) whereby participants successful in particular College programmes have access to undergraduate study in the Social Sciences at UKZN.

The College has a long-standing interest in RPL as a basis for enhancing the epistemological relevance of their programmes for the knowledge and skills priorities of the social movements they serve. Its interest in this project is to explore ways of enhancing the integration of RPL-related processes and practices into the Diploma programme from three perspectives.

Firstly, from the perspective of participants in the programmes, the research seeks to build participant confidence and ability to draw on prior experiential learning as a valued resource for new learning and for dialogue with peers and course facilitators. Secondly, from the perspective of the curriculum, the study seeks to recognise the epistemological value of knowledge sources other than those found in formal education and training institutions, and to engage with these forms of knowledge as part of the programme. Thirdly, from the perspective of the institution, the project aims to facilitate associated policy and staff capacity development towards provision of quality RPL-enhanced programmes and services that meet the requirements of participants, their organisations, and UKZN.

This participatory research project involves critical evaluation of existing RPL practices within the Diploma programme and the organisational context within which it is located. Use of Adult Learner Friendly Institute (ALFI) principles developed in North America will be customised and used for evaluation of the institutional component of this study.

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Abstract
Embracing non-formal learners in Economic and Management Environment

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Many adults do not have opportunities to improve themselves professionally because they cannot access Higher Education. As part of the solution to this problem, the University of South Africa (UNISA) pioneered the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Pre-access Assessment for University admission in 2004. Studies evaluating performance of these pre-access learners have not been conducted to date. The current study addresses this gap.

This study is a comparison of the performance of pre-access (non-traditional) students and students satisfying the standard university admission criteria (traditional students). The comparison is done for both the pre-access and traditional students who registered for the module: Introduction to the Economic and Management Environment (INM1013) at UNISA. Preliminary findings from the comparative analysis suggest that the non traditional students are at par or in some cases outperform their traditional counterparts.

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Abstract
Self-efficacy and the Recognition of Prior Learning

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“In every country, experience shows that some people find personally transforming the experience of trying to articulate for themselves what they have actually learned although they did not know they had learned it. Confidence can be boosted. Aspirations can expand. Motivation for learning is often strengthened. And as the sense of self is strengthened, so the world can become a better place. Often this is referred to as the empowerment of people.”

Evans, cited in Volbrecht et al 2005:19

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), referred to in the United Kingdom as APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning), is a mechanism grounded in the educational transformational policies of the African National Congress (ANC) to redress the historical legacy of apartheid, and is a relatively new (and often contested) concept in South Africa.

When one looks at the emergence of RPL in South Africa (and world-wide) it is important to also recognize the context in which it evolved. Michelson refers to the “differing historical moments” (Michelson 2006:142) at which RPL emerged in different countries. She posits that in Britain RPL is based in the emergence of the country as a multi-cultural society and operates in tandem with the changing class base of Higher Education. She sees it in South Africa as a mechanism to overcome the huge wage and education gaps created by apartheid (Michelson 2006) and in New Zealand the focus was on backlogs in aboriginal education (Michelson 2006). The focus in all of the above cases of RPL was clearly to deal with a societal situation, in which people required some form of fast-tracking or alternately, to give people who would otherwise not have access to institutions of learning the opportunity to study and attain qualifications.

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University’s (NMMU) RPL–access into the Bachelor of Education (B. Ed) for in-service teachers is one example of addressing the educational gaps in South Africa. This paper presents the findings of research into the effect of a module which forms part of a B. Ed (upgrade) programme offered at the NMMU to in–service teachers. The module operates within the framework of the processes and principles of RPL, and focuses on the students’ (in–service teachers’) self–efficacy and their skills in terms of the planning, development and execution of work schedules and lesson plans.

The methodology included the gathering for statistical analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data through the administering of pre– and post–self–efficacy questionnaires. The self–efficacy instrument that was employed in this study is based on that designed by Riggs and Enoch (1990), which was originally designed to measure the self–efficacy of science educators. I also focused on the biographical background of the students, assessed the portfolios of evidence produced by the students during the course of their studies, and obtained feedback from focus–group interviews conducted with a small sample of other RPL students.
The results indicate a statistically significant improvement in the participating students' self-efficacy and also draws attention to the negative impact of social context in previously disadvantaged South African schools. The significance of the research lies not only in the interrogation of an innovative approach to dealing with RPL issues in an academic programme, and its possible influence on teacher self-efficacy, but also in its contribution to the academic debate about the RPL currently taking place both locally and internationally.

References


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Abstract

Experiences and lessons from the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in accessing Higher Education: the case of the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) at the University of Limpopo

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University of Limpopo

The purpose of this paper is to share experiences and lessons learnt from the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a tool to open access to Higher Education (HE) for previously disadvantaged groups at the University of Limpopo. The paper draws on understanding of curriculum as contextualized social practice, on the theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) as advocated by Lave and Wenger (1995), and legitimisation of knowledge in the work of Bernstein (1977).

The study uses a qualitative approach, a case study design. Participants were drawn via a purposive strategy from the School of Education at the University of Limpopo. Some 41 in-service teachers enrolled as students in two programmes namely, the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI), of which 21 RTI students and 20 NPDE students were selected. Two lecturers who were coordinators of RPL, and the two coordinators of the programme were included in the sample. Data was collected through individual and focus group interviews, and analysis of documents (RPL instruments). The findings show that the RPL process, though fraught with challenges, was an efficient tool to open access to Higher Education.

References


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Section 2: Recognition of Prior Learning for recognition/ upgrading/ en-skilling
Abstract
Recognition of Prior Learning intervention within the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services sector (merSETA)

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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) workshops were conducted to train and orient workplace champions to carry out the roles of RPL assessors or RPL advisors (also known as evidence collectors) in support of the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services SETA (merSETA) Chamber\(^1\) (equal number of members representing employees and employers) RPL initiatives, and thus building capacity within the workplace to carry out RPL. These workshops formed phase one of the RPL initiative, other phases are soon to follow.

Workshop delegates consisted of a mixture of experienced and inexperienced assessors, and non-assessors who were subject matter experts in their respective fields. A specialised approach was required to reach RPL candidates within the industry. As a result, the merSETA had devised an RPL working group relationship between the following parties:

- RPL advisor (evidence collector) and the assessor;
- RPL candidate;
- employer;
- moderator;
- accredited provider; and
- merSETA ETQA.

In many cases where the workplace has an in-house assessor, who is also a subject matter expert in the field in which RPL will be conducted, all assessment and advising roles will be fulfilled by the assessor. In other cases RPL has been conducted in small businesses that do not have access to an in-house technical assessor. In cases such as this, technical subject matter experts (referred to as the RPL advisor or evidence collector) were used to offer candidates advice about work whilst they were at the workplace. The subject matter experts served a coaching and supporting role.

The RPL candidate applied to undergo an assessment of his/her skills in the respective unit standard/trade which he/she had mastered. The candidate was thoroughly introduced to the RPL process and its requirements.

The employer is a member of one of the merSETA chambers. The RPL candidate is in the employ of the respective employer. The employer supports the candidate in all RPL activities.

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1 A Chamber is a voluntary membership private sector employer organisation. The Chamber exists as the Principal advocate of major policy positions endorsed by the mining employers and represents these to various organs of South African national and provincial governments and to other relevant policy-making and opinion-forming entities, both within South Africa and abroad. The Chamber also works closely with the various employee organisations in formulating these positions where appropriate. Chambers in sectors such as Metal, Motor, Plastics, New tyre, Auto have been established.
The merSETA registered moderator confirms or overturns the assessment decisions made by the assessor. The moderator plays a quality assurance role in terms of the process, evidence verification as well as final assessment decisions. In many instances the moderator is also employed by the accredited training provider.

The role of the training provider was to assist parties with assessment and related activities, such as candidate screening.

The role of merSETA ETQA was:

- quality assurance (external moderation);
- project management;
- stakeholder liaison;
- trade test assistance (application and funding); and
- funding, support, certification and registration.

The findings and lessons learnt were:

- SETA RPL capacity building is needed before RPL processes are attempted; SETA involvement is crucial for the success of the RPL intervention;
- involvement of SETA regional offices is crucial in all roll-outs of projects in the respective regions;
- providers should register as ‘RPL centres’ with the merSETA which will ensure that both ETQA and provider are in regular RPL communication;
- clearly defined pre-requisites for assessors and RPL advisors must be compiled respectively. Assessor and moderator training is suggested for labour representatives;
- special attention must be taken to ensure that RPL candidates are experienced and eligible for RPL before embarking on the process; candidate language and resource needs must be identified and addressed;
- evidence collectors (non-assessors) and registered assessors should attend separate RPL sessions;
- RPL training sessions (for non-assessors) should be conducted over at least a three day period;
- the following RPL processes should be ensured by providing forms of support: provider support, workshops to share latest RPL trends and good practice, involvement of providers, support regarding assessment tools, and instruments;
- advisors/evidence collectors and assessors should follow a clearly outlined RPL process to ensure that guidance is consistent and reliable throughout the industry; and
- follow-up sessions should be held to ensure that RPL is implemented appropriately.

The following parties worked together which contributed to the success of the workshops:

- RPL advisors (evidence collectors) and the assessors;
- RPL candidates;
- employers;
- moderators;
- accredited providers;
- merSETA ETQA;
• Intertrain Consulting; and
• Sparrow Consulting.

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Abstract
SAPPI RPL intervention: RPL in practice

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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) workshops were held at the following South African Paper and Pulp Industry (SAPPI) mills:

- Sappi Enstra (Gauteng);
- Sappi Ngodwana (Nelspruit);
- Sappi Cape Kraft (Western Cape);
- Sappi Adamas (Port Elizabeth);
- Sappi Stanger (KwaZulu-Natal); and
- Sappi Tugela (KwaZulu-Natal).

The main aim of these workshops was to introduce assessors to the RPL process ultimately to enable them to support their candidates through the processes and procedures of RPL. At the same time new Pulp and Paper qualifications were registered. As part of the project, participating assessors were registered for new unit standards/qualifications before embarking on the RPL process.

In certain instances talks were held with management, prior to the RPL initiative, to explain the RPL process and its impact on the workplace. During Day One of the initiative, assessors were introduced to the same aspects as discussed during the management meetings. Assessors were issued with comprehensive portfolio templates as well as assessment tools and instruments. Sparrow Consulting (a company of experienced technical education and training consultants) also developed the learning materials for Pulp and Paper Levels 1 to 4 for the industry. This availability of well designed materials and tools made the RPL process run smoothly. Documents were issued so that assessors could prepare RPL candidates for the assessment process. Practical and theoretical assessment took place during Day Two.

A few weeks were allowed between Day One and Day Two of the intervention so that both candidates as well as assessors could be properly prepared for the practical assessment. The supervised, on–site theory component of the RPL was conducted by the mills’ assessors before the second day of the project. Practical RPL assessment and internal moderation were conducted on Day Two of the initiative. Assessors submitted their candidates’ portfolios before conducting the practical on–site assessment. A Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) assessment was conducted which served as a desktop evaluation to ensure that sufficient evidence existed in order to merit a practical RPL assessment. On–site practical assessments were carried out by workplace assessors and the process was moderated by a Forest Industries Education and Training Authority (FIETA) registered moderator. Candidates were put at ease and understood the process of RPL and what was expected from them.

Feedback was given regarding the outcome of their portfolio as well as their practical assessments. Where gaps were identified in terms of evidence these were addressed and discussed with both the assessor and the
candidate. Further opportunities were given for candidates to close gaps if any gaps existed. Documentation was completed to record all RPL assessment findings.

External moderation was conducted. All parties involved in the SAPPI RPL intervention were requested to be available for verification purposes. Parties included all RPL candidates, assessors, internal and external moderators and advisors. Interviews and documentary reviews of RPL assessment tools and instruments were used as moderation methods. Where no gaps were identified and the candidate was declared competent by both the assessor and the moderator the portfolios were collected for verification by the FIETA. Candidates were registered for unit standards and/or qualifications.

Assessors pre-selected eligible candidates who were willing to undergo an RPL process. Five to six candidates were taken through the RPL process per mill. The idea was for the mill to experience RPL, learn from experience and then to implement it on a larger scale.

Findings and lessons learnt were:

- unions must be involved and consulted before RPL can be implemented in the workplace; this will help to clear misconceptions and benefits associated with RPL processes;
- actual RPL benefits and processes must be openly communicated to all relevant parties;
- complex assessment terminology should be avoided and simplified, jargon hinders the RPL process when speaking to people who are not familiar with Education and Training terminology;
- many misconceptions regarding RPL exist such as candidates believing they will receive remuneration after they have been found competent as a result of the RPL process. Some believe that they will be automatically promoted while others fear that they may be exposed and be put out of a job as a result of the assessment. These misconceptions need to be addressed through dialogue before the process;
- RPL should always be voluntary;
- it is important to establish and maintain contact with an ETQA/quality assurance representative so that follow-up activities/queries such as registration can be confirmed;
- clarify and document roles before the project commences;
- RPL awareness sessions should be run regularly;
- within a production environment it is quite difficult to attempt RPL on an entire qualification as it may take a long time, it may be wise to first do sections of unit standards which will keep candidates motivated;
- where companies are using a licensing system (to enable someone to operate a certain machine) they should consider combining their licensing system with that of RPL (unit standards), as this will eliminate the duplication of assessment;
- production and line management must work together on a central assessment system. Everyone involved must take ownership of RPL. RPL does not only lie with the training department but must be central to all departments in order to be implemented successfully;
- RPL initiatives can be successful if management is involved and committed to the RPL process and its continued implementation;
- always keep copies of submitted materials;
• ask for acknowledgement of receipt for all submitted documents from consultants and ETQA/quality assurance representatives; and
• keep central records of assessments and other submitted documents.

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Abstract
SASOL, Sparrow and CHIETA RPL intervention: a cascade model

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This Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) project first started as a project between Sparrow Consulting (a company of experienced technical education and training consultants) and SASOL (a petro–chemical manufacturer). It was initiated because significant changes were made to the Chemical Operations qualifications at NQF Levels 1 to 4. Due to these changes, all assessors and moderators within the company had to undergo upgrades/confirmation of their assessor and/or moderator status. Assessors could not be automatically re–registered to assess the new qualifications due to the fact that they contained a number of new unit standards.

The new qualifications were developed to stay current in terms of industry needs and processes. The first group of upgraded assessors and moderators came from Sasol, who then in turn upgraded the next groups of assessors and moderators. Sasol assessors and moderators were trained in RPL during a one day interactive workshop (training was conducted by Sparrow Consulting). A matrix (a reference document listing possible sources of evidence) was developed and used as a guideline for possible sources of evidence which could be used as evidence against the respective unit standards.

Soon after phase one of the project, the Chemical Industries Education and Training Authority (CHIETA) Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) body decided to embark on a national RPL project with the goal of building capacity within the chemical industry so that assessors and moderators could, in turn, assess candidates against the new qualifications.

The CHIETA ETQA agreed to assist already accredited providers by facilitating a number of RPL workshops. The idea was to capacitate one assessor per provider. Thereafter the assessor could assist her/his colleagues to undergo the same process so that they too could be registered as assessors for the new qualification(s).

Prospective assessors and moderators were contacted by the CHIETA and received comprehensive RPL toolkits which guided them on the following:

- An RPL booklet which explained the RPL process, the appeals process, evidence collection, verification of evidence as well as how the outcomes would be communicated and verified.
- Detailed documentation on a step–by–step process of portfolio of evidence compilation.
- A sample of a completed portfolio.
- Assessment checklist for a Portfolio of Evidence (PoE).
- RPL workshop dates and procedures.

Assessors and moderators were requested to compile and submit their Portfolios of Evidence at least 10 days before the respective workshop date. This gave the assessment team sufficient time to assess, and if applicable, send back the portfolios with comments which could also be addressed either before, or on the day of the RPL workshop.
Each session was scheduled over a three day period which consisted of pre-assessment activities, Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) compilation, assessment activities and review activities. The PoE was assessed for a second time to see if gaps have been closed. A specially constituted assessment team of re-registered assessors worked with the CHIETA to assess and declare candidates competent in individual unit standards or the qualification(s) which they wanted to be registered for.

The matrix was used as an assessment instrument to guide assessors and candidates. The matrix also allowed for additional pieces of evidence to be added to the list of acceptable evidence. Where candidates did not have sufficient evidence to prove their expertise in a respective unit standard(s) they had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge by means of writing an integrated assessment test.

All assessments were conducted during the workshop under the supervision of one of the RPL project team members and assessed by a registered assessor. These assessments were then used as evidence and added to the PoE. Assessment results were made available at the end of the workshop.

Once PoE assessments had been conducted, feedback was given and where gaps were identified these were communicated to the candidate. By the end of the workshop candidates had a clear picture of the unit standards in which they were to be declared competent.

After the moderation process documentation was submitted to the CHIETA's certification department. Successful candidates were either issued with a statement of results or a qualification. The RPL assessment team met after every session and shared comments about the project and how practices could be improved.

The findings and lessons learnt are:

- RPL was designed as a one-stop-shop where all activities were cleverly integrated without a time lag;
- the matrix (evidence reference document) provided strong direction in terms of evidence collection;
- information and guidelines must be sent to candidates well in advance to allow them to respond and to prepare for the initiative;
- copies of all documents must be kept by the assessor as well as the ETQA;
- records must be kept of all the assessment outcomes;
- a group of experts were involved and openly shared ideas and good practices; and
- positive synergy existed between the ETQA and industry.

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Abstract
Some barriers to the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and some suggestions

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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) can be described as the process of giving someone recognition for what they know and understand and/or can do in a particular field of expertise. The system acknowledges that people learn many things outside the formal education and training systems. This form of recognition, or assessment, does not require the candidate to be in possession of a formal qualification but rather aims to accredit, or recognise, the candidate for informal learning which he or she has acquired through life experience. RPL further aims to provide access to a certain level of expertise within a specific field. RPL is the key that allows successful candidates to seek further education, employment and opportunities.

As with any form of assessment a number of visible and invisible barriers exists within the ever-evolving educational system. One of these barriers is, undoubtedly, the use of jargon in RPL. The current education and training world is weighed down with jargon. Picture an RPL candidate who has been working as an automotive mechanic for the past 15 years. How would they react to the RPL process if words such as RPL, National Qualifications Framework (NQF), summative assessment, credits, assessor, competent, not yet competent and so on are used without a clear explanation? An assessor who embarks on the RPL process must be someone who understands the ‘world of the candidate as well as the world of assessment’ so that these terms can be broken down in a way that relates to their field of work and frame of mind.

We know that if a learner is enrolled in a training course, learning materials and assessment tools are often designed in a fragmented manner to allow for formative, ‘digestion’ of the subject matter. This brings us to another possible RPL barrier – assessment tools and instruments. Often, due to the way in which materials have been designed, it may be difficult to use the same tools for an RPL candidate who did not attend the training course. Think back to the last non-RPL assessment you have written or undertaken... would this assessment be suitable for RPL purposes? It is clear that tools will need to be carefully and specifically designed to allow RPL candidates to display their overall competence in the field or subject in which they wish to gain recognition.

The following suggestions could be considered based on experience with RPL practices:

- Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) should get involved in RPL and should actively drive RPL forward as directed by the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS). Inconsistency of levels, qualifications and standards have hindered candidates from gaining access to institutions of learning/workplaces due to the difficulty of aligning the course content or the level of one course with another. A great degree of subjectivity is involved in evaluating/aligning qualifications. Assessors, lecturers, facilitators are not always confident and comfortable in the field of RPL. As a solution, RPL centres could be set-up and accredited with the relevant ETQA/quality assurance body to fulfill this role. There
is a need for the ETQA or quality assurance bodies to evaluate the assessment tools and instruments to ensure that all outcomes are assessed in valid ways.

- The current assessor unit standard only briefly touches on the subject of RPL, yet the responsibility with which the RPL assessors are tasked is often more complex in practice. The assessor unit standard should be expanded to allow more in-depth RPL training or assessors should attend additional RPL training which focuses specifically on the practice of RPL.

- In cases where candidates are applying for occupation based unit standard(s) within the workplace it is strongly suggested that such unit standards be aligned and grouped according to workplace specific job descriptions. This will ensure that if the candidate is declared competent they can function fully in a job that builds and affirms their confidence.

- Management at all levels needs to be informed and to some extent involved in promoting and driving RPL, ensuring that it obtains its rightful place in the workplace/institution of learning.

- Administrators are often expected to administer the RPL process without being in possession of the necessary knowledge regarding RPL and its implementation. Administrators should also be trained or briefed on ‘the world of assessment’ for them to be able to add value to the recognition system.

These suggestions are made on the basis of experience in the merSETA; SAPPI; SASOL-Sparrow–CHIETA projects covered in the previous three abstracts, and other initiatives.

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Summary
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) requirements within Standard Bank’s Personal and Business Bank environment

Rory Brown, Standard Bank

The primary aim of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within a Standard Bank Learning and Development (L&D) context is to recognise years of experience which have led to observable and demonstrable competence on the job. The level of competence is directly linked to an individual’s ability to perform satisfactorily in an assigned role. RPL assessment is therefore linked to the following:

- general competency assessments against identified competencies contained within each job profile;
- specific knowledge/theory assessments as they form part of a learning item;
- specific practical/application assessments as they form part of a learning item;
- specific experience assessments as they form part of a learning item;
- formal qualifications issued via the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) process; and
- formal qualifications issued via the Council of Higher Education (CHE).

The last two points – formal qualifications issued via the QCTO and CHE – refer to the educational requirements for identified roles within Standard Bank’s Personal and Business Bank (PBB). These educational requirements fall across Levels 4 – 9 of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF); certain roles within the organisation require specific qualifications as minimum entry requirements. RPL is a tool that can be utilised to address specific qualification inadequacies (individuals not having the required qualifications) especially in situations where potential internal candidates vie for roles.

An example of this requirement features in the updated Financial Advisory of Intermediary Services (FAIS) Act. Housed within this legislation is the requirement for all financial institutions to ensure that all FAIS representatives hold a qualification recognised by the Financial Services Board (FSB). The process of providing the relevant qualification to unqualified or under-qualified incumbents within particular positions would be expedited if RPL was a valid and implementable option. The Standard Banks’ Personal and Business Bank (PBB) has approximately 5 000 representatives within the organisation.

Against this background and need for training, training is viewed as a strategic imperative by the Executive of the Bank. It is the tool used to build core competencies aimed at improving business competitiveness through the performance of individual staff members. Assessment is a key component of all L&D’s training interventions.

To incorporate an RPL approach as part of the training intervention has two primary benefits. Firstly, it provides an opportunity for staff members to pre-test themselves against the content of a course. Should they complete pre-assessment successfully then they are not required to complete the associated training. This result can lead to cost and time savings. Secondly, individuals have an opportunity to utilise their experience and gain recognition in the form of a formal occupational qualification certified by the QCTO.
All interventions include an assessment to measure competence against set learning outcomes. RPL assessment guides and detailed instructions regarding portfolios of evidence (PoE’s) are developed in depth. These documents are shared with learners prior to undertaking the assessments. For the purposes of the RPL process only one attempt or submission of the RPL assessment is allowed and marked. Should the result be “not yet competent” the learner will need to attend the course and complete all relevant assessments for the learning programme requirements.

The following RPL assessment methods are acceptable approaches within the PBB space:

- Paper–based assessments such as written tests conducted in the classroom; assignments in the classroom and/or in the workplace; line manager/supervisor observation check–lists.
- On–line assessments which include: online tests/examinations; interactive simulations; and line manager/supervisor observation check–lists.

Should the RPL process lead to a formal qualification that is to be issued by a university or other tertiary institution, then the detailed RPL process provided by the relevant institution will be applied.

In the workplace, line managers/team leaders/supervisors are constantly assessing the performance of their staff against job requirements. A natural extension of this assessment is to consider the competence of the staff member with regard to knowledge and skills required to perform a specific job/function. As part of the RPL and assessment process, L&D will develop and provide line managers with the following:

- training to assess competence in the workplace correctly and identify competency gaps;
- training to coach staff to become competent, to fill gaps regarding the applied knowledge and skills required;
- guidelines with regard to creating applied learning environment for staff in the workplace; and
- tools to perform on the job competency assessments. These tools will be directly linked to the relevant training programmes that staff have attended to address competency gaps.

Support to the learner is provided in terms of pre– and post course attendance discussions and guidelines, and pre– and post–workplace assessment discussion and guidelines. All workplace RPL activities and assessments involve in part the collection of evidence (Portfolio of Evidence) that can prove applied competence. This evidence needs to be valid, authentic, reliable, current and sufficient.

Internally at PBB, the process for designing and developing RPL assessment tools and instruments run concurrently with the design and development of the learning materials. It is also directly linked to the development of the summative assessment instruments and tools. Invariably the same assessment approach will be used for pre–assessment and post–assessment as part of the RPL process. Each course that forms part of a curriculum will contain pre–assessment (RPL) and post–assessment. These two components need to be indicated and outlined in the relevant learning strategies (assessment strategies). The same approach and assessment tools can be used for the RPL process (pre–assessment) and in post–assessment.

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Abstract
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for credit – unlocking the gate to qualifications by changing the paths followed

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Simply put, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) challenges ideas around sites of learning.

Through the process known as RPL an individual can potentially have their workplace and personal–life learning assessed and ‘matched’ to the requirements of a qualification. If the assessor judges that the workplace/personal–life learning matches the requirements of the qualification then the registered assessor and accredited provider may award the individual the full or partial qualification.

This explanation seems so simple. It contains so much hope for individuals because, on the face of it, the promise of RPL is so compelling. What individuals understand is straightforward - they read: “I can get a qualification using RPL and all I have to do is tell some assessor about my working experience.” Many potential RPL candidates see RPL as a simple swop a box of workplace memorabilia and artefacts for a qualification. They believe that if they are doing a good job and are functioning well in the workplace then they must be worthy of the qualification. They justify these ideas by thinking: “Graduates come and go and they can’t do my job – yet they have a degree. I have been working for 15 years – I must be at least able to get a degree.”

But in reality, this RPL-for-credit is far from simple. Key constraints include that:

- RPL-for-credit is always done against a specific qualification – so the first step is always to choose the qualification mostly likely to match the experience – a ‘best-fit’ qualification. This qualification is rarely a perfect match – qualifications tend to be broad while work experience can be narrow – this challenges the RPL candidate as he or she now needs to come up with evidence that he or she does not have. Candidates often need to demonstrate knowledge and skill in subject areas not covered at work;
- candidates’ workplace knowledge has been gained informally. It is not codified in the language of the qualification. Workplace experience is also acquired collectively, while the RPL process is individualistic. This difference often causes RPL candidates to feel that they do not actually have the knowledge to match the requirements of the qualifications concerned. It can lead them to give up: it is de-motivating and counter–productive.

Thus, in reality RPL-for-credit is not a simple process. RPL should ideally be helping performing employees to earn full or partial qualifications – simply because they are performing effectively as employees. Yet, because of the constraints described above, RPL more frequently helps those who:

- can read and ‘translate’ the academic wording and constructs of the qualification they want to acquire (i.e. those who are already privileged and literate);
- know where to find evidence to show an assessor (i.e. those who are already privileged and literate, who
have access to research facilities like the internet and who have access to people within the company who have the power to assist them to access documents and evidence of competence;
• can compile a portfolio of evidence (i.e. those who are already privileged and literate who can afford to photocopy evidence, purchase a file and file dividers and who know how to present an impressive package to the assessor);
• can spend time alone, working in a quiet place for long periods (i.e. those who are already privileged with access to resources like time, a desk, a computer, and other such items needed);
• can individualise and make their experiences ‘abstract’ – can separate their learning from the collective learning experience of the workplace and reflect upon that learning (this is easier in some positions than in others – usually those higher up, with more autonomy and more power in the organisation);
• are confident enough to take on the system of RPL and its assessors – and believe that they are able to get the qualification because they are generally used to being successful; and
• who have good support networks (both at home and at the office) – who know where to find information and resources and who have role models in their spheres of influence to counsel and advise them.

In other words, RPL–for–credit holds a promise for the majority of our workers in South Africa, but the reality of its implementation is that it favours the already privileged.

The current research project looks at a small group of black, disadvantaged, low-level workers who embarked upon an RPL activity to be awarded the National GET Certificate in Business Practice at NQF Level 1. All were selected by their employers because they were performing at excellent levels and their employers wanted to help them to get formal qualifications so that they could advance in the companies within which they already worked.

The research explores the many challenges these performing employees experienced in the RPL–for–credit process and how these problems were overcome during RPL delivery to a point where all the RPL candidates were awarded full qualifications.

Broadly, the aim of the research is to develop an RPL–for–credit model that will assist performing employees (regardless of privilege) to earn qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework.

References


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Abstract

Current perceptions and challenges of Recognition of Prior Learning learnerships in a blue collar flexible staffing environment

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With the advent of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) as well as the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), various new assessment methodologies and options have become available. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has emerged as a contentious assessment method as it is viewed as being a short cut to recognition, and RPL's efficacy or ability to help meet skills targets has yet to be interrogated. Historically in South Africa, RPL has been used as an access route to Higher Education and not at the lower end of the NQF at Levels 1 and 2.

The Production Management Institute of South Africa has piloted an RPL model in the blue collar environment, and more specifically in the flexible staffing solution or labour broking arenas using ideas in Judy Harris' (2000) book RPL: Power Pedagogy and Possibility as a point of departure. Having implemented an RPL process the opportunity presents itself to analyse critically the execution of the process and share the lessons learnt as well as successes achieved through formal research.

The research questions that guide the study designed for this purpose are: What are the perceptions of RPL within a selected pool of academics and how can these be transferred into a blue collar environment? What lessons can be shared about implementing a national project in a temporary employment sector specifically?

The research will be undertaken using both qualitative as well as quantitative methods to produce both theoretical interrogation as well as practical outcomes that are defined and measurable.

Questionnaires and interviews will be used to gather information. This data will be gathered based on geographical regions, as well as industries affected. Findings will potentially help to identify patterns and anomalies in the processes used. This data will then be analysed and a series of papers developed as appropriate.

The research hopes to make a contribution towards the debates that industry and academia are having on RPL. Furthermore, it will provide a practical analysis of a blue collar learning intervention in which skills and knowledge are conventionally passed on from workplace learning. The research potentially provides role players in the Education and Training field, industry, as well as government an important understanding of whether RPL is a feasible tool for skills development in South Africa and what some organisations in the temporary employment sector offer the sector in terms of skills development.

References


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Abstract
The Butterfly Process: delivering Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) that makes a difference

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Project Butterfly was a research and development pilot project offering working media persons in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the opportunity to take credit for what they know and can do, for skills gained through their day-to-day work in various forms of the media – print, radio and television. It established a certificate (Certificate for the Multi-media Practitioner), assessment guidelines, a process for assessment, and accreditation (recognition) procedures for individuals' skills against various unit standards. It was a joint African-American programme involving the Polytechnic of Namibia and Elizabethtown College (United States of America).

The pilot was part of the larger Operation Butterfly project within the Media in Africa Education Programme – in turn part of the current African Lifelong Learning Initiative's (ALL's) Partners in Progress Programme in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This paper covers the various aspects of this SADC project including the process of developing unit standards for accreditation; development of an accreditation system; the seminar workshop held to prepare candidates for the gathering and the development of their portfolios of evidence; and a review of the actual accreditation evaluation by the accreditation board (involving accreditation (recognition) of the individual as a multi-media practitioner). It points to the potential value of the processes utilised, for addressing skills shortages and unemployment. It also shows how the same processes can be used at retirement age to give persons an opportunity of extending their economic lives for their own benefit and that of the countries in which they live.

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Abstract
Understanding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the context of Organised Labour: opportunities and challenges

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COSATU, the largest labour movement in South Africa plays a critical role in the promotion of the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The purpose of this presentation is to critique an understanding of RPL from an organised labour perspective.

The critique argues that very little has been done in the development of plans and structures to ensure that RPL benefits those who need it most, that is, the workers. This critical analysis conceptualises RPL. Secondly, it emphasises the importance of skills development in the country, particularly for the workers, and describes the role that organised labour can play in implementing RPL to up-skill its membership. Thirdly, it notes how RPL has implications for addressing national skills priorities. In the final analysis it looks at the challenges regarding RPL in the South African context.

The analysis concludes by arguing that RPL should be conducted in a more focused way for real development pathways, real employment benefits and to address the demands for skills development in the workplace.

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Abstract

Bell Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pilot project

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The purpose of the Bell Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) project was to identify skills gaps for Bell Equipment Company employees in two assembly and machining areas of the manufacturing process and implement training interventions. This initiative was requested by manufacturing management and implemented by Bell’s Training and Development Centre for those who did not meet the requirements of the NQF Level 2 qualifications: National Certificate: Automotive Components: Manufacturing Assembly (ID 71950); and National Certificate: CNC Production Machining (ID 57878).

The agreed aim of the project was to explore and develop the role that RPL assessments can play in enhancing the foundation for lifelong learning in the workplace at minimum cost to employee and company. The following areas were seen as central to that aim:

- An exploration of the andragogy issues and advantages of deploying RPL assessment processes throughout all manufacturing processes. Bell Equipment has a number of employees who do not have the literacy skills that meet required entry level for learnerships or artisan training, but have the ability, skills and knowledge to produce end-products that meet requirements regarding quality standards and time frames set. It was necessary to understand how they would cope in the workplace. It was found that on the job coaching and mentoring has given those employees with lower levels of literacy enough knowledge and skills to be able to read and communicate workplace instructions. Simple measuring tools were used such as vernier gauges and tape measures, as were interpretations of line build instructions and basic engineering drawings.
- An overview of the strategic, cultural and operational issues affecting the delivery of RPL assessments within the manufacturing environments. It was found that conducting of skills audits were well planned and executed which resulted in minimum disruption to production. Employees were informed that the RPL process was not a performance evaluation and that their jobs were not at risk. Once they understood the benefit of the RPL process they cooperated fully for formative and summative assessments.
- An understanding of how portfolios of evidence (PoE) support effective lifelong learning. It was found that well documented PoE’s have given employees a reference to, and a sense of ownership and responsibility for future development in line with their potential to better themselves. It gives them equal opportunities in the workplace to take on bigger responsibilities and better their income.
- An understanding of how RPL can better support work-based learning especially with regard to the role of employer/employee relations within the training and assessment process. It was found that managers, workplace supervisors and employees have seen that RPL for qualifications can also be the same tool to use when identifying potential employees for further training and promotion, thus improving the scope for equal opportunity and removing the notion of biased appointments.

A skills audit was performed to investigate the level of knowledge and skills of the employees in these positions to see if they meet the full range of competencies of the requirements of the job against the job...
description. Competencies were aligned to the unit standards in the NQF Level 2 qualification for assemblers and machinists. Evidence from observations, interviews, historical data and bio–data profiles was collected to gather sufficient information so as to complete the audit. More specifically, the audit focused on gathering information by completing an observation checklist on 28 candidates on the job, whilst doing the job, to see if the equipment being used was of the required standard and to observe their daily routines, duties, capability of performing tasks required. Working documents such as job cards and non–conformance reports were part of the information gathering on each employee. A questionnaire was completed by each of the employees to gather more personal information such as conditions at home including bread winners and orphans, health, education, previous experience, knowledge of systems needed for the position, and basic ability to perform the functions of the position to meet the required standard and time.

These methodologies were used to understand the environment in which the candidates are working and the level of activity in relevant areas. Being able to observe them on the job gave a clearer understanding of their daily tasks and level of competence of each candidate. A representative from the MerSETA ETQA moderated the RPL process over two days. Day one was allocated to moderation of portfolios of evidence (PoE). Day two involved observation of a variety of live integrative summative assessments in the workplace. Feedback from the moderator, and the employees, showed that the RPL process was a resounding success.

The formative and integrative summative assessment process was recognised as the most important and fundamental aspect of the RPL process. The Project team noted that increasing emphasis was placed on the role of assessments within the RPL and learning process. The project team also understood that the time was ripe for an in–depth evaluation of total workplace competency, addressing concerns about the equity of the training experience, quality assurance and enhancement issues. The project won substantial support from employees, unions and management.

Overall it was found that some of the candidates were competent in all areas but others were found to be lacking in some of the requirements especially Mathematics. However, we also found that the need for Mathematical Literacy in almost all areas was not a problem as most employees knew how to read and interpret tolerances from engineering drawings and apply these readings to measuring equipment such as vernier gauges and micrometers. We also found that some of the candidates after completing a short summative assessment, needed specific brush–up training.

It has been realised that the RPL process is the ideal tool to be used for the basis of accelerating manufacturing skills development, and that the NQF Level 2 qualification was the ideal foundation for long term skills development and career pathing within the engineering/manufacturing environments. The process gives consideration to employees who were previously disadvantaged, and to those have been let down by the poor delivery of education at schools especially in our rural areas.

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Abstract
Can Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) contribute to the government’s new economic development and growth path for South Africa?

Jaap Nel,
Mentornet

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has been identified as one of the strategic areas of focus for version three of the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS III) (RSA 2010). The rationale behind this focus is that there are too many previously disadvantaged people who were denied fair and equal access to formal learning in apartheid times, who are still at a disadvantage because of the standard entry requirements of learning institutions. It is argued that such people who seek to enroll for learning programmes without the standard entry qualifications need to be afforded the opportunity to have skills they have acquired through experience measured against those which they are required to attain.

The speaker will discuss interactively the following salient issues:

- the advantages and disadvantages of RPL for various stakeholders, notably individuals, employers, learning institutions and the communities;
- misconceptions about RPL;
- stumbling blocks in the way of using RPL to achieve the strategic social objectives of inclusion and access; and
- a holistic approach to RPL as a possible way to contribute to the achievement of the NSDS III objectives.

Reference


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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) alignment with conventional qualification and certification programmes

Wessel Pieters

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Project management finds application in a wide range of business and human activities. It can be seen as a lifestyle skill. It involves formulating requirements and objectives and translating them into projects with scope and deliverables. Project management requires competence in specialised methods and techniques, and appropriate behaviour and contextual understanding. This paper describes the normal Project Management Four Level Certification (PM 4-L-C) process to provide contextual understanding for achieving the necessary occupational competences. It elaborates on the methods used to implement an RPL process in graded occupation–competence programmes for both project managers and project support–services persons. It includes defining the roles of interested parties (training services providers, professional bodies, candidates, various authorities and the public).

Project management occupations are defined in four graded levels (Levels A, B, C, D). Progressing through levels involves a certification process based on recognition of knowledge, experience and behavior assessments by independent approved assessors following an objective assessment process. This vertical bottom–up process where the one level builds on the previous level is particularly suitable for career development. Levels of complexity and types of knowledge determine differences between the various programmes, projects, and portfolios.

RPL processes must not compromise the status of the PM 4–L–C qualification and the branding of the associated certificate (which is recognised worldwide). RPL processes are therefore conducted with the same rigour as are standard certification processes. Candidates are assessed on knowledge obtained in the workplace as well as in training institutions, ensuring alignment with current disciplinary definitions of “best practices”. The assessment process is not bottom–up (as it is in the certification process), but is a ‘horizontally entered’ procedure targeted at the competence levels (Levels A, B, C or D) suggested after initial evaluation in an application phase.

Special care is taken to ensure the reciprocity of certification between countries, as well as within the country concerned. Knowledge bases are aligned to associated competence frameworks. Ad hoc and non–aligned training courses have limited value for conventional and RPL certification processes. Validation of certification processes and their governance is required. Adhering to the International Standards Organization (ISO) standards is a pre–requisite for credibility. These principles can be applied to a range of occupations.

The development of organisational roles, key performance areas and performance indicators must be generic and transparent if there is to be a national methodology for the definition of occupations and their associated competences. Coherent occupational definitions need to be at a high level of abstraction to accommodate differences in detail. Objective and credible competence assessments are required for persons that work in the public domain nationally and internationally.
The International Project Management Association (IPMA) has more than 100 000 project managers certified in terms of the IPMA PM 4–L–C certification process. Most of these persons are young professionals who have needed and undergone the RPL processes, training and certification offered by private training providers. The Association for Project Management in South Africa (APMSA) has applied the assessment and certification processes to encourage a new project management–related occupation. This occupation is likely to appeal to individuals with interest in project support services, and little or no project experience. It could also assist shadow workers in project management.

Given the level of need for RPL, it is imperative that Government authorities engage with professional bodies and create the environments for these bodies to support occupational–competence programmes. This combination of state authority and the skills and resources of a variety of sources of provision could lead to a win–win solution in the quest for occupational–competence in South Africa.

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Abstract
Extended Credit Accumulation and Transfer (ECAT): Modular and Credible Coach Development and Coach Accreditation

Matt Shelley,
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The coaching and mentoring profession can benefit substantially from a credible, rigorous and authentic Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) system. What does CAT offer and why does it do so?

Coaching is a responsive client led discipline. A client chooses what action to take to achieve their goals or which capability to focus on to be able to achieve their goals. Growth therefore tends to be more unpredictable than it is in a traditional educational system. Flexible, well sign-posted development offerings are required to achieve such pathways.

Coaching is a very practical discipline – it is about trying new behaviours and developing new habits. Whatever knowledge, skills and awareness are passed on in traditional education and training, we believe the real development of coaches takes place over time and with thoughtful practice. This means that previous experience is a very important aspect for the delivery of good quality coaching. A sound Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approach to assessment and prequalification, quality controlled Continuing Professional Development (CPD), and coaching supervision aids quality and public protection for those who use coaches.

A CAT system that uses consistent units of measurement between traditional qualifications, RPL, CPD and coaching supervision has the potential and flexibility to encompass the special requirements of the coaching discipline and the real world requirements of corporate buyers of coaching.

The Extended Credit Accumulation and Transfer (ECAT) framework sets out what is on offer and what development requirements are supported by each element of the training. This development choice applies to individuals as well as to corporates wishing to educate managers on a part time basis. It provides a scheme to measure individual development, strengths and areas for development – it gives feedback. This approach handles diversity well – it allows a diverse group of trainers, coach mentors and supervisors to meet and interact with a diverse population of individuals wishing to develop specific areas of their own capabilities and specific areas of personal interest and purpose. It covers specialisation and context-appropriate standards of practice.

Corporates have voiced their frustration regarding exclusive coach training – they want to be able to choose comparable modular training that suits their needs rather than being tied into a single approach by a single school. The ECAT framework provides choice. This choice also applies to individuals who are free to choose the modular or conventional approaches. The Sandton Coaching Centre is setting up an ECAT system for the coaching and mentoring industry. Specific training is being developed which will form a pilot for framework criteria. This training is Ethics Training; Introduction to Coaching; Supervision training – for two institutions (Nedbank and University of the Witwatersrand).
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Section 3: Recognition of Prior Learning practices in depth
Abstract
Evaluation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applicants’ knowledge claims towards fourth year study at a university of technology

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The research project presented here is part of a Master of Education (M. Ed) thesis about knowledge claims and how these are being assessed as part of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). The research is a case study on RPL applicants granted access into the Bachelor of Technology (B Tech): Project Management.

The focus of this paper is to investigate the interpretation by academic staff of the knowledge claims made by RPL applicants. The paper sets out to explore what is regarded as sufficient and appropriate knowledge to grant an individual access to fourth year level studies. The research reports on the progress made by the RPL applicants once they are students and the interpretation of academics on their participation in the course.

The conceptual framework used for this research has two components: one based on the knowledge claims made as part of the RPL application before entering Higher Education, the other on the knowledge claims made as part of the RPL student’s studies after entry into Higher Education. These two components have guided the study throughout the theoretical analysis, the analysis of the data as well as the interpretation of the findings.

Within this framework various RPL approaches are discussed such as the Credit Exchange model, the Learning and Development model and the Retrospective and Prospective action (Shalem and Steinberg 2006) as well as discipline-specific RPL (Breier 2005). The paper reflects on the use of these approaches at CPUT. Not all of these theories are used and recommendations are made to the advantages if CPUT were to use them.

Theories about the development of knowledge outside and inside the academia (Eraut 2004 and Bernstein 1999 respectively) are discussed and their relevance for this study pointed out. The paper analyses the use of workplace knowledge during the RPL assessment as part of the knowledge claims before entry into Higher Education. It deals with the use and subsequent value of workplace knowledge in the classroom and the curriculum as part of the knowledge claims after entry in Higher Education.

Methodology used is qualitative due to the interpretive nature of the study. A case study approach is used because it provides the researcher with space to do in–depth investigation of the knowledge claims being made.

The participants in the study are the three parties involved: the academics, the RPL applicants and the RPL lecturers at CPUT. Three academics involved in the assessment of RPL applications and who also lecture on the programme, participated in the research. Six students who were successfully RPL-ed into the B Tech Project Management programme without having the required three years of undergraduate study also participated.
Their progress was monitored until successful completion of their studies. The researcher involved is the RPL lecturer at CPUT, who due to the nature of her work assists both the students and the academics in the RPL process.

The findings reflect firstly on the assessment activities during the RPL assessment process which consists of a test and a panel interview. The effectiveness of the assessment process and the academic knowledge required, are discussed. It is found that the academics are focused more on the ability to study at fourth year level than on the theoretical knowledge of the candidates. Secondly, the findings deal with the knowledge of the RPL applicants once the person is a student and how that affects not only the classroom, but also the curriculum. It is found that the RPL student makes a considerable contribution to the classroom, but that the curriculum is unaffected by the RPL process.

In conclusion the findings are discussed from an RPL perspective and conclusions are drawn regarding the approach used by CPUT. Recommendations are made for the improvement of the RPL practice at the university.

References


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Abstract
Knowledge typologies and their impact on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes and articulation: findings from the SANTED research at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University

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One of the goals of the South Africa Norway Tertiary Education Development (SANTED) Project at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) relates to curriculum design, access, success, mobility and progression (also referred to as ‘articulation’). Work on ten case studies was used to arrive at some conclusions regarding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

The project activities have been conducted by three task teams – referred to as Thematic Task Teams – that have worked on different focus areas of the project, while a separate part of the project has conducted a set of ten case studies in specific academic disciplines where former university- and technikon-type qualifications have been brought together. This paper will focus on the case study research that was conducted at the NMMU, and specifically on the focus area of Thematic Task Team 2, relating to curriculum design, mobility and progression (also referred to as ‘articulation’).

The research was conducted in two distinct stages. The first stage focussed on developing preliminary proposals on consolidated qualification structures in the ten case studies identified.

During the second stage, NMMU cooperated with the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at UCT to develop a more robust analytical model that would provide for clearer understanding of the knowledge properties of the curricula in a selected number of the case studies. The purpose of the model is to provide a framework for the analysis of specific programmes in terms of their overall coherence along a spectrum between contextual and conceptual knowledge, based on analysis of the knowledge properties of their curricular components. The Stage 2 process focused specifically on the analysis of the knowledge properties of curricula.

By discussing the case study work in two distinct stages, we have been able to demonstrate how assumptions that informed the Stage 1 work and preliminary conclusions that were reached during that stage were reviewed and refined during the second stage.

The findings in Stage 1 (the ten case studies) raised questions and issues regarding knowledge and the curriculum as well as articulation, and in some cases even suggested possible solutions. Three of these findings related to progression and articulation were:

- uncertainty regarding articulation between a diploma and a Bachelor’s degree;
- should articulation pathways be planned, then these should occur early in the programme; and
- different knowledges in the diploma and the Bachelor’s degree could make articulation between the two problematic.
The above-mentioned findings from the Stage 1 research highlighted a number of important issues regarding knowledge and the curriculum as well as articulation, and some of these were further explored in Stage 2 when we were afforded the opportunity to return to them with a more robust conceptual framework for differentiation of knowledge and cognitive complexity.

This paper explains how the conceptual framework developed is used to analyse knowledge types and cognitive complexity in the various programme modules, and how these findings can assist with making responsible decisions pertaining to progression and RPL.

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Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as social entrepreneurial practice

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A social entrepreneur is defined as one who aims for value in the form of large-scale activities or practices of transformational benefit that accrue either to a significant segment of society or to society at large (Martin and Osberg 2007). This inquiry will examine the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship and contextualise Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a practice within the language and phenomenon of social entrepreneurship. In doing so the inquiry will refer to research and current discourse about RPL, what RPL is and how it happens.

The inquiry will demonstrate that the social entrepreneurial value and the ‘practice’ of RPL is not yet fully developed or recognised due to various barriers; not least of which include resistance to move beyond the traditional and ‘trusted’ forms of qualification assessment and achievement; and general mistrust and suspicion of the integrity of the RPL assessment process and quality assurance thereof.

This inquiry uses action learning and research and case study methodologies, presented through five case studies of interlinked RPL projects over a period of seven years in the insurance industry.

A new focus is premised through this study that RPL has a social entrepreneurial role, in contexts that favour all learners who could potentially benefit socially, economically and intellectually. The entrepreneurial element of RPL capitalises on using all necessary resources to develop, implement and achieve the entrepreneurial ends which include sustainability, transformational value and replication of the model to large scale. The social element of RPL is that its social mission is explicit and central. RPL seen in this way potentially brings a new equilibrium into how non-formal, workplace and informal learning is recognised to the benefit of South African society and other developing societies at large.

References and bibliography


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Abstract

Competency conversation: a quality-focused approach to alternative assessment methods in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

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In most countries where Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has been implemented as a force for educational or labour force development, the issue of quality has been a persistent concern (Butler 1993; Harriger 1991; Mann 1997; Merriam & Brockett 1997; Preston 1981; Sadler 1987; Simosko 1991; Wheelahan et al. 2003; Davies 2006). This has been exacerbated by a scarcity of research and lack of empirical data on the impact of RPL even from those initiatives perceived to be the most successful.

Methods used to identify people's knowledge and skills have not undergone much development over the past decade. Written examinations on particular subjects, portfolios using reflective practice, and competency-based assessment of discrete skills have been the major vehicles used to identify learning acquired from formal education and outside of school. While international literature associated with national qualifications offers an abundance of suggested principles and show a strong trend toward competency-oriented assessment (CEDEFOP 2010), there is little new on the horizon for RPL and even less discussion on how to ensure quality-focused assessment methods and tools.

One innovation which may hold potential for RPL is an assessment method referred to as ‘competency conversation’ (VETASSESS 2009; Industry Training Authority 2010a), also referred to as ‘professional conversation’ (Peterson 2006) – a methodology for identifying individuals' knowledge and skills related to particular occupations. This current paper explores competency conversation's alignment with experiential learning theorists such as Dewey (1916, 1939) and Mezirow (1989) who believed that experience is the root of all learning, and its conflicted links to Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theories on situated learning and communities of practice (Wenger 1998) which tie learning inextricably to the context in which it is acquired.

The telling of stories and other oral strategies such as structured interviews to assess learning are common and accepted practices, but competency conversation is a departure from these methodologies and is unfamiliar to most RPL practitioners.

Competency conversation is in its early stages of evolution. It is aptly named, for it is a deep conversation between assessor and candidate about what the candidate knows and is able to do. It differs from other forms of assessment through its capacity to single out or cluster elements of learning and examine work experience, its workplace-oriented settings, its heavy reliance on assessor expertise and judgment, and its capacity not only to showcase evidence, but to generate evidence. Because competency conversations rely heavily on the expertise of assessors, strong supports are necessary to ensure the quality of assessment outcomes and thus the credibility of the system. Competency conversation has been used as an assessment method in Australia in technical occupations and trades (Department of Education and Training 2010). It has been piloted in two occupations in Canada (Industry Training Authority 2010b), and in teacher education in New Zealand. This
paper draws on the experiences of these countries to help us understand the process and explore its potential for application in South Africa.

A review of educational literature reveals no publications describing or critiquing the practice of competency conversation. Current documentation primarily takes the form of policies, procedures and support materials for assessors and candidates from which an understanding of general practice can be gleaned (Department of Education and Training 2009; Industry Training Authority 2010b). Like many other forms of learning assessment currently used by colleges and universities, validation of current tools and supports has been limited.

However the paper argues that competency conversation as an RPL methodology is worth exploring. Informed by the theories of Messick (1994) and Baartman et al (2006), and earlier research on quality in RPL in Higher Education (Van Kleef et al. 2007), the author mines the literature on quality in assessment and real-life practice to proposes criteria and strategies for promoting quality in RPL using competency conversation as an assessment method.

These criteria accommodate the use of both traditional and contemporary, authentic assessment methods based on the principle of fitness for purpose. For example, the competencies needed to build a brick wall are different from those necessary to design the same wall. These two sets of competencies can and should be assessed using different forms of assessment. Where the competencies overlap, so can the assessment thereof.

The proposed criteria address quality in RPL as a broadly-based system that includes macro and micro strategies that take account of relevant stakeholders in establishing occupational competencies as the basis for assessment, training and use of subject experts as assessors, peer-driven moderation processes that monitor the quality and consistency of decisions, adoption of procedures to promote continuing competence, development of materials to support candidates and assessors, and validation of assessment methods and tools using contemporary alternatives to traditional forms of validity and reliability.

These criteria are currently the subject of a Canadian qualitative research study that will be nearing completion in early 2011. It is anticipated that a model for quality–focused RPL will emerge that can be used for a range of occupations.

References


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Section 4: Windows into Recognition of Prior Learning realities
Abstract
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – finding a way forward.

John Arnesen,
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There is extensive local and global academic research into the concept of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and much has been said about RPL by politicians, policy developers, academics and leaders from all walks of life. Deep and wide reflection about RPL as part of the intellectual discourse is an important challenge, but doing is where the “rubber hits the road”. The problem statement is that RPL is mostly captured in research papers and policy documents, but there is very little written in terms of implementation and actual RPL practices. Reflection and discourses about RPL has in general terms not surfaced sufficient energy and oneness of purpose to make RPL a practical reality for all South Africans.

There is no doubt that every National Qualifications Framework (NQF) accredited and officially registered institution of learning, private and public, at all levels of the NQF, will have an RPL policy. However not many will present RPL as a first choice option for those learners who have relevant and appropriate experience and are classic RPL candidates. The question is why is this the case? Most institutions of learning front line–staff are simply not sufficiently knowledgeable and skilled to deal with the subtleties and nuances of what an RPL applicant needs. Further to this, most institutions do not have readily available “products” with competitive pricing models and easily accessible delivery mechanisms for assisting RPL candidates. And lastly many institutions simply resist the concept as it does not lie in their traditional frame of reference.

Apart from institutional difficulties with RPL, it seems that from the point of view of RPL candidates, there is a maze of routes to be taken without clarity on how to go about following the optimum RPL route.

How does the ordinary South African navigate this maze and ultimately get an answer to the question: “Where can I get formal and nationally accepted recognition for my experience and how do I go about it?”

It is recommended that the Education, Training and Development (ETD) sector builds on lessons learnt from the experience of the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup (SWC). Many armchair critics said that there were insurmountable challenges but in the end the 2010 SWC was acclaimed, locally and globally, as a huge success. RPL implementation to a large extent has challenges of the same magnitude and a multitude of critics but actually greater potential for a powerful lasting legacy. So how does South Africa become a leading example of successful RPL implementation in the world? An analysis of commonalities between the events in 1994 (rugby) and 2010 (soccer) could provide a way forward in finding solutions to the implementation challenge of RPL.

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Abstract
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – a vehicle to help unqualified educators to attain a professional qualification

Zweli Baleni,
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This is a case study of how Walter Sisulu University (WSU) applies the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes to improve educators' qualifications.

Colleges of Education were closed down in 2000 all over South Africa. This left some student teachers who had not completed their diplomas in a big dilemma as to where to complete their studies. Some of these educators were employed by the government as educators, and paid at lower rates than the Relative Education Qualification Values (REQV) 13 qualified educators. Although an effort was made in 2002 to give tuition, and examinations were written, there are still some individuals from this group stuck as being unqualified and as such can never be promoted nor further their studies.

A joint venture between the Faculty of Education and the RPL manager at WSU has been drawn up to intervene in the plight of these educators by applying the RPL process. These educators will be divided into two groups: those employed and those not yet employed so that proper assessment methods can be used to ensure credible assessment and better life for these people.

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Summary
Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) input to RPL Conference

Adrienne Bird
Quality Council for Trades and Occupations

Under current legislation the responsibility for standards setting and quality assurance for occupational skills (qualifications and part-qualifications) lies with the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) launched by the Minister of Higher Education and Training on 23 February 2010. This Quality Council came into operation on 1 April 2010 (RSA 2010).

An occupational qualification is defined in the Skills Development Act (RSA 1998) as: “a qualification associated with a trade, occupation or profession resulting from work–based learning and consisting of knowledge unit standards, practical unit standards and work experience unit standards” (Section 1 in Act 37 of 2008). The family of occupational qualifications makes up the Occupational Qualifications Sub–framework (OQF) which is one of three sub–frameworks comprising South Africa’s National Qualifications Framework.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a central means whereby occupational qualifications can be obtained either in full or in part, as much competence is obtained through learning at work in the workplace.

The QCTO is at the beginning of its journey on this RPL path. However, even at this stage, it has plans to ensure that those who come with skills learnt at and through work are given full recognition for them. For instance at minimum, it will be possible for learners to go through RPL processes for each of the components of an occupational qualification – the knowledge, practical, and work experience components – with accredited providers for these components. Where individuals are successful, they shall be credited for that component – again in full or in part. It will also be possible for a learner who meets the basic entrance requirements, to take the final external, summative assessments. As these processes will apply across the entire occupational sub–framework, beginnings are being made to lift RPL to system level – with potentially positive results for the country.

References


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Abstract

Financial Services Sector Education and Training Authority (FASSET SETA) report on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in its sector

Compiled by Natércia Faustino,  
Financial Services Sector Education and Training Authority

Financial Services Sector Education and Training Authority (FASSET) is the Sector Education and Training Authority (ETQA) for Finance, Accounting, Management Consulting and Other Financial Services in South Africa. The nature of the business in which the majority of organisations in the sector operates is, on the whole, legislated, for example, the submission of tax returns. Therefore, the sector has historically been well organised and structured.

The accounting sector, both locally and globally is organised primarily through professional bodies. A broad definition of a professional body is that it is a group of people in a learned occupation entrusted with maintaining control or oversight of the legitimate practice in the occupation. In some instances professional bodies have a significant role in the oversight of education linked to the professions. It is the prevalence of these professional bodies that has allowed the sector to be so structured, particularly with respect to the training of accountants.

The prevalence of well organised and well structured professional bodies in the sector prompted Fasset to develop the Quality Assurance Partner (QAP) model. As an accredited ETQA, Fasset devolves some of its accreditation responsibilities back to the QAPs. The devolution of these responsibilities only pertains to the qualifications over which the QAP has authority.

The devolution of accreditation responsibilities has allowed Fasset to achieve economies of scale and not to engage in duplication of work. In addition, sharing accreditation responsibilities leads to benefiting from a range of experience, particularly in relation to the occupations in question.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a form of assessment and is one of the functions devolved back to the professional bodies. For professional bodies, the learners’ theoretical understanding of the occupation is important. Equally important is the practical implementation of that theoretical knowledge, in other words, practical experience.

The majority of professional bodies offer RPL for both the theoretical components and practical experience components of qualifications. The theoretical aspect of the professional qualification is often effected through exemptions. As the word implies, subjects that the learners have already completed, if aligned with subjects in the professional qualification, do not have to be repeated. These usually involve the professional bodies recognising tertiary qualifications. Tertiary qualifications however, do not lead to recognition of the whole professional qualification. There are always elements which the professional bodies retain the right to examine.
The professional bodies however also recognise prior practical or work experience that is relevant to the occupation. Much the same as exemptions, prior practical work experience, if verified and completed within a certain time frame, is recognised. However, unlike the RPL for the theoretical aspect of the qualification, there may be times when all the work experience of the learner may be recognised.

Non-professional qualifications are defined as those that do not have professional bodies associated with them. There are not many of these types of qualifications in the FASSET sector. They are typically at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Level 4 and below. Where possible, FASSET makes use of RPL tools for these qualifications.

The RPL tools in these instances closely resemble the typical assessments for the qualification itself. They require determination of learners’ competence in the theoretical and the practical components relevant to the occupation concerned. Unlike professional body type RPL, it is theoretical knowledge that the learner has gained through practical implementation, that needs to be assessed.

RPL in the FASSET sector has always been available and widely used by the professional bodies. The use of RPL continues to ensure that learners are not required to do any unnecessary repetition of work, theoretical or practical. The RPL process is diagnostic. This permits learners to focus on the areas in which they require proficiency in order to gain competence, allowing them to complete qualifications.

The RPL process is valuable in the recognition of both theoretical and practical knowledge. It provides a model that is worth investigating for its relevance to other sectors.

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Abstract
A practical epistemological model to understand the unique, diverse loci (islands) of different sciences, enhance interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary cooperation and facilitate Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for articulation.

Johann Lemmer,
Academy for Sexology

This practical epistemological model is based on Ken Wilber’s (2000) universal integral theory and a diversity of system theories (Lemmer 2005: 118–161). It illustrates the overlapping loci of the various scientific disciplines within four quadrants of (a) the intentional, subjective “I”, (b) the behavioral objective “It”, (c) the cultural inter-subjective “We” and (d) the social inter-objective “Its” (Wilber 2000:197–198).

The model graphically explains the unique, diverse loci (islands) of different sciences as well as their complex interrelated dependency (Lemmer 2005: 186–190). It accommodates qualitative approaches from constructivist, narrative and postmodern perspectives as well as quantitative post positivist approaches (Creswell 2003: 17–23). It enhances equilibrium between diverse individual sciences (the ‘trees’) and the whole web of science (the ‘forest’). It describes the parts, the whole and the functioning of the parts within the whole (Lemmer 2008).

The model also enhances understanding and communication between the sciences. It demonstrates how islands of academic disciplines as well as academic institutions (with diverse theories) can build effective bridges via mutual understanding of each other’s loci.

The diversity of the sciences and/or approaches on the one hand and the flexible common ground between the sciences and/or approaches on the other hand, make possible the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). RPL can potentially be used in relation to the traditional sciences of the West as well as the more holistic sciences of the East. Previously disadvantaged sciences such as Sexology (Diamond 2002) can be recognised and accommodated. RPL can accommodate professionals from related disciplines for enrollment in postgraduate studies in Sexology. The model was implemented by the Academy for Sexology for a trial period of five years with professionals from related disciplines, and was made available to 230 countries worldwide.

In sharing a combination of research and practical experience this article’s objective is a better understanding of the unique, diverse loci (islands) of different sciences, to enhance interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary cooperation and to facilitate RPL for articulation.

References
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Summary
RPL practices: some experiences from the mining sector

Vusi Mabena
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This presentation covers some Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) successes in the mining sector. It starts with some RPL-related definitions as perceived in the mining sector, including the perceptions within organised labour. Using these definitions, examples of RPL practices implemented in the gold and coal sub-sectors will be presented. Some anecdotal successes will be outlined. The purpose of the presentation and paper is to add to the current research aiming towards common understandings of the meanings of RPL. The presentation and paper aim to contribute to guidelines for leading practices in the implementation of RPL at sectoral level.

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Abstract
Education Standardisation for the Property and Real Estate Industry

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The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) process has been a great success in the property and real estate industry. It is my claim that being able to recognise prior learning experience in well-established agents who have worked in the field of real estate over a long period, is invaluable to the industry. Measuring standards and applying a qualification to these standards (Further Education and Training Certificate: Real Estate (SAQA ID 59097, NQF Level 4) and National Certificate: Real Estate (SAQA ID 20188, NQF Level 5)), have uplifted both individuals as well as the industry as a whole. Clients are satisfied in being confident that they are dealing with true property professionals. The fact that they have qualifications lends credibility to the profession. The learning and portfolio of evidence (PoE) compiled and prepared by each individual agent, is a measure of their acumen and ability. The outcome ensures that an agent has the practical skill as well as the theory required by the profession.

The previous examination system for estate agents did not meet the regulations set by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act (RSA 1995). For this reason, estate agents could not be professionals as the estate agent education and examination system did not in the past form part of the bigger picture of the SAQA Act. It must be said that the industry has benefited tremendously by the new system. It has served to professionalise the industry that prior to these interventions was lacking in standardisation.

With time the professional standards will potentially be raised further as more and more agents are obliged to participate through legislation in this process of up-skilling (RSA 2008a). With the implementation of Acts like the Financial Intelligence Centre Act (FICA) (RSA 2008b) and Financial Advisory and Intermediary Services (FAIS) Act (RSA 2002), together with the Government Gazette (RSA June 2008) specifying the substitution of regulations relating to the standard of training of estate agents – the knowledge and skills requirements demanded of an agent are very different to days of old. Skills required are specific, technical and relate to regulations. Proof is now required to show that this knowledge has been attained. Moreover – the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) initiative potentially drives this continued growth and increase in knowledge.

Whilst the new education dispensation may serve to uplift property industry members, aspirant agents and especially historically disadvantaged individuals (HDI) wishing to enter the property industry, in both the short and long term, may consider it a barrier to entry. It is argued however, that on the balance it will produce a more refined and better quality estate agent who will be equipped to take on the role that a client/consumer may expect. The regulations potentially make things difficult for ‘fly-by-night’ agents coming into the industry with little or no knowledge, doing damage and then after a short sojourn dropping out and leaving a trail of debris behind them. In a sellers’ market thousands of ‘unqualified’ people who merely wrote a board exam came into the industry making deals not knowing anything about the property or the rules of the market nor about the laws surrounding the property industry. Contracts were lacking; important clauses and pieces of information were left out. These individuals failed to protect sellers and or buyers.
On a more positive note, it can be observed that the syllabus for principals from the Estate Agency Affairs Board (EAAB) is sound. This NQF Level 5 syllabus is potentially invaluable to the estate agency profession as it is based on thorough research and is well balanced in theory and practical application in terms of the EAAB textbook NQF Level 4.

With the legislated deadline of December 2011 (RSA 2008) it is a concern that there may be too few assessors and moderators to be able to process successfully RPL applications for the close to 50 000 estate agents currently in the business nationally. The assessors’ course is extremely paper driven, time consuming, copious and complex in its formation and needs to be simplified to attract more assessors into the business.

References


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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Financial Regulatory Environment

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The adoption and implementation of the Financial Advisory and Intermediary Services Act (FAIS), Act 37 of 2002 (RSA 2002), brought about a mind shift in the financial services industry regarding qualifications. The FAIS Act prescribes that role-players in the regulated environment need to meet competence requirements, which are further expanded in the subordinate legislation, namely the Fit and Proper Requirements for Financial Services Providers (RSA 2008). The competence requirements include that role-players in the regulatory ambit of the financial services industry must meet certain qualification requirements at entry into the industry, and then meet further qualification requirements, which are appropriate to the financial services industry, within a specified period of time.

The FAIS Act was promulgated in 2002 and went into effect on 30 September 2004. Between 2002 and 2004 the financial services industry realized that there were significant numbers of people, within the financial services industry, who were either unable to provide proof of their scholastic qualifications or had left school without obtaining what was then a Standard Eight, Nine or 10 school-leaving certificate. This meant that people were currently unable to prove that they met the ‘entry level qualification’ requirements required by the FAIS Act, although they had been functioning in the industry for many years.

A second problem was that people were unable or reluctant to enroll for formal qualifications that would meet the “appropriate qualification” requirements deemed to meet the competence requirement in relation to qualifications for role-players in the regulatory environment.

At this stage, 2002 to 2004 and even later, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was used by many people in the training and development fields to attract such role-players in the financial services industry, promising that it would be an “easy” alternative to formal studies. The Financial Services Board (FSB) is of the view that the promises made to people were in many instances over-optimistic, and that RPL is quite probably a ‘promise that did not deliver’. The regulator would not want to support a process that is not realistic and achievable for role-players.

Research was conducted to investigate how RPL was used within the Banking, Insurance, Wealth Management, Health Services and Investment Management sectors of the financial services industry. The aim of the research was to establish to what extent RPL was used, what the successes and the failures were and whether these role players would use RPL again in future.

The primary sample consisted of three Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) active in the financial services industry, of whom two have been involved actively in the qualification process; seven medium to large banks; six large insurance companies; five large industry associations; and five large independent compliance practices.
The secondary sample targeted 130 000 people who are either key individuals or representatives, these being the two regulated roles. The survey was made available to the key bodies, and was also made available on the FSB website for access by the individual role-players.

Telephonic interviews were conducted with representatives of the primary sample. Where it was difficult to conduct the interviews telephonically, the interview questionnaire was e-mailed to respondents. An online (web based) survey was made available to industry players, including the large banks and insurance companies, the two relevant SETAs, training providers, industry associations and their members, large independent compliance practices, and individual role-players, comprising the secondary sample.

References


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Abstract
Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) attempts at implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): a case study on interventions

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This paper describes Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) attempts at facilitating Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Wholesale and Retail sector. It discusses the implementation methods and models designed for RPL, an analysis of the root causes for failure of these methods and models as well as the way forward, taking into account stakeholder feedback.

Research was conducted in 2003 which indicated the need for the development of a standardised approach to RPL in the wholesale and retail sector. The W&RSETA subsequently developed an RPL toolkit as a model to standardise and facilitate RPL implementation in the sector. This toolkit was piloted prior to the widespread dissemination of the toolkit. The dissemination was done through national stakeholder sessions where all constituent employers and training providers were capacitated regarding the toolkit and given the toolkit. Since the distribution of the toolkit in 2007 it was found through monitoring by the W&RSETA that only two providers of a constituent provider base of 232 providers at the time implemented RPL in the sector, and both used the toolkit.

In 2008 a survey was conducted amongst all beneficiaries who received the toolkit with the aim of soliciting feedback on reasons for the low uptake of RPL implementation and the usage of the kit. A poor response rate of only two percent was received. The W&RSETA then decided to host a conference on RPL in May 2010. The discussions, strategic decisions reached and operational requirements identified by the Wholesale and Retail Sector during this conference made clear the reasons why the RPL uptake has failed. Four focus group discussions that took place during the conference were useful in this regard: how to facilitate Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) expectations for RPL implementation; potential solutions to obstacles for RPL implementation; matching business and labour expectations with regard to RPL; managing learner expectations in the workplace.

The outcomes of the focus group discussions as well as the way forward for RPL implementation for the W&RSETA are discussed in the presentation.

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Abstract
The professionalisation of the Real Estate industry – a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approach

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Legislation promulgated in the Government Gazette (RSA 2008) stipulates that individuals in the estate agent industry should become qualified professional members of the profession. The purpose of the research is to gain insight into the impact this legislation had on the agents’ morale as well as the financial repercussions for the real estate industry at large.

A qualitative research method was used to observe/ascertain the response and reaction of the agents affected by the legislation to the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) tool, the curriculum content and its fitness for purpose. The responses of the agents who had gone through the RPL process were researched. Attempts were made to understand their mindsets around RPL and the impact it had had on their personal development within the industry.

Sampling was done using experts, principals and learners (Real Estate agents) to draw on their experiences, comments and observations.

Findings suggest that respondents experienced the RPL process positively. One assessing agent indicated: “I often have people starting on the process being quite apprehensive but by the time they have finished they are ecstatic about having being able to get through it and be found competent – doing something they first thought would be impossible. Often I find that sales figures escalate during the process. I think the mere fact that they engage with what they really should be doing is great. Many agents want to continue their education and go on with NQF Level 5 (life-long learning).”

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Section 5: Towards developing Recognition of Prior Learning systems
Abstract
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): in search of a valid and sustainable mechanism for South Africa

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Using a grounded theory approach, this study developed a conceptual framework for the search for a valid and sustainable mechanism of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for South Africa. A grounded theory approach facilitated the development of theory from the data. It emerged that, despite differences in practice and implementation, the integrity of the process, and therefore the validity of the process, needs to be protected by a quality assurance framework. Such a framework includes stringent quality criteria and common benchmarks against which RPL practice is measured. The primary research question was: Which mechanisms are needed to ensure that recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a valid and sustainable process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)?

The research approach was a mixed method design. This design was used to answer questions that neither a qualitative approach nor a quantitative approach could have answered on their own. The mixed method design also supported the emergence of theory through the triangulation of qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire) data.

For the interviews, seven organisations were targeted. These organisations were all, to a greater and lesser degree, implementing RPL at institutions, workplaces or at Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) (two HE institutions, three SETAs, a bank and a FET provider).

For the questionnaire, convenience sampling was used when an opportunity arose where a range of institutions/organisations at various stages of implementation came together for a RPL implementation workshop. These institutions included a mix of public and private General Education, Further Education and Higher Education institutions.

In terms of the first supporting question to the main research question, the key finding was that a valid approach to RPL is associated with the level of accountability of the system. Validity seems to be supported by the presence of a clear quality assurance framework within which common benchmarks, against which different institutions and sectors can measure their services, facilitate a sense of trust in each other’s processes. A quality assurance framework, therefore, seems to provide an enabling environment where the principles, the purposes, as well as the practicalities of a RPL system can be explored, developed and implemented.

Findings emerging from the second supporting question in relation to the sustainability of an RPL system included explicit requirements in respect of RPL, as well as fit–for–purpose assessment instruments, and ease of implementation of the process. The need to understand ‘equivalence of learning’ rather than curriculum coverage per se, pointed to the need for highly skilled and confident assessors.
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Abstract
Researching Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): an international agenda

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In July 2009, Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, hosted and financed a meeting of 12 leading Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) scholars from around the world. The purpose of the meeting was to review RPL research and to inaugurate PLIRC – the Prior Learning International Research Centre – with networking, research, policy development and information dissemination as its aims. The proposed conference paper provides an overview of the country-specific themes that emerged from the papers presented at the founding meeting and presents an international agenda for future research on RPL. The paper will refer to RPL research in England, Scotland, Canada, South Africa, Sweden, the European Union, Australia, the United States and other Organisation for Economic Co–Operation and Development (OECD) countries.

The paper discusses some of the driving forces in RPL development in the different regions, for example:

- Scotland’s Credit and Qualifications Framework, in which RPL is seen as a means of facilitating more learning pathways between the community, the workplace and formal education;
- Australia’s national training reform agenda that included the introduction of a competency–based Vocational Education and Training (VET) system;
- the Canadian government’s initiatives to increase and improve the quality of the labour supply through further and accelerated education;
- the introduction of the French concept of “validation” in Swedish education policy in 1996; and
- South Africa’s post–1994 policy agenda to redress past educational discrimination.

The main body of the paper considers the nature and extent of the research on RPL which has accompanied these developments. A range of lines of enquiry are pursued: what and who is driving the research agenda; who is doing the research and from what vantage point; what types of research are being undertaken and using what methodologies and methods; what theoretical lenses are used to frame and support enquiry; what are the main focuses for the research and what kinds of findings have emerged.

In these ways, the authors synthesise the research that exists, draw comparisons across different countries, identify points of convergence and difference and highlight gaps and suggest an international research agenda to support more theoretically informed accounts of practice using better–refined and empirically justified methodologies.
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Abstract
Reflecting on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) initiatives in Higher Education: what lessons can be learnt from the past decade?

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Between 1999 and 2005, the authors were involved in a number of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pilot projects and policy development processes in a range of contexts and disciplinary areas that spanned the former technikon sector, teacher and adult education, agriculture, nursing, and the reintegration of military veterans. One of the authors also provided technical assistance to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) over 2001/2 to develop the first draft of SAQA’s RPL policy.

The paper sets out to achieve the following four purposes, in support of the Conference foci:

- describe some of the early policy development and implementation projects undertaken in Higher Education between 1999 and 2005;
- outline the principles, strategies, influences and practices that underpinned this early work;
- reflect on the successes and limitations of the early work and its various contexts; and
- distill implications for rethinking RPL in the current national processes of reconceptualising Higher Education in an expanded post-secondary education system.

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Abstract
Towards a framework for accrediting up to 100% of prior informal and experiential learning of public service financial managers

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A priority of the Institute for Public Finance and Auditing (IPFA) is to professionalise financial management in the public service (IPFA 2010). Currently many financial managers in the public service, with a number of years of experience, have no applicable formal tertiary qualification. A method to contribute towards this priority of IPFA is through the application of what is referred to as Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). RPL provides recognition for a candidate's non-formal and informal learning and experience by evaluating it against a set of formal learning outcomes (RSA 1998). In order to qualify for IPFA's top tier of membership and associated professional qualification, a candidate must hold a relevant formal qualification plus a required number of years of related experience, before qualifying to undertake the professional assessment. After the successful completion of the assessment the professional qualification will be awarded.

As a general rule South African universities provide RPL recognition for access towards a formal qualification (UCT 2004:6; UKZN 2010) and/or exemption to a predetermined maximum percentage of subjects as part of a formal qualification (SA 2007:9; SAQA 2004:12; TUT 2006:9). Government regulation also limits the number of RPL-candidates that may gain access to a formal university programme, within a particular academic year (UKZN 2010). Currently a public service financial manager will thus not be able to obtain a formal qualification from a university, purely based on previous informal learning.

This article examines the possibility of up to a 100% recognition of prior informal and experiential learning, for ‘under qualified’ financial managers in the South African public service, towards obtaining the IPFA professional qualification, in lieu of a relevant formal university qualification.

The research underlying this study comprises an RPL-related content analysis of South African Higher Education legislation (RSA 1997; RSA 2007); other regulations and guidelines (RSA 1998; LGSETA 2003; SAQA 2004), South African university policy (TUT 2006; UCT 2004; UKZN 2010; UNISA 2005) and more established South African frameworks and practice (Underwood 2003; Volbrecht 2009). It compares ideas in these policy and practice documents to international policy and practice (Joosten–Ten Brinke, Sluijsmans and Jochems 2009a; Joosten–Ten Brinke, Sluijsmans and Jochems 2009b; Anderson 2008; Conrad 2008; Chrisholm and Davis 2007; Taylor and Clemans 2000). The aim was to develop a framework within which RPL may be applied for financial managers in the South African public service, towards obtaining the IPFA professional qualification.

References


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Abstract
Moving towards a functioning National RPL system

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If South Africa is moving towards a fully functioning Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system, then a number of issues will need to be addressed. To achieve this goal, one key element would comprise knowing the current status of RPL in the country. The following questions may be useful for guiding research into a sustainable RPL system:

- What is the learning environment within which the national RPL system will reside?
- Are there sufficient competent RPL practitioners?
- Are a sufficient number of providers delivering RPL services?
- Do learners have easy access to RPL services?
- How does the structure of qualification-awarding processes impact on associated RPL processes?
- Are there sufficient funds available for RPL?

Firstly, it is argued that RPL is an assessment process residing within the lifelong learning environment. There is a range of issues here, amongst which a key question revolves around how lifelong learning is funded, regulated, institutionalised and understood. The idea of lifelong learning needs to permeate learning environments and ideas about learning in South Africa.

Secondly, it is asserted that the underpinning issues regarding data on practitioners include:

- how data on practitioner qualification status is maintained and made available to all (to view);
- how practitioners are licensed to practice; and
- what institutions have the authority and the means to maintain this data in an open but socially responsible and sensitive manner.

Thirdly, key issues are noted. Given that the scope of RPL coverage potentially ranges from General Education and Training through to Higher Education and Training, and the workplace – and that potential RPL candidates would emerge from a wide range of learning fields and occupational sectors – it might be important to institutionalise RPL processes in every component of the system; to ‘build RPL from the bottom up’ to create a lifelong learning environment in which there is always an opportunity for RPL.

It is worth reminding ourselves that irrespective of the impact of RPL on individuals and society, RPL is primarily a form of learning assessment. There are many institutions in South Africa that provide assessment services at all levels of learning. The important question is: is there an adequate number of RPL providers and are they competent to provide quality RPL services? And if not, what are the functional solutions?

Last – it is important to note that institutional processes impact on when and how RPL is available and visible to potential candidates. Effective processes are required to serve the needs of candidates. Part of this
effectiveness depends on considerations of timing, time, and money. If these considerations are not taken into account, RPL processes are in danger of being undermined.

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Abstract
Challenges in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) perspectives

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The National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS III), First Draft (Department of Higher Education and Training 2010) indicates that all principal sectoral and national programmes should include Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) access routes by 2016. For the first time since the inception of the NSDS, RPL is explicitly mentioned within the success indicators and will now form part of the targets Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) will have to achieve. Research was undertaken to assess the views of SETAs on the incorporation of RPL as a success indicator in the NSDS III as well as to identify challenges relating to RPL implementation. A survey questionnaire consisting of nineteen items was sent to 22 SETAs and a forty-four percent response rate was achieved.

The survey items were aimed at obtaining information on the following issues: the interpretation of the RPL success indicator in the draft NSDS III Strategic Framework; SETA views on RPL as a national target in the draft NSDS III, information on current RPL implementation, and recommendations from SETAs for successful RPL implementation.

A literature review was conducted and divided into three categories: RPL in the South African policy context; a review of international research on RPL implementation; and findings and recommendations from the document: Recognition of non–formal and informal learning: Country Practices (Werquin 2010).

Some of the findings from the survey indicated that most respondents believe that RPL should not be a separate indicator on the NSDS III. Two respondents indicated that they have not implemented RPL in their sectors and varied reasons were given for this situation (such as insufficient funds, other learning interventions being regarded as a priority). Some 70% of respondents have implemented some form of RPL for longer than three years; most of those who have implemented RPL do not have specific funding models for RPL implementation.

Recommendations made in the research report are centered around the following areas: RPL policies, qualifications and assessments in relation to RPL, the RPL process, reporting on RPL and finally funding and a possible funding model for RPL.

References


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Revisiting the introduction of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa: fifteen years on

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It was perhaps inevitable that the introduction of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa would prove difficult, uneven, and challenging. RPL came with many hopes and agendas attached. From the initial Department of Education White Paper on adult education and training and initial formulations of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), RPL has been associated with economic equity and social justice on the one hand and high occupational standards and economic efficiency on the other. According to one group of associations, RPL would “accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training, and employment opportunities” and thus “contribute to the full personal development of each learner” (RSA 1995). According to the other, RPL would contribute to the “economic development of the nation at large” (RSA 1995) because “successful modern economies” require “the elimination of artificial hierarchies” and citizens who are able “to move flexibly between occupations, to take responsibility for personal performance, [and] to set and achieve high standards” (HSRC 1995). Either set of goals, which might be loosely characterised as social equity and economic rationalisation, would be steep enough for any educational and vocational practice to attempt to fill. In the case of RPL, the challenge was made all the greater by the ways in which the tensions between the two sets of goals were elided as the terms of the discourse were being set.

This paper offers a retrospective on the ways in which those involved in the implementation of RPL, myself included, failed to take a variety of assumptions, past practices, epistemological and social hierarchies, institutional self-interests, and conflicting political goals sufficiently into account. I focus specifically on a series of contradictions, some of which date from the days of apartheid and some from the invariably imperfect transition to the post-apartheid era. I explore ways in which debates, difficulties, and disappointments regarding RPL were symptomatic of more basic tensions, contradictions, and competing social goods. That is, I consider what appear to be RPL’s failures as indicative of deeper forces in contention following South Africa’s transition to democracy.

As an illustration of what I mean, I provide the goal of upgrading of skills among South African workers as one of the stated purposes of RPL. While seemingly an objective around which all sectors of the society could unite, this ostensibly unitary goal was reflective of multiple conflicting agendas, among them:

- rationalising the workplace for purposes of greater productivity and improved performance;
- improving the skills, upgrading the job titles, raising the pay, and increasing the upward mobility of workers; and
- recognising the informal and implicit skills of experienced workers and the informal relations of comradery, mutual aid, and mentoring at the workplace for purposes of empowering workers as creators and agents of knowledge.
Drawing on categorisations of RPL practice that have often been used in South African writings on the subject (see, for example, Harris 1999), these goals might be aligned with instrumentalist, developmental, and emancipatory approaches to RPL respectively. The difficulty of maintaining those distinctions has often been commented on, as has the hybridity of most RPL practice. What has not been clear is that those categories are best understood not as educational philosophies, but as conceptualisations of social existence that reflect differing notions of the social contract and differing understandings of the relationship of the worker to her/his work and of the citizen to the state.

I am hopeful that exploring such abiding tensions as these will allow us to go forward with a more coherent sense of the place of RPL in multiple social agendas and multiple visions of the good. A new appreciation of RPL as an ideologically invested social practice might be supportive of greater self-awareness on the part of RPL advocates and practitioners and clearer lines of negotiation, dialogue, and policy.

References


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Abstract
A shift to a more critical orientation to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy and practice; and its use to analyse RPL policy in the public service in South Africa

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The vision of the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as one of its components is to develop a seamless and articulated education and training system. This paper argues for a greater theorisation of the NQF to improve the implementation and further development of the NQF, with the intention of moving closer to the vision.

The purpose of the paper is to explore possibilities for a critical orientation to RPL policy and practice and to demonstrate its application in analysing the draft RPL policy for the public service in South Africa. The research will address the following critical questions:

• What key concepts frame a critical orientation to RPL policy and practice?
• How can these key concepts in a critical orientation to RPL be used to analyse the RPL policy for the public service in South Africa?

This paper responds to the need for more theorisation of the NQF including RPL, the paper argues for a critical discourse in dealing with issues such as equivalence, knowledge-power dynamics, and the differences in interpretation and application of the NQF including RPL in the different sectors. The paper also challenges the dominant technicist approach to RPL policy and practice in education and training system and proposes a critical orientation. The key concepts that frame a critical orientation to RPL have been generated from a case study of recognising and assessing prior learning of adult learners in a vocational context. These key concepts that frame a critical orientation will be used to analyse the draft RPL policy for the public service in South Africa.

The paper firstly describes the following key conceptual layers of a critical orientation to RPL:

• The first conceptual layer examines the impact of contextual factors on RPL policy and practice.
• The second conceptual layer looks at the purpose and values that underlie RPL policy and practice.
• The third conceptual layer considers issues relating to the nature of knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge, learning and experience in an RPL and assessment context.
• The fourth conceptual layer examines the relationship between assessor and the learner in an RPL and assessment context.

Secondly, the paper addresses the power relations between and within each of the above conceptual layers to understand the potential use of RPL policy and practice – either as a mechanism to reproduce the past and present patterns of social inequalities; or as a catalyst for social transformation.
Thirdly, the key concepts of a critical orientation to RPL are used to analyse RPL policy for the public service in South Africa. Finally, the paper examines the robustness of the key concepts and their generative potential in the use of a critical orientation to RPL for analysing policy.

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Abstract
A comparative and critical analysis of selected institutional Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practices

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This research adopts a post–positivist approach in its comparative and critical analysis of selected institutional Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practices. The sample is selected purposively to include RPL policies of a comprehensive university, university of technology, open and distance learning university, and a traditional university. Further, the availability of an RPL policy was used as a criterion for inclusion in the sample. Use is made of content analysis in the evaluation of university RPL policies.

The findings are corroborated by interview and questionnaire data solicited from RPL offices and practitioners associated with these selected institutions. Comparison and critique is made with particular reference to RPL purposes, models, perspectives, assessment processes, support to RPL candidates, advocacy, institutionalisation of RPL, and other aspects.

Implications for advocacy, policy review, policy implementation support, and institutionalisation of RPL are drawn.

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Abstract
A case study on Recognition of Prior Learning: reflexive practice in Continuing Education for teacher development

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Experiential learning includes reflective learning from the present and past. It is a form of learning from and by doing, also described as ‘Living Education Theory’ in the field of reflective action-research. It is – or should be in my view – the basis on which in-service educator development happens. The rationale for this position is that reflective practice recognises past and present in-situ action learning.

Reflexive learning has the potential to maximise the benefits of contextually relevant knowledge and subjective ‘capital’. If such learning is critically facilitated and acknowledged, it has great potential for empowerment of both teachers and learners, through its form and content. If formal education courses recognise and work with this potential, they build on and add to, rather than break down and remould according to the requirements and preferences of potentially hegemonic discourses.

Continuing Education courses in the Faculty of Education at the University of KwaZulu–Natal (UKZN) have over the years developed practices to recognise, reward and build on prior – and existing – learning. Such recognition has been used for purposes of academic access and progression, as well as for pedagogical form and content.

It is argued that in the current policy frameworks, Continuing Education through in–service learning is being down–graded and students are being prejudiced with respect to both academic progression and academic acknowledgement and development. The policies imply that in–service learning that works with recognition of prior learning is synonymous with sub–standard learning that is not adequately intellectual or academic. This view enables universities to exclude or discriminate with an increasing number of barriers to block access and advancement of those whose form and content of learning is not traditionally valued and acknowledged in Higher Education Institutions (HEI’s). Paradoxically, such interventions are in direct contradiction of the prevailing social and institutional rhetoric of justice, equity, empowerment, agency, indigenous knowledge and non–transmission teaching. Not surprisingly though, the policies tend to conform more closely with the skills and value requirements of a profit driven, hierarchical capitalist economy – with all the attendant requirements/ills of obedience (subordination), the teaching to transmission of foreign skills, competitive individualist values, and so on.

This case study is an attempt to provide [n in–motion] picture of the way in which:

- Continuing Education courses in the Faculty of Education at UKZN consciously and purposefully recognise and build on the prior learning of their in–service educator–students; and
- prevailing discursive practices nationally and institutionally are prejudicing these practices in a way that discriminates against the students and RPL pedagogies, negatively affecting teacher development possibilities appropriate to the South African social context and transformation for equity and democracy.
The case-study uses a basic ‘ecosystemic framework’ to map the findings of a ‘force field analysis’ informed by numerous small research studies on multiple aspects of Continuing Education that is premised on the recognition of prior learning. These studies include a focus on ‘academic progression’ attributes (characteristics recognised in academic advancement, or not); benefits and possibilities of contributions to education of teachers using critical reflective practice to inform educator roles; educators’ perceptions of their improvement as educators through recognition and development of their prior learning; rural teacher stability and contextual responses resulting from located learning.

**Items on which the present article draws**


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Abstract
The new kid on the block has come to stay: lessons from twelve years of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) implementation at the University of South Africa (UNISA)

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Twelve years of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) implementation for access and for credit/advanced standing within formal/non-formal qualifications at the University of South Africa (UNISA) has resulted in a number of possible lessons for RPL practice at Higher Education institutions. Research was initiated to evaluate RPL performed during these 12 years.

The research methods used were (1) a literature study of the nature of RPL as well as current RPL practices; and (2) responses to two surveys of the user perspectives of RPL finalists; academic assessors; and RPL advisors and administrators regarding their ‘lived’ experiences of current and past RPL processes at UNISA.

The research resulted in a number of emergent themes: a value-adding process for individual RPL candidates; the need for a credible RPL process; the profile of RPL candidates requiring an individual approach to assessment; the need for personal contact, interaction and communication with RPL candidates to provide support and reassurance; reluctance of staff to get involved in RPL practices; the need for what is called flexible assessment (flexible use of assessment tools); and limited knowledge of RPL in all sectors in South Africa and the need for training in RPL.

On the basis of the findings, it is suggested that:

1. From the perspective of the RPL candidate, user-friendliness can be assured by incorporating:
   - regular communication between RPL staff and candidates;
   - opportunities for interaction with RPL staff and with academic staff;
   - optional face-to-face portfolio development workshops;
   - additional optional training in research, and
   - learner support and career counselling.

2. From the perspective of the academic assessor, academic rigour and accountability can be assured by incorporating:
   - a screening process as the first step in an assessment process;
   - a panel approach to assessment;
   - higher order institutional decision-makers ultimately ratifying the process;
   - sufficient checks and balances to ensure academic rigour; and
   - sufficient quality control mechanisms to ensure accountability.

3. To overcome staff reluctance, an RPL strategy should include:
   - measures to give staff recognition for participating in RPL processes;
   - regular training in the RPL process; and
   - appointing faculty champions of RPL.
4. Assessors need to be flexible in their choice of assessment tools which should:
   • fit the profile of the candidate, the situation and the context; and
   • offer fast-tracking in terms of theoretical knowledge where candidates have shown mastery of practical skills (applied knowledge), but lack theoretical underpinning knowledge.

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Abstract
Linking Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), curriculum, and curriculum development or are we trying to push the marshmallow through the keyhole?

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Over the years, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has been implemented in a variety of contexts, in industrial environments as well as in the Higher Education and Training (HET) sector, where the feasibility of such implementation has been questioned by academics. What makes the current study interesting is its context: RPL implementation in Higher Education. This issue is often contested, always contentious and ever thought provoking. Implementing RPL policy at institutions of Higher Education is acknowledged as being a complex matter, the problems of which are not easily resolved.

Broadly speaking the research explores the extent to which RPL practices have been institutionalised from a variety of institutional perspectives. The conceptual framework is constructed around an understanding of RPL in terms of the ways in which it contributes to the current economic, political and social imperatives of South Africa. This conceptual framework is strongly informed by a literature review of the work of others working in the field of RPL. Assumptions underlying implementing RPL policy include acceptance that learning takes place in contexts other than formal institutions of learning.

The research used a mixed methods approach (sometimes referred to as the Third Research Paradigm): it blends qualitative and quantitative data. The result is a set of findings that, among other things, looks at the relationship between RPL and curriculum development and ways in which curriculum can successfully facilitate the practices of RPL. A sample was drawn from academic teaching staff of three institutions in KwaZulu–Natal: Durban University of Technology, University of Zululand and University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The research findings showed that both institutional capacity and staff expertise impact on the implementation of RPL and both of these have implications for the curriculum. Specifically, the research looked at how curriculum structure, an outcomes-based curriculum, assessment (as part of curriculum design), and curriculum support strategies have the potential to facilitate RPL, but that each of these components of the curriculum is under-utilised in this regard. The overall finding was that curriculum in Higher Education has failed to deliver the kinds of transformation hoped for by prominent researchers in the field. More significantly, it emerges that a community of practice for RPL is underdeveloped at this stage.

There should however, be a strong cautionary note about not expecting too much from curriculum change in terms of the delivery of Higher Education. There is currently a great deal of expectation of curriculum in Higher Education. One of the assumptions is that changes to curriculum will be a panacea for solving very deep-seated economic and educational problems. Some of these problems are so deeply ingrained in the make-up of the country that the expectations placed on the curriculum may be unrealistic.
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Abstract

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes: theory and evidence

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This paper is based on a large-scale Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) thematic review that the author undertook when he was with the OECD (Werquin, 2010a and 2010b1). It is based on documents prepared by countries and experts (www.oecd.org/edu/recognition) as well as on the existing literature, especially the documents prepared by and for the European Union Commission (EUC). Interestingly enough, this thematic review went beyond the OECD borders, and countries from all five continents were involved in this activity, including South Africa. To that extent this paper has benefited from an exposure to many different systems2 and sheds light on the somewhat different approaches that countries have taken in the area of recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes.

The concept of learning outcomes is at the heart of many research programmes and policy responses. International surveys (from the International Adult Literacy Survey, IALS, back in the mid nineties, to the forthcoming Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes, AHELO), National Qualifications Frameworks or the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) engineered by the European Commission, and the most recent laws and policies on recognition of non-formal and informal learning (RNFIL), all rely on the concept of learning outcomes. In addition, qualifications frameworks and recognition of non-formal and informal learning processes share an ultimate objective of social justice: the former because qualifications frameworks have to be built so that all individuals find their place in the framework, and not only those who achieved a qualification/certification in the formal learning system; the latter precisely because recognition of non-formal and informal learning is a necessary step to create new routes to qualification/certification, especially for those who do not cope with the formal learning system but still have knowledge, skills and competences. In short, it is very unlikely that qualifications frameworks will fly without recognition of learning outcomes.

It is only recently that national qualifications systems have been seen as policy tools for promoting lifelong learning. OECD (2007)3 shows that there are many potential mechanisms that can promote lifelong learning from within qualifications systems. Together with establishing a qualifications framework, providing credit transfer, organising information and guidance, for example, recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes appears as one of the most powerful of these mechanisms. We are constantly learning, all of us, everywhere and all the time! While there is nothing new about this observation, the idea of exploiting learning that takes place outside the formal system of initial education and training seems to have emerged on a large scale only recently. Taking advantage of such learning requires it to be visible and recognised.

The production of skills, knowledge and/or competences concerns all human activities, not only, nor obviously, in the context of formal learning situations. Learning that occurs on a daily basis could also represent skills,
knowledge and/or competences that are more interesting and longer lasting because they take place in a practical setting, at work or in daily life. Whatever the case, skills, knowledge and/or competences representing non–formal and informal learning outcomes are likely to be very valuable, to judge by the interest shown by public authorities aiming to catch the train of economic growth, global competitiveness and human development.

The first aim of the paper is to give an overview of the key theoretical issues involved in recognising non–formal and informal learning, ranging from the legitimacy of the learning activities in terms of the outcomes to be recognised, through the cost of the necessary assessment, and essential elements such as quality assurance, the standards used, the potential benefits and the real obstacles. The findings can be summarised as follows:

- There is no or little agreement about definitions and concepts. Nevertheless, the paper makes the case that an international agreement may not be needed for recognition processes to be implemented and to deliver promising results.
- In many countries, recognition of non–formal and informal learning is seen as a possible solution to make skills, knowledge and/or competences visible as well as to deliver partial or full qualifications directly to individuals that meet the expected and agreed standards; with or without additional top–up formal learning.
- Recognition must be understood here as social recognition; where what is delivered to successful applicants through a recognition process has value and is used in the society in which they live, particularly in the labour market and in the lifelong learning system.
- In the most advanced countries indeed, recognition of non–formal and informal learning has a double currency: it may give people access to the labour market as well as allowing them to re–enter the formal education and training system.
- Recognition of non–formal and informal learning is not free, not always cheap but is usually cheaper than formal education and training.

The second aim of the paper is to present country practices and policies. If most countries share the same issues (economic growth, demographic downturn, skills shortages, high rates of unemployment, especially among people with low levels of qualifications), they have different rationales for organising recognition of non–formal and informal learning outcomes. Therefore, applications vary from one country to another. Evidence suggests the main applications of recognition of non–formal and informal learning outcomes are:

- second chance school certificates;
- entry to Higher Education;
- exemptions from formal programmes;
- labour competences certification;
- Vocational Education and Training (VET) system redesign; and
- discrete applications (language certificates, professional bodies et cetera).

Some countries propose almost the entire range of these applications, others propose only a few. Countries can therefore be ranked according to whether they have a system or not. A typology – based on evidence – will be proposed from “limited practice” to “full system”.

This approach makes possible the description of barriers that prevent initial policies and practices from developing into a full system. Moving from a piecemeal approach to an actual system has proven difficult in
many countries. The scaling up of interesting pilot programmes has proven an issue for different reasons – including cost and legitimacy – issues also developed in the paper.

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List of abstracts and summaries alphabetically by author

Appollis, J. (*Helderberg College*). Do mature adult learners need additional support compared to school leavers? (Page 13)

Arnesen, J. (*South African Qualifications Authority*). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – finding a way forward. (Page 66)

Baleni, Z. (*Walter Sisulu University*). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) – a vehicle to help unqualified educators to attain professional qualifications. (Page 67)

Bird, A. (*Quality Council for Trades and Occupations*). Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) input to RPL Conference. (Page 68)

Blom, R. (*Umalusi*). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): in search of a valid and sustainable mechanism for South Africa. (Page 81)

Botha, E. (*Intertrain Consulting*). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) intervention within the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector (merSETA). (Page 28)


Botha, E. (*Intertrain Consulting*). SASOL, Sparrow and CHIETA Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) intervention: a cascade model. (Page 34)

Botha, E. (*Intertrain Consulting*). Some barriers to the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and some suggestions. (Page 36)

Breier, M. (*University of Cape Town*) and Harris, J. (*Prior Learning International Research Centre, Canada*). Researching Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): an international agenda. (Page 83)

Brown, R. (*Standard Bank*). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) requirements within Standard Bank’s Personal and Business Bank environment. (Page 38)

Buchler, M. (*University of Cape Town*); Gawe, N. (*Durban University of Technology*) and Prinsloo, R. (*University of South Africa*). Reflecting on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) initiatives in Higher Education: what lessons can be learnt from the past decade? (Page 85)

Cooper, L. and Jones, B. (*University of Cape Town*). Building an optimally-inclusive model of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) into postgraduate pedagogy. (Page 15)

De Graaff-Mazaza, F. (*Cape Peninsula University of Technology*). Evaluation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applicants’ knowledge claims towards fourth year study at a university of technology. (Page 55)
Deller, K. (Prior Learning Centre). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for credit – unlocking the gate to qualifications by changing the paths followed. (Page 40)

Erasmus, L. and Cassim, Z. (Tshwane University of Technology). Towards a framework for accrediting up to 100% of prior informal and experiential learning of public service financial managers. (Page 86)

Farrelly, P. (Independent Consultant). Moving towards a functioning National RPL system. (Page 89)

Faustino, N. (FASSET). Financial Services Sector Education and Training Authority (FASSET SETA) report on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in its sector. (Page 79)

Le Grange, J.; Tome, L. and Botha, J. (Production Management Institute of South Africa). Current perceptions and challenges of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) learnerships in a blue collar flexible staffing environment. (Page 43)

Lemmer, J. (Academy for Sexology). A practical epistemological model to understand the unique, diverse loci (islands) of different sciences, enhance interdisciplinary and trans–disciplinary cooperation and facilitate Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for articulation. (Page 71)


Mabena, V. (Skills Development Adviser). RPL practices: some experiences from the mining sector. (Page 73)


Marrian, I. (Wholesale and Retail SETA) and Akoojee, S. (Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services SETA). Challenges in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) perspectives. (Page 91)

Meintjes, D. (Bell Equipment Company SA). Bell Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pilot project. (Page 47)

Michelson, M. (State University of New York – Empire State College). Revisiting the introduction of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa: fifteen years on. (Page 93)

Naidu, V. (Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy). A shift to a more critical orientation to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy and practice and its use to analyse RPL policy in the public service in South Africa. (Page 95)
Nel, J. (Mentornet). Can Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) contribute to the government’s new economic development and growth path for South Africa? (Page 49)

Nkonki, V.; Chabaya, O.; Muhuro, P.; Rembe, S. and Wadesango, N. (University of Fort Hare). A comparative and critical analysis of selected institutional Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practices. (Page 97)


Paxton, P. (Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University). Knowledge typologies and their impact on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) processes and articulation: findings from the SANTED research at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). (Page 57)

Pieters, W. (Association for Project Management South Africa and the International Project Management Association). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) alignment with conventional qualification and certification programmes. (Page 50)

Prinsloo, N. (Further Education and Training Institute (FETI), University of the Western Cape). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practices within the public Further Education and Training (FET) college sector. (Page 17)


Shelley, M. (Sandton Coaching Centre). Extended Credit Accumulation and Transfer (ECAT): modular and credible Coach Development and Coach Accreditation. (Page 52)

Sipengane, A., Marrian I. and Van der Merwe, T. (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority). Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority (W&RSETA) attempts at implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): a case study on interventions. (Page 78)

Smith, E. (University of South Africa). The new kid on the block has come to stay: lessons from twelve years of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) implementation at the University of South Africa (UNISA). (Page 101)
Stamelman, S. (*iSeleSele Property Academy*). The professionalisation of the Real Estate industry – a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) approach. (Page 79)

Steenekamp, S. (*South African Qualifications Authority*). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as a social entrepreneurial practice. (Page 59)

Sutherland, L. (*Consultant*). Linking Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), curriculum, and curriculum development or are we trying to push the marshmallow through the keyhole? (Page 103)

Themane, M.J. (*University of Limpopo*). Experiences and lessons from the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in accessing Higher Education: the case of the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) at the University of Limpopo. (Page 26)


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