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An electronic resource: Papers based on presentations delivered at the RPL Conference 2011
An electronic resource: Papers based on presentations delivered at the Recognition of Prior Learning Conference 2011
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Foreword

SAQA’s National RPL Conference: Building and expanding existing islands of excellent practice (2011) was highly productive and may be seen as pivotal. Some 350 delegates - reflecting very different contexts and interests - sustained concentrated engagement through the conference. Delegates worked late into the night to debate and draw together the learning from 52 poster presentations. Directions were agreed and were later acted on in a concentrated period of development.

The conference was the result of growing concern that RPL - a key bearer of the transformative values and objectives of the NQF - had not taken off. An international study had positioned South Africa at the forefront of RPL thinking. Yet the reality of RPL seemed enmeshed in conceptual and technical problems, and had met with institutional inertia and resistance. The national uptake was slender. However, the NQF had created the foundations for effective action, and some institutions and industries had invested substantially in the development and use of RPL. The conference was designed to bring together the collective learning from these investments.

Outcomes of the conference included a participant-endorsed RPL Working Document (SAQA 2011). The conference called for and influenced a number of actions that were subsequently undertaken over a number of years. These included a National RPL Task Team appointed by the Minister of Higher Education and Training; a representative SAQA Reference Group of RPL specialists; national RPL implementation initiatives, and revision of the initial RPL policy (SAQA 2002) and Criteria and Guidelines for RPL (SAQA 2003). An inclusive RPL model was developed through long-term SAQA-University of the Western Cape (UWC) Partnership Research; drawing on this work, and with the Reference Group, the new and widely embraced National Policy for the Implementation of RPL (SAQA 2013) was published and disseminated in 2013. In addition, the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET 2013: 73) maintains RPL as a key approach for addressing past injustices. RPL is also a tool to address present injustices. Following the conference SAQA has engaged with 18 major national institutions which are putting RPL in place. An increasing, though still relatively small, number of RPL learner achievements are recorded on the National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD). In addition SAQA are in process of publishing a series of illuminating case studies of RPL in practice.

The concern and the aspirations of the conference had major backing from the Department of Higher Education and Training; the fine opening address by Dr John Pampallis captures the issues and the concern of the DHET concisely. After this, Prof Ari Sitas’s address at the opening dinner provides a global perspective. He points to the pressure of multiple revolutionary changes in society and knowledge in our time. The big picture destroys any complacency we might have about easy achievement of the deeper intentions of RPL. Prof Sitas argues for the importance of creating an enabling environment.
Twenty of the delegates offered papers to support their presentations. These range from the emergent grand theory-and-practice of RPL reflected especially in the papers that close this publication, to accounts of multiple practical interventions - some modest, others exhaustive in their investment of time, effort and expertise.

When the idea of RPL was introduced to South African policy thinkers in the early 1990s it seemed obvious, just and simple. The entanglement of conceptual and practical complexities was inconceivable. The papers in the workshop collectively show a number of features of this complexity:

- There are very different forms or intentions for RPL: there is the adult education perspective especially concerned with personal affirmation; the academic perspective concerned with access or awards; and the occupational perspective concerned with suitability for employment or further training. There are common concerns among these perspectives, but the differences of purpose and intention are significant and must be taken into account when we study the implementation of RPL.

- The costs of RPL are very substantial. RPL cannot be undertaken lightly. The costs are not only in time and money, but in the development of new forms of professional expertise and thoughtfulness.

- The efforts of the last 20 years or so to introduce and implement RPL have led to a considerable growth of insight into the implications of this vital endeavour. There have been advances in conceptual clarification and depth. And there have been advances in the practical experience of implementation. But there still seems to be far too little interpenetration of depth of conceptual understanding with sensible, contextualised implementation. Such interpenetration can only be seen in three or four of the papers in this publication. There may still be work to be done in the necessary conversation between the theory and the practice of RPL.

The NQF was established among other things to stretch our understanding of knowledge and its recognition in our society. RPL has proved to be a major instrument in taking the intention forward. This set of papers shows how RPL challenges assumptions about our ways of assessing learning and competence. But it also shows that we still have some way to go to meet the challenge.

Joe Samuels
Chief Executive Officer: South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)
Editorial note

As can be seen in the foreword by the CEO of SAQA, the National RPL Conference: Building and Expanding Existing Islands of Excellence stimulated and informed concerted action to create a more supportive policy environment and accelerate the implementation of RPL in South Africa. This led to significant achievements in resource and guideline provision for RPL.

Because of the priority of action the publication of the full set of workshop papers was delayed. After a comprehensive process of peer review it became clear that:

- all 20 papers submitted plus the two introductory addresses offer a rich mine of resources for insights and historical perspectives relating to RPL
- a number of the papers make enduring contributions to the understanding of RPL
- many of the documents are not "finished" academic products, but rather collocations out of theses, company policy and guideline documents or institutional research reports

Accepting that the whole collection constitutes a rich and varied resource, SAQA has decided to make them all available in a SAQA Bulletin in electronic form only.

The papers have been lightly edited for correctness. Major editorial interventions in the structure, coherence and argumentation of the papers were not considered suitable or feasible. The reader is encouraged to use the publication as a reflection of intensive work-in-progress at a moment in time. This approach should not, however, lessen the achievements in conceptual and practical growth seen in the papers published here.
Chairperson; distinguished visitors; fellow participants; our path toward the achievement of social justice in education and training has been marked by many milestones and some wrong turnings.

If all goes to plan in the next few days, by Friday afternoon we will have erected one more milestone in the form of a cogent, research-based map toward a powerful new national Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system and implementation strategy.

Thanks are due to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), not just for arranging the conference but for the colossal preparatory work that has preceded it, the work of many months and years. These preparations have involved the mobilisation of expert resources across the whole terrain of institutional and workplace learning as well as the sponsorship and coordination of important research—hard intellectual work in conceptualisation, method and application—that distinguishes our conference programme and that will light our way as we go forward.

Special thanks are due too to our international visitors, who have been generous enough not just to attend but to share the fruits of their own hard-won research and experience. It is a truism that every country is different; each system’s dynamic is unique. It is also a truism that no country is an island, especially not in our era, and that learning is not deterred by boundaries but penetrates them with enthusiasm. As South Africans we will treat you as our own while you are here, and we will expect you to talk as frankly as if you were on home ground.

It is 25 years since a labour union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), and then a labour federation, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), first raised the RPL banner in defence of workers’ rights to fair job grading and decent wages.

The National Training Strategy Initiative report of 1994 was a great victory for the democratic labour movement and its allies in the education sector because that project successfully lodged RPL (and the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)) on the national policy agenda.

RPL and the NQF were adopted as part of the African National Congress’s (ANC’s) National Education Policy Framework in 1994. The ANC and its Alliance partners incorporated RPL unambiguously into the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) initiated at the time. The
RPL base document had this to say:

By establishing a National Qualifications Framework which integrates all elements of the education and training system, we must enable learners to progress to higher levels from any starting point. They must be able to obtain recognition and credits for qualifications and credits towards qualifications, from one part of the system to another. The system must enable assessment and recognition of prior learning and skills acquired through experience. To this end, curricula should cut across traditional divisions of skills and knowledge.

That was sixteen years ago, and the words sound as fresh as if they had been written yesterday! Colleagues and comrades, RPL is a sixteen-year-old promise. The NQF has been delivered. It is now an indispensable and universally acknowledged national institution. The integration of the education and training system is (at last) moving from rhetoric to reality, with the reorganisation of government and the creation of the Ministry of Higher Education and Training. But the state still has to deliver fully on the promise of RPL made 16 years ago by the democratic forces on the eve of our first democratic election.

What does that mean? It means that where RPL was not available to a worker to test her knowledge and skill and receive credit that same worker sixteen years on has not reaped the benefit of her knowledge and skill; the workplace has been denied that worker’s advancement; and that worker’s family and the economy they support are that much the poorer.

I would like to urge you all to talk about and give consideration to the problems as well as the successes in your experiences. What makes RPL successful and what leads it to fail or at least to be less successful than it should be? What are the conceptual problems that must be clarified and what are the potential problems related to implementation? Is RPL more successful in certain circumstances than in others? Is it more successful, for example, for recognising the skills of carpenters than of teachers? What are the differences between RPL which leads to the recognition of skills required for certification of, say, an artisan and the recognition of learning in order to open access to university studies?

One of the things that we would have expected of ourselves fifteen years ago was that we would have had a well functioning system of RPL in place by now. As we all know this has not happened even though we have had our successes (the islands of excellence referred to in the theme of this conference).

Maybe we need to be admonished for our slow progress, but far more important is to understand why progress has been so slow. Is it the way we have understood the concept of RPL? Have we had a common understanding of what RPL should be in the South African context? Has it been implemented

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1 The previous Department of Education was restructured to form two departments: Department of Higher Education and Training; and Department of Basic Education and Training.
poorly, with too much red tape and lack of clarity regarding our goals and purposes?

Let’s not forget that when we embraced RPL in the mid 1990s, most of us believed fervently that it was one way to a more just society. So why has it made so much less progress than we had hoped for and expected?

The kind of answers that we arrive at will affect the livelihoods along with the hopes and aspirations, and the unfulfilled talents of millions of learners and workers.

As a country we must develop a viable, evidence-based, credible policy and plan for the national Recognition of Prior Learning system. These are the immediate tasks. If additional resources need to be invested in the application of that system, which will undoubtedly be the case, then we at the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) have an obligation to make the most convincing case we can, not just to the National Treasury, but to the National Skills Authority (NSA) and the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) for the appropriate allocation of funds already in the public domain via the skills levy.

A national RPL system must be responsive to a myriad of learning and workplace environments, formal and non-formal. Fortunately we have a well-developed institutional base, in our SETAs, Further Education and Training (FET) colleges and universities that can be enlisted in the common cause and contribute their knowledge of their own industrial and disciplinary fields to the development of a responsive RPL system.

Institutional conservatism and inertia and the negative power of vested interests, are likely to be significant obstacles on the path to effective implementation. That is where a well-researched system, based on well-considered experience and well-planned pilots, and backed by convincing mobilisation of resources, will prove to be a formidable instrument of persuasion.

I would urge you to tackle the problems head on; do not accept anything uncritically because others will not. Don’t shy away from self-criticism where it is due. If we assume that we as an education community and an RPL community are not due for criticism either by ourselves or by others we are failing to recognise the problems that are so patently obvious to everyone. You in this conference are South Africa’s experts in the recognition of prior learning. Your main task here is not to defend your turf or your record although this too may be necessary at times. Your main task here is to think incisively about the problems of RPL with a view to strengthening it for the benefit of all South Africans, but particularly for those who need RPL to allow them to fulfill their potential.

I thank you.

John Pampallis

SPECIAL ADVISOR TO THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING
Notes
Conference dinner address

Why are we so disabled? Higher Education and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) challenge

Professor Ari Sitas,
Director of Ministerial Task Team: Charter of the Humanities and Social Science
University of Cape Town

I so hoped that you had invited me as an academic, a fantasy man to speak about my personal experiments with educational convictions that everyone has, even you and me; creative and productive talents and how these could be nurtured, stretched and realised. And how over the last three decades such an active effort by a range of thinkers and doers sought to remove constraints and thought that it was possible to move from a system of closures to create a system of openness, creativity and solidarity.

We could have been discussing oral cultures, forms of story-telling, theoretical parables and a range of know-hows that are or should be part of our intellectual heritage. I wish that I could share with you my frustrations too, with an economic system that promises so much whilst at the same time condemns the majority into a world of drudgery, cognitive death and alienation.

Alas, I have to be detached, focused and responsible: my task tonight has to be a reflection on the challenge of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in relation to developing a Charter for the Humanities and Social Sciences (CHSS).

After all, RPL has proven difficult in our educational landscape, despite the acceptance of the principle and despite serious spurts of energy to achieve it. This conference itself bears witness to the seriousness of the issue and for those of us who remember the 1970s and 1980s, it is heartening that the principle is still alive as the key proponents of it, are moving towards retirement and beyond it to the land of the high winds.

We would all agree that the principle involves the recognition of a sustained application of cognitive effort in the worlds of work and the worlds of social interaction - an effort which can be demonstrated to an appropriate authorising committee, council, or structure.

Furthermore, very few people will deny the importance of embedded experience in the corporate sector and civil service ï Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes thrive on that, and so does the proliferation of public administration programmes worldwide and in this country.
As from October 2010 when the Task Team to develop a charter for the future of the Humanities and Social Sciences was announced by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, our team and its reference groups have been deeply concerned about access to our tertiary institutions and how we could bring the wisdom accumulated in the qualification authorities and the manifold centres of application and research concerned with prior learning and its recognition closer to our more specific concerns.

Our Task Team has been involved in extensive visits to and workshops with all tertiary institutions from those that are furthest north to those in the south. So far we have listened in detail to ten of our institutions and already we sense that where we expected certainty and experimentation, we have encountered a lot of self-doubt.

What I would like to do this evening is to sketch five dimensions that make the principle of RPL particularly difficult in the South Africa of the 21st century and how these principles create the disablement already alluded to.

But before we do so, we have to understand a key imaginative and seductive fiction that allows us to organise the world around us: that we live in perfect social systems that, left to themselves reproduce themselves ad infinitum that their steering and navigating heights steer, institutions get steered and we help steering or get steered too in more or less predictable ways.

Within such a framework the solution to the RPL challenge would be simple. The correct people who are the standard bearers and standard gate-keepers in the tertiary world of knowledge would be gathered together in designated fields and define what in the world of work and the worlds of social interaction constitute significant knowledge or learnings to be recognised. All that governments would need to do would be to create a framework of how it is to be done and allow some flexibility for field-based and institutional variation.

The standard-bearers and keepers would recommend how RPL would be part of access policies, or in some cases function to provide credit co-equivalents beyond access. In rare cases it could constitute a leap above undergraduate levels towards post-graduate access. All this is necessary and common sense stuff.

Of course, the imaginative fiction of this working social system is important for most of us - it allows us to design institutions, put procedures into place and create synergistic vectors in the governance of daily life.

The problem with the current period is that it is marked by challenges that undermine and make vulnerable the standard-bearing and standard-maintenance aspects of our institutions. These challenges make RPL like decision points of tension rather than points of expert-led consensus. The
CHSS Task Team listened carefully and this is how it pans out for the moment.

There is turbulence at all times because we all understand the simple historical insight that capitalism itself is dynamically creative and destructive; in times of acute downturn or crisis it creates enormous systemic uncertainty.

The five challenges outlined here are over and above such systemic turbulence; they comprise: the technological revolutions of the late 20th century and their consequent proliferation; the social transformation or revolution we are currently experiencing in South Africa; the challenge between expansion of access necessary for the circulation of post-apartheid elites, and systemic and professional pressures for constriction; the permanent misfit between models of success and our perceived everyday realities, and finally the philosophical assumptions of best-practice in the West versus the economic realities of a globalising South. Each of these challenges is dealt with briefly here.

1. TECHNOLOGICAL REVOLUTION

It is obvious that technological revolutions render unstable the standard-bearers in any tertiary system of education and training. The proliferation of knowledge, learning and know-how in the broader society where a lot of the innovation and improvisation is taking place brings with it an enormous challenge. This situation is even more so in South Africa. It has been hard enough that creating new society has proven to be a vulnerable project and our educational mission fragile; it is harder still that the world around us has unleashed tremendous forces and itineraries of change.

In the words of Manuel Castells (1997:1), the sociological pundit of the new information age:

“a technological revolution, centered around information, has transformed the way we think, we produce, we consume, we trade, we manage, we communicate, we live, we die, we make war and we make love.” And he continues in a tone pregnant with warnings - “a dynamic global economy has been constituted around the planet, linking up valuable people and activities from all over the world, while switching off from the network of power and wealth, people and territories dubbed as irrelevant from the perspective of dominant interests” (1997: 1).

The informational revolution on the one hand, the genetic revolution on the other; their varied combinations; the integration of a number of new technologies; and the proliferation of a variety of commodities that have embedded complex research and development inputs, make standard-bearers insecure and fractious.

After RPL-like decisions we are told that our landscape is littered with failures as the varied capacities that have been recognised did not match the demands of progression in our institutions; that the skill matrices of global competitiveness and the knowledge economy have been unkind to our local efforts.
The global economy created its own traditionalists and modernisers, its new experts and critics, its putative success stories. It is very hard to distinguish between fashion and substance, depth in knowledge and posturing.

2. THE SOCIAL REVOLUTION

The instability associated with the global economy is punctuated by the social revolution that has been underway in South Africa. Although much has been said about learning in social and anti-systemic movements, in non-government organisations (NGOs), faith-based associations or development projects, much of the skills and cognitive forms of prowess are of the oral world with its own epistemological limits. The chasm between the oral and the written continues despite the theories that so wonderfully attempt to bridge them - the entire university canon is primarily on the side of the written despite the orality of new media and new technologies; and for those who have made it we have been informed, there is little success beyond the more critical fields of inquiry.

But since the processes of change are also about race, gender and a host of disabilities, any closure is seen as a sociological reproduction of an apartheid-tinged and a sexism-infused world order of discriminations. Yet, any standard-bearing is disabled by contestations over race, gender and in many cases Eurocentric biases.

Where it gets tricky is when working class people (in most cases black people) with experience, popular wisdom and knowledge in everyday life, who are members of strong organisations and movements, attempt to receive such or similar recognition - usually respect and validation remains within their respective communities but it rarely translates into tertiary education access.

When such capacities meet the educational sector with its own protocols and criteria the problem becomes pronounced if not profound. For many years Adult Education and community development centres/schools and some of the Social Sciences have been trying to validate RPL, conduct action research, and provide policy-linked answers.

Ironically, there is also the opposite pressure: the world’s anti-systemic movements are moving away from credentialism and towards a new phase of collective people’s education.

3. ELITE CIRCULATION

In times of change the role of tertiary institutions as clearing houses in the stratification of society and in the circulation of its professional elites is deeply strained. On the one hand, the raison d’être of access policies is about constriction rather than openness. This institutional bias coupled with professional associations trying to restrict the uncontrolled growth of graduates in their domains gets into conflict with the challenges of qualifying many more people in society.
4. CONTINUOUS OUT OF JOINT-NESS

The models of success that have been sought as bench-marks for our skill and education pedagogy and design most often define a world of developmental deficits. There is always the gap between what they claim as success as opposed to what we have in place.

The definition of incapacities and deficits spawns many training and educational specialists who have a continuous interest in re-dressing a shifting set of training requirements. The existing working population and the prospective one - such as unemployed youth - are constantly trapped in a paradigm of 'lack' which always measures what they do not have as opposed to what they might have.

5. THE KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY AND POST-INDUSTRIAL DISCOURSES

Due to the dominance of North American and European scholarship, it is assumed that the world is in a phase where services and knowledge are at the heart of our economic futures (needing to move beyond Fordism) and therefore a certain mix of design is necessary. This picture is partly accurate but it ignores that the world is not post-industrial (production in tonnage terms has tripled since the 1970s globally, the heyday of Fordism) and large chunks of our economy are trapped and will for a long time get their sustenance from productive and mass-producing mines, industry and agriculture. The mental and manual divisions of Fordism continue and the most cherished jobs are of a semi-skilled and low cognitive nature.

6. FOUR AREAS OF DELIBERATION

Each one of these five areas discussed above, singularly or in a variety of combinations affect the capacity of the system to respond, define and authorise. In CHSS related discussions with deans and academics involved with admissions and access at faculty level; with institutions that deal with trade union and skills development training; senior people in the human resource development world; educational consultants and social movement leaders so far point to serious challenges.

Even assuming a benign number of experts at the gates of the tertiary system, we would be hard-pressed in the Humanities and Social Sciences to understand some of the ingenuity involved in the techniques of animation, musical montages, game programming, hacking and communicative innovation. I could go in detail into each one of the challenges and what it would involve but it would take a nightshift worth of points.

Most certainly the Charter for the Human and Social Sciences will need to place RPL and its relation to access as a central consideration and we expect to say something sensible by June this year. For that, we will need your help.
But what should we be looking for? Our encounters thus far point to four areas of deliberation and I list them because we need to converse about them.

Firstly we have to move away from a narrow definition of work and/or labour - we have to look at work and by implication production as the expenditure of human effort and energy for the creation of useful, reproductive, symbolic, aesthetic, relational and cognitive values. In most cases in contemporary economies these activities (or these energies) are translated into labour power for exchange purposes. In most cases of such labouring there is very little cognitive or creative effort, and training remains a repetitive task-related routine.

Nevertheless, the duty of all trainers is to enhance the most routine forms of training by encouraging more cognitive complexity; more design; more inventiveness and more coordination skills in even their simplest of modules - even if they are intended for simple and lowly skilled jobs.

What we should be looking for in the complex world of work, defined by new technological infrastructures and activities, by the interplay of the formal and the non-formal, are the signs of creative and cognitively enhanced activities. It is a misnomer to look at the value-chains of any work process, local or global, as the terrain of formal work. As an aside, thanks to the Commission on the Unregulated Sector, 2010 of India: it is staggering to understand that the majority of workers in the formal economy are informal and unregulated. And we should be helping the development into demonstrable portfolios of competence.

A second area of deliberation is the complexity of ways in which people who have neither economic nor educational forms of capital are handled in the context of daily pressures of life. People form instrumental and defensive combinations, and create cultural formations and networks of solidarity and care. Some of these formations are sustained movements or organisations, women's collectives and associational institutions: the largest in South Africa is the trade unions that look after a substantial percentage of people.

Not only should RPL practitioners be concerned about the development of demonstrable competencies but we do need to witness the proliferation of training and further education institutions to expand the pool of skilled labour.

A third area for consideration is that by now there is consensus that learning is polyvalent: it happens everywhere. When RPL happens, and when it occurs despite all coefficients of adversity, many incumbents fail, or to be more generous, they succeed in some areas but not in many others.

Furthermore, the tacit skills of the workplace skills of handling technical problems meet their limit. The transition to technological and engineering skills, let alone design skills is very taxing; the design of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the attempts by the South African Qualifications
Authority (SAQA) to create rational steps point to invisible borders - levels are difficult to be transported as the policy wishes. Despite the developmental ideology of most of our institutions of higher learning they do hide a serious scorn and reticence to open up to the broader majority. It is not a technical problem; it is a deeply sociological one. Can such mobility be achieved in a society punctuated by class, race and gender stratifications?

Fourthly, most certainly we are moving away from an old problem and we need to face the new: in ten years time very few of the older oral-knowledge generation will be with us. Who will be though, from a younger generation are those who had left school by their mid-teens; those who received non-portable matriculation certificates those who had not completed tertiary degrees. Their attempts to re-enter the educational system will vary but assuming there is a significant gap in years, the Schools of Adult, Continuing and Community Education will have to refine their criteria for RPL proactively, fully aware of new technological and social realities.

7. CREATING AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT

We understand these four areas of thought; namely, (1) broadening understanding of production to include enhance cognitive complexity and inventiveness (2) existing cultural formation and the need to increase the number of education and training institutions (3) the need to embrace different kinds of learning more fully; and (4) an under-prepared younger generation of individuals that arise from our institutions. We recognize that there cannot be simplistic solutions. To even consider solutions we have to develop a consensus around an educational vision that is enabling. We cannot wallow in a Brahminical caste-world of those already-empowered or devise more intricate Mandarin-like examination points to keep the upper echelons of our system pure and enlightened.

In creating an enabling environment we would have to respect the philosophy underpinning SAQA: that each human being has to have an equal chance to actualise his or her talents through an open system that allows people to move from zero-complexity to its zenith. But it need not be bureaucratic - an open-system is not about bureaucratic rule and over-regulation. The latter subsists on institutional mistrust - we need to mature beyond that, so that there is trust.

RPL remains, however we tweak it, an issue of social justice and an issue of skilling our society. It is a key demand in the country’s democratic revolution and it challenges the principles of all movements - the Freedom Charter, where the doors of learning should have been opened by now; the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) with its strong emphasis of self-emancipation, and the African Renaissance movement which seeks a re-affirmation of the talents and capacities of all Africans. Against our very principles we strain to show success!

We know now that success matters that are educational is a product of three factors: when the institutional matrix of a society allows for seedbeds of innovation and creativity to flourish; when a
society invests in quality development of its human capacities; and when there is a motivational structure that urges innovation and performance.

We are convinced that there is no going back to a past that never existed - we have to make a concerted effort to create a proper and acceptable RPL system. We have the imperative to redress skill shortages and enhance existing skills levels. We need to understand the strength of our existing efforts and trumpet out our innovations. But we also have to be brutally honest about our weaknesses and challenges.

I thank you for giving me the platform to raise uncomfortable realities.
REFERENCE

PRESENTATIONS
Section 1

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for access
Do learners accessing Higher Education through alternative routes need more support than those who enter via conventional routes?

Ms Jillian Appollis,
Helderberg College

ABSTRACT

This research explores the proposition that candidates who gain alternative 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 (PDC) is not enough preparation for embarking on academic studies. The question is, what kind of student support would mature adult learners require compared to that required by students who have just graduated from high school and entered Higher Education via the conventional route? 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 account for their higher levels of motivation and success in Higher Education institution than that experienced by those younger and less experienced peers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The research question was: What are the perceptions of RPL candidates regarding the appropriateness of the RPL initiative at Helderberg College in terms of preparing students for study at the college? This study looks at the practice of RPL at a private higher education institution. The practice of RPL at Helderberg College comprises a Portfolio Development Course (PDC), an interview with an assessment panel and writing the National Bench Mark Test. RPL candidates may either be recommended for Senate’s Discretionary Acceptance into the Degree Programme; it may be recommended that they do the Foundation Year programme after which they may receive Senate’s Discretionary Acceptance; or they may not be accepted. The RPL process takes place over a period of three weeks. Currently only students doing BA Theology have been retained.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The research design can be described as predominantly qualitative comprising interviews with purposively selected RPL candidates (Mertens 1998). The research instruments comprised semi-structured interviews and student records.
3. SAMPLING

Purposive sampling was used. Six students were interviewed, two from each of the three cohorts (first, second and third year of study, as indicated in the table below) that had gained access via RPL since 2008. The Faculty Chair of the Theology Faculty and two lecturers were also interviewed. It was felt that this number of staff interviews would be representative out of a total of six full-time lecturers. The facilitator of the Portfolio Development Course was also interviewed.

The table immediately below provides some background details for the six RPL respondents. It includes: (i) a description of the academic (school and other training); (ii) work experience background of each participant; and (iii) the year of study for which they were registered. The last three columns indicate (iv) the current cumulative averages of the participants; (v) the range of cumulative averages of other students in the same year of study and the same stream; and (vi) the final column provides an average of the students who are in the same year and stream.
Do learners accessing Higher Education through alternative routes need more support than those who enter via conventional routes?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Qualification and level passed</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Other training received before entry at Helderberg College</th>
<th>Work experience</th>
<th>Year of study</th>
<th>Cumulative average in %</th>
<th>Range of other students</th>
<th>Average % of stream</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passed Grade 11 and wrote Matric but failed in 2005</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>• Basic HIV &amp; AIDS counseling (short course)</td>
<td>• Driver for the aged</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>45.76</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed 6 subjects for the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate in 1999.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Intec College passed:</td>
<td>Part-time writer (Newspaper); • Health worker • Secretary • Programmes Manager (Radio)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>46.86</td>
<td>64.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passed Grade 12 in 2004.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>• Basic HIV/AIDS Counselling • Literature Evangelist (selling religious books); • Contracting in parks</td>
<td>• Project Manager (farming and gardening) • Literature Evangelist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>51.85</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Passed 3 subjects in the General Certificate of Lesotho

Passed Grade 11 in 2001

Passed Grade 10 in 2002.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passed Grade 11 in 2001</th>
<th>35</th>
<th>• Security training (short courses)</th>
<th>Security Force worker Evangelist</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>45</th>
<th>45-76</th>
<th>62.4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passed Grade 10 in 2002.</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>• Security training (short courses)</td>
<td>Waiter; Manager; General Liaison Director; Operational Manager</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>51-85</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>56.8</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>62.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Perception of students entering via the RPL route

The six students entering via the RPL route felt that the PDC prepared them mentally for academic studies and gave them insight into the demands of Higher Education. These six students indicated that students who entered Higher Education via the traditional route could deal with academic pace and pressures better than those who had studied years before; but those entering via the RPL route could master subject content more easily as the traditional full time students as they had gained organisational time management and communication skills through their work and life experiences.

Three of the students entering via the RPL route expressed the idea that interpersonal skills which they developed in the workplace helped them to interact with fellow students and with the lecturers in helpful ways. It was specifically stated that interaction with lecturers and students did not distract them from learning as seemed to be the case with some students who had just completed school. These three students (entering via the RPL route) stated that the RPL process had been sufficient preparation for Higher Education for them. Some did suggest that it would be beneficial to start the first semester with a lighter load so that they could adjust to the pace of Higher Education. Some
participants suggested that the PDC could be lengthened and that more people should be involved with the presentation.

4.2 The lecturers

The two lecturers and Chair of the Faculty who were interviewed were of the opinion that the RPL process was satisfactory but that it could be augmented by more tests to substantiate the evidence provided by the portfolio. Although the evidence suggested that candidates had the potential and skill to enter into Higher Education, processes could be introduced to prepare candidates more fully for academic studies.

The two lecturers and Chair of the Faculty felt that they could not generalize performances of students entering via the RPL route but that it could possibly reflect the performance trend of the rest of the student body. One lecturer, however, felt strongly that their performance was poorer than that of other students; this claim was anecdotal.

4.3 The PDC facilitator

The PDC facilitator indicated that candidates were generally enthusiastic about the PDC, although at first they found it challenging to hand assignments in on time. Some candidates had difficulties with English. The facilitator found it difficult to generalize about the academic ability of this particular group of participants especially because their backgrounds and experiences varied widely. He suggested that the following processes could complement the PDC in preparing RPL candidates to cope with the demands of academic life:

- An introductory course to computer literacy;
- A "buddy" system in which a senior student would mentor an RPL candidate;
- A reading assignment dealing with the preparation for academic success which is assigned before the commencement of the PDC; and
- Individual tutoring in some cases.

4. CONCLUSION

The students entering via the RPL route felt confident that the PDC course and the RPL processes in their entirety are sufficient to prepare them for entry into Higher Education. The majority of the students entering via the RPL route had no problem adjusting to the work load of the first semester.

Skills and experience gained in the workplace such as organisational, interpersonal and communication skills, gave students entering via the RPL route better insight into their field of study and, working under pressure helped them cope with the pressure of meeting deadlines.
The performance levels of students entering via the RPL route could not be generalized. These levels appear to reflect the performance trends of the rest of the student body. Student records confirm that students entering via the RPL route have varied experiences and performance levels.

Records also confirm that students entering via the RPL route are not the poorest performers in their streams and year groups but fit within the range of cumulative averages. In two cases the performance of students entering via the RPL route is higher than the average, the rest are below average and two are under-performing with a cumulative average of below 50%. More needs to be done to ensure that the majority of students entering via the RPL route performance levels could at least compare favourably with the performance of the average student.

A suggestion for further study is to explore possibilities which could augment the RPL process to prepare students sufficiently for Higher Education.
Do learners accessing Higher Education through alternative routes need more support than those who enter via conventional routes?

REFERENCE


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

Mr Nigel Prinsloo,
The FET Institute, University of the Western Cape

ABSTRACT

In this research paper, the nature and form of RPL practices within two public FET colleges have been investigated to consider whether social justice objectives of access and redress contained in national and institutional policies are being met in practice. This research objective is framed by the research question: "How do public Further Education and Training colleges understand and implement RPL?" Using a qualitative research methodology comprising interviews and surveys of a number of policies, the study investigates the extent to which RPL policy intentions are being implemented in practice. The study found that RPL policy is being implemented to a limited extent, the RPL practices are limited and that where RPL practices were found, an instrumentalist approach is evident. The study also found little evidence of the RPL policy intentions of access and redress reflected in practice. This is because the institutional systems to allow these objectives to be achieved either do not exist or are inadequately resourced.

1. INTRODUCTION

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 employed. The research focused on courses in two engineering fields which purported to include RPL practices. The study focused on programmes leading to learnerships, Competency Based Modular Training (CBMT) and trade testing. The research question therefore asked: How do public 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 an inherently political process. Thinking critically, he holds, is mostly defined as the process of unearthing, and then researching, the assumptions one operates under, 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 RPL policy as practiced.

This research is a qualitative study and relies on first-hand experiences obtained through semi-
structured interviews and 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, involving a provincial education department official, two Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA) representatives and eight public FET college staff members (four per college) involved in RPL. The public FET college personnel were selected by the researcher on the basis of their involvement with RPL and their teaching of courses. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, while field notes on interviews held supplemented the transcripts.

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

The study reveals that there are similar conceptions of RPL amongst practitioners but varying RPL practices in these colleges. It was not possible to obtain the extent to which learners progressed through RPL as there was no record of students entering via this route. Respondents explained that this was so that RPL students were not stigmatised. 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 existed, these reflected an instrumentalist approach. Standard assessment regimes were used to assess candidates through a Òpre-trade testÓ or they were allowed to progress faster through a module based on their performance. Disadvantaged students were not actively recruited for RPL purposes and RPL, though seen as valuable, was not particularly viewed in terms of redress. The social justice imperative of transformative policy was therefore not being reflected in practice.

2. METHODOLOGY

A research questionnaire was developed based on the research questions of this paper. A scoping exercise was done and contact was made with potential respondents to assess their willingness to participate in the research. Individual interviews were held with identified personnel who were once again informed of the nature of the research and the assurance of confidentiality.

Eleven interviews were conducted. This involved one Provincial Education Department official, two Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETA) representatives and eight public FET college personnel (four per college) involved in RPL. The public FET college personnel were chosen on the basis of their involvement with RPL and their teaching on the programmes or courses identified by the researcher. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, while field notes supplemented such transcripts.
The choice of SETAs was based on the economic sectors in which trade testing, apprenticeship and learnerships were evident at both the selected public FET colleges. The SETAs were also selected because their RPL policies had been adopted by the colleges concerned. Desktop research investigated definitions and understandings of RPL while RPL policies both at a macro (national) and micro (college) level were analysed. Drawing on the research questions and sub-questions, interview questions were developed and piloted. The primary focus of the interview was to assess what RPL practices were occurring within public FET colleges.

3. LIMITATIONS

This research paper focuses on three relatively small programmes that are offered by two large departments within two public FET colleges. These are trade tests, Competency Based Modular Training and learnerships. Within these programmes two industry sectors were identified and on that basis, two SETAs who had existing RPL policies were approached. Hence there is a lack of generalisability of the findings and further research will be necessary to validate these.

The study did not investigate the RPL assessment tools as its primary aim is the investigation of RPL practices within the two public FET colleges. The researcher did however see a sample of tools and these provided key insights into the arguments made later in the study.

As far as could be ascertained, there were no records of RPL candidates among the official records of public FET colleges. In addition, due to the nature and scope of the research, only practitioners in the public FET colleges, SETA and Provincial Education Department staff were interviewed. This excluded students and private providers of education and training. This study also excludes new developments in RPL within the public FET colleges as the data gathering process was concluded in October 2008. Hence the analysis of the data, the findings and conclusions reached need to be seen in the defined scope of this paper.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Lecturer conceptions

Data gathered from Mountain College\(^2\) revealed that conceptions of RPL are based on ideas of equity and are instrumentalist in their application. Respondents from Mountain College mentioned that RPL was the measuring of candidates\’ skills against set standards.

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\(^2\) Mountain and Sea colleges are pseudonyms to protect the identity of FET colleges
Mr. Akoojee and Mr. Julie note that many can in fact do the job and just require the certificate. They suggest that a candidate should not be disadvantaged if she/ he can do the job competently and should be remunerated for this competence.

A perceived advantage of RPL stated by Mr. Akoojee was that it allowed the learners to progress though the CBMT (Competency Based Modular Training) course faster (Prinsloo 2010). RPL was also used as a diagnostic tool in the pre-trade tests which allowed skills gaps to be identified and corrective measures to be taken.

There were some financial benefits to Mountain College campuses which have trade testing venues, but most were not covering their costs. In some cases there were increased enrolments in skills programmes by candidates who had not been successful in their trade tests and those with identified skills gaps.

Most of the respondents from Sea College mentioned that RPL was the measuring of the candidates’ skills against set standards. They noted that there was not a lot of RPL happening.

The conception of RPL amongst Sea College lectures varied across lecturers. Some viewed RPL as the assessment of specific skills acquired outside the institutional contexts and assessed against predetermined unit standards (Mr. Julie; Mr. Sylvester). Others such as Mr. Maart viewed RPL as an audit of a person’s knowledge and skills in order that it assists [him] in achieving a qualification in the future (Prinsloo 2010). RPL in this view is about giving credit within a qualification. Another conception perceives RPL as a form of diagnostic assessment (Mr. Green). This form of RPL is frequently used as a strategy to provide access to a qualification rather than giving credit within a qualification.

RPL was also conceived of in terms of what it can do for candidates. One of the advantages of RPL noted by the interviewees was that it is used as a diagnostic tool. Mr. Sylvester noted that in the pre-trade tests learners’ skills gaps were identified and corrective measures were offered (Prinsloo 2010). Though financial benefits to Sea College campuses with trade testing venues were noted, most felt that the advantages accrued to the students more than to the institution.

Despite the variation in lecturer conceptions of RPL, they do not critique the pedagogical validity of the practice. Accordingly, it can be argued that Sea College lecturers’ conceptions of RPL are limited to their specific practices rather than the educational philosophy that underpins RPL practices. These practices reflect an instrumentalist conception of RPL and closely resemble the Credit Exchange Model (Osman 2003). It is evident that the Human Capital Theory conception of learning dominates current RPL Practices within both the trade tests and Competency Based Modular Training within both colleges.

3 Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of respondents
4.2 Institutional Practices

From the research it appears that the RPL which is done is either diagnostic in nature (pre-trade tests) or credit is awarded for certain skills or modules (learnerships and CBMT).

In cases where RPL has been applied, it is evident that RPL candidates benefit in that they gain their qualification in a shorter time, which in turn reduces their financial costs.

A respondent (Mr. Maart) noted:

For the college in a sense I think it is more for the learner because it assists the learner in acquiring, it could allow him to acquire a qualification in a shorter period of time for arguments sake. Where a normal qualification institutional training would be 23 weeks but due to prior learning that can actually be halved, so his actual institutional stay would be much less (Prinsloo 2010).

Another respondent (Mr. Heerden) noted:

They would be able to get credit for their module and would be able to get more on site experience but still have to do the two year learnership. As they would finish the module sooner their chances of getting a job improves. This was the first time we did the learnership so we will know how to fast-track next time (Prinsloo 2010).

As stated earlier under limitations, the researcher could not quantify the number of RPL candidates as their details were not recorded. The lack of institutional records seems to indicate that RPL was not a priority for public FET colleges at the time.

Despite the lack of institutional records related to RPL candidates, interviewees noted that a very small number of students did gain access to programmes through institutional RPL services. The respondents estimated that approximately 1 to 8% of the student population within learnerships made use of RPL services (Prinsloo 2010). It must be emphasised that these figures are estimates, as evident in the statement below:
4.2.1 Limited implementation

At the public FET colleges, there were traditional RPL practices in trade testing and Competency Based Modular Training (CBMT). Trade testing and CBMT had a historical link to Sea College as it had trade testing centres. Mountain College was in the process of seeking accreditation to establish a Trade Test Centre. However, very little had changed in trade testing, CBMT and learnerships.

4.2.2 Loss of Expertise

Even though the RPL capacity was generally low at the public FET colleges, the capacity was further eroded by high staff turnover. There has also been a loss of key RPL expertise in some public FET colleges as a result of restructuring.

The public FET colleges at the time did not have a strategy and/or plan to systematically train their staff involved in RPL. This together with the loss of existing RPL expertise will have a significant impact on the continued implementation of RPL at public FET college level.

4.2.3 Cost of RPL

RPL carries a high cost to the institution. Most of the respondents mentioned that the cost of resourcing of testing centres and employing staff costs was high. "RPL is a very expensive process." was the comment of several of the interviewees. The costs in both human and capital resources make RPL potentially unsustainable. Mr. Sylvester noted that "We are struggling to cover our costs." (Prinsloo 2010). Mr. Green noted that the high capital cost of setting up a trade test venue was prohibitive and that he was in conversation with the SETA to find funding.

Consequently there are prohibitive costs to learners. Other researchers including Luckett (1999) and Ryan (1996) have noted that learners carry significant costs when requesting RPL, especially in the low skills segment of the economy. Many low skilled contract workers preferred to be trade tested, as learnerships are viewed as burdensome because of their long duration and cost. RPL candidates would often not be supported by their employers and would lose a day’s wages in travelling to the...
trade test venues, although some public FET college trade test officials go to the work site to assess the learners, as stated by Mr. Small:

There are two types of trade test centres in South Africa. The Olifantsfontein Trade Test Centre for example is state-subsidised as opposed to the Public FET college trade test centres which are more expensive. In addition, there are a limited number of learners per year at public FET colleges, which affects the viability of some of the centres (Prinsloo 2010).

This is consistent with the literature on RPL which suggests that the cost issue is arguably one of the primary reasons for the non take-up of RPL (Luckett 1999; Ryan 1996). This study has shown that the financial costs related to RPL implementation might contribute to public FET colleges not offering RPL services.

5. RPL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

There was little evidence of social justice intentions in the two public FET college RPL practices. Mountain College respondents noted that they offered RPL to those referred to them by the SETAs for trade testing or they targeted those already employed in learnerships or they had CBMT artisans sent to them by industry. Though acknowledging the importance of social justice to redress past inequalities, the recruitment system and financial and time constraints prevented them from a targeted approach.

The respondents noted that the challenge to increase the social justice intentions of RPL was at the level of implementation.

Respondents from Sea College confirmed that though social justice imperatives were important, they took whoever was available and did not specifically target previously disadvantaged people. Resourcing was a key concern and without sufficient resources, achieving social justice would be difficult.

Harris (2000) as well as Ralphs and Hendricks (2001) and Luckett (1999), discuss social justice as the need for inclusivity and redress. Neal (1996) emphasizes the need for agency and lobbying in order to ensure the success of policy initiatives. In addition to ensuring that social justice is included in policies, institutions need to translate these objectives into the curriculum and assessment processes.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study offers 3 key recommendations:

First, with regards to RPL policy, the study highlights the need for FET college-wide, uniform RPL
implementation guidelines that are easy to use. These implementation guidelines need to be integrated within the FET college assessment policy and allow for articulation and credit awarding processes.

Second, the study recommends that RPL practices should accommodate different languages and knowledges and that resourcing and training needs to increase to achieve the transformation necessary to provide effective access and redress.

Third, regarding social justice, the study suggests that increased resourcing to target specifically the marginalized should be initiated to achieve RPL policy intentions of access and redress. Social justice objectives should be seen as part of the assessment policies of the FET colleges.

This study is particularly relevant because, though RPL has been studied in Higher Education (HE) institutions and international Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, there is limited literature on RPL practices in South African public FET colleges. This study therefore contributes to a growing body of literature on RPL practices in FET college settings.

Furthermore, this study investigates the relationship between policy and practice at a local institutional level within two public FET institutions and the extent to which social justice concerns of access and redress which appears in the SETA and college RPL policies is applied in practice.

Finally, this study took place at a time when the two public FET colleges and the concept of RPL are in the midst of several government initiatives to address skills shortages. Learnerships and skills programmes offered by colleges are seen as important to addressing this. This research will therefore contribute to ongoing studies within the FET college field.

6.1 Specific Recommendations 1: Improving RPL implementation

From the analysis of the data the following policy suggestions on RPL were proposed by respondents:

Recommendation 1: Develop uniform RPL guidelines across colleges

Implement a college-wide policy that would allow FET colleges to implement RPL in a more standardised way. From an initial scoping exercise the study found that most FET colleges in the Western Province either had RPL policies not in the public domain (2 FET colleges) or were in the process of completing their policies (4 FET colleges). The need for uniform and user-friendly policies is vital to ensure effective RPL implementation (McLaughlin 1998).
Recommendation 2: Integrate/ develop RPL articulation and credit awarding processes more explicitly within FET college assessment policies

From the research gathered, current RPL practices do not allow for the awarding of formal credit in respect of courses offered at the public FET colleges. The study found that the use of RPL within the selected public FET colleges was only for access to particular courses. Ways need to be found to integrate RPL assessment within the assessment regime of FET colleges to allow for access, and recognition of candidates’ skills and knowledge as well as the awarding of credits. The study asserts the importance of this form of integration to avoid policy symbolism.

Recommendation 3: Change RPL from a peripheral exercise to one integrated into practices of the two public FET colleges

Analysis of the interviews revealed that a key focus of the two public FET colleges is the delivery of the new National Certificate Vocational (NCV) curricula which are based on broad exit-level outcomes that make RPL difficult to implement. Occupational programmes, though important sources of income generation, are peripheral to the two public FET colleges’ current mandate. Comments from RPL practitioners reveal that some unsuccessful pre-trade test candidates often entered a skills programme at the FET colleges because they could then gain funding from the SETAs as a source of income. As mentioned previously, policy must allow for the integration of RPL within the institutional framework.

Recommendation 4: Encourage Public Private Partnerships (PPP) between the two public FET colleges and private providers to address the shortage of skilled RPL assessors

Such partnerships could be further enhanced by creating synergies to address capacity constraints. For example, public FET colleges could focus on their key strengths in fundamentals and trade testing / CBMT and RPL these areas, while private providers could look at RPL in specialist technical areas. This would increase access to RPL services to a wider community at lower cost as economies of scale become achievable.

Recommendation 5: Integration of social justice beyond policy

Though respondents recognised the need for social justice as one of the stated purposes of RPL policy, it needs to be integrated into the institutional system of the two public FET colleges. This integration will facilitate the implementation of the policy intentions of social justice. This finding supports the position on the need to have policy integrated within the institutional practice of educational institutions.
6.2 Specific Recommendations 2: Improving RPL provision

Analysis of the research data around practice suggests the following to improve RPL provision:

**Recommendation 1: Recognise different forms of knowledge within RPL**

There is an emergent view amongst some RPL practitioners that current RPL practices could not remain the same and that RPL processes within the FET colleges needed to take the candidates’ knowledge, skills and language into account (Prinsloo 2010: 58, 66). The research concurs with the view that new conceptions of knowledge need to be taken into account for RPL to be transformative (Osman 2003; McLaughlin 1978).

**Recommendation 2: Reduce costs/ Increase resourcing**

The access and redress intentions of RPL are affected by cost constraints. Interviews revealed that costs associated with RPL were high and often prohibitive for the two public FET colleges and candidates. The interviewees noted that it was important that RPL processes become sustainable. Interviews conducted also revealed that there was only one state-sponsored trade test centre, in Olifantsfontein, while the rest were ‘privatized’ in FET colleges. Candidates often had to pay for trade testing out of pocket and lose a day’s wages to undergo the trade tests, hence the need to have increased funding for trade test/RPL centres. Policy should provide leverage to access resources, acceptance and development of RPL.

**Recommendation 3: Increase the number of trade test/RPL centres**

At the time of writing there was only one accredited trade test venue in the Cape Town metropolitan area. Lecturers suggested that more trade test centres would allow more RPL candidates to be assessed. Resource and structural constraints impinge on the rate and efficacy of policy implementation and would need to be addressed. More centres would be one way of addressing this problem as they would allow for easier access by communities close by.

**Recommendation 4: Reduce complexity.**

One of the learnership coordinators mentioned the importance of informing potential candidates, in advance, of the requirements describe by RPL policy. This would allow potential candidates to be better prepared for the RPL process.

**Recommendation 5: Train new RPL practitioners and upskill existing ones.**

The two colleges in the study had capacity challenges. Some of the lecturers involved in RPL were
close to retirement or had been recently appointed. Loss of RPL expertise in this situation could create a capacity difficulty. In addition, others were involved in learnerships, skills programmes, lecturing and trade testing which resulted in significant time pressures which could affect the number of RPL candidates that are assessed. Ways need to be found to train new lecturers in specialist fields so that they can conduct RPL. Established RPL practitioners need to be trained in assessing candidates in new fields/methods. RPL implementation relies on the expertise and political will of institution-based assessment and programme teams to validate the learning and admit the candidate to further learning experiences.

**Recommendation 6: Address RPL stigma**

It was not possible to obtain exact figures from the two public FET colleges and the SETAs as to how many RPL candidates they had admitted into courses, as information about RPL candidates is not recorded. One of the reasons given was that an "RPL stigma" could lead to discrimination. An option could be that credits awarded through successful RPL, are recorded. This would allow for better data to quantify the extent to which RPL is being applied and it would also serve to promote the access and redress objectives of RPL.

**Recommendation 7: Recording and feedback**

Though all public FET colleges have a Quality Management System (QMS) that governs the assessment process, this research found that the RPL process does not necessarily feed into the assessment system. The writing up of new RPL practices needs to be encouraged to feed best practice examples into the system and to develop RPL communities of practice.

**Recommendation 8: Promote RPL through the SETAs and colleges**

The SETAs and some of the lecturers noted that people did not know about RPL and that there was a need to advocate it.

7. **CONCLUSION**

This study argues that support for RPL needs to extend beyond policy and needs to be done in a sustainable manner. RPL holds much potential for addressing some of the current challenges but faces many stumbling blocks including political will, as well as financial and human resource capacity. In order for RPL to achieve the policy intentions of access and redress, implementation strategies need to be adequately resourced and funded so that RPL policies have their objectives reflected in practice.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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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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OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

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. First, 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. Second, 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. Third, 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 South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)-University of the Western Cape (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 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.
First, 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 it is located. Use of Adult Learner Friendly Institute (ALFI) principles developed in North America will be customized and used for evaluation of the institutional component of this study.

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Self-efficacy and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a relatively new concept in South Africa which has been introduced as a mechanism grounded in the educational transformational policies of the African National Congress to redress the historical legacy of apartheid.

This paper attempts to determine the impact of RPL-outcomes of a module on the self-efficacy of in-service educators involved in a Bachelor of Education (upgrade) programme on offer at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). The methodology included the gathering of quantitative and qualitative data through the administering of pre- and post self-efficacy questionnaires and focus-group interviews. Other foci were on the biographical background of the students, and the portfolios of evidence they produced during the course of the module. The data generated reveal a statistically significant improvement in the participating students’self-efficacy over the course of the module, but draws attention to the negative impact of context in previously disadvantaged South African schools. The significance of this 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 processes currently taking place both locally and internationally.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is generally seen as having its roots in the United States of America (USA) during the 1970s when the shift towards adult education gained prominence (Evans, 2000). Some researchers, however, place the origin even earlier, linking the emergence of RPL to the return of US veterans who wanted universities to recognize their skills after World War Two (Harris 2006). RPL is currently practised in many countries all over the world, i.e. the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Canada, Sweden, South Africa and Scandinavia (Harris 2006). It is generally linked to the context in which it evolved. Michelson (2007: 142) refers to the ‘differing historical moments’ at which RPL emerged in different countries. In South Africa she sees it as a mechanism to overcome the huge wage and education gaps created by apartheid and in New Zealand the focus was on backlogs in Aboriginal education. The focus was clearly to deal with a societal situation which required some form of correctional action or fast-tracking to give people who would otherwise not have access.

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to institutions of learning the opportunity to study and attain qualifications.

In South Africa, the concept of RPL is grounded in the educational transformational policies of the governing African National Congress, because "teacher education for Black South Africans under the apartheid system was fragmented, unequal and of questionable quality" (Hendriks, Ralphs, Tisani and Volbrecht 2005). In a position paper drafted by a government-appointed study team in preparation for the proposed South African Universities Vice-Chancellors’ Association (SAUVCA) Conference in 2002, RPL is presented as redressing historic inequalities through the formal recognition of existing skills and knowledge of workers and adult learners (SAUVCA Study Team 2002). The document states that the SAQA Act of 1995 established the objectives and legal framework within which RPL was to become an integral feature of the design of all standards and qualifications registered by the Authority (SAUVCA Study Team 2002). The National Qualifications Framework defines RPL as

“...the comparison of the previous learning of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements” (SAQA Policy document 2002: 7).

RPL as a transformational tool could be applied to bring about possible change within teaching practices. Research has shown that teachers’ beliefs in their personal efficacy have a clear impact on their teaching practice and the manner in which they relate to the education processes (Pajares 1997). Albert Bandura developed a theoretical foundation of self-efficacy, which is rooted in social-cognitive theory. According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy can be defined as a person’s belief about their ability to produce the levels of performance required to positively influence events that affect their lives. Support for Bandura’s work on self-efficacy, amongst others, comes from the finding of Graham and Weiner (1996: 63), namely

“...What cannot be disputed is Bandura’s argument that self-efficacy has been a much more consistent predictor of behaviour and behaviour change than any of the other closely related expectancy variables.”

In the PSPL201 module (a module which is offered as part of a Bachelor of Education (B Ed) (upgrade) programme at NMMU), the RPL component provides the in-service educator with an opportunity to demonstrate his/her ability to draft work schedules and lesson plans, based on his/her prior experience. The underlying premise of this study is that the process adopted in the PSPL201 module is transformative in nature and provides a positive learning experience for the participants.

This study is an attempt to investigate whether the module in question has any effect on the in-service educator’s self-efficacy and, if so, what are the factors contributing to change in efficacy, if any.
2. BACKGROUND

The Faculty of Education of the NMMU offers the module PSPL201 as part of the B Ed (upgrade) programme to in-service educators. The module outcome of PSPL201 is: "The production of a portfolio of evidence that will convince the assessor that the student is able to plan work schedules and design and implement lesson plans" (Science, Mathematics and Technology Education 2006). This RPL module utilises a variety of approaches.

Firstly, the in-service educators (participants) were required to produce evidence in working from his/her prior knowledge and classroom experience in the form of a work schedule and a lesson plan, which is handed in and assessed against a rubric. Secondly, the participants were then engaged in contact sessions focusing on feedback from the initial task and guidance in best practice. Based on the feedback, the participants were required to repeat the task, employing the new knowledge gained. This new knowledge had to be discussed with a peer assessor, before the lesson was taught. A self-assessment rubric was provided. A second lesson was planned and taught in the presence of a peer assessor. A peer-assessment rubric was provided. All the data was collated in a portfolio, which had to be submitted for assessment. A rubric was provided as pre-reading for the assessment of the portfolio, so that the participants had a clear understanding of the outcomes required. The participants were also provided with guidelines on RPL, developing learning programmes and developing quality lesson plans.

Generally, the participants consisted of rural, black educators who, because of the (often deeply) rural environment in which most of them found themselves, were exposed to poor training and operated in a challenging teaching environment.

An initial total of 188 participants were involved in the programme. In the table below, a summary is provided of the spread of the participants throughout the different NMMU on- and off-campus sites. In the headings of the table, the ‘No. students’ refers to the total number of students in each centre; the ‘Self-efficacy pre-test’ indicates the number of students who completed the initial self-efficacy questionnaire, while ‘Self-efficacy post-test’ is the number who completed the (second) measurement of their self-efficacy after the intervention. ‘Biographical’ refers to the number of students who completed the biographical details questionnaire, while ‘Permission’ indicates the number of students who gave permission for their work to be used in this study.
Table 1: Participant numbers at the different centres, who participated in the module, wrote the pre- and post-tests, filled in the biographical questionnaire, and gave permission for their data to be used in the research study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Centre</th>
<th>No Students</th>
<th>Self-Efficacy Pre-test</th>
<th>Self-Efficacy Post-test</th>
<th>Biographical Permission</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ngcobo</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durban</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lusikisiki</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mthatha</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Port Elizabeth</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queenstown</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kokstad</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>188</strong></td>
<td><strong>161</strong></td>
<td><strong>134</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear that not all participants in the programme, to whom we refer as the 'population' of this study (Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee 2006; Jain 1998), participated in all aspects of the research project. There are a variety of reasons: (1) students were absent when data were collected; (2) some dropped out after the initial self-efficacy measurement was taken; and (3) some only joined the class after the initial measurement was conducted.

Some participants also provided incorrect information, which invalidated their responses. It should be noted that although some participants chose not to be a part of this study and were not included, it is possible to reach accurate conclusions by examining only a portion of the total group (Bless et al. 2006).

3. METHODOLOGY

As a starting point, the Science Teacher Efficacy Belief Instrument (STEBI), designed by Riggs and Enoch (1990), was adapted for the purposes of this study and administered to the students during the first contact session of the module. The purpose of using the instrument was to measure the various levels of self-efficacy of the educators involved in the study prior to their exposure to the content of the module and the (intervention) processes that form part of the RPL component of this module. A follow-up assessment was done when the instrument was again administered after the completion of the module. Results from these two measurements would give an indication if the process (of generating work schedules and lesson plans based on teaching practice, learning in a structured and supportive environment) has impacted positively on the participants' self-efficacy.
A secondary line of investigation is related to the possible role played by the contextual factors which may influence levels of self-efficacy. A questionnaire was administered to generate biographical data on each of the participants. Factors such as gender, age, educational environment and experience were included.

In order to collect further quantitative and qualitative data, a sample of the portfolios containing the Work Schedules and Lesson Plans developed by the participants was collected and assessed in order to give an indication of their abilities and how they relate to their self-efficacy as indicated by their scores on the STEBI self-efficacy scale. Qualitative data were generated via their written responses regarding their experiences of the module.

Finally, a number of interviews were conducted with participants. We chose the focus group approach. In this approach, participants were gathered and a group discussion was held. In order to facilitate the process, we drafted an interview schedule, listing the questions we wished to ask. We chose not to ask a list of questions, but rather to engage the group in a conversation, (albeit a conversation guided by a set of pre-determined questions), ensuring that all the required areas were covered. It was important for us to ensure that the group was relaxed and that they had bought into both our integrity and the need for honest, accurate responses, hence the opening indication that there were no correct or incorrect responses, but that we needed to record their feelings, opinions and comments.

Statistica version 7.1 was used for data processing and statistical analysis. Firstly, exploratory factor analysis was used to identify the factors of the questionnaire items which clustered them together. The internal reliability of these factors was calculated using Cronbach Alpha (α) coefficients. Both numerical and descriptive statistics were used to illustrate results of the individual items and the identified factors. The Statistica general linear model routine was used and analysis of variance (ANOVA) and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) procedures were used for inferential tests. ANOVA was used to identify the relationships between the dependant variable and a set of qualitative independent variables, whilst ANCOVA was used to identify the relationships between the dependent variable and sets of quantitative independent variables.

4. RESULTS

The data subjected to factor analysis revealed that items 5, 8, 10, 13, 14 and 16 did not cluster. It is interesting to note that these items all dealt with the same content, that is, the participants’ ability to achieve (or the educators’ beliefs about their ability to influence their learners’ achievement levels). It is possible that the respondents (educators) were struggling with issues concerning their locus of control (Rotter 1954 1966).

The remaining items clustered into three groupings: items 1-4, which focus on the participants’ perception of his/her own ability to develop work schedules and lesson plans; items 6, 12 and 15,
which focus on their perception of his/her ability to plan and execute lesson plans and deal with learner responses, and items 7, 9 and 11, which focused on the participants’ perception of the learners’ performance in relation to effective planning of work schedules and lesson plans. The data generated within these clusters were subjected to t-tests and analysis of variance and co-variance (ANOVA and ANCOVA) in order to provide inferential statistics.

Table 2: The mean pre- and post-test scores for the clustered items (questions) on the five-point self-efficacy questionnaire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clustered Items (Questions)</th>
<th>Mean Scores</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development related items (1-4)</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Execution related items (6, 12 and 15)</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner-performance items (7, 9 and 11)</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development related items (1-4)</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Execution related items (6, 12 and 15)</td>
<td>4.29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner-performance items (7, 9 and 11)</td>
<td>4.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table reveals an increase in self-efficacy in all three of the clustered items and inspection of all individual questions making up the clustered items followed the same pattern. It should also be noted that these items were not deliberately clustered by the researchers, but that they clustered as a statistical consequence of the data analysis.

Further quantitative and qualitative data were collected from the portfolios of evidence the participants produced for the module PSPL201. We scanned a sample of portfolios selected from three centres (Durban, Kokstad and Lusikisiki) in order to cover the range of socio-geographic settings in which the participants were located, viz., urban (Durban), semi-urban or country town (Kokstad) and rural (Lusikisiki). We selected 12 sets of complete data from each centre for comparison (there were only 12 full sets from the Kokstad region, so this set the upper limit of the sample).

We focused firstly on the following quantitative aspects of the 36 selected participants from the three centres:

- Scores of the self-assessment and peer assessment of the two lessons, and
- Scores of the self-assessment and the tutor-assessment of the final portfolio presented by the students.
Table 3: The number of portfolios used for research purposes, as well as the means and medians of the data gained from them.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Lesson plan Mean</th>
<th>Lesson plan Median</th>
<th>Portfolio Mean</th>
<th>Portfolio Median</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(n)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Assessment</td>
<td>84.9%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>70.3%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(33)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(32)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Assessment</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>60.4%</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(36)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(36)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The mean and median of the self-assessment scores are also noticeably higher than the assessment scores by both the peers (for the second lesson) and the tutors' assessments (for the portfolio).

If one views the average marks obtained at each of the centres for the different assessments done, it is of interest to note that the participants at the urban centre, Durban, score noticeably higher in both the self-assessed and the peer-assessed lesson presentations than their colleagues at the other two (semi-urban and rural) centres. However, the average scores obtained in the portfolio assessment indicate very similar scores in the self-assessments and, in fact, the rural centre (Lusikisiki) scored noticeably higher than the other two centres in the tutor-assessed result.

Qualitative data was gleaned from the written comments by the participants in terms of their lesson evaluation (first lesson) and by their peers when evaluating the second lesson. The participant and his/her peer-assessor were also required to make qualitative (written) assessments as they reflected on the lessons presented. These data give an added insight into the developmental process of the participant as a teacher, as well as his/her self-efficacy perception. In an attempt to group the various responses, we created the following categories of responses for the self-assessment section, as they became evident after reading all of the written comments on lesson 1:

- Participants feel they need more help and missed some criteria items;
- Contextual factors interfere with successful lesson delivery; and
- Participants feel positive about their efforts.

A variety of responses was interpreted to mean that the participants felt that they still required further assistance. Participants who felt intimidated to a certain degree of insecurity, varied in their responses. Some indicated that “I still need to be assisted in lesson planning” while others had difficulty in distinguishing between a work schedule and lesson plan.

Participants referred to numerous contextual factors that were indicative of the difficult world in which they operate. Issues of under-staffing and classes that are too big were referred to by many students. Some students also claimed that multi-level classes (numerous grades in one class) hindered their performance, while others were teaching outside the grade level they normally teach. Language was
recognised as a problem for some, while it was clear that (the lack of) equipment presented a problem on two levels: (i) what the school could (not) provide and (ii) what the learners could (not) bring to class.

There were many who responded with satisfaction to their experience, while some focused on the enjoyment experienced by the learners, the interest they showed and the results they achieved.

In terms of peer-assessment, the researchers created the following categories for the various written responses after reading and reflecting upon the responses:

- Participants need assistance in some areas;
- Participants produce excellent lessons; and
- Contextual factors have a negative impact on the lessons.

It is significant to note the apparent progress made by the participants from the initial reflective comments on Lesson 1 to the subsequent comments made by the peer assessors with regard to Lesson 2. While there were 44.7% of the students who felt positive about lesson 1 they had presented, 89.7% of the peer assessors believed that the second lesson attempt was successful. Similarly, 39.5% of the participants acknowledged problems in their lesson presentation, but only 7.6% of the peer assessors indicated problems in this regard. Finally, 50% of the participants cited contextual problems in their reflection on the first lesson presentation, while this factor was referred to by only 15.4% of the peer assessors for lesson 2. This shift is also clearly reflected in the quantitative data (results) presented earlier in this regard.

Comments made by peer assessors in this section clearly mirrored the comments of the participants. Understaffing and overcrowding are indicated, while reference is also made to the lack of equipment, the language issue and the artificially created situations in which the lessons were presented.

In order to further develop our understanding of the data analysis above, we conducted interviews with three participants from each of the focus-centres: Durban, Lusikisiki and Kokstad. This sample was limited to three from each centre, who had shown a significant improvement, or a decrease in their self-efficacy levels, as well as some participants who showed minimal, or no change in their self-efficacy development during the period of the intervention. This may be referred to as 'convenience sampling' (Cohen and Manion 1994).

In terms of the development items (planning of work schedules and lesson plans) prior to the intervention, the participants reported that they were unsure and even sceptical of this new approach. It was interesting to note further that the participants generally attributed a significant improvement in this regard to the intervention of module PSPL201.
In terms of the execution of the work schedules and lesson plans before intervention, a similar picture emerged as the participants reported a marked improvement in their ability to deliver the planned work schedules and lesson plans after the intervention.

With regard to having an influence on the learners, there was also a generally more positive (post-intervention) feeling. Participants referred to the variety of assessment strategies that they had learnt about (during the intervention) that had ensured that the learners were more involved in their learning.

In terms of contextual issues, the same issues that were raised in the written responses of the portfolios again surfaced: the number of learners per class at schools, inadequate classroom facilities, language, a shortage of apparatus and the poor roll-out of the NCS by the provincial education department featured prominently.

During the course of the research, a number of issues arose from the results:

- The participants’s self-efficacy generally improved as a result of the intervention of the module PSPL201;
- The increase in efficacy differed with regard to the three clusters of items, with the development cluster generally showing a greater increase than the execution cluster, and the learner performance cluster showing the smallest increase;
- There were a number of issues regarding locus of control that came to the fore; and
- The context in which the participants operate as teachers had a significant impact on the levels of self-efficacy achieved by the them.

5. DISCUSSION

The question posed at the start of this research report asked if the process of generating evidence by teachers for the Recognition of Prior Learning in the module PSPL201 can effect a change in their sense of self-efficacy. If their self-efficacy measurement is an indication of their level of functioning, as suggested by Pajares (1997), then it may be expected that there would be a correlation between the quality of the work schedules and lesson plans and their STEBI scores. However, if this is not the case, it would lend support to Ernest (1989) and Lerman’s (2002) stance that there is not always a correlation between the beliefs teachers verbalise and their practice in the classroom.

Firstly, the statistical analysis of the efficacy questionnaires indicated three well-defined sets of items, which clustered as follows: the teachers’s ability to develop work schedules and lesson plans, their ability to execute work schedules and lesson plans and learner performance.

Secondly, while the analysis showed that there were three sets of items that clustered, there were also a number of items (six, in total) that did not cluster showing no commonality across the various
responses. The significance of this became apparent as the research unfolded, because these items all focus on the teachers' perceptions of their ability to impact on the learners in their classes. The analysis indicated (where similar items learner performance did cluster) that this is in fact the area where educators showed the lowest level of efficacy increase. This finding correlated well with the quantitative analysis of the portfolio results \(n = 36\) and the qualitative responses made by a small sample of educators \(n = 9\) during the interviews that were conducted. In each of these avenues of research, this factor impacting on the learners in their classes was indicated as the most problematic for the teachers. Generally, contextual issues were cited as the main reason for poor learner performance.

This trend links with Rotter's (1966) notion that locus of control is either internal or external. Given the context in which these teachers operate, we believe that external factors play such a big role that the majority of these educators' sense of self-efficacy regarding learner performance is externally driven; hence, the relatively poor performance for the learner-performance cluster when compared to the other two clusters.

The results further show that from the pre- to the post-test, there was a general increase in efficacy in the mean scores for all three clusters. This would indicate that the intervention strategy of the PSPL201 module generally had a statistically significant, positive effect on the participants' sense of self-efficacy. It is interesting to note that the increase in efficacy was most pronounced (0.59, which represents a 12\% increase on the five-point Likert scale) in the development-related clusters, while the learner-performance cluster showed the smallest increase, 0.15, which is a 3\% increase. The execution-related cluster improved by 0.26 (5\%). These increases correspond very closely with the results generated for the portfolios produced by the smaller group of participants selected from the three off-campus centres, Durban, Kokstad and Lusikisiki, while these two sets of quantitative and qualitative data triangulate very well with the qualitative comments made by the students during the focus-group interviews, as they reflected a stronger sense of efficacy increase for the development and execution-related items, while they had a much more subdued response to the learner-performance items.

Finally, another interesting factor to emerge from the analysis of centre-specific efficacy results \(n = 36\) is the distribution of increased, decreased and unchanged efficacy scores. It is clearly demonstrated that the greatest number of increases (29 participants) occurred in the development cluster, followed by 20 participants who increased in the execution cluster. The lowest increase (11) was recorded for the learner performance. Conversely, the highest number of participants (15) recorded a decrease in efficacy in terms of the learner-performance cluster. This information fits the pattern that emerged in both the written responses in the portfolios as well as in the focus-group interviews.

The written responses by the participants in their portfolios are consistent with the results indicated by
the shift in efficacy scores in that they record the feelings of insecurity experienced by many of the participants at the start of the module intervention. Many expressed concerns about their inability to plan the time frames of the lessons effectively, and also struggled to come to grips with the concept (or lay-out) of Work Schedules and Lesson Plans. These comments also echo the verbal input we received from the focus-group interviews.

Similarly, contextual factors are a common thread throughout this research. The interesting aspect, however, is that despite the increased efficacy generally attained by the participants in the three clustered sets of items, this factor continued to be cited, even by those who had shown an increase in their efficacy levels.

Researchers (Guskey and Passaro 1993; Rotter 1966) have noted the effect of internal versus external sources of efficacy on an individual’s ability to take responsibility for his or her actions. Teachers with high efficacy levels will assume responsibility for poor learner performance, while those with low efficacy levels will attribute failure to external factors. While this may be true under ‘normal’ circumstances, we believe that context plays such a central role in the lives of most of these teachers that it impacts on both groups. In this regard the findings of Henson (2001) that teacher-efficacy is a joint, simultaneous function of a teacher’s analysis of the teaching task, supports our belief. Teachers consider a variety of issues, including context, in the determination of their responses. Similarly, Housego (1992) and Hoy and Woolfolk (1990) reported general changes in teacher efficacy attributable to a growing pessimism about the overpowering negative constraints that can hamper a teacher’s efforts.

An abiding sense that we gained from this study is that despite the impact of the intervention (PSPL201) on the lives of the participants, the context in which they operate will always negatively impact on their efficacy levels. Class size, language problems, teaching multi-level classes, lack of equipment and facilities all add up to a context that militates against effective delivery in the class room.

As such, we believe that context will have a negative effect over time on the (increased) efficacy levels of these participants, and probably will reduce their improved levels of teaching and sense of self-efficacy; that they will become disempowered to the extent that they reflect the feelings, so eloquently expressed in the poem Last lesson of the day by D.H. Lawrence: "What good is this teaching of mine and this learning of theirs? It all goes down the same abyss! I shall sit and wait for the bell."

However, in a more positive vein, it is clear that the module PSPL201 does provide an opportunity for teachers to review and re-contextualise their prior learning with regard to new methodologies in terms of work schedules and lesson plans proscribed by the national curriculum statement. In addition, analysis of the changes from pre- to post-test suggests that the participants were able to master (to a
greater or lesser extent) new terminology and that they perceived a significant improvement in their teaching practice. Their varying levels of successes were achieved, despite the context in which they teach. Possibly then, these participants have not relinquished their locus of control and have become co-participants (with their learners) in their effort to achieve the expected learning outcomes against the odds and, perhaps, through this, their self-efficacy gains will be sustained.
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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): putting policy into practice – a case study for learner support

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ABSTRACT

Non-traditional learners applying for access to Higher Education experience a variety of barriers, one of them being the compiling of a portfolio according to rigorous academic guidelines. As a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) facilitator tasked with facilitating portfolio workshops, the challenge was to ensure a meaningful learning experience. Through a process of self-reflection, the learners gain an understanding of themselves and realise the value of knowledge gained from personal experiences. They also learn how the RPL process helps them to compile quality portfolios. One of the advantages of the portfolio workshop is that it helps a student to bridge the gap between being an adult with experience and a mature learner prepared for the demands of post-secondary education.

A facilitator must use innovative practices, a developmental approach and participatory learning methodology to engage mature learners. Activities help learners to reflect on aspects within a learner-friendly, non-threatening environment.

The portfolio of evidence is the tool most often used for the assessment of prior learning. The success of portfolio assessment depends on the preparation for assessment and effective learner support. The challenge for facilitators of an RPL portfolio workshop aimed at mature learners is to ensure a meaningful learning experience for a diverse target group. The interactive portfolio workshop also benefits the learner at different levels.

1. INTRODUCTION

Non-traditional learners applying for admission to Higher Education institutions experience a variety of barriers, one of them being the compilation of a portfolio according to rigorous academic guidelines. These learners do not meet the admission requirements at a South African distance learning university and therefore enter the RPL mature learner assessment programme.

As an RPL facilitator whose task it is to facilitate portfolio workshops, it is my responsibility to ensure a meaningful learning experience for mature learners. I have therefore developed a workshop, using a developmental approach and participatory learning methodology, to equip learners to compile RPL assessment portfolios. In this context, activities help learners to reflect on aspects in a learner-friendly,
non-threatening environment. The interactive portfolio workshop as preparation for assessment benefits the learner at different levels.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

According to Ntsoe (2010) Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) plays an integral role as an important agent for the transformation of education and training. Ntsoe (2010) further argues that it was agreed by the then Department of Education (DoE) (now Department of Higher Education and Training) and Council on Higher Education (CHE) (1998/9) that a key factor to transformation within Higher Education is the creation of access possibilities for non-traditional learners. Within the context of Open Distance Learning (ODL), the implementation of RPL is key to ensure access possibilities for mature learners, as supported by the University of South Africa (UNISA) 2015 Strategic Plan (2008), which supports the notion of widening access through an RPL process. SAQA (2002) supports this mission by stating that the entry of learners to Higher Education via non-traditional routes will be the objective of most RPL candidates. The UNISA Open Distance Learning (ODL) policy, the UNISA RPL policy and the SAQA policy document (2002) give priority to learner-centred support systems. With regard to the assistance in the preparation of assessment (SAQA 2002), the removal of barriers towards a holistic, flexible and learner-centred approach to assessment is essential. Therefore the implementation of an RPL process within a distance learning mode should be planned within the context of removing barriers, student-centredness and effective learner support to assist in the preparation of assessment.

3. RESEARCH APPROACH

This case study is based on data gathered from participant observations during the workshop, written feedback from learners after the workshop, and learners' life stories or reflective essays in the form of prior learning papers. Merriam (1998) cites Sanders (1981), who states that case studies help us to understand events. Creswell (2002) notes that qualitative observation involves listening to and watching what people say and do, and it relies heavily on the researcher in this case, the workshop facilitator as the research instrument. Since qualitative research aims to help participants take an active part in generating detailed descriptions of their life experiences, the reflective essay is a valuable source of data. Reflective essays facilitate reflexivity self-reflection being the process of creating and clarifying the meaning of experiences in terms of the self and the world (Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

4. FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF A PORTFOLIO WORKSHOP

After the first workshop, it was realised how important it was to include sufficient activities to build self-awareness. During feedback sessions following activities it was important to acknowledge the
individual’s contribution and that adults respond well to positive feedback. As soon as candidates experience a sense of acceptance, they enjoy sharing their own values and beliefs, and once they trust the facilitator and the process, they become receptive to participatory learning and are able to discover and experience the benefits of the portfolio, the workshop and the RPL process on a personal level (Gravett 2001; Peters, Pokorny and Johnson in Michelson et al. 2004).

4.1 Activities

It is worth noting that workshop participants are initially hesitant to share information because, in their experience, informal learning is not usually valued. They experience threshold fear during their first encounter with a university, hence the need for a meaningful icebreaker to create a cooperative learning climate (Gravett 2001).

4.2 The icebreaker

A specific icebreaker, used as a light-hearted means of introduction, is useful. Cranton (Mezirow and associates 2000) justifies the use of icebreaker activities by explaining that they focus on differences among individuals and contribute to the fostering of self-awareness, since they raise students’ awareness of their preferences.

The purpose of this informal activity is to:

- Determine an immediate informal learner profile of the target group;
- Create strategies to encourage dialogue between a diverse group of delegates;
- Create a forum for discourse;
- Demonstrate that interaction and participation are crucial;
- Create a rapport with the group to ensure a successful three-day workshop;
- Focus on the object and activity, and not on the person; and
- Instil confidence in the learners by making their first encounter with a university a successful experience.

The icebreaker demonstrates a few basic truths to us as RPL practitioners:

- Each learner is an individual and will have an individual approach to the introduction and the portfolio;
- We need to see the world through the eyes of our learners;
- RPL encourages learners to take action;
- It is not easy to make sense of unstructured learning;
RPL is not a matter of "one size fits all" (SAQA 2002);
Learner involvement in the RPL process is key; and
The positive should be emphasised during the first contact.

4.3 The target group

A shared characteristic of this group of learners is that their education has been disrupted, usually because of inequalities of the past or personal problems. Those who have been excluded from the education system for a long time are likely to be unfamiliar with academic discourse and education processes. They experience a range of social and personal barriers, which result in high levels of stress; much of this is related to earlier negative experiences of formal education and assessment.

Learners tend to enrol for this mature learner assessment programme for reasons related to career progression, job security and the need for a formal qualification to apply for promotion. These reasons are supported by internal motivations, for instance candidates want to fulfil a lifelong dream to have a degree; they believe that they are constantly discriminated against because they do not have a school-leaving certificate; or they want to be the first one in their family to obtain a degree.

A unique characteristic of these workshops is that participants are extremely diverse in terms of race, age, background and career; the only thing they have in common is their aspiration to be admitted to study at a university. The following is a conservative categorisation of participants into major groups. This categorisation is based on information from the participants' prior learning papers, a reflective essay, and observation by the facilitator and workshop attendance registers.

The groups are:

- South Africans who were disadvantaged by the previous education system;
- Women who fell pregnant at an early age (many at the age of 16), who have had to raise the child on their own and who now need to prove that they can succeed academically;
- Young men in their late twenties who were rebellious at school and dropped out; they are usually successful in the work situation, but now need a formal qualification - they often feel that they owe it to a parent or parents to obtain such a qualification;
- Women who have been victims of abusive husbands or partners and who need to secure their own identity - in the words of one student: "I want to become an attorney because I want to help women who do not know the law, and what their rights are." (Carien);
- Learners (mostly white) who left school before matriculating because there were job opportunities available, for instance in the civil service; and
- Those who had to start working to support their parents and siblings.
Much has been written about the adult learner, but the following pointers (Gravett 2001; Smith 2003) provide a useful foundational summary for the development of meaningful reflexive and learning activities:

- Adults learn by doing and solving problems, and they learn when they experience a need to learn;
- Different adults learn in different ways;
- Adults like variety in learning activities;
- Adults want feedback on performance;
- Adults want to apply what they learn, hence the need to guide them to apply experience in their assignments;
- Adults are motivated to learn when they are faced with an immediate problem, for instance the compilation of a comprehensive portfolio;
- Adults have a wealth of knowledge and information derived from their own experience, hence the importance of a prior learning paper. Gravett (2001) mentions that adult learners bring accumulated experiences with them into educational events; and
- Their readiness to learn is linked with their life roles and life tasks (Gravett 2001).

This raises the question of whether the characteristics and learner profiles of RPL candidates are similar to those of adult learners described in the literature. The relevance of considering the adult learner profile in developing RPL practices is emphasized by Osman (2003) who states that the framework of adult education, which places the adult learner at the centre of its theorising and practices, provides an ideal framework for understanding RPL in South Africa.

5. THE PORTFOLIO WORKSHOP AS A VALUABLE LEARNING EVENT

5.1 The workshop outcomes

The rationale for our workshops could be described in the words of Merriam (Merriam and Caffarella 1999), where she states that adult education is a form of social intervention and very often begins as an effort to solve a problem. In this case, the problem was to prepare the candidates for compiling the portfolio. To enable them to prepare and submit a portfolio, it was necessary to bridge the gap between their past and their new role as adult learners.

Learner support to ensure achievement of workshop activities should be given within a constructivist framework. This is supported by the trend in ODL delivery towards student-centredness within a more constructivist approach (Mitchel and Le Roux 2010) which subscribes to reflective practice, self-directed learning and experiential learning as manifestations of learning in adults (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). The inclusion of Freire's (1972) concept of dialogue in planning a workshop...
generates the opportunity for authentic critical thinking, learner empowerment and reflection. The constructivist approach (Ausubel 1986; Mezirow 1991; Merriam and Caffarella 1999) acknowledges the learner’s existing knowledge framework and provides the opportunity to make sense of learning and experiences where the learner is actively involved in constructing meaning. It acknowledges learning as a transformational process. Constructivism offers the candidates the choice of realising their full potential by solving problems independently through the construction of meaning from experience (Merriam and Caffarella 1999) and reflective practice. The constructivist approach is a learner-centred approach where learners are actively involved in constructing their own knowledge within a context that allows social interaction (Woolfolk 2007).

Learners need to experience the workshop as a transformative learning experience to ensure they are fully prepared for the assessment. Transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a person’s frame of reference. Mezirow (1991) perceives transformative learning as the most significant type of learning in adulthood, and a learning process where the use of prior interpretations are used to construe a new interpretation of the “meaning of one’s experience” (Mezirow et al. 2000). Some of the central themes in Mezirow’s theory (1991; 2000), are:

- The relevance of the role of the learner’s existing meaning structures in new learning;
- Critical reflection as it relates meaning to transformation; and
- Dialogue and learner interaction as the medium for activating critical reflection to promote and develop transformative learning.

Simpson and Coombes (2001) describe adult learning as transformative which include crucial elements such as emancipatory learning and consciousness-raising, where the learner develops self-knowledge and self-awareness through critical reflection and accepts the importance of personal experience. Mezirow’s theory (1991) provides prescriptions for good practice to ensure that transformational learning occurs when candidates develop new assumptions or views of the world or their reality. Through the process of critical reflection, they gain a deeper awareness of their skills and competencies. The adult learner’s “learning past” (Kegan 2000) forms an important aspect of the current and future learning context, hence the need for reflection.

Besides the main purpose of the workshop, namely to prepare students to compile the portfolio of evidence, a set of secondary outcomes is necessary, namely the workshop outcomes. Based on transformational learning theory, observation and feedback from learners, the workshop outcomes are to:

- Make learners aware of the wealth of knowledge that they already have, and the value of knowledge based on their own life experiences;
- Facilitate the personal discovery of skills, learning goals, learning styles, focus and self-knowledge;
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): putting policy into practice: a case study for learner support

- Ensure that learners grow in self-esteem, empowerment and motivation. This is supported by the strengths approach (Simpson 2008) to learner support, where enhancing learner motivation by realising the value of self-esteem and focusing on strengths rather than weaknesses are key factors;

- Bridge the gap between being an employee and being an adult learner in Higher Education by transforming the prospective student or candidate with working experience into a motivated and confident mature learner;

- Assist adults to develop an individual student identity or profile. Whittaker, Whittaker and Clearly (2006) refer to ‘flaking on a new identity through learning’. Learner support should assist them to add the role of learner to their other multiple roles (Merriam and Caffarella 1999);

- Create the realisation among participants that they are not only adults, but mature learners; this entails a mind shift or paradigm shift on their part. The transformative learning experience can provide ‘changed habits of mind’ (Mezirow and associates 2000);

- Break down the barrier created by the fear of failure;

- Guide learners to extract learning from life experiences and to build their confidence by helping them to become aware of their own skills; and

- Socialise learners into the learning process.

These outcomes are not static, but dynamic. To achieve these outcomes, I ensure that the focus of the first day of the three-day workshop is on supporting activities. These activities prepare learners for the daunting task of compiling assignments at the required level so as to gain admission to a Higher Education institution.

5.2 The workshop context

At first, learners are hesitant to participate actively in the workshops and appear to be unaccustomed to dialogue within the academic environment (Gravett 2001). It is therefore necessary to establish a workshop climate conducive to interaction and dialogue. This approach is based on the situated learning perspective and Lave and Wenger’s (1991) communities of practice, which support the notions of social networks and the necessity of interaction between people. The workshops provide a structured situation conducive to learning — a community of discourse engaged in activity, reflection and conversation. They also become an informal and, often, rather social learning experience, allowing learners to reflect on their problems and past experiences, share information about culture and traditions, and increase their knowledge and skills base within a non-threatening relaxed learning atmosphere (Gravett and Henning 1998).

The learner profile of the target group indicates the need for a holistic and developmental approach (SAQA 2002). A holistic approach subscribes to the values of human development and lifelong learning; it assigns a high priority to learner support systems, recognises the diversity of knowledge, is
learner-centred and developmental, enhances self-esteem and confidence of learners, and provides motivation for returning to learning.

The success of a holistic approach is confirmed by the following feedback from learners:

The context within which a workshop is presented is vital to breaking down the barrier of fear of Higher Education. This involves both the physical and the psychological climate (Gravett 2001). Experience has shown that learners appreciate personal attention and the care taken by the facilitator to ensure a friendly environment, such as venue decorations representing diversity and the availability of refreshments.

Psychological climate refers to matters such as mutual respect, collaboration between members, mutual trust, supportiveness, openness, pleasure and humanness. The facilitator must ensure that the learners are open to the potential benefits of RPL by ensuring the success of the workshop, which serves as preparation for the RPL assessment process. This can be achieved by using an approach that is characterised by respect, negotiation, dialogue and cooperation (Gravett 2001). The key is respect for the learner and humanness, which means that the facilitator has to make provision for human comfort by creating a supportive social atmosphere necessary for learning.

Social interaction in the learning process is vital, especially since learners are in a new environment. Initially the perception was that issues of sensitivity and confidentiality would be problematic, but the learners seem confident about sharing information with strangers, probably because they have one important factor in common, namely their motivation to gain access to university education. The group activities provide the opportunity to discuss problems they experience, such as particular life circumstances, negative experiences with educational institutions, and personal problems such as fear of failure and workload. These problems can result in barriers to learning. As barriers can impact on an RPL candidate’s motivation to complete the portfolio, these barriers should be addressed in the preparation for assessment (Prinsloo 2009; Pretorius, Prinsloo and Uys 2010).
The benefit of the group activities is emphasised in the following learner feedback:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Excellent and great fun. Learnt so much about our fellow students and</td>
<td>Bongani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their culture. The group was interesting and motivating.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fact that all three of us come from different cultural backgrounds</td>
<td>Rengani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>made it an experience to remember.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It has been fantastic (the workshop) and I will cherish this time for</td>
<td>Ndoku</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a long time to come.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I learned so much from other people's experiences; it also sharpened my</td>
<td>Jeconiah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skills of interaction in a team situation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking your mind and hearing others do the same.</td>
<td>Julius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smart group of people, good ideas and opinions.</td>
<td>Gary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The worst was to leave the campus because of the friendship of the</td>
<td>Michelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students; it was an excellent experience.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The supportive learning context provides an opportunity for reflection. Bloomfield (Mezirow et al. 2000) remarks that critical reflection must be a collaborative process that asks for "critical friends.

### 6. REFLECTION AS A TOOL FOR SELF-DISCOVERY AND GROWTH

Reflection serves as a tool for self-discovery, empowerment and growth in adult learners (Merriam and Cafarella 1999).

Kolb's experiential learning cycle and Knowles' theory guide much of the RPL discourse (Osman 2003). Both take as their point of departure experience as a resource for learning, with reflection being central. Reflection takes place within a safe and non-threatening learning environment. Through reflection exercises in the workshop, learners become aware of the value of learning from past experience and personal achievement, and realise that experience is a significant learning resource. Mezirow et al. (2000) define learning as a result of reflection as a process of "using prior interpretation to construe a new interpretation to the meaning of one's experience."

Central to the view of the main theorists on adult learning, such as Kolb (1984), is the notion that when adults learn, they relate past, current and possible future experiences to learning. To encourage the reflection process, the facilitator needs to guide the learner through the process of critical
reflection. Since adults tend to be life-centred, it is necessary to start with reflection on their personal life and then move gradually towards work experience. Learners are asked to reflect on a concrete experience, such as their childhood experiences, family life and cultural tradition. This biographical approach, as proposed by Whittaker, Whittaker and Clearly (2006), allows the learners’ self-perception to be central and to be placed in the required context, which ensures the transformation of the participant’s sense of identity (Whittaker, Whittaker and Clearly 2006). They then move on to abstract conceptualisation and are able to understand themselves and put their abilities and possibilities into a new perspective (Kolb 1984). Through the various reflection activities, they discover that they are individuals with value and worth.

The role of the RPL facilitator is essential in this process. He or she is required to develop, facilitate, coach, guide and mentor suitable reflection and learning activities to guide mature learners to discover hidden learning and articulate relevant learning within an academic mode.

Positive feedback from the facilitator and affirmation from the group build self-confidence based on self-knowledge and valuable prior experience. Adults derive self-identity from experience (Knowles 1980), and in this situation, where experience is valued, self-awareness improves.

Learners had the following to say about reflection and self-discovery:

- An eye opener to who I am (Ndoku).
- For me it was like putting my mind back to track again (Natasha).
- You motivated all of us because you allowed us to say things that concerned ourselves, you listened and respected all our opinions. The feedback you gave was constructive and objective, you never criticised. You recognised all our efforts (Jan).

Reflection can be perceived as empowering learners and providing them with transformative learning experience resulting from a critical evaluation of their learning experience (Pokorny in Andersson and Harris 2006). Pokorny also explains that assisted reflection requires personal qualities such as confidence, facility in language. Experience shows that reflection can be a confidence-building tool and a self-assessment tool to determine a possible learning gap, for instance inadequate language skills. However, only when the prior learning the raw data has been subjected to guided reflection, articulation and any form of assessment, such as self-assessment, can it be worthy of recognition for a specific purpose, such as the compilation of a portfolio of evidence. It is necessary to structure unstructured learning.

I have observed that informal conversations assist learners to engage in critical reflection, which we
discovered to be a highly complex cognitive skill. Reflective abstraction appears to be the driving force of learning. At the end of the workshop, learners often say that they have learnt a lot. The question is whether this relates to personal self-discovery, learning how to compile a portfolio, or the collaborative learning experience (Gravett 2001) of sharing ideas and being respected as a person whose opinion counts.

7. THE WORKSHOP AS PREPARATION FOR PORTFOLIO ASSESSMENT

7.1 Definition of the portfolio

The focus of this case study is not on portfolio assessment, but on how the RPL candidates benefit from the process of learner support in preparation for assessment. However, a few introductory observations are necessary, since the purpose of the workshop is to prepare students to compile the portfolio. The portfolio is the end product that learners need to submit to gain access to university education. It also prepares learners to write the academic literacy test that forms part of the assessment tool.

The portfolio can be defined as a file or folder of information that has been accumulated about a learner's past experiences and accomplishments. It can be a vehicle for organising new experiences into a manageable form for assessment. A portfolio is not only a product, it is a process by which prior learning experiences can be translated into learning outcomes, documented and assessed for academic credit (Knapp [forthcoming]).

The portfolio is more than an assessment tool; it is also a learning tool. This explains the use of the development model (rather than the credit exemption model), since the development model of RPL is committed to in-depth reflection on past experience and aims to help candidates derive learning from the reflection (Osman 2003). The benefit of the portfolio is that it also provides an opportunity to include evidence outside these boundaries, such as reflection on community involvement, cultural background and valuable learning gained from experience. The appropriate assistance by the RPL facilitator during the workshop is required to utilise the portfolio as a tool for reflexive engagement, to guide candidates in finding their own knowledge, to demonstrate the link with future studies and to guide the discourse, thus promoting self-directed learning, which is essential for distance learning.

Feedback from learners concerning the portfolio:

"After I have done this portfolio, I will be able to do anything (Selma)."

"I have learned about my own strengths during the portfolio and that it is imperative to take time out and reflect on decisions that you have made and see how you would have handled the situations different in your present life, this will strengthen you (Ian)."
A concern is that portfolios can become "weighty documents" (Pokorny in Andersson and Harris 2006). One of the supporting workshop activities, therefore, is to guide learners with regard to collecting and analysing evidence, and deciding when evidence is sufficient. This also equips the learner to plan the prior learning paper for inclusion in the final portfolio.

8. THE PRIOR LEARNING PAPER AS A TOOL IN LEARNER SUPPORT

The development model allows for the "personal statement" (Osman 2003) in the portfolio. An example is a reflective essay, which is one of the portfolio assignments and takes the form of a prior learning paper (Smith 2003b). In planning and writing the paper, learners become aware that they are self-directed learners, but that they have to give evidence of the fact that they can manage time effectively, are intrinsically motivated, can take responsibility for learning and recognise a purpose in what they do.

The reflective essay allows for both personal and academic development, for example new learning about essay structure and style. Candidates also acquire information-collection skills, developed through the actions of reflection, analysis, organisation and critical evaluation. The workshop activities help the adult learner to put his or her life, experiences and learning in perspective in preparation for writing their life stories. The adult learner develops a "self-authoring mind" as proposed by Kegan (2000), as a means to develop an adult learner identity and ensure the learning is a transformational process.

Although personal emotional healing is not the main purpose of the reflective essay, the reflective essay does facilitate emotional healing too. Learners write the essay after reflection activities, and I have observed that there is healing in reflection. Nevertheless, it is essential to encourage learners to take reflection a step further - the point where they see themselves beyond the RPL process and set clear and manageable future goals as successful learners. They are given the opportunity to explain personal problems and to give an account of how they have managed the situation. They often realise that they do not need to be victims of their past and that they should embrace this second opportunity to gain access to Higher Education.

In the first draft of the reflective essay, given as homework after the workshop activities of the first day, learners include details of their personal experience. Although the underlying assumption is that the RPL student is a story teller (Osman 2003), I have found that these candidates are not aware of this ability and often fear storytelling. I often receive feedback such as "I worked the whole night and I could not stop writing." When they come to the second day of the workshop with their story, I know that they have broken through personal and background barriers to be successful learners. A common remark is "I do not know whether this is right hence the need to assure learners that there are no right or wrong answers when we talk about life experiences; that experiences are to their advantage; and that the RPL process values their life experiences."
The prior learning paper offers learners a unique opportunity to think about their past; gain a new understanding of themselves and all they have accomplished in life; gain confidence for future plans and objectives; and realise the link between past, current and future plans.

Feedback from one specific learner:

"The aspect of the preparation for the portfolio I enjoyed the most is the essay on my life story as it gave me a chance to reflect definitely a learning reflection." (Ian).

9. THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

Facilitators and, especially, academics at universities are recognised as figures of authority and knowledge and, unfortunately, they are perceived as having power over learners. Therefore the initial icebreaker is crucial as a means of breaking down this barrier and giving learners the sense that the workshop is going to be a pleasant experience.

The facilitator shapes the learner support and guides the process that enables people to work together so as to meet their goals and accomplish what they set out to do. The challenge for the facilitator is to facilitate the journey through a learning process, but not to be the seat of wisdom and knowledge. This means that a facilitator is not there to give opinions, but to elicit the opinions and ideas of the group members. The focus is often on how people participate in the process of learning or planning, and not just on what is achieved. A facilitator does not have all the answers and should not talk all the time: what the participants have to say is the most important thing. Therefore, a facilitator needs to focus on how the groups are structured, make sure that everyone can participate, and ensure that the group remains focused (Meyer, Mabaso, Lancaster and Nenungwi 2004; Gravett 2001).

The following are useful guidelines for the facilitator:

"I feel that the RPL gave me a lot of confidence." (Michelle).

"I learnt that I gained more experience than I realised and that shaped me in the decision making and career path." (Gary).

"The workshop brought out the best in me. I do not like speaking in front of people, and here I had to do it as part of the team effort." (Pearl).
9.1 Commitment to lifelong and adult learning

To be a dedicated supporter of adult learning, facilitators need to be convinced that adult learning is a strategy aimed at providing opportunities for individuals and ensuring personal development. Facilitators should respect the adult learner as a person and be familiar with adult learning theories and committed to facilitating self-directed adult learning. They need to be sensitive to the difficulty of combining education and training with the roles and responsibilities adults have both at home and at work. Facilitators must have faith in their own abilities and in the process.

9.2 Belief in the knowledge, skills and experiential learning of potential candidates

For most adults, the return to formal learning brings back many memories and feelings about their prior learning experiences; some may have lost their self-confidence through previous social, political and employment experiences. The facilitator needs to focus on the individual, build his or her confidence and self-esteem, and provide practical ways to heal the hurt experienced in the past and use learning to meet future objectives. People's development and constructive individual feedback should always be valued.

9.3 Sensitivity to diversity (e.g. of culture, gender, race)

Adult workers who need educational advice have different personal and collective value systems, histories and issues. A facilitator must be careful not to project his or her own values onto the learners. Listening skills and having respect for who the learners are, where they come from, what they bring with them and where they aim to go are key.

This requires a variety of strategies to encourage dialogue between learners and a variety of methodologies and approaches suitable for mature learners from diverse backgrounds and cultures. The role of the facilitator is to plan and facilitate a suitable environment for active learning. The workshop climate establishes a beneficial relationship that empowers not only the participants, but also the facilitator.

9.4 Consciousness of the boundaries of the facilitator's role

A facilitator must not try to solve every problem. Adults returning to formal learning may need advice on issues that do not necessarily fall within the field of educational planning. The facilitator therefore acts as advisor and must be able to refer learners to resources such as the academic literacy centre and counsellors. During feedback on reflection activities, it is necessary to be supportive and to listen without allowing the session to become a counselling session.
9.5 The role of the facilitator as a change agent

The role of the facilitator is crucial, and his or her attitude towards people and learning will determine whether the learning outcomes are achieved. The facilitator is not just a subject-matter expert; his or her role extends far beyond subject knowledge. The role of the facilitator is that of a change agent (Meyer, Mabaso, Lancaster and Nenungwi 2004) who creates suitable learning opportunities and allows individuals to graduate from one mindset or position to a higher level of understanding. The learners need to make a paradigm shift to create their individual learner identities.

Learner feedback in this regard:

"When I walked into that classroom, realising that I was the oldest person there, I felt out of place and wanted to run away. That was until the start of the workshop – I felt at home!" (Jan, 50 years old, achieved 96% for portfolio).

The role of the facilitator is key to ensuring that learners benefit from the workshop as preparation for assessment. The challenge is to relate activities and new learning to prior experience and the profile of mature learners. Learners will benefit from the portfolio workshop if the facilitator is willing to use them as a resource, value their experiences, elicit expertise from the group and allow them to discover answers though the collaborative learning process, for instance through assignments.

9.6 Use of a facilitation approach where motivation is central to learner support

Motivation is central to a learner’s success and ensures effective learner support (Simpson 2008).

9.7 Willingness to become a collaborative learner (Mezirow et al. 2000; Freire 1972)

Facilitators must encourage discourse and be willing to participate in an active dialogue to assist learners to gain a better understanding of a certain experience.

Although the purpose of the learner-support intervention is not to create an awareness of the benefits of RPL, the involvement of learners in the workshop made them aware of the possibilities of RPL. During workshops, learners asked questions about the history and the possibilities of the process.

10. Does RPL benefit our learners?

The portfolio workshop, as a learner support tool and intervention for the preparation for RPL assessment, manages to create an awareness of the benefits of RPL. This intervention should be seen within the framework of the implementation of RPL within an ODL context.
The benefits of RPL are evident at three levels:

10.1 At national level

RPL in South Africa has a very specific purpose: it is meant to support the development and transformation of an equitable education and training system for the country (SAQA 2002). In South Africa there is still a gap between policy and practice, and the challenge is to implement policy in practice and to recognise RPL as a tool for transformation. Unfortunately, this does not always happen: A learner attending one of our workshops explained how she had been trying for years to get further in her career without a matriculation certificate, and remarked that RPL is the best kept secret in this country.

As RPL practitioners, we are all too familiar with the fact that there are large numbers of adults in South Africa with a wealth of experience, but who, for a variety of political or personal reasons, were unable to complete their schooling. Since the skills shortage is limiting the growth of the economy (Pityana 2007), RPL could profitably be marketed as a tool for providing alternative admission to university and giving motivated adults the opportunity to embark on university studies.

As the body responsible for the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) articulates some of the key objectives of the NQF in the national RPL policy (SAQA 2002):

- It accelerates redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment; and
- It facilitates access to education.

RPL practices therefore promote the NQF principles of access, articulation and redress, and should be implemented to the advantage of learners. Nzimande (2009) demands that the policy on recognition of prior learning be strengthened and that RPL become a central component of education. According to him, a mature learner cannot be expected at 45 to go back and redo his matric.

10.2 At institutional level

A mature learner assessment programme is a means of giving previously disadvantaged learners access to Higher Education. Within this context, RPL has the potential to drive organisational change. Unfortunately, however, Higher Education is still too rigid and not yet ready to utilise and appreciate this wealth of knowledge and to admit mature learners who are motivated to succeed.

Pityana (2007) acknowledges the failure of Higher Education after apartheid to provide alternative frameworks of knowledge production. A benefit of RPL that merits consideration is the fact that it creates awareness of alternative knowledge. Pityana (2007) encourages us to rehabilitate the
indigenous African knowledge systems. In one of the workshop group discussions, learners are given the opportunity to share indigenous knowledge, and this is the first time that many are sufficiently confident to share this valuable knowledge in public. Taking cognisance of the wealth of learning that mature learners can bring to Higher Education will allow RPL practices to acknowledge their potential to influence and enrich the curriculum.

The diversity of this target group and the wealth of experience that learners can bring to Higher Education remains largely unacknowledged; unfortunately, most South African universities are still suspicious and doubtful of RPL (Osman 2003). It remains to be seen whether South African Higher Education institutions will embrace the benefits of RPL rather than perceive it as a threat.

10.3 At candidate level

The RPL learner-support intervention is not only preparation for assessment and an assessment of competence, but also preparation for lifelong learning and inclusion in a learning society. The benefits are twofold: the adult benefits both as a prospective learner as well as on personal level.

The following are aspects of the benefits of RPL on a personal level:

- Dialogue generates further thinking. In the opportunities for reflective discourse, the adult learner gets the opportunity to find one's voice (Mezirow and associates 2000). The participant learns to think like an adult learner (Mezirow and associates 2000);
- The learners discover the importance of learning by doing and thus promoting cognitive-constructivist assumptions, in terms of which learning is treated as a “process of construction to which learners bring diverse prior knowledge structures and experiences and their own unique needs as learners” (Murphy 1997). The workshops serve as a trigger event to prepare learners for Higher Education;
- The workshop participants discover that nothing has meaning or is learned in isolation from prior experience (Merriam and Caffarella 1999) and that they can draw on past experiences. Learners learn to make connections between past, present and future by formulating goals influenced by the motivation of the past. Learners realise that both negative and positive past experiences can be a driving force and their mentor for future success;
- Learners develop the ability to self-assess, which results in critical reflection and gives them an in-depth view of their prior learning skills and experiences. In this process of redefining previous experiences as learning (Whittaker, Whittaker and Clearly 2006), the adult develops a learner identity;
- Learners become aware of their own creative abilities. The facilitators challenge them to generate ideas, for instance through an essay on cultural diversity and problem-solving;
The workshops create opportunities for action learning. The overall goal of action learning is the development of questioning insight, for instance through the discussion of valid and suitable evidence. Mashile (2001) observes that in the action learning process, learners are led to take action in brainstorming their approach to assignments and are given the opportunity to develop cognitive and evaluative skills. The workshop serves as a tool to prepare students for the compilation of their portfolios of evidence;

- Learners gain insight into their own strengths and skills. They are often not aware of their own skills, such as informal learning that they gained in the community and from family life. They learn to appreciate the importance of these skills for learner success and the ability to transfer these skills to the study environment (Simpson 2008), for example the development of time management skills by raising a large family, or being willing to ask for assistance; and

- They recognise the crucial role of supportive relationships and a supportive environment.

Learner feedback in this regard:

> The RPL process has given me new hope in achieving my ambition. Furthering studies does not only open a gateway to improvement or reaching my objective, but personally it would complete me (Jackie).

11. Facilitator’s observations

The benefits of attending the portfolio workshop (i.e. the process) often outweigh the ‘prize’ of gaining university admission (i.e. the product). Learners appreciate their personal knowledge resources. The question: “How do you feel about your own learning?” usually elicits responses such as “proud”, “surprised” “did not know that I have done such a lot” “I underestimated myself” and “I have achieved things, my past has meaning”. Learners arrive at the workshops as individuals and although groups are always extremely diverse they invariably leave as a group of friends.

Learner feedback in this regard:

> Although we are different we have lot in common. I never realise that Afrikaners and African cultures have things in common (Nomsa).

> I thought I knew the African cultures, but I have learned a lot about my brothers now I understand them (Siphiwe)

Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Howell, Howorth, Lamarre and Van Kleef (1999) confirm that participation in the workshop activities reinforces the adult learners’ confidence in their own abilities to learn and motivates other adult learners to pursue further education. The workshop activities provide an opportunity for learners to exhibit a rich display of their development. Learners are empowered to
extract learning from experience.

Involvement in the workshop is a powerful affirmation of the individual, which results in self-confidence and a feeling of empowerment. This enhances the motivation of the learners, which is a key factor in learner support (Simpson 2008). Peters, Pokorny and Johnson (2004) refer to this empowerment process as “cracking the code” as learners’ confidence and self-esteem grow during a portfolio workshop.

Reduced time in the education system is considered one of the generic benefits of RPL. However, for this target group, RPL is not the “easy” and shorter option; it is a demanding process. Candidates’ increased self-confidence and motivation seem to compensate for this. They also realise that in taking responsibility for further studies, they are no longer victims of their past situations, but can achieve even more than they already have.

Metacognitive abilities are needed to ensure academic success. Mature learners often already have these abilities, but do not realise it. The challenge is to facilitate awareness of these skills: adult learners can become aware of their metacognitive abilities, which means that they can think about thinking (Kilfoil 2007). The collaborative learning environment guides this process, for example through group discussions on suitable, valid, sufficient and authentic evidence for learning experiences. To ensure success, learners need to be aware of their own knowledge, strengths and weaknesses as mature learners. This awareness empowers them to ensure more successful learning, because they are able to reflect on and explore a variety of strategies to learn more effectively.

Through the process of discussion and critical reflection, participants are able to re-evaluate their experiences. Whittaker, Whittaker andClearly (2006) refer to the “changed people” who experience RPL in this way. My own observation during workshops is that the uncertain adult sitting in a classroom with strangers is a changed person by the third day, having come to feel part of this community of practice and having taken the first steps towards entering university.

Feedback from a learner about this transformation:

| “I feel it helps as a bridging gap, preparing us for the learning process” (Belinda). |

12. CONCLUSION

A positive climate in the workshop is tangible and is regarded as a privilege to gain insight into the subjectively lived experiences of RPL candidates and to be part of the process of adults finding their voice (Osman 2003). The sense of achievement that learners experience on realising that they have
succeeded in giving expression to unstructured learning within an academic mode is rewarding. Only after learners have realised the value of knowledge from personal experiences; have discovered learning goals and self-knowledge; and have grown in self-esteem, empowerment and motivation, they are ready to compile portfolios to help them gain access to university and start the lifelong learning journey. After every workshop, it is realised anew that humans need to be acknowledged and treated with respect.
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Experiences and lessons in the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in accessing Higher Education at the University of Limpopo, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to share experiences and lessons learned from the use of Recognition Prior Learning (RPL) as a tool to open access to Higher Education for the previously disadvantaged groups. The paper draws its understanding of curriculum as contextualized social practice from the theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) as advocated by Lave and Wenger (1990) and of legitimization of knowledge from the work of Bernstein (1971).

The study used a qualitative approach to case study design. Participants were drawn from the School of Education, in-service students who were enrolled in two programmes, namely, the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) and the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) for a Bachelor of Education (Further Education Training and Senior Phase). A sample of 41 teachers (21 RTI students and 20 NPDE) was selected through a purposive strategy. Two lecturers who were coordinators of RPL and two coordinators of the programme were included in the study. Data was collected through individual and focus group interviews and documents (RPL instruments).

The findings show that the RPL process, though fraught with challenges, is an efficient tool to open access to Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Moon (2007) is spot on when he argues that in all parts of the world, it is a major challenge to attract young or mature entrants into teaching. Across the world problems in recruiting sufficient teachers still exist. In many countries and regions recruitment of specialists in subject areas at the primary and secondary phases is particularly problematic (especially in Mathematics and Science). The age profile of the teaching profession is also problematic with large percentages of teachers likely to retire in the coming decade. This situation suggests that across the world special attention must be given to teacher training and development.

The scale of demand for teacher expansion to deliver universal primary education by 2015 (United Nations 2000) is unprecedented, particularly in developing countries of Southern Asia and Sub-
Saharan Africa. This demand has been exacerbated by the scourge of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, especially in the Sub-Saharan Africa and its impact on teacher numbers. The need for expanding teacher numbers and the need to provide comprehensive professional development cannot be met by existing institutional structures. There is a definite need for new, flexible and dynamic modes of teacher education expansion programmes (Moon et al. 2007).

In South Africa, such innovative thinking has included the rationalisation of former colleges of education, and the reallocation of teacher education to institutions of Higher Education. This move has come with enormous challenges, such as poorly prepared teachers, who for example, do not meet the minimum admission requirements.

The challenge found universities unprepared. It is here that the University of Limpopo, like other universities, had to explore the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) as an alternative route. Whereas RPL provides wider access to In-Service Teacher Training (INSET), it is not without its challenges in terms of its effectiveness of impact and efficiency in delivery. Therefore the purpose of this paper is to present the experiences we gained in the process of applying RPL in two programmes, namely NPDE and Research Triangle Institute (RTI). The presentation is designed as follows: a) a brief background of the students who underwent RPL b) the process which was undertaken c) challenges faced and d) lessons learned.

2. METHODOLOGY

1. Research design and sample

The study followed a qualitative research design where a sample of 41 student-teachers (21 RTI students and 20 NPDE) and three lecturers, (an NPDE coordinator, RPL coordinator and RTI RPL coordinator) were included in the study through a purposive strategy as participants in the study.

2. Data collection

Data were collected through interviews (individual and focus group interviews) and documents (RPL instruments).

3. Profile of student-teachers

There were two groups of students for the RPL route. The first group was the NPDE and the other was the RTI. The two groups had different profiles. For example, the second group was composed of teachers in the FET band, who hold degrees already. The first group was made mostly of foundation phase teachers. Because of their diverse profiles, the two groups were taken through different processes, though the principles of the process were the same. The details of their profiles can be
grouped in terms of age and sex, and academic qualifications as discussed below:

1.1 Age and gender

The NPDE’s average age group was 50, and the RTI was 40. Of the 21 in NPDE more than 60% were females and the remaining 40% were males. It was interesting that the students were eager to learn despite their age. Whether this enthusiasm was due to the threat from their employer (Department of Education), that they needed to upgrade their qualification or whether they were intrinsically motivated, it is difficult to establish at this stage. But most of them were committed to the programmes. It is also interesting to note that in terms of dedication to submission of assignments, and work in general, female students were better than their male counterparts. The latter were characterized by drunkenness and absenteeism and general laissez-faire attitude.

The RTI group was made up of the age-group between 30 and 45. There were more males than females.

1.2 Academic qualification

The NPDE group was taken through an RPL route because they did not obtained a National Senior Certificate (Grade 12). This was the group that completed Grade 10 (pre 1996, erstwhile standard 8) and had to register for the Primary Teachers Diploma (PTD); and those who had attempted matric, and had obtained a school leaving certificate and registered for the Junior Secondary Teachers Certificate (JSTC) with previous colleges of education. Thus with the new teacher categorization in terms of Relative Equivalent Qualifications (REQVs) by the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), the above qualifications were found wanting, that is, falling below REQV 13, which is regarded as the minimum requirement for being a teacher in South Africa. This pronouncement meant that these teachers, especially in the primary schools were unqualified teachers.

It is against this background that the Department of Education introduced the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) to address the situation. The programme was intended to upgrade these teachers to the level of REQV 13. Unfortunately, because of their lack of matric (Grade 12) they were not qualified for acceptance at a university. It is here where innovative intervention to access Higher Education was introduced.

The RTI group was made up of different people who had different qualifications. Some had matric, the JSTC, and others had degrees already. The reason why they enrolled for the B Ed (Senior Phase (SP) and Further Education and Training Phase (FET), was to upgrade their Mathematics, Biology and Physical Science knowledge and skills. These students were identified by the Limpopo Department of Education and were sponsored by RTI. Unlike the NPDE group they were enrolled on a full time basis, whilst they kept their teaching posts at their respective schools.
In order to fast track their completion, they were taken to the second year of the programme. Those who did not qualify for entry at a university had to be taken through the RPL route. This approach meant that they had to do both first and second year courses in the same year to complete a four year programme in one year. To achieve this was a challenge first for those who did not have a matric examination, but also to the entire group because their programme had to be compressed to accommodate them in the same classes as full-time students.

Both groups were taken through the RPL route separately, but all followed the construction of a portfolio of evidence approach. The NPDE group followed the portfolio development process as outlined hereunder:

4. RPL MODULE

As part of the programme design, the NPDE structure included a fully-fledged module, which carried 120 credits, to be taken only by those who did not meet the basic requirements as discussed above. The duration of the module was a full academic year (8 months). The module sought to address 42 specific outcomes, which among others, included classroom management, theories of learning, curriculum development, and the latest educational policies in South Africa. These topics were addressed by different subject lecturers who formed part of the RPL project team.

5. RPL PROJECT TEAM

The RPL project team was made up of lecturers from the two participating universities, namely the Universities of Venda and Limpopo. Two project leaders were appointed from the respective universities. These project leaders formed part of the module coordinators of the entire NPDE programme. Like all other module coordinators, the team leaders were responsible for organising workshops for the training of the respective subject lecturers on how to develop a portfolio of evidence to address the 42 specific outcomes of the module.

Since these lecturers had no previous experience on the process of RPL, a consultant from the Joint Education Trust (JET), a Non-Government Organisation (NGO), was contracted to facilitate the training of the project team. To this end quarterly workshops were conducted. These workshops were very helpful in providing both a theoretical as well as practical base in conducting RPL, especially the development of a portfolio of evidence.

On the whole, participants expressed appreciation of the process followed in eight workshops and also indicated that they were fully empowered to carry out RPL tasks with some confidence. In the language of Lave and Wenger (1990), those who were novices in the process of RPL were drawn from the periphery to the centre.
6. EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT

After the end of the year, student-teachers submitted their work for assessment. The assessment followed a rubric which was agreed by lecturers and the student teachers in the respective units. A mark was allocated and the portfolios were sent for review by an external assessor at another university.

For the RTI students, a slightly different approach to developing a portfolio of evidence was followed. Unlike in the NPDE programme, the RPL process did not comprise the Bachelor of Education modules, but rather an add-on requirement for those who did not meet the University admission requirements. A lecturer who had prior experience in both the theory and practices of RPL was identified by the Head of Department in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, where the students were registered, and the Director of the School of Education.

The affected students were then assigned to the lecturer, who guided them on how to compile a portfolio of evidence. The competences that were addressed included the demonstration of:

- Writing and study skills;
- Classroom management skills; and
- Basic research skills and knowledge of the latest policy documents in education.

After completion of the portfolio of evidence, the lecturer assessed the portfolios where students had to present the evidence in the portfolio to a panel made up of lecturers from the respective department.

In both cases (the NPDE experience and the RTI experience) the process provided an enriching experience for the student-teachers and lecturers respectively. Hereunder are a few lessons learned from this process:

7. DISCUSSION

The findings show that the RPL process, though fraught with challenges, was an efficient tool to open access to Higher Education. Since this was the first experience and produced good practices to copy from, there were numerous challenges that we faced in the application of RPL. The challenges could be classified into three sections: a) institutional barriers, b) lack of physical resources and c) student-teachers.

7.1 Institutional barriers

Despite the institution having an RPL policy, its implementation is fraught with absurdities,
contradictions and difficulties. These included strict admission rules which needed to be circumvented to allow both the NPDE and RTI students admission into the programmes. But the drive from the Provincial Department of Education provided an impetus to have the students admitted and supported, in spite of the existing rules. In using Bernstein’s (1971) framework of class, codes and control to understand these current structures, one sees how rules and regulations of access to schooling in general and Higher Education in particular, are meant to control the masses in terms of the education system.

7.2 Lack of physical resources

Lack of resources such as finances was a big challenge. Because of the uniqueness of the design of the programme, there were no funds allocated for RPL. Therefore, due to the lack of funds, certain activities, such as the development of a portfolio of evidence, could not be carried out. For example, student-teachers were not visited at their respective schools to check what these student-teachers claimed to have done in the portfolio of evidence.

Another challenge was the lack of sufficient workshops for lecturers to be trained for RPL and in particular, how to develop a portfolio of evidence. If more training was provided more lecturers would have been empowered in this area.

7.3 The approaches of student-teachers themselves

Most of the student-teachers were not committed to the process. We had difficulties with low-rate of submissions of work, absenteeism from contact sessions, plagiarism and poor quality of work - to name but a few.

8. LESSONS LEARNED

We learned that:

- All people know something even though that may not be certified by some legitimate body. NPDE students through the RPL process suddenly discovered how much they knew;
- The linking of the school context of teachers to what they learned in the university/college classroom provided a new perspective to both teachers and lecturers;
- Teacher development should be school-based and practically focused;
- There is a need to embrace Information Technology (IT), for example, the use of cell phones, to teacher development;
- Teachers need development initiatives operating outside conventional institutional provisions, such as the RTI programme, that expanded access to quality education; and
Experiences and lessons in the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in accessing Higher Education at the University of Limpopo, South Africa

- There is a need for reconfiguring teacher development, for example, to include the Open Distance Learning (ODL) modalities, if the Education for All (EFA) goals are to be achieved.

9. IMPLICATIONS FOR RPL PRACTICES

There are several implications that may be extrapolated in implementing RPL from these two programmes. First, for RPL practices to succeed there is a need for i) drivers ii) partners iii) supporters and, iv) networks.

For programmes to succeed there is a need for drivers. Drivers could be the Department of Education at the university and school management teams. The pressures on teacher supply, retention, education and training require leaders who think outside the box; leaders who can see a big picture and drive the process of PRL beyond petty bureaucratic impediments. Most innovative programmes, such as RPL have stalled because of lack of political will and strong leadership at institutional levels.

Partners could be sponsors such as the private sector. Supporters could be parents or other civil organisations such as churches; which might offer support for the implementation of programmes. Establishing networks such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), and other local non-governmental organisations may help with the implementation of interventions such as RPL. These may provide international collaborations that may assist in terms of capacity building or even with finances in some cases.

The second implication is that Higher Education institutions need to think in innovative ways to open access for prospective students who do not meet the conventional standard of matriculation. RPL is one such an alternative. The theory of Lave and Wenger (1990) on situated learning could be helpful in prompting school-based training.

The third implication is that for innovations of this nature to succeed, there should be funding allocated to support RPL implementation.

Future studies are required to pursue the theoretical basis of these implications, especially expanding access. Undoubtedly, there is a need for policy structures that support RPL innovations, including the idea of teachers' entitlement to access continuous professional development. This seems paramount.
REFERENCES


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Notes
Section 2

Recognition of Prior Learning for recognition/ upgrading/ en-skilling
Practical Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) interventions within the Manufacturing, Engineering, Forestry and Chemical sectors

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ABSTRACT

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 three sectors: the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services; Forestry Industry; and Chemical Engineering. These three RPL initiatives included capacity building within the workplaces to carry out RPL. Similar processes have been followed, although these have been tailor-made to fit the context.

The RPL processes as described resulted in positive findings.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper encompasses information on three RPL initiatives that were carried out within the following industries:

- Project 1 – RPL within the Forestry industry;
- Project 2 – RPL within the Chemical industry; and
- Project 3 – RPL within the Metals and Engineering sector.

Each project will be explored in more detail by outlining the scope, processes, and outcomes; and by sharing useful findings and lessons learnt.

2. PROJECT 1: RPL WITHIN THE FORESTRY INDUSTRY: A SOUTH AFRICAN PAPER AND PULP INDUSTRY (SAPPI) DRIVEN RPL INTERVENTION

1.1 Circumstances that led to the initiative

New pulp and paper qualifications (on NQF levels one to four) were developed and registered which meant that the Pulp and Paper industry now had a set of custom-fit qualifications in place against
which employees could be trained or coached. The Forestry Industries Education and Training Authority (FIETA), together with the Paper Manufacturers Association of South Africa (PAMSA), sponsored the development of the learning materials for the full suite of qualifications and these were made available to all accredited Pulp and Paper mills. Mills now had the necessary resources in place to implement in-house learnerships within their respective mills. Assessors were trained and registered.

The fact that mills were now able to implement learnerships was an educational breakthrough. It did pose a potential threat to the experienced employees who did not have the necessary credentials to support their technical expertise.

Inexperienced but qualified entrants are constantly entering the Pulp and Paper environment where they require technical skills training. New entrants are coached by experienced employees in order to operate specialised machinery and equipment. Experienced and in many cases, older employees had no formal qualification(s) in place.

Furthermore, recruitment specifications had changed over the last few years; from a time where employees did not have to be in possession of a matric qualification (or equivalent) to a time where prospective work applicants had to be in possession of a matric certificate (or equivalent), with pass marks in both Mathematics and Science as a minimum requirement, before they could be considered for a permanent position.

Job specifications had also changed as the educational system evolved. Employees were required to have a combination of work experience as well as work related qualifications before they could be considered for promotion.

The impact of the above aspects on the experienced, yet unqualified employees became apparent. The need for an RPL intervention became evident. Experienced employees needed a platform from which their skills could be recognised so that they could advance further within their working environments. An RPL intervention was proposed and explored.

1.2 *Overview of the Sappi RPL initiative*

Discussions were held with mill management and union representatives prior to the planned RPL initiative. The RPL process was discussed and its potential impact on the employees and the workplace was explored.

As part of the intervention, participating assessors were registered for the newly registered part qualifications/ qualifications in order for them to be able to assess RPL candidates against these qualifications. A number of meetings were held to decide upon a suitable RPL strategy.
1.3 An RPL intervention came to life

Sappi appointed a group of RPL practitioners (Erica Botha, Johannes Els and Lynda Prinsloo) to demystify the RPL process to their mills and open up opportunities for their experienced pulp and paper operators to become recognised for the skills and knowledge that they had acquired through work experience.

It was decided to host an RPL intervention by conducting a number of practical RPL sessions.

RPL workshops were held at the following Sappi mills:

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

1.4 Day one of the Sappi RPL intervention: Preparation

During the first day of the initiative assessors were introduced to the RPL process, its potential benefits and its anticipated impact on the mill environment. Workplace assessors were properly inducted in the RPL process; knowledge of RPL and workplace requirements and concerns were openly shared.

Assessors recruited eligible candidates who were willing to undergo an RPL process. Five to six RPL candidates per mill were selected and taken through the RPL process. The main aim behind these workshops was for the mill to experience RPL, learn from experience and to subsequently roll-out RPL within the larger mill environment.

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) developed RPL tools and instruments at the same time that the learning materials were developed for the pulp and paper industry. They were also the driving force behind the RPL process. The availability of well designed learning materials and RPL tools served a valuable resource function without which the RPL process would have been hampered. Assessors were coached in RPL and its processes. Candidates were required to compile a Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) under guidance of their respective RPL assessor and advisors. The RPL candidate also had to undergo an integrated theoretical assessment before day two's practical activities.
Days one and two of the initiative were scheduled as non-consecutive sessions. Day two was scheduled a few weeks after the first day to allow sufficient time for assessors to conduct theoretical assessments and compile portfolios, and for candidates to prepare for on-site practical sessions.

1.5 Day two of the Sappi RPL initiative: Assessment

Assessors and candidates were invited to the second day of the RPL initiative. The workshops started off with a feedback session on the outcomes of the on-site theoretical assessments.

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. Care was taken to ensure that RPL candidates met health and safety as well as technical requirements before practical assessments could be carried out. A series of integrated summative assessments was conducted.

Practical RPL assessment activities were carried out by registered assessors and were confirmed by moderators. Feedback was given during and after the practical assessments. Where gaps were identified in terms of evidence/experience these were addressed and discussed with the candidate. Further opportunities were given for candidates to close the gaps. RPL assessment outcomes were recorded.

1.6 Day three of the RPL initiative: External moderation and review

An on-site external moderation was conducted at each of the participating mills. All parties involved in the Sappi RPL initiative were requested to be available for verification purposes. Parties included the RPL candidates, assessors, internal and external moderators as well as advisors. Interviews and documentary reviews were used as moderation methods. Assessment outcomes were verified by the FIETA appointed moderators, and portfolios were collected and submitted to the FIETA. Competent candidates were registered against current part qualifications.

1.7 Scope of the initiative

- This particular RPL intervention was an institutional initiative which was rolled out in five provinces (as stipulated in the overview);
- The target group of the initiative was skilled, blue collar employees within the various Sappi mills;
- Candidates within the pulp and paper industry could apply to be recognised for a full or part-qualification (a combination related of unit standards within the same qualification) on NQF levels one (1) to four (4); and
- RPL was centered on the recognition of skills and knowledge as well as access to further
progression into the Further Education and Training (FET) band.

The following parties contributed to the success of the intervention:

- RPL advisors: Johannes Leon Els and Erica Botha;
- Sappi representatives and quality assuror: Lynda Prinsloo and Chris Gengan;
- FIETA Education and Training Quality Assurance body;
- PAMSA (Paper Manufacturers Association of South Africa);
- SAPPI RPL candidates;
- SAPPI assessors;
- Internal moderators, training managers and mill representatives; and
- External moderators.

1.8 The RPL process

The following is a broad illustration of the RPL process that was followed:
1.9 Results

- As a result of the initiative some 50 RPL applicants have successfully completed the RPL process. The aim of this initiative was to train workplace assessors on the necessary skills needed to roll out RPL within their respective mills;
- The FIETA could be contacted for more accurate statistics regarding the registration particulars and the subsequent RPL assessments which have since taken place;
- Most RPL candidates applied for part-qualifications with specific work related unit standards in mind which meant that they were assessed on processes and equipment they work with on a daily basis; and
- Assessment was carried out with cost effectiveness in mind due to the fact that it was integrated with normal work processes. Many of the mills have linked internal job descriptions to mill section specific unit standards. Candidates can apply to undergo RPL in his/ her specific section of work and become formally certified to fulfill that specific job function which is not only linked to the company’s job specifications but also to nationally recognised standards. The remainder of the part qualifications can be trained through workplace coaching or formal, non-RPL based training.

2. PROJECT 2 OVERVIEW: RPL WITHIN THE CHEMICAL INDUSTRY

2.1 Phase 1—Sasol (South African Coal and Oil) driven

This RPL project first started as a project between Sparrow Consulting (a company of experienced technical education material developers and training consultants) and Sasol (a petro-chemical manufacturer). The need for RPL arose due to significant changes that were made to the Chemical Operations qualifications (NQF levels 1 to 4). These changes meant that all assessors and moderators within the chemical sector had to undergo upgrades/confirmation of their subject matter expertise. Assessors and moderators could not automatically be re-registered to assess/ moderate against the new qualifications due to the fact that it contained a number of new technical part qualifications. Due to the nature of the industry great care is needed to ensure that all assessors who assess within the industry do so in line with quality, and with health and safety standards at the heart of their assessment practices.

Assessor and moderator upgrade sessions were conducted in the following provinces:

- Gauteng Province;
- Western Cape; and
- KwaZulu-Natal.
The new Chemical Operation qualifications were designed to stay up to date with industry needs and processes. A group of subject matter experts were identified to become the first group of upgraded assessors. The first group of successfully upgraded assessors and moderators came from the Sasol group, who then in turn were expected to take other RPL candidates through the same process so that assessments can take place against these new qualifications. RPL upgrade sessions took place in the form of panel assessments after which Sasol assessors and moderators were trained on RPL during interactive workshops. A matrix was developed by a team of industry and assessment experts to serve as a guide that could be used to identify competencies required against the respective unit standards.

2.2 Phase 2 – A growing need for RPL, industry driven

Soon after phase one of the project, the Chemical Industries Education and Training Authority (CHI ETA ETQA) took the decision to embark on a national RPL project. The main purpose behind this initiative was to build assessment capacity within industry and to subsequently register learners against the new qualifications.

A decision was taken to assist accredited providers by facilitating a number of RPL workshops. Sessions were designed to capacitate at least one assessor per provider. After the sessions the assessor could assist her/his colleagues to undergo the same RPL process in order for them to also become registered for the new qualification(s).

2.3 Scope of the initiative

- The initiative was implemented on a national and sectoral scale;
- The RPL target group consisted of delegates who were subject matter experts as well as assessors and/or moderators within the chemical sector;
- Delegates were given the opportunity to apply to become registered for full or part-qualifications; and
- Candidates were provided with the opportunity to receive recognition for their skills and to gain access to further learning opportunities within the FET and/or the HET bands.
2.4 RPL processes and instruments

The following diagram outlines the RPL process that was followed:

Prospective assessors and moderators were contacted by the CHIETA and received comprehensive RPL toolkits which included 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;
- Step-by-step guidelines to assist in the PoE compilation process;
- Portfolio of Evidence (PoE) assessment checklist;
- A sample of a completed portfolio; and
- RPL workshop dates and procedures.

Assessors and moderators were requested to compile and submit their PoEs 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 be addressed either prior to, or during the RPL workshop.

Each workshop was scheduled over a three day period which consisted of pre-assessment activities, PoE compilation and amendments, assessment activities and review activities. The PoE was assessed for a second time to see if gaps had been closed. A specialist assessment team of re-
Practical Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) interventions within the Manufacturing, Engineering, Forestry and Chemical sectors

registered assessors worked with the CHIETA to assess and declare candidates competent in either individual unit standards or for the full qualification(s).

The evidence matrix was used as an assessment tool to guide assessors and candidates on evidence collection. The matrix also allowed for additional pieces of evidence to be added to the list of suitable evidence sources. Where candidates did not have sufficient evidence to prove their expertise in a respective part qualification they had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge by means of writing an integrated assessment.

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

After the PoE assessments were conducted, feedback was given. Where gaps were identified these were communicated to the candidate. By the end of the workshop candidates had a clear picture of the part qualifications which they would be registered for.

After the moderation process documentation was submitted to the CHIETA’s certification department. Successful candidates were either issued with a Statement of Results (SoR) or a certificate of competence against the full qualification(s). The RPL assessment team met after every session and shared comments about the project and how practices could be improved.

2.5 Results

- 78 delegates were registered as assessors and/or moderators against either full qualifications or part-qualifications. The majority of the delegates achieved full qualifications as a result of the RPL intervention; and
- Registered delegates could now assess and/or moderate against the new qualifications.

3. PROJECT 3 OVERVIEW: RPL WITHIN THE METALS AND ENGINEERING SECTOR

RPL workshops were hosted to train workplace champions to carry out the roles of RPL assessors and/or advisors in support of the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services SETA (merSETA) chamber initiatives. An RPL steering committee was appointed to ensure that an RPL initiative is implemented that would meet specific industry needs. Company management and labour both participated in this process through their training committees.

The steering committee liaised with relevant role players after which they took a decision that industry
champions needed to undergo RPL training. Training took place during interactive RPL capacity building workshops.

In cases where the workplace had access to an in-house assessor with the relevant subject matter expertise in place all assessment and advisory functions could be fulfilled by this assessor. Smaller organisations often were not in the fortunate position to have access to in-house subject matter experts who possessed both technical as well as assessment expertise. Under these circumstances, subject matter experts (referred to as the RPL advisors or evidence collectors) were tasked to guide and offer subject specific as well as RPL guidance to candidates within his/her working environment. Subject matter experts fulfilled an RPL coaching and supportive function. Where assessments were conducted within larger organisations assessments were usually conducted by an in-house assessor.

In order to implement and reach industry members, the merSETA devised an RPL working group relationship between the following parties:

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

The above parties signed agreements and worked together as a team to ensure that RPL could be carried out in the workplace. The merSETA provided funding which made RPL activities possible.

3.1 Scope of the initiative

The project plan objectives included the following:

- The promotion and advocacy of RPL amongst industry stakeholders;
- The establishment and sharing of best practices in the implementation of RPL initiatives;
- The identification and training of RPL advisors; and
- The establishment of a greater understanding of the RPL process amongst industry stakeholders.

Nationwide RPL workshops were hosted as sectoral needs arose to conduct RPL within the Manufacturing and Engineering fields.
The following merSETA chambers took part in the RPL:

- Automotive manufacturing;
- Metals and engineering;
- Motor retail and component manufacturing; and
- Tyre manufacturing and Plastics industries.

Capacity building workshops were conducted in Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Western Cape and the Free State.

Advisors and assessors assisted RPL candidates throughout the entire RPL process and ensured that all parties worked together so that outcomes could be registered on the National Learners’ Records Database (NLRD).

Experienced candidates were given the opportunity to apply for full or part-NQF qualifications, trade qualifications or skills programmes, depending on their individual circumstances and RPL needs. Candidates were provided with the opportunity to receive recognition for their skills and to gain access to further undergraduate workplace related learning programmes.

### 3.2 RPL processes and instruments

The following 12 step methodology was used as a broad visual guideline to the merSETA RPL process:
3.3 RPL workshop resources

RPL advisors and assessors were provided with RPL toolkits. The aim here was to provide delegates with useful tools which they could customise and implement within their respective working environments.

Delegates were provided with RPL toolkits which included the following:

- RPL PoE induction document;
- RPL PoE guidelines;
- RPL PoE template (PoE starter kit);
- List of MerSETA Trades;
- Trade application forms;
- List of MerSETA qualifications;
- MerSETA RPL policy;
- MerSETA assessment and moderation guidelines; and
- Practical exercises.

All of the above resources were discussed and were designed to assist and simplify the RPL and portfolio of evidence building process.

1.3 Results

- A total of 50 delegates were trained as RPL advisors and assessors during the first phase of the initiative;
- 28 companies within the respective merSETA sub-sectors took part in the initiative;
- 181 RPL candidates were identified as potential candidates, 47 of these candidates were assessed and found competent as an immediate result;
- The remainder of the candidates are yet to be assessed or they have encountered challenges such as skills gaps, time limitations and/or other personal challenges. Gap training has commences in cases where gaps were evident; and
- These RPL workshops were conducted as the first phase of the merSETA RPL initiative; other phases are in the planning stages. We look forward to receiving feedback on other project phases which will stem from phase one of this RPL initiative.

For more information on this research, contact Ms Erica Botha:
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Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT)

Ms Caroline Hall,
Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT)

ABSTRACT

This report serves as a 'how to' guide for awarding bodies and training providers by examining current Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policies and practice at the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT), professional body and awarding body for accounting technicians.

The report first considers organisational policy and practices and explores the different methodologies employed in RPL at the AAT:

- Use of workplace evidence - what types and how to assess it;
- Use of exemptions – external consultations, how much to preplan and circulate and how, and how to operate on the hoof; and
- Use of skills tests and checks.

A snapshot of current practice in 20 South African providers is then portrayed and evaluated, together with examples of good practice and student case studies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) is the United Kingdom’s (UK) leading qualification and membership body for accounting staff. We were established in 1980. AAT awards around 90% of all vocational qualifications in accounting in the UK, and are sponsored by the professional accounting bodies such as the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland (ICAS). AAT is based in London, United Kingdom (UK).

In South Africa, the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT) works as Association of Accounting Technicians South Africa (AAT[SA]). This is a joint partnership between The South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) - South Africa’s top accountancy body - and AAT, the leading international body promoting the skills and recognition of accounting technicians.
AAT(SA) is the leading professional body in South Africa dedicated to the education, development, regulation and support of accounting technicians. We also raise the competence and professionalism of our members through continuing professional development (CPD) — paving the way for career advancement and raising standards of performance in the workplace.

AAT has over 120,000 members in more than 90 countries worldwide. Our members include students, people working primarily in accountancy as well as various other fields, and self-employed business owners.

Our employees are essential to our success as an organisation. In 2009 we won a Best Companies award as part of their employee engagement survey. “Best Companies” is the name behind the Sunday Times list of 100 best companies to work for.

The AAT is regarded by Ofqual (the regulator in England) as an innovative awarding body, in particular in the area of computer based testing. The AAT sits and has sat on many advisory groups such as the Ofqual 14-19 Diploma regulatory criteria, National Occupational Standards (NOS) strategy steering committee, Ofqual / Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) / Council for the Curriculum Examination and Assessments (CCEA) (regulators for Wales and Northern Ireland) / National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF), Welsh Assembly Government Credit Common Accord Forum, Learning and Skills Council and Skills Funding Agency Advisory groups on the QCF and the Federation of Awarding Bodies (FAB) QCF implementation programme which ran a series of workshops for awarding bodies and Sector Skills Councils. The AAT is also one of the few awarding bodies approved in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF).

AAT is a member of The Eastern Central and Southern African Federation of Accountants (ECSAFA), a regional body whose objects, inter alia, are to co-ordinate development of the accountancy profession and the promotion of internationally recognised standards of professional competence and conduct within the region. The mission of the organisation is to build and promote the accountancy profession in the Eastern, Central and Southern regions of Africa in order that it is and is perceived by accountants, businesses, financiers and governments, to be an important factor in the economic development of the region.

AAT offers suites of qualifications in Accounting which begin at NQF Level 3 and build upwards to Level 5. Learners may progress at own pace and finish at whichever level is appropriate for their needs. Those completing the Level 5 qualification may practice as self-employed accounting technicians, or may choose to progress further onto chartered accountancy status. AAT also enjoys some partnerships with universities and the integration of AAT qualifications into degree courses. Our qualifications are registered with SAQA.
2. RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

There are many learners performing relevant jobs to a high standard within organisations, who nonetheless find themselves unable to progress in their careers through lack of external recognition of their achievements: recognition readily conferred by the attainment of a qualification. It is this cohort of potential students that AAT RPL policy aims to address, by recognising their prior achievements and crediting those against AAT qualifications. Students should not be required to undergo training or sit assessments that they do not need. Reducing the time and financial commitments needed to acquire a qualification is a positive strategy to attract the involvement of these workers to education.

AAT has three different approaches to RPL, any of which can be applied depending on the particular circumstances of an individual candidate. This report will now consider the three routes:

- Use of workplace evidence — what types and how to assess it;
- Use of exemptions — external consultations, how much to pre-plan and circulate and how to operate on the hoof; and
- Use of skills tests/ checks.

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Case study

**Rachel Mmapula**, Sony, Johannesburg

Rachel works as a treasury coordinator for Sony, a position she has held since July 2010. Previous to that, she worked in hotel management. She had studied for a Diploma in Management Accounting and Finance at Varsity and found out about AAT(SA) in 2009 via the South African Institute of Chartered Accountants (SAICA) website. She was interested in AAT so she decided to do more research. Due to her RPL, she was exempt from the first level and began her studies at Intermediate level.

AAT(SA) has really helped Rachel’s understanding of accounting, especially the ethics of accounting. She has attended several continuous professional development events, including cash flow. Her levels of confidence have reached a higher level in terms of "putting her knowledge into practice." She also regularly consults her AAT(SA) text book at work to assist her with tasks. Her duties at work include work flow, cash allocation, profit and loss balance sheets, fixed asset registers and a lot of compliance stuff. AAT(SA) really helps her with the compliance aspects of her work as Sony do a lot with banking procedures. AAT(SA) offers something different, "something that is more practical and not just theory."

Rachel meets with her tutor every Saturday and she will study three times a week to keep on top of her work. She is currently studying for her Unit 5 exam in December 2010 and logs onto the AAT website at least once a week to get past papers for exams. She is planning to complete her studies by 2012.

Her potential for growth at Sony is good. She told Sony that she was studying AAT(SA) when she applied for the position and she is sure this influenced them positively. She already has mentors in the company including her financial controller. Sony is happy to allow her release days for exams.

As for future ambitions, Rachel wants to progress to become a member of AAT (MAAT). She has asked her tutor, Amelia, about MAAT and is very interested in running her own business.
Case study

Pinda Mose, Izizwe (Civil Engineering Company), Port Elizabeth

Pinda has worked at Izizwe in the finance department for four years. She deals with balance sheets and payroll.

She completed a National Diploma in Management in 1992 at the Peninsula Technicon (now the Cape Peninsula University of Technology Bellville Campus). She found out about AAT(SA) on the SAICA website.

Pinda began at Technician Level in February 2009 through distance learning. In her own words, she has worked really hard, doing an average of four hours study every day on top of her regular working hours. She finds AAT(SA) website very useful, especially the past papers and AAT forums.

AAT(SA) has helped Pinda put her financial duties at work into context as now she understands the purpose behind what she is asked to do. She found international accounting standards and tax computation particularly useful in terms of her job, and strongly believes studying AAT(SA) will help her career progression.

Izizwe has been particularly supportive of Pinda’s study by paying her fees. She has now submitted her application for MAAT (member of AAT) status, but is waiting to obtain her professional reference. Having completed AAT(SA) qualification, she wants to go on to study at the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) in 2011.

These methods will credit a candidate with a unit and can be used to claim certification from the awarding body (with the exception of full unit exemptions). This is particularly useful in cases where learners feel they have already covered part of a qualification but not the whole of it. Additionally, they may be used, or indeed a combination of them may be used, to determine at which level a learner should commence. In these cases, a learner starting at NQF Level 4, for example, will not claim certification for the NQF Level 3 qualification. They will instead be exempt from the requirement to acquire the Level 3 qualification before commencement of the Level 4. Technically, the use of exemptions is not usually considered to be RPL, but is included in this report as an important factor in enabling candidate progression.

3. WORK PLACE EVIDENCE

Students with current work experience or previous work experience are able to demonstrate their abilities via a portfolio of evidence. Much freedom is allowed in the manner in which the student is able to demonstrate this so as to incorporate both individual preference and the business reality within which they operate.

This involves assessors making assessment decisions on a broad range of evidence. For example, witness testimonies, written or oral questions and answers, observation records, workplace documents and recognition of prior learning (RPL).

1.1 Witness testimony
A witness testimony is a statement from an employer that confirms that the student member regularly performs certain tasks in their work role. The witness testimony must not be a direct replication of the assessment criteria but must be a statement as to the tasks completed by the student member. The statement must be on organisational headed paper and dated and signed by the employer. The training provider will need to ensure that the employer signature is authentic. This may be achieved through a witness signatory list, which is a list of the people involved in the assessment process together with an example of their usual signature or by making telephone contact with the witness. The witness testimony must be assessed against the assessment criteria in the unit. Where the witness is a relative of the student member an independent witness should also be sought.

3.2 Written and oral questions and answers

Assessors may devise questions in order to plug a small gap in work place evidence or strengthen a weak area. Questions can be oral or written, whichever is the most appropriate to the situation, but it is important that they relate directly to the original gap or weakness. The questions and the student member’s answers must be recorded, and that record should be signed and dated by both the student member and assessor.

3.4 Assessor observation

Assessors may have the opportunity to conduct a work place observation. This is where a qualified assessor witnesses the student member completing a task(s) to prove competence in that area. The observation process should be fully recorded and matched to the assessment criteria within the unit. The observation record should be signed and dated by the student member and assessor.

3.5 Validity, authenticity, currency and sufficiency

When the workplace evidence option is available and used, assessors need to ensure that the evidence is valid, authentic, current, and sufficient:

• Valid - the assessor must ensure that the workplace evidence produced is relevant to the assessment criteria it claims to cover;
• Authentic - the assessor must ensure that the student member has indeed been responsible for the production of the workplace evidence. This can be achieved through a statement from the line manager confirming the student member’s contribution to the evidence. The line manager’s signature must be authenticated, and this could be achieved through a witness signatory list as described in the paragraph relating to witness testimony;
• Current - the assessor must ensure that the workplace evidence is less than 18 months old; and
• Sufficient - the assessor must ensure that there is enough evidence produced from the workplace to satisfy the assessment criteria it relates to and give confidence in the student member’s competence.

Assessors map the evidence against the assessment criteria of the unit within the qualification using a mapping sheet.

Case study

Mahomed Althaf Ismail, Sultan & Associates, Durban

Mahomed has worked at Sultan, a chartered accountants practice for three and a half years. Sultan is a medium sized business with 25-30 staff. He is now a senior account clerk with duties covering working with financials and supervising finance staff.

Previously, Mahomed studied for one and a half years as a Bachelor of Commerce, which allowed him to start at the Intermediate level of the AAT(SA) qualification. He saw the AAT(SA) qualification as a good, practical option for his career development.

He initially heard about AAT(SA) in the Durban Mercury newspaper when he saw an advert for a training provider offering AAT(SA) and was really interested. He then looked at AAT’s website to find out more and this convinced him that it was the right choice.

Studying for the AAT(SA) qualification has really helped Mahomed at work, especially around the thorny subject of ethics, and it has also given him the background knowledge to understand the reasoning behind his activities at work, rather than just carrying out duties blindly. He is sure his promotion at Sultan from accounts clerk was due to studying AAT(SA).

Mahomed has reaped the benefits of AAT(SA) to such an extent that he has successfully encouraged two colleagues to take up the qualification. He is happy to be an ambassador for the qualification to promote its growth in South Africa.

He studies for at least two hours a day and meets his tutor every fortnight in a study group of six. He enjoys studying in a group because individuals come from different working backgrounds – practice and industry. He uses the website for past papers and, although interested, hasn’t yet been able to attend any continuing professional development (CPD) events.

4. EXEMPTIONS

Exempting units or qualifications achieved elsewhere through another awarding body and at an earlier date involves recognition and transfer of credits. In practice, units are more readily transferable than full qualifications because the overall content on one qualification does not tend to match perfectly with that of another. Even where the earlier qualification may contain a greater breadth of content, there is always a tendency to find missing gaps. In this situation, it is viable to find equivalent content across many but not all of the units.

In the case of commonly used alternative qualifications, it is expedient for the awarding body to map these against their own qualifications on a unit by unit basis and provide this to their providers. This means that providers are already furnished with an aide memoire at the point the learner arrives to be
registered and is assessed at induction. However, in the case of more unusual qualifications, the provider has to map the qualifications themselves and then gain agreement from the awarding body.

5. POLITICS

Mapping one qualification against another is resource intensive. An alternative approach to that of the awarding body taking on full responsibility for this, is to contact all other awarding bodies operating in the subject area at the same level(s) and ask them to put forward any of their qualifications for which they would seek exemptions. In this case, the other party conducts the mapping and forwards their mapping to the requesting body, who must then verify the exercise. A common problem at this stage is finding knowledge based qualifications mapped against competence based qualifications. Knowing the theory of a discipline cannot compensate for the hands-on skills of being able to do it and this is a frequent cause of lack of compatibility. Partial compatibility may however be secured in qualifications with unit structures. To ensure the mapping exercise is conducted properly, where the syllabus lacks detail, it may also be necessary to evaluate the assessments too.

Where a match is not agreed, the requestor then faces the delicate situation of informing the other awarding body that their units have not been accepted and why. This generally results in an appeal for further consideration and possibly the submission of further materials to support the case. Sadly, in practice, this usually turns out to be in vain. However, it is important that several exchanges take place so that the other parties eventually realise and accept why a match is not possible. You can expect this procedure to take about six months.

If both parties agree to a two-way exemption - all the better for the sector. Sometimes, it is only possible to agree to a one-way exemption.

6. PROCEDURE

A common misunderstanding in the mapping of qualifications is to look for a direct match between units. As in the rest of life, perfect fits seldom exist. The other unit can always be larger and have more breadth of content. (This would be a one-way exemption). If the other unit is missing a particular topic, but that topic is covered in a further unit, it is possible to accept a unit cluster. However, this kind of complexity tends not to help the student in practice and unit by unit matches prove to be far more useful. Often, a small aspect of the unit is not covered and a pragmatic approach needs to be taken as to whether this is a key aspect of the unit or, ultimately, one that can be overlooked in the larger context.
How the mapping is laid out is flexible. Some prefer to list one specification or syllabus in one column and the other in a second column. This easily identifies the overlap, any gaps, and any additional material in either. Other people only list their own specification and then conduct a tick box exercise against it. People conducting mapping exercises should be subject experts.

7. SKILLS CHECKS/TESTS

This method may be used as a standalone assessment or in conjunction with workplace evidence, in cases where the learner is unable to provide sufficient evidence from the workplace in order to demonstrate competence across all the assessment criteria of a unit. In the latter case, the provider may devise questions or a short test in order to cover the outstanding assessment criteria.

Some learners request to begin their studies at NQF Level 5 and be exempt from the qualification at NQF Levels 3 and 4 on the grounds of workplace experience. We have a situation where no credit is actually claimed for the Level 3 and 4 qualifications, just a desire to enter the programme at a higher level. Many providers facing this situation chose to administer an old AAT exam which will test financial accounting in detail. Past exams are available on the AAT website at no cost to providers or learners. The answers are also available. There is of course a risk attached to this approach of detailed assessment of part of the whole qualification, as illustrated in the following comments.

Example

AAT External Verifiers visit providers and verify RPL, work place evidence and any assessments conducted by a provider.

The following two comments are made by External Verifiers:

Very few of my centres allow candidates to start at a different level to Level 3 because they have not found an equivalent qualification which adequately prepares candidates in the double entry aspects of accounting. I used to be an examiner and moderator for the Matric Accounts papers and that certainly contains minimal double entry book keeping and therefore whilst centres have been tempted to put candidates on Level 4 invariably they drop back to Level 3. If a candidate has extensive work experience centres tend to give them a past Level 4 exam paper as the test (rather than AAT skills check) as they often find that discussions about jobs and work experience is so hit and miss in ascertaining someone’s suitability to start at a higher level than 3.

I have plenty of examples where workplace experience has been used (checked by using the AAT online skills test) to determine the start level and students have started at Level 4 because of their experience. I have had centres in the past which allowed RPL because of Matriculation; and given immediate entry into Level 4 because of this achievement (in any subject) though all of my centres that did this have stopped, because the students were not ready for this level. I have one new training provider who only offers Level 5 because of students’ prior learning it is a university. I cannot think of any examples where students have started part way through a level because of RPL, except where they have moved training providers mid-year.
The following comments are made by training providers.

[Enclosed box with text]

8. CURRENT PRACTICE WITH PROVIDERS IN SOUTH AFRICA

In order to supply empirical evidence for this report, we undertook a survey of current RPL practices in October 2010 with 20 of our providers in South Africa, one of whom conducts only distance learning. These cover the majority of regions in the country. Of the 20 providers canvassed, four providers are solely involved in a particular programme which targets the disadvantaged, and which is unlikely to attract applicants with RPL to offer. Their responses confirmed that no instances had arisen in the last 12 months.

Of the 16 remaining providers, four confirmed that no instances had ever arisen, and one provider was keen to point out that as they only recruit school leavers, this is only to be expected. This indicates that 75% of the providers are currently undertaking RPL with their learners.

Of the 12 providers carrying out RPL, three providers said they regularly use exemptions.

Three providers have specially designed bridging courses for students who manage to RPL part of a qualification but not the whole of it, thus enabling the students to begin their studies proper at the next NQF level up. The College of People Management and Development carry out a skills check together with use of an old AAT exam, Unit 30. Those students who fail the exam undergo a five day bridging
course. This alternative pathway also holds for students who hold a first year Accounting degree, or who undergo a skills check or submit workplace evidence. One provider combines the use of exemptions with a bridging course.

Work place evidence was cited by four providers. One noted that they had been using skills checks combined with curricula vitae (CVs), but were now moving to employer witness testimony instead. ESP Consulting show evidence of best practice in their in-house policy.

A very different style of policy is produced by Atcor. This policy explicitly refers to a charge for the provider service, a charge which equates to the normal unit assessment cost. Only two providers in the survey referred to charges, but this information was volunteered rather than requested.

Example

Computer Fundamentals CC uses a mix of workplace evidence and tests.

In terms of my experience we have not used RPL as a common practice - it is marketed to learners when they first commence on the programme as an option, but it generally turns out to be the exception rather than the rule. The process is as follows:

In my experience within the South African context very few learners embark on the training with a prior qualification, and if they do have some form of tertiary qualification it is not at a very high level.

All learners attend a full induction programme. This programme includes a full discussion on RPL. As the programme is generally paid for by a supportive employer we inform the employer of the same. The employer then either suggests RPL or requests a ‘wait and see’ period. Once the RPL process is requested, the employer then submits signed off documentation to the effect which we use as the basis for the RPL process. Evidence of work based efficiency and practice is considered and tendered as further proof of ability.

Over the period of 15 years working with and offering AAT, I have RPL’ed approximately six learners - three of whom flew through the qualification and did exceptionally well. Another one battled with the level of the work from a fundamental understanding of the basics initially, but then eventually moved through the programme successfully. One learner dropped off because of personal pressure and under performance in the workplace and the final learner is still busy with her studies and we have had to do hours of revision with her. What was very important in all cases is the professional membership and this does not only apply to RPL learners, but to all AAT learners.

When the learners do well on the course we often suggest a ‘double up’ process by way of writing simulations/assessments outside of the training schedule, and in this way the learner gets through the entire programme in an accelerated timeframe but they still attain all the necessary certification which assumes huge importance in the South African market. People want all the certificates that they can get.

Four providers referred to their use of skills checks specifically. Bryant Bell & Associates use these in conjunction with a CV and professional discussion. They have also designed a policy specifically for their students.
9. CONCLUSION

At AAT's core is a commitment to high values and customer centricity which guides its approach to RPL. By recognising the skills and knowledge of individuals already working in accounting roles, AAT is facilitating the career advancement of individuals who may otherwise find their avenues for progression limited. AAT allows students to claim credit for units of work which they can prove they already have knowledge of. In this sense, RPL replaces needless training and assessments, thus saving students time and money. In order to facilitate RPL, AAT endorses workplace evidence, exemptions and devised assessments in the forms of skills tests and checks.

Each approach results in different demands being put onto training providers and assessors, ranging from collecting witness testimonies to mapping exemptions and devising skills tests. To ensure consistency and to safeguard the high standards of AAT, it is important that processes are quality assured and rigorously applied. The reported problems with RPL include the fact that even after the use of multiple methods of assessment, some students still suffer difficulties starting with AAT at higher levels, as they have insufficient experience of the more elementary accounting functions, and when this occurs students are reluctant to drop down a level.

Feedback from our training providers has shown variation in their application of the assessment of RPL, with some methods being preferred over others in certain circumstances, demonstrating the need for training providers to be flexible in their approach to RPL. In South Africa, where there is a large market of uncertified individuals working in accounting roles, RPL has been readily adopted by training providers some of whom are using bridging courses to facilitate advancement onto AAT qualifications. This application of RPL is giving many individuals the chance to boost their career options through formal recognition of their skills.

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

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this presentation is to critique an understanding of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) from organised labour’s perspectives. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the largest labour movement in South Africa, played a critical role in the promotion of the concept of recognition of prior learning. The critique argues that very little has been done in the development of plans and structures to ensure that RPL benefit those who need it most, that is, the workers. This critical analysis conceptualises RPL. It also emphasises its importance for skills development in the country, particularly for the workers, by stating the role that organised labour can play in implementing RPL to up-skill its members; and its implication for addressing national skills priority. In the final analysis it looks at the challenges and recommendation for the implementation of RPL in the South African context. The analysis concludes by making a recommendation that RPL should be conducted in a more focused way in the quest for real development pathways and real employment benefits to address the demands for skills development in the workplace.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the early 1990s COSATU promoted RPL as the principle to redress the past inequalities which was inherited in 1994 as the outcome of deliberate policy of underdevelopment to the majority of South Africans from the British and the Dutch colonisation to the apartheid era. RPL was drawn out of the radical theory of education of learning, transferring skill from generation to generation outside formal learning, such as making pots, building homes, making tools of war and farming. Such a skill was learned in the community, family and trade unions.

2. WHAT IS RPL?

According to the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), RPL means "the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specific qualification" (RSA 1998). RPL is a practice that gives value and recognition to a person’s previous learning, regardless of how and where that learning was acquired (RSA 1998), this recognition can be in the form of academic credits or advanced placement.
In South Africa, there are many contexts within which RPL can be practised, including Higher Education (HE), Further Education and Training (FET), General Education and Training (GET), Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), workplace-based training centers and in the workplace itself.

Despite the South African government’s frequently stated role for RPL as a tool for social transformation the SAQA policies give no national implementation plan to guide RPL implementation specifically in the workplace (Deller 2007). This could be one of the reasons why there has been little implementation of RPL in South African workplaces (Deller 2007).

The questions that arise from workers’ perspective and that this presentation will attempt to answer are as follows:

- What is our understanding of RPL from our perspective as organised labour?
- What are the opportunities and benefits in implementing RPL in the South African workplace; and
- What are challenges of RPL in South Africa?

3. UNDERSTANDING RPL FROM ORGANISED LABOUR’S PERSPECTIVE

COSATU has consistently argued that we need to ensure that workers gain recognition for the skills and knowledge that have been acquired through years of experience at the workplace and in the communities (COSATU 2000). While workers daily demonstrate a range of abilities, this is generally not formally recognised, either by employers or by educational institutions. In many cases workers are required to perform a range of activities in the workplace, but this does not translate into a promotion in the grading structure, or an increase in pay. In other cases, lack of recognition for the skills and knowledge that workers have, led to inefficiencies in the workplace because of limited way in which individual abilities are utilised.

The General Secretary of COSATU, Comrade Vavi (COSATU 2002) stated that:

"Workers are often disadvantaged and denied access to promotion opportunities in favour of others that have formal academic qualification, yet it is those same workers that are then required to assist the person that has been appointed to undertake their role. The reversal of this situation is central to the proper implementation of employment equity."

RPL is critical to ensure that workers are able to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge that have been developed in a range of different ways. Thus workers can be assessed against nationally agreed upon unit standards, and can receive credits towards a qualification. This recognition can open up access to pathways and opportunities. It is not enough to simply have the skills and knowledge recognised which employers or educational institutions define as important.

From the workers’ view the struggle is about recognising the value of the skills that members of the
working class have acquired through the different activities that people are involved in during their daily lives.

When shop stewards are involved in negotiations this requires a range of skills such as gathering information about the options available; consulting union structures; presenting options to workers seeking a mandate from workers; and presenting these positions to management. It is these values and skills that we need to introduce into the education and training system.

We need to ensure that the standards that workers are assessed against incorporate the kind of skills that workers have, and that the system we build is one that opens access and does not serve as a way of entrenching status quo. The RPL process can assist to enable the Labour Movement to realise the principles of "closing the wage gap" and of ensuring equity in the workplace and in society.

4. WHY IS RPL CENTRAL TO WORKERS’ DEMANDS FOR SKILLS DEVELOPMENT?

Worker demands and reasons for wanting RPL are to meet the following human developmental challenges:

- Social justice;
- Access to education and training;
- Validation of knowledge;
- Personal and social empowerment;
- Improving the education and training system; and
- Job opportunities

5. THE ROLE OF ORGANISED LABOUR IN DEVELOPING RPL TO UP-SKILL ITS MEMBERS

COSATU initiated in 1997 a research project which explored the RPL processes that have been implemented in industry in order to learn from these experiences and develop a policy and guidelines for RPL. The first phase of the project was completed in December 1997.

Subsequently a second phase was planned to assist COSATU affiliates to work with employers to pilot aspects of this new policy in order to enrich the guidelines and to build the capacity of shop stewards who are then able to implement RPL processes. The RPL capacity building project, which commenced in December 1998, included two COSATU unions, The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) (COSATU: 2000)
6. THE OUTCOME OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Ten percent of NUMSA members who participated in the process were upgraded and the union accepted the strategy to ensure training of their members.

NUM candidates and their shop stewards indicated the project did not meet their expectations. Management was seen to be using RPL to identify some people for promotions, even if they were still using human resource practices (Lugg, Mabitla, Louw and Angelis 2003).

7. OPPORTUNITIES AND BENEFITS FOR IMPLEMENTING RPL IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN WORKPLACE

RPL can be used to examine historical rigidities and barriers that might continue to exist in education and training particularly regarding inclusion in curricula knowledge of the knowledge systems that traditionally fall outside of formal recognised academic discourses.

RPL offers the potential for reducing the costs of delivering education and training and thus widening access, and of redressing previous and continuing disadvantages.

The models of RPL should attempt to reconcile learner-centredness, negotiated procedures, and flexible assessments with rigorous standards and quality assurance systems for recognition. To an extent this should be attempted through the set of relationships between the workplace, the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and SAQA, and the respective roles of RPL advisers, assessors and moderators.

8. CHALLENGES OF RPL IN SOUTH AFRICA

One challenge for RPL is that recognised learning must be aligned with the SAQA registered unit standards or qualifications. This means that:

- Informal learning is assessed only against outcomes that are specified in the unit standards or qualifications;
- Learning that falls outside of the specific outcomes is not assessed; and
- There is no formal procedure available for recognising and formalising indigenous knowledge and accommodating those who cannot read and write but have a wealth of experience and knowledge.
A more debilitating challenge has been the lack of directive from the government and statutory bodies to enforce the implementation of RPL. This challenge leads to a situation in which:

- Few institutions feel compelled to incorporate RPL in their education programmes;
- Government funding earmarked for skills development may or may not include RPL;
- Funding for ongoing RPL capacity development is limited. Projects undertaken by SETAs are few;
- Practitioners are not trained to implement RPL, which practically speaking restricts the skills development to training only; and
- Many Higher Education institutions are not readily embracing the principle of RPL, and are therefore not making the necessary adjustments to accommodate such students.

9. **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- That we streamline RPL tools and implementation across all economic sectors for the purpose of uniformity;
- That RPL be an integral part of every training programme to include those learners with previous knowledge and experience;
- That the Labour Movement incorporates RPL as part of their demand for the development of unit standards that would give recognition to indigenous knowledge, and funding of education to include RPL;
- That we embark on RPL as a project to determine/audit the skills we have as a country, in each sector funded through the National Skills Fund (NSF);
- That RPL be included in the curriculum of the practitioners;
- That workers receive support and guidance throughout the RPL process and beyond; assessment to be flexible;
- That RPL be enforced in the workplace, Higher Education institutions and Further Education and Training colleges;
- That government develop capacity and instruments of enforcement particularly so as to avoid marginalisation of RPL from academic institutions; and
- That RPL centres are accessible particularly for rural and township base workers.

10. **CONCLUSION**

Based on the critique from this analysis of RPL from organised labour's perspective, it can be concluded that although the national policy context allows for cautious optimism, it is conceivable that problems within the present policy framework could undermine the opportunities for the advancement of RPL practices for workers in the workplaces if not enforced. RPL practices should be based on
experience, reflection and knowledge. South Africa is currently undergoing a renewed drive to
develop a skilled nation in a more focused way than in the past. The lessons learned from workers’
perspectives should assist in ensuring that RPL is conducted in a more focused way, together with the
identification of real development pathways and real employment benefits.
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A holistic approach to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

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ABSTRACT

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) (DHET 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 their knowledge gained through experience measured against those which they are required to attain.

The paper will discuss 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.

1. INTRODUCTION

In general terms a holistic approach to RPL (SAQA 2002) subscribes to the principles and values of human development and lifelong learning. This approach ties in well with the objectives of redress and the promotion of lifelong learning. A holistic approach to RPL seeks to realise real benefits to all stakeholders who support its implementation by being cost-effective, enhancing self-esteem, increasing participation in education, training and development and promoting real economic and social benefits in workplaces and communities.

2. A HOLISTIC APPROACH

When following a holistic approach the assessment of evidence does not have to be formal, i.e. a test,
assignment, etc. if the evidence is compelling enough. However, the evidence must still be assessed by viewing, analysing and authenticating it. RPL is a subjective assessment method, and although different from formal assessment methods, is still just another method and nothing more. So the question is: how can we practise a holistic approach to assessment without sacrificing the credibility of RPL?

The following are in our opinion the general characteristics of a holistic approach to RPL:

1.1 **RPL can be used to overcome social and personal barriers**

A holistic approach to RPL consciously seeks to address the context and conditions that inform the practice of RPL. This means taking steps to remove the emotional, educational, cultural and economic factors that constitute barriers to effective learning and assessment practices. It is important to start establishing a learning culture at an early age already and this can only be achieved if children receive the right stimulus even before they reach school going age. This underlines the importance of early childhood development and is the reason why people in the community who look after children should be properly trained. Ignorance of learning and assessment opportunities that are available is often responsible for people either not even considering RPL as an option or harbouring unrealistic expectations with all the resultant disillusionments and frustrations.

A holistic approach allocates high priority to the establishment of learner-centred support systems and programmes necessary for the proper preparation and implementation of RPL in the workplace and in the formal institutions of learning. People in rural as well as urban areas should have access to RPL and they should be informed of the opportunities that RPL offers them. Employees need to be informed of all the assessment opportunities that are available to them of which RPL is one. They should also be educated in the procedures, advantages and disadvantages of RPL. RPL opportunities should be actively marketed to members of communities.

A holistic approach to RPL positions the process within a broader process of lifelong learning, where individualised career-pathing and educational planning are part of the services offered. Even more, RPL instruments and processes should be contextualized to the cultural values of communities. For example, it is important to ensure that RPL instruments or tasks are available in the first (home) language of the candidates.

All stakeholders in Education, Training and Development (ETD) should participate in and support the RPL process. It is a team effort even though the RPL facilitator will probably play a key role in the planning and coordination of the process. Government has an important role to play in the promotion of RPL. Arguably the most important role that government has to play in this respect is in providing funding for RPL projects. Secondly, government can promulgate legislation that supports the achievement of qualifications through RPL.
Even those who know what RPL entails, including learning institutions as well as individuals, often feel that credits and certificates achieved through RPL are inferior to credits and certificates for formal learning. This perception needs to be changed by ensuring that assessment centres and learning institutions do not differentiate between qualifications and credits achieved through RPL and formal examination (following on formal learning). There should be no difference between certificates achieved through RPL and certificates achieved through formal assessment.

1.2 The RPL system must be flexible

A holistic approach to learning, teaching and assessment recognises that RPL should ideally be the first step into a programme that will build on the skills and knowledge already recognised and credited. Learning programmes should be flexible and rest on sound adult learning principles and practices in order to maximise the learning and teaching process. Assessment within both the RPL processes and learning programmes itself needs to be flexible, participative and integrated.

A holistic approach to RPL takes as its starting point the standpoint of critical theory which challenges the social and structural conditioning of the curriculum, institutions and related opportunities for adult learners in formal education. This implies that a curriculum cannot contain all the contents and standards that are relevant to the achievement of knowledge and skills in a particular field, discipline or workplace. It is quite possible and likely that different industries will require different skills needs and knowledge of their workers even if they occupy the same positions. An accountant in a bank, for example, require different skills than an accountant working for a mining company. RPL in this approach seeks not only to facilitate access to registered standards and qualifications, but will also increasingly challenge the construction and content of qualifications to be more inclusive of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are produced in communities of practice outside of the formal institutions of learning in society. The achievement of a qualification and credits is, therefore, not entirely dependent on the achievement of learning content and standards specified in a curriculum – there will often be alternatives that should also be recognised.

Flexibility of RPL also impacts on the assessment methods and instruments used. A holistic approach to RPL recognizes the rich diversity of knowledge and learning styles, which learners bring into an assessment situation. It subscribes to the principles of good assessment practice as formulated in the registered generic assessor standard. As such, it actively promotes the principle of flexibility in the use of assessment methods and instruments in accordance with the principles and the rights of the RPL candidates to participate in the selection and use of assessment methods and instruments appropriate to their situation. So, it is not only content and standards (curriculum) that needs to be interpreted in a flexible manner but also the types of assessment used.

Flexibility of RPL can be enhanced by regularly reviewing RPL policies, procedures and instruments. Review is necessary because the environment constantly changes and with it the skills needs of
industries. RPL policies, procedures and instruments must keep track with these changes if they are to remain valid. Secondly, it is unlikely that RPL policies, procedures and instruments will ever be perfect; there will always be room for improvement and learning institutions and assessments centres who are serious about quality will persistently strive towards the improvement of their systems. We need to keep in mind that RPL can be used for different purposes, each requiring different approaches and, perhaps, instruments. RPL evidence can take many forms and include a diversity of knowledge and skills which need to be contextualised to the needs of the client and articulated to the purpose for which RPL is sought. RPL policies, procedures and instruments can be relatively generic but also need to be sufficiently flexible to be adapted to the unique needs of the environment in terms of purpose and time.

The flexibility of RPL processes can be enhanced by providing for multi-entry and exit points in RPL processes. Formal learning is not the only possible entry point; workplace and social experiences should also be possibilities if they are relevant. At the same time we must guard against placing so much emphasis on flexibility that standards are eroded in the process. Not all experience will be relevant to just any RPL assessment. The candidate must still provide real and valid evidence of prior learning and it is the responsibility of the RPL facilitator to assist the candidate in identifying such evidence. As much as candidates sometimes submit irrelevant evidence, so they often also have evidence that they do not submit because they don’t realise that it is relevant. This problem can be reduced by involving RPL candidates in the planning of RPL processes; by adopting reasonable time frames and simple RPL procedures; by not making the process unnecessarily complicated; by making guidance and support available at all times; by making sure that RPL assessments focus on the specific needs and profile of individual candidates; and by not using ‘blanket’ assessment criteria in the hope that these will apply to all candidates. In other words, assessments need to cater for the special needs of individual candidates.

1.3 RPL should provide people with some new knowledge and skills

The principles and values of human development are as relevant to RPL as they are to formal learning and assessment, and a holistic approach to RPL describes the principles and values of human development and lifelong learning. As such it supports the social purposes of RPL in relation to access, equity and redress, and strives to implement assessments in a manner that promotes dignity, confidence and educational opportunities for all learners. RPL should be made increasingly available and affordable to all candidates who request it. RPL should also be voluntary.

A holistic approach to RPL is developmental. RPL is not only about assessment, but should be seen as a broader process that places the candidate at its centre. Thus the RPL process should focus on preparing candidates, assessing what they do know (not penalising them for what they do not know) and then using that information to guide decisions around career- and educational planning.
Career- and educational planning requires that people who were out of the education and training system for a while are motivated to return to lifelong learning. Gaps in knowledge and skills need to be identified and candidates must not just be assessed to find them competent or not. Once such gaps have been identified top-up learning should be offered to close the gaps. In this manner formal learning can be linked to informal learning, and classroom learning to workplace learning. Quality assurance is important in a holistic approach to RPL. The impact of RPL and the accompanying top-up learning on the workplace and on the candidate’s work performance should be evaluated.

It is important to ensure that RPL leads to further learning if it is to promote lifelong learning. RPL potentially equips unemployed people to find jobs, which in turn have potential to lead to further learning.

1.4 External barriers to RPL, such as conflicting legislation, lack of cooperation between role players, and costs, must be removed

We already mentioned that government is an important role player in RPL as it is government who can ensure that RPL is not hampered by conflicting legislation, who can fund RPL projects and who can facilitate cooperation between the different role players in RPL. Government can already make a substantial contribution by just openly supporting RPL drives.

The second important role player is learning institutions and assessment centres that can ensure that external barriers do not hamper RPL. External barriers could be targeted by formulating and implementing sound RPL policies and by ensuring that RPL policies and plans show explicit commitment to the principles of equity, redress and inclusion. It is also learning institutions that are responsible for ensuring that functioning RPL systems are in place and that all RPL role-players in the institution are experts at their jobs. Learning institutions and assessment centres are responsible for ensuring that all RPL role-players know what the processes involve and how the candidates, employers and communities can benefit from RPL. This could be achieved by, amongst other things, evaluating the performance of RPL facilitators, assessors, moderators and management regularly.

Learning institutions and assessment centres are responsible for gaining the support of the relevant quality assurance bodies for the various RPL processes. Costs, as an external barrier to RPL, can be reduced if not entirely eliminated by ensuring that RPL systems operate cost-effectively.

1.5 Internal barriers to RPL must be removed

Internal barriers can be anything within a learning institution or assessment centre that hampers RPL, for example lack of capacity, lack of knowledge and skills and lack of funds. Some employers assert that lack of capacity is the reason for not providing RPL opportunities for their employees, when in reality they have other motives, such as not wanting to, or being able to, increase remuneration
levels, or wanting to make the seeking of employment elsewhere difficult for their employees. Balance between these factors and new kinds of dialogue need to be found to deal with these challenges.

Employer organisations generally need to do more research to identify knowledge and skills gaps in their employees, close the gaps by using RPL followed by top-up training. This implies that employer organisations have learning institutions or at least sections responsible for skills development. The Skills Development Facilitator can make an important contribution in this respect because she or he is responsible for doing skills audits at least once a year. A skills audit can be used as a gap analysis because it is not only skills shortages that are identified but also available skills that might not be recognised as certificates or credits that can lead to further leaning.

A rather common internal barrier to offering professional RPL services is that people responsible for RPL at learning institutions and assessment centres do not have appropriate levels of knowledge and skills to offer best practice RPL assessments and services and training and mentoring for RPL role-players. This can be solved in bigger organisations with learning institutions and/or assessment centres by having staff members properly trained in RPL procedures. If RPL services are offered, then appropriate RPL strategies need to be in place. Similarly, all attempts need to be made to ensure that sufficient resources are available to offer best practice RPL services. Resourcing includes using existing facilities, equipment and tools more extensively to assess RPL candidates and to provide top-up learning. Alternatively, and this applies equally to small organisations, the RPL function can be outsourced.

Cooperation can make a substantial contribution to the removal of internal barriers to RPL because the expert knowledge and skills of one person can make up for deficiencies in the knowledge and skills of someone else. RPL assessment should ideally be done by two people working together an expert in assessment and an expert in the subject or trade being assessed. Secondly, cooperation is necessary for the successful functioning of any system because groups of individuals can only achieve success, or at least achieve success efficiently, if all agree on and support what is to be achieved.

2.6 **RPL should as far as possible be workplace-based**

Although RPL equally applies to academic and workplace settings, it would be rather difficult to achieve if skills are not demonstrated or evidence of skills is not required. It is not customary for RPL candidates to write theoretical examinations (although these can be used for certain purposes) because it is mostly historical evidence that is called for. After all, it is prior learning that we are dealing with. Besides, even academic learning should ultimately lead to improved workplace performance, so that workplace-based evidence is often the best evidence for RPL purposes.
The collection and evaluation\(^5\) of workplace-based evidence requires that the Departments of Education (the Department of Higher Education and Training, as well as the Department of Basic Education in South Africa) need to collaborate with the Department of Labour in order to integrate training offered at learning institutions with experiential learning in the workplace.

Employers also have an important role to play in the collection and evaluation of relevant workplace-based evidence of prior learning. Employers need to work closely with learning institutions and assessment centres for the enhancement of the relevance of RPL and capacity to carry it out. For example, it often happens that assessment of competence requires special tools or equipment which only employers have, with the result that the assessment needs to be done at the particular workplace. This is why the RPL assessment plans need to be contextualised to the workplace of every candidate and why employers play a pivotal role in the identification and description of scarce and critical skills needs. Standards for assessment of prior learning can be workplace-based rather than curriculum-based, which lends flexibility to the RPL system. Employers can play an additional important role in workplace-based assessment by training and assigning workplace mentors and coaches to assist RPL candidates with workplace experience and preparing workplace-based portfolios of evidence of knowledge and skills.

**1.7 RPL should facilitate assessing different people with different prior learning and knowledge, and recognise a rich diversity of knowledge and skills**

As we saw when we discussed the need for flexibility in RPL, a holistic approach takes into account that there are different purposes for RPL and candidates should be involved in deciding the purpose for which they are undertaking RPL. While the purposes for RPL may vary, and even though workplace-based evidence is often most suitable as evidence of prior learning, learning institutions and assessment centres should be encouraged to use national standards and outcomes as the benchmarks framing the RPL advising and assessment process. The reason for this is that assessment in the absence of standards can easily be irrelevant, which places an important responsibility on the assessor to ensure that the assessment is valid, relevant, authentic and consistent.

In spite of the need for validity, relevance, authenticity and consistency, RPL candidates need to be assessed individually and not as part of a group if fairness of assessment is to be achieved. Furthermore, assessment needs to be fit for purpose and appropriate for the context within which it takes place. Diversity would potentially be accommodated if assessment consists of a combination of baseline criteria (to be met by all candidates), and contextualised (context-specific) criteria that apply to individual learners or places of work only. This calls for assessors that are experienced enough to recognise a wide variety of skills sets, and to match these with criteria in formal standards or curricula.

\(^5\) Evaluation here implies "judging if the evidence is relevant" and not assessment (judging if the candidate is competent or not). It is only once we have determined if the evidence is relevant that we can use it for assessment purposes.
Diversity is likely to be acknowledged if there is application of the totality principle of adult learning—that is, judging learners’ entire profiles (sets of knowledge-skills-aptitude-values combinations) rather than selected criteria in isolation.

1.8 **RPL must be assessed in such a way that the integrity of the formal standards is not compromised**

Stated differently, assessment for RPL purposes must not be of lesser quality than assessment of formal learning aligned with particular standards. A holistic approach to RPL is deeply committed to the development and maintenance of systems for assessment that protect the integrity of the standards, qualifications, and institutions responsible for quality assurance in education, training and development. Integrity is ensured by clear policies and procedures and placing high merit on assuring quality assessment processes.

Formulating and following clear and explicit plans for integrating RPL with other learning services can also contribute to the maintenance of integrity in assessment.

RPL assessors and moderators must be committed to best practice standards and be sufficiently trained in the RPL processes. Expert levels can be assured by using the same assessors and moderators for the assessment of both formal and RPL-related learning. Further, it is advisable for all RPL assessors to have access to expert advice from senior assessors or moderators in formal assessment systems. In addition, all standard principles of assessment need to be observed, and well-designed assessment tools should be used.

Integrity of standards can also be protected by providing as much support and feedback as possible to RPL candidates and every effort needs to be made to address known barriers such as those relating to language and gender.

To protect the integrity of assessments, close cooperation between role players in, and aspects of, quality assurance of RPL is required. Cooperation between internal moderators and external moderators is vitally important for ensuring the integrity of standards in RPL. There needs to be quality assurance in terms of compliance with accreditation criteria and quality assurance of performance.

1.9 **RPL assessment must protect and promote the interests of RPL candidates**

RPL must be as fair as in the case of assessment of formal learning. For some reason employers or managers apply for RPL on behalf of employees or force employees to apply for RPL without ensuring that the individual agrees to follow an RPL process. RPL must be a voluntary process. The employer, human resources manager, supervisor, skills development facilitator, etc. may provide the
employee with guidance and support in this respect but the final decision whether to embark on RPL rests with the individual. Care needs to be taken to ensure that RPL is in line with the interests and talents of the RPL candidates, and to provide them with sufficient professional guidance and support in terms of planning their future learning pathways and careers. In addition, care needs to be taken to ensure that the standards with which RPL is aligned are relevant to the skills needs of the candidates. Learner-centred RPL assessment procedures need to be used. Further, assessment instruments and processes need to be flexible in order to be able to cater for a variety of different types of prior learning experiences that differing RPL candidates might have gained.

As in the case of formal assessment, confidentiality of information needs to be maintained at all times. An RPL portfolio is different from a formal examination as there are usually no questions that may not be revealed to the candidates in advance of the examination. The curriculum is also the standard and almost any evidence of prior learning that the candidate can provide will be considered. However, the possibility that one candidate may copy from another still exists so that portfolios need to be kept in a safe place. Furthermore, it is the prerogative of the candidate to decide who may have access to his or her assessment results and this should also be respected. Certain employees of the assessing institutions will inevitably have access to assessment results as might the candidate’s employer. This is inevitable if the employer pays for the RPL.

Apart from the particular needs of individual candidates, assessment and assessment criteria should ideally be needs-based in terms of the skills that the particular industry will require from the employee. To achieve this, the RPL process should be contextualised to the skills and knowledge requirements of the particular industry. The workplace or RPL centre should brief the RPL candidates with as much detail as possible so that they will know what to expect from the processes and what will be expected from them.

Determining competence is important in RPL, but skills development remains equally important even though formal learning will not necessarily take place. Providers of RPL need to develop RPL candidates rather than to judge if the candidates are competent or not. Top-up learning often forms part of the RPL process because different candidates will have different prior experiences and knowledge. Even though flexibility in assessment is important a reasonable measure of a standardised skills and knowledge profile needs to be achieved if standards are not to be eroded.

1.10 RPL processes and the people who receive certificates or credits through RPL must add value to their places of work

It serves no purpose to grant people certificates without ensuring that value is added to places of work. It is possible that a candidate has obtained deep and relevant prior knowledge and skills and that no top-up learning is required. Such a candidate will probably already operate on an optimum level. Adding value to the workplace will possibly only materialise if the qualifications or credits
achieved through RPL provide the candidate with access to further learning. In this manner lifelong learning is supported, which is why certification is not regarded as the last stage in the RPL process. Certification should be followed up with additional guidance and support to people who have already successfully completed RPL assessments to embark on further learning or provide assistance in career pathing of co-workers. Such guidance will usually have the interests of the worker as well as the organisation in mind. In this manner the human resource development strategies of the particular organisations concerned are linked to the process of RPL.

Ensuring that RPL adds value to the workplace requires open and regular communication between the RPL centre and the employer. Staff who went through an RPL process should be monitored and evaluated in terms of work performance to ensure that the RPL process did add value to the workplace.

3. CLOSING REMARKS

A holistic approach to RPL is a flexible one that not only enables people to obtain recognition for prior learning, but also sets the stage for further learning. Although learning must be relevant to the learning programme in question, a holistic approach to RPL recognises that there are many different places and ways in which prior learning could have been acquired. Even so, one must guard against eroding the quality and status of qualifications by ignoring the curriculum or standard for a qualification.
REFERENCES


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

Mr Wessel Pieters,
Association for Project Management SA and International Project Management Association

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the normal Project Management Four Level Certification 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).

It is argued that RPL processes must not compromise the status of the Project Management Four Level 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 Œbest practicesô. The assessment process is not bottom-up (as it is in the certification process), but is a Œhorizontally entered procedure targeted at the competence levels (Levels A, B, C or D) suggested after initial evaluation in an application phase. The impact on curriculum development is illustrated.

1. INTRODUCTION

ŒProject Managementô finds application over a wide range of business and human activities. It is also viewed as a lifestyle skill and a business method of Œmanage by projectsô. It is useful to look more closely at what these skills entail. The International Project Management Association (IPMA) Project Management competence framework (IPMA Competence Baseline generally known as ICB version 3 available from www.ipma.ch), describes project management as a combination of:

- Knowledge about methods, tools and techniques;
- Appropriate behaviour; and
- Contextual knowledge.
The competence of a person in a project management occupation is assessed by a certification process including all three above competencies:

![Diagram](image)

Figure 1 - Understanding the relationship between competence and skills

It is appropriate to look closer at the term “project” by considering the following definitions:

2. **PROJECT**

A project is a time- and (mostly) cost-constrained operation to realise a set of defined deliverables (the scope to fulfil the project’s objectives) up to quality standards and requirements (of the interested parties).

Project management typically involves project management personnel from project management associates up to senior project managers, projects directors (IPMA Level-D to B). An organisation may decide to appoint a projects director (IPMA Level-A) to manage a crucial project or programme.

We could postulate that “project management” is a role within an organisation and the role equates to an occupation with sub-occupations. The sub-occupations carry the same three competencies as required above (knowledge, behaviour, and contextual knowledge) but the complexity of the occupations and sub-occupations differs. We thus discover the basis of the requirement of graded sub-occupation within an occupation. We postulate that graded sub-occupations apply to all occupations across government and industry.

3. **METHODS TO EVOLVE ROLES AND OCCUPATIONS**

The issue at hand is therefore to create a definition for “roles” and “occupations” in such a manner that the definition will not age when “occupations” and “roles” change over time and often disappear and new roles evolve. This requires methods and models for formulating frameworks and standards for organisations that will result in occupational definitions in terms of Key Performance Areas (KPAs)
Recognition of Prior learning (RPL) alignment with qualification and certification programmes

4. PROGRAMME

A programme is set up to achieve a strategic goal. A programme consists of a set of related projects, and requires organisational change(s) to reach a strategic goal and to achieve the defined business benefits. Programme management typically involves senior project managers or projects directors (IPMA Level-B or A as indicated below).

We understand that the project management occupation is required to manage programmes to achieve strategic goals. We discover that programme managers execute the strategic plan. In government and large corporations, the strategy execution and implementation is a programme manager’s task. Lack of project management and programme manager competence are the only constraints an organisation has to resolve when it plans to execute its programmes.

5. PORTFOLIO

A portfolio is a set of projects and/or programmes, which are not necessarily related, brought together for the sake of control, coordination and optimisation of the portfolio in its totality. Important issues on a portfolio level are reported to the senior management of the organisation by the portfolio manager, together with options to resolve the issues. This enables them to reach a decision on what should be done based on facts.

We can consider, for example in government, that the Treasury should in particular have strong portfolio management competence and the government departments strong programme management competence. The same can be said of the holding company (portfolios) and corporate entities (programmes and projects). This generalisation is only to illustrate the value of a graded occupational definition.

6. GRADED OCCUPATIONS

Project management occupations are defined in four graded levels (level - A, B, C and D). Complexity and knowledge determine the differences between portfolios, programmes and projects. Complex project management is characterized by all of the following concurrent attributes (IPMA definition):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Many interrelated large work-streams, project management - process systems and sub-projects and elements should be taken into account within the structures of a complex project, and in relation to its context in the organisation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Several external organisations are involved in the complex project and/or different units of the same organisation may benefit from or provide resources for a complex project.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. More than three different technology disciplines and legal/regulatory or financial or social knowledge areas are required to work on a complex project.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The management of a complex project involves several different, concurrent overlapping project phases.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Many of the available project management methods, techniques and tools need to be applied in the management of a complex project. This implies that more than 60% of the competence elements would be applied.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Some of the standard project management methods, techniques and tools are incomplete in their scope or functionalities and innovative solutions need to be developed/ found to resolve general management or project management issues.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1 - Complex Project Management characterisation**

The basic terms for project management competence certification are derived from the ISO/IEC17024 standard "General requirements for bodies operating certification of persons", and IPMA definitions are as follows:

- **Competence** is the demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and/or skills, and where relevant demonstrated personal attributes;
- A **certification scheme** contains the specific requirements related to particular categories of people to which the same standards and rules, and the same procedures apply;
- The **certification process** encompasses all activities by which a certification body establishes that a person fulfils specified competence requirements;
- The **assessments** are the methods that determine a candidate's competence by one or more means such as written, verbal, practical and observational; and
- A **qualification** demonstrates the personal attributes of education (cognitive ability and technical understanding), training and/or work experience of the individual.
The assessment does not measure or predict the future. It evaluates the past and present knowledge and experience of the candidate based on the evidence presented by the candidate and checked by the assessors. This is an RPL-process. This evaluation is a good indicator that future projects will be managed successfully. In addition, it is a good basis for planning further professional development.

The IPMA defines project management occupation in four graded levels (level-A, B, C and D). This grading is applicable to any environment e.g. the build environment, business processes, social engineering (including the task of a politician or a minister), ICT and politics.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Designation</th>
<th>Capabilities</th>
<th>Assessed at level</th>
<th>Certification Process</th>
<th>Validity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IPMA Level A Certified Projects Director Portfolios &amp; Programmes</td>
<td>Competence = applied Knowledge + relevant Experience (+ professional Behaviour for ZA)</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Written exam at Level-A-B, Transfer evidence, Projects Report, Literature study, Work shop / Attitude assessment</td>
<td>5-years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPMA Level B Certified Senior Project Manager Programmes &amp; Complex Projects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Application, CV, Project list, References, Self-assessment</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPMA Level C Certified Project Manager Non-complex projects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Written exam at Level-D-C, Transfer evidence, Project report, Options: Work-shop 360° feedback</td>
<td>10-years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPMA Level D Certified Project Management Associate Project team member</td>
<td>Qualification = Knowledge</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Written exam at Level-D, Transfer evidence, Interview.</td>
<td>10-years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2 - Grade occupational competence**
7. THE PROJECT MANAGEMENT FOUR-LEVEL CERTIFICATION (PM-4-L-C) PROCESS FOR CAREER PROGRESSION

This is a vertical bottom-up process (orange arrow) where the one level builds on the other level and is particularly suitable for career development. The certifications process is an increasing progression of complexity and experience.

8. PREFERRED BEHAVIOUR

The candidate’s preference for certain types of activities and tasks are evaluated together with his application documentation to determine career path vectoring and personal talent characterisation.

A successful career in project management is a progression through a range of tasks and process complexities in the management of projects, programmes and portfolios. It is a mechanism to avoid the application of the Peter Principle (advancement to the first level of incompetence) and discharge or redeployment. Instead, it guides the candidate to a successful career until retirement.

9. THE RPL PROCESS

This is a horizontal assessment process (yellow arrow) with an entry point at any of the A, B, C or D levels. The process is not bottom up, but has a horizontal entry point targeted at a likely competence level (level A, B, C or D). The target competence level is suggested after an initial evaluation during the application phase.

It is particularly suitable for knowledge upgrading (re-learning and validation) for persons who do not have a formal knowledge qualification but are working in an occupation with self-learned knowledge and who have earned the respect of colleagues and clients.

It also applies to persons with formal qualifications in a technical or business discipline and who are practising project management. These persons want to revalidate their current knowledge and self-confidence that they are competent as assessed by an objective assessment process.

10. THE RPL PROCESS CREDIBILITY

The IPMA RPL process has the same rigour as the career-path certification process. The candidate’s knowledge that may be vocationally obtained, or newly learned is assessed for an appropriate level. This ensures alignment with current discipline definitions and best practices. The experience and behaviour assessments are similar to the vertical certification process for each level.

In all certification processes the same competence framework is rigorously used. Assessment process and procedures are the same. RPL certification is therefore equal and in some case more
valuable than career path certification. It offers the benefit of practice versus theoretical understanding, vis a vis the conventional learning and certification process.

An IPMA RPL person at Level-C (all other things being equal), is the preferred candidate to fill a level-C position. Experience when relevant is weighted higher than an academic qualification.

![Figure 3 – IPMA Competency Baseline](image)

The RPL process must not compromise the Project Management 4 Level Certification status and branding. It therefore requires that the same authority that assesses and adjudicates the Project Management 4 Level Certification competence must also assess and adjudicate the competence according to the RPL Project Management 4 Level Certification process.

RPL is seen by most employers as achieving a qualification of lower status than those obtained from an acknowledged institution of learning. This is partly due to the relatively unknown RPL process and the manner it has been governed. The table for maturity below refers equally to the RPL organisation and its governance body.

### 11. Creating the Governance Framework for Skills Development and Certification

The role of government should be to create environments to facilitate consensus, and create the legislative environment where interested parties can cooperate with each other in aligning their respective frameworks. The table below shows the maturity scale that could be applied to such an authority. Ideally we could suggest that the authority should be assessed at maturity Level 4 to bring effective governance to the industry.
### Table 2 - Maturity assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generic Description</th>
<th>Maturity Level</th>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Metric range [%]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>OPTIMISED</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Continuous and proactive improvements</td>
<td>91–95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Systems and Metrics are used to optimise Performance Indicators by Learning From past experiences, applying control actions, using a stable System of processes with Adaptive parameters. The assessment evaluates the achievement of optimal Performance Metrics.</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANAGED</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Monitored &amp; Controlled results by means of Measurement and Analysis</td>
<td>76–83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Defined and well integrated System of Processes with Methods, Tools, Techniques, Business Rules, General Policies, Guidelines, Procedures, Work Instructions and Quality Control Plans, all documented in compliance with Quality Assurance ISO 9001:2000 and integrated in ICT Systems. The complete ICT system is well integrated. The assessment evaluates the capacity to achieve consistent improvement of organisation Performance Indicators.</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEFINED</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Documented Process, Standardised and Integrated</td>
<td>51–64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Defined processes and practices with application of some Methods, Tools or Techniques, which are to an extent described in procedures and guidelines, but lack consistency in application, resulting in reduced organisational capacity.</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REPEATABLE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Documented Process and Institutionalised</td>
<td>31–40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Repeatable informal processes and practices with ad hoc application of Methods, Tools or Techniques. Avoid doing projects.</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INITIAL</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Reaction-driven, Planning, and undocumented Process</td>
<td>0–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Little understood Systems and Procedures with no stable Methods, Tools or Techniques. Avoid doing projects.</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Disaster Ready"
12. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

Government in principle makes policy and adjudicates resources to achieve political objectives to satisfy its constituency. Government departments are expected to act in the “public good” (Batho Pele) but are often constrained by their internal power struggles, cultural dimension and personal loyalties. It has a particular obligation to set up schemes for occupational competence and qualification for the sake of excellence and maturity; it has by its nature to set up schemes to suit its political agenda(s).

Therefore, if a certificate has been issued by an “approved” assessor against a national standard which is somehow connected to a governmental authority, there could exist doubt about the motive and validity of the assessing authority regulatory framework or the manipulation of criteria used and the rules of adjudication by the “independent” government bodies, especially when targets are to be met to demonstrate “good government” or “performance”.

13. LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

We observe that courses in project management at learning institutions often fall short of the knowledge-frameworks that the professional bodies promote. The course content of learning institutions should be aligned with the knowledge-frameworks of professional bodies. Course accreditation will ensure course content alignment. Experienced lecturers should present learning materials rather than lecturers that have M- and D-degrees without appropriate experience in the profession. One needs to learn how models are applied in practice and which tools suffice.

Learning institutions are not geared up to certify a person for competence in terms of the definitions above. It is not their business. It is the task of an ISO 17024 compliant certification body to certify professionals. Collaboration between the professional body and academia will facilitate success in knowledge and competence assessments.

14. TRAINING AND RECIPROCITY

14.1 Alignment to the professional reality

The knowledge-framework must be aligned to the professional body’s occupation-competence framework given that the professional body owns a professional knowledge-framework. Alignment assures the candidate of knowledge relevance for the profession. A professional body that does not own a body of knowledge cannot be regarded as a “professional body” although they may have a “professional” membership.

Ad hoc and non-aligned training courses have limited value for the conventional project management
and RPL project management certification processes. Many institutions follow their own ‘best understanding’ of project management and that in turn, may be based on personal or textbook knowledge frameworks usually American based (mostly available) and in English (language access). We therefore inherit a filtered project management knowledge framework based on the American understanding. This has manifested itself in the structure of the NQF unit standards for project management.

14.2 Reciprocity

Validation of the certification process and its governance is required for reciprocity purposes. It provides a common accepted basis for assessment processes.

The International Standards Organisation (ISO) standards become a pre-requisite for a credible certification process. The ISO 17024 principles and administrative prerequisites (ISO/IEC 17024:2003 is an international standard which sets out general requirements for bodies operating certification of persons) can be applied to all occupations.

Government’s current supervision of the certification process is weak and as one senior SETA official has put it ‘we are the government and we do what we judge fit to meet legislated performance criteria’ (unanimous). This position is in violation of ISO 17024, and it does not promote credibility because of internal inconsistency and conflict.

Although the government’s policy objectives may align with the Public Good, the execution is at the operating and the governance level. This sets up a conflict of interest instance which is embedded in government being the regulator and the operator.

Reciprocity is an unlikely result if a common standard is not used between the parties, and international recognition of governmental programmes is not likely. Special agreements between authorities in different countries do not facilitate the development of a credible programme.

The IPMA certification model is an agreement between the professional bodies of 50 countries. Special care is taken to ensure IPMA certification reciprocity between countries, and within the same country. The application of the ISO 17024 process is externally validated to ensure compliance of process between members in different countries.

14.3 The knowledge standard

Maintenance of the knowledge standard is important. Knowledge must be kept current to ensure relevance and alignment with best practices and international trends. The knowledge standard is based on the project management competence framework but adjusted to the specific cultural attributes of a country. In this standard the differences in culture receive more attention and pose
transformation challenges that are not usual in countries with a dominant monolithic culture.

A monolithic competence framework suitable for a highly industrial country is not transferable to a country with a development agenda and a population made up from different cultural perspectives that influence contextual understanding, different values systems and ethics.

Examples are:

- Government sets job creation as a prime objective (leading indicator) but adds more obstacles to SME growth by making employment more difficult and risky; imposing a heavy regulatory burden on small companies; and
- Industry requires economic growth as a leading indicator and job creation as a lagging indicator with a relaxation of the regulatory burden to support an investment climate.

These two positions are diagonally opposed and are the results of different cultural and value perspectives.

15. DEFINING OCCUPATIONS: PRE-CONDITIONS AND LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The development of the list of national occupations, key performance areas and performance indicators must be a generic and transparent process to be credible. The national methodology for occupation definition and their competences is a very difficult task and requires new job descriptor abstractions to be formulated to be successful.

Government policy (National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS III)) now demands intentionally professional bodies and industry groups to define occupations. Will the new regulatory environment permit this development to be undertaken by those parties best equipped for the task?

The diagram below describes the process to arrive at job descriptions that meet industry or organisational requirements and are consistent with a professional (or trade) standards. Although the diagram is project-management specific, it can be generalised into a generic process diagram that will delivery job descriptions that will be with us for many years.
16. SKILLS DEVELOPMENT: EMPLOYERS AND EMPLOYEES

Legislation (Skills Development Act of 1999) requires employee and employer skills development interests to balance towards consensus in a collaborative manner. This can be implemented as employee bodies (trade unions) and employer bodies (industry type associations) exist and are willing to collaborate. These bodies are focused on the purpose of their existence - not because there is a requirement for an industry or employee structure to be available as a Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) consultative body.
Professions (employees) do not willingly group into trade union type bodies and are fiercely independent from governmental or organised labour influence. Professional employer bodies simply do not exist. Consequently, the SETAs are in many cases unable to form the governance bodies required to guide them in certain skills development sectors. The SETA legislation (Skills Development Act of 1999) is weak as it does not provide for professional bodies to play a meaningful role. Trade and professional skills have deteriorated and are already past the critical point in South Africa. The average age of an artisan in SA is 55+ years.

Professional occupations require a different approach because there is not one identifiable industry for a profession. The legislative requirements for "employers" and "employees" groups are not achievable for professional occupations and only partly valid for trade and administrative occupations. Professional bodies have both individual and corporate members and they will not change their nature because of legislation or a regulatory requirement. They must remain true to their purpose. Government has by its own legislation isolated itself from the professional bodies. Work around the legislation does not carry general industry support and is not credible. Professional bodies categorize occupations as a generic grouping of skills and complexity typically found in their industry branch.

It is required for legislation to be generally applicable to the changing environment of organisational roles and new occupations and to require governance to meet its declared objectives for the public good across all ethnic, cultural and professional groups.

17. GENERIC ORGANISATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

Consider the permanent and project organisations that exist within the business or governmental sectors. These organisations should be well-designed to delivery on their purposes. The question therefore is; what are the necessary and sufficient conditions that one needs to construct an effective organisation that can deliver to its mission and realise its vision?

The table below suggests the necessary and sufficient conditions for capable mature and excellent organisations to satisfy their business purpose. (It cannot show the tacit aspects of management.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework components</th>
<th>GOVERNANCE (permanent org)</th>
<th>Process for organising effective and objective decision-making</th>
<th>Processes to establish effective and sustain effective delivery</th>
<th>Processes to establish, train, manage and sustain personal performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Performance capability</td>
<td>MANAGEMENT AND CAPACITY</td>
<td>SYSTEM</td>
<td>ORGANISATION</td>
<td><strong>ALL COMPONENTS REQUIRED FOR DELIVERY</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROCESS</td>
<td>SKILLS</td>
<td>Skills to establish and sustain governance</td>
<td>Skills to operate System of Processes to required standard</td>
<td>Skills for Functional competence at all Levels (OBS Level A, B C and D)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKILLS</td>
<td>BEHAVIOUR</td>
<td>Behaviour to empower authority and apply power</td>
<td>Behaviour to drive the system of processes to achieve effective delivery</td>
<td>Behaviour to integrate collaboration and learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3 - Conditions for excellence and maturity**

The functional and project occupations follow from the application of a management model and the complexity of the management tasks. The Auditor-General and management consultants could consider applying maturity assessments to assist organisations with organisational and skills development programmes using the requirements described in the tabled above. This applies to both government and industry.

**18. THE NEED FOR BALANCED OCCUPATION-COMPETENCE**

In the figure below project management lies within the PM01 work group. The project manager requires a competent functional manager in each of the adjacent and interfacing departments. Occupational-competence must balance for achieving effective delivery. For example, A-competence relates to A-competence and not to D-competence. Imbalance in the competences set the organisation up for failure as can be imagined of the Table 3 above.
When an organisation is driven by other drivers than those required by its purpose, it becomes purpose-unfocussed and consequently political. Lack of competence can leave an organisation riddled with politics.

A politically driven organisation will fail in managing projects due to the subjective choice of human resources (not competent) and the subjective allocation of resources and engagement of skills to achieve non-project objectives. Figure 5 - KPI diagram indicates the relationship between the relevant parties to define coherent occupation definitions for a functional occupation-competence definition programme.

Competent persons and mature organisations are pre-conditions for economic growth, and efficiency in the business and production system to participate in global trade. There is no getting away from these requirements.

19. RPL WITH SUBSTANCE AND CREDIBILITY

The International Project Management Association (IPMA) has more than 100 000 project managers certified in terms of the IPMA Project Management 4 Level Certification process (IPMA Annual Report 2010). Most of these persons are young professionals who use the certification process and training provided by training services providers.

There are those persons that require an RPL process because of historic reasons and because of changing employer demands and technology. These persons are more mature than young persons,
but often lack the academic background for advancing their careers. In a profession it is not unusual to be retrained several times during a lifetime. Continuous Professional Development (CPD system) is one initiative to address the currency of professional knowledge.

20. PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Professional knowledge standards are in the domain of the professional body and its members. The development of standards by either engaging PM ‘experts’ from the academic environment (non-practitioners) or from self-appointed expert-groups to bring credibility and assessment standards to the government’s own management skills development programme are not acceptable to the profession. The system bypasses the profession it attempts to regulate, and because of its inherent lack of best practice and non-aligned knowledge frameworks, the standard will not support the skills development programmes.

This approach is undesirable when no international or acknowledged standards or no professional body exists that could provide such standards. Such an instance is highly unlikely as the profession is keen to define itself for the sake of professional branding.

RPL assessment organisations should be accredited by the professional body and governed accordingly to permit validation and compliance to ISO17024 processes. Government should facilitate such validations.

21. THE ROLE OF THE PROFESSIONAL BODY, PRACTITIONER AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Objective and credible competence assessments are required for persons that work in the public and private sectors and internationally. The users of project management services need assurance that when a project manager is employed or contracted, the person has a level of competence suitable for the project to be implemented. The weak South African PM-competence metric in industry and government leads to failing project implementation. It is bad for everybody.

Consider the large budget overruns experienced in the 2010 soccer stadium projects, Gautrain budget overruns, or service delivery failures, or lack of implementation skills, embedded corruption and criminal behaviour of officials or organisation. They point to a failing project execution.

The recent toll road fee structure debate and strikes indicate that the objective and requirements of the interested parties have been ignored (see Sunday Times 3 March 2012 and many published newspaper articles over the radio and in the press). These aspects are directly related to competence in managing projects. Authorities are encouraged to engage with professional bodies and create the environment for them to be able to support government and industry occupational-competence programmes. The academic
environment needs to define their purpose to provide knowledge and excellence in knowledge transfer.

The combination of authority, skills and resources against a balanced framework from each party's perspective will result in win-win solutions in the quest for occupational-competence in South Africa. This is a pre-condition for economic growth and job creation.

### 22. THE WAY FORWARD

Two universities and one training firm are now in the process of reviewing their academic programmes to align them with an IPMA knowledge framework and will be offering both an academic qualification as well as an IPMA competence certification at level. APMSA-Sert is an active partner in the assessment process in accordance with ISO 17024.

Professional bodies are welcoming a fresh approach to their engagement. The Federation of Professional Management Organisations (FPMO) is an organisation that may be engaged in management competence development processes. Other organisations for trades and commercial services and engineering are all organisations that must be actively engaged within a regulatory framework.

### 23. PROJECT SUPPORT SERVICES: A TRANSFORMATION INSTRUMENT

APMSA aligned the Project Support Services (PSS) occupation competence standard to the IPMA Project Management standard to encourage competence in PSS as a project management related occupation. PSS is for persons with an interest in PSS (project controls and related services), who have specific personal behavioral preferences and with little or no project experiences. This development is a collaborative effort between APMSA and the Southern African Project Controls Institute (SAPCI).

The PSS-competence certification process will make them occupation competent. They will have a productive ability from the beginning of their first career choice as project services employees. RPL process may well apply to current project controls workers in the execution of projects or government programmes.
REFERENCES


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Section 3

Recognition of Prior Learning practices in depth
Evaluation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applicant’s knowledge claims for access to fourth year study

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ABSTRACT

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 Peninsular 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.

1. INTRODUCTION

Individuals with extensive experience find themselves sometimes appointed in managerial positions in the workplace, without having formal qualifications. They find themselves having acquired occupational knowledge and competence over a period of time that enables them to be successful managers within the organisation or industry. Recognition of this knowledge is a necessary option for these individuals. The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy of Cape Peninsular University of Technology (CPUT) allows for access into a Bachelor of Technology (B Tech) programme - which is at fourth year level.

This paper explores the RPL process used for access into the B Tech Project Management, which is a course offered by the Department of Management at CPUT. This qualification presents the RPL assessment process with a challenge as there is no National Diploma underpinning it. The B Tech is a generic programme aimed at people from any profession who are involved in projects. This paper looks into how the academics involved in the RPL assessment determine whether RPL applicants' knowledge is at the level of a National Diploma. In addition, the paper analyses the performance of the RPL students in the B Tech programme once the individuals have been admitted to the University. Participants in the study are six RPL applicants who completed their studies successfully during the
course of the research. Three academics who lecture on the B Tech also participated in the research.

This paper is part of a M Ed thesis looking into knowledge claims in RPL. The approach used is based on two sets of knowledge claims, namely claims made prior to the RPL applicant’s entry into Higher Education and claims made after the person has become a student.

![Figure 1: Knowledge Claims in RPL](image)

The focus of this paper is the academic interpretation of the knowledge claim. Firstly the interpretation of the knowledge claim by the academic staff involved in the RPL assessment is addressed. Secondly the paper deals with the knowledge claim once the RPL applicant is a student and the academic’s interpretation thereof. The focus is therefore on the bottom half of the diagram in Figure 1.

The methodology used is a case study. The aim of the study is to develop a deeper understanding, and not to draw generalisations of the interpretation of the concept of a knowledge claim(s) made by the various participants in the study. The B Tech in Project Management at CPUT is the frame for the unit of analysis (Creswell 2007) in this case study.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Various theories were used in the study within the framework explained in Figure 1: focusing on the knowledge claim before entry into Higher Education and another knowledge claim made after entry into Higher Education. All the theories used in this analysis are used within this framework, but at the same time cognizance has to be given to management knowledge and practices.

Project Management is part of management theory; its focus is on the completion of a specific task, for example the construction of a building, with a specific beginning and end. The major tasks of a project are planning, sequencing, coordinating and control (Hannagan 1998). Project Management is associated with very specific phases, namely Initiating, Planning, Executing, and Controlling.
including financial and human resources and ŕClosingô (Adams and Caldentry 2004; Project Management Institute: 2004). These phases are accepted worldwide by most project managers as the standard phases used in the management of any project, regardless of its size. Sometimes these phases are named differently, but the approach is the same. Software packages also use similar phases. The theoretical departure point needs to be kept in mind when analysing the knowledge claim made, because it provides a paradigm that is common to the practice of project management.

3. RPL APPROACHES

RPL models relevant to this paper focus on the knowledge claim made before entry in Higher Education: these are the ŕcredit exchange modelô and the ŕlearning and development modelô. The credit exchange model generally requires the RPL applicant to link knowledge to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria relevant to the level of the qualification or subjects for which recognition is sought. The credit exchange model does not attempt to develop new knowledge or convert knowledge from one form to another (Trowler 1996), but if an RPL applicant claims to have certain knowledge and he/she can demonstrate this or provide evidence of this knowledge, recognition is given. A problem with this approach is that knowledge becomes invisible if it falls outside what is deemed to be pertinent to the Higher Education Institution curriculum, especially when compared to specific subjects within a qualification. As Harris (1999) states, ŕThe site of knowledge production has changed, but not what counts as knowledge.ô (Harris 2000: 40).

Recognising knowledge in the learning and development approach requires prior knowledge to be linked to the academy in a creative and reflective manner, and provides developmental opportunities to the candidate to make the necessary links. Paul Trowler (1996) interprets the ŕcredit exchangeô and ŕlearning and developmentô models as being ŕtwo poles on a continuumô because the latter merely provides support for the candidate embarking to meet the requirements for credit exchange. In this model, the RPL applicant is assisted to meet the relevant learning outcomes by a process of learning and reflection. It is often characterised by the development of a portfolio, where the RPL applicant is required to re-work and interpret his/her own knowledge about specific topics and aspects of his/her experience and to compare it with the curriculum of a level, qualification or programme against which recognition is sought (Butterworth 1992; Breier 2005; Harris 1999).

An RPL approach that bridges the gap between knowledge claims before and after Higher Education can be found in the work of Shalem and Steinberg (2006), who indicate that RPL assessment includes ŕa prospective and a retrospective actionô. The academics, involved with the RPL assessment, need to be ŕprospectiveo and look at knowledge that they can recognise. At the same time, the same academics are being ŕprospectiveô because they want to be able to explain if the person is able to cope with studies within Higher Education.
3.1 Before entry into Higher Education

Before one can understand knowledge claims of the RPL applicant, a short analysis needs to be made about the nature of learning in the workplace.

What is being learned in the workplace is broader than what is obtained in Higher Education. It is individually focused, workplace or community based and socially orientated. Eraut (2004) and Evans (2002) list a variety of competencies that are required in the workplace, such as problem solving, task performance, use of academic knowledge in the workplace, decision making, interpersonal skills, including communication and awareness of diversity, and organisational ability.

The context of learning influences what the person knows. This issue is addressed by Eraut, (2004) who deals with the concept of "codified knowledge" which, in the workplace, deals with an organisation's specific information records, correspondence manuals, policy and procedures.

Eraut mentions academic knowledge as one of many competencies used in the workplace. He uses the concept of "propositional knowledge" (Eraut in Breier 2008) which consists of discipline-based knowledge and concepts derived from bodies of coherent systematic knowledge, applied in a field of professional action and including specific propositions about particular cases, decisions and actions. A similar process is discussed by Michael Barnett (2006) in an interesting theory on how academic knowledge is incorporated and re-contextualised into the workplace and vocational pedagogy.

Barnett (2006), looking into vocational training and vocational qualifications in the UK and drawing on the work of Basil Bernstein has come to interesting conclusions about different types of knowledge. Analysing vocational education, he found that it is influenced by "workplace activities" on the one hand, and by "disciplinary knowledge" on the other. Using the concept of "re-contextualisation" from Bernstein (1999), which Barnett (2006) defines as "the appropriation and transformation of knowledge for various purposes", he applies the concept to both academia and the workplace. His work is applicable to RPL, because in a knowledge claim "re-contextualisation" needs to take place to transform acquired knowledge into measurable knowledge.

Barnett (2006) explains that disciplinary knowledge is transformed from primary sources to academic subjects that are studied at universities. Textbooks, especially in the humanities, are constructed from multiple sources to suit the needs of a particular syllabus. This is what Barnett calls "pedagogic re-contextualisation" making disciplinary knowledge more teachable and learnable in a particular educational context. According to Barnett, a similar process takes place in vocational education and training.

Vocational education relates to "practicalities of occupations or groups of occupations which relate to bodies of knowledge that may not be occupational specific" (Barnett 2006: 145). Vocational pedagogy
occupies a space between subjects and jobs, because it is influenced by workplace activities, as well as disciplinary knowledge. Using the concept of Pedagogic Re-contextualisation, Barnett explains that there is a link between "vocational pedagogy" and "discipline knowledge reorganised for vocational purposes" (2006: 146).

Development of workplace knowledge occurs when an individual manages his or her work, makes decisions and solves problems. Barnett says that the "reclassification re-contextualisation" creates a "toolbox of applicable knowledge" (Barnett 2006: 147). During the process of analysing the knowledge claims re-contextualisation of knowledge takes place as part of the RPL assessment process. This paper analyses how the toolbox of applicable knowledge is interpreted by the academics when assessing the RPL application.

This concept of re-contextualisation might work the other way around from what is described by Barnett. Barnett describes the process starting at the point of disciplinary knowledge being re-contextualised. However, the RPL applicant might not have been exposed to disciplinary knowledge when the person started to work, but learnt in the workplace how to perform the jobs they are doing. This is important for the knowledge claims presented in this study. The question underlying the RPL application is: what is the knowledge that the RPL applicants has and is using in the workplace to succeed?

1.2 After entry into Higher Education

Having done a RPL assessment and given the individual access to Higher Education, this research also analyzes the interaction between the knowledge that the RPL applicant already has before applying for RPL and how the knowledge is used and is influenced once the individual is a student within Higher Education.

The second part of this paper focuses on the interpretation by academics of the RPL student’s performance in the class. According to Barnett (2006) situational knowledge is associated with particular job tasks and is mainly tacit. Michelson’s (1996) interpretation is broader and she looks at RPL as a method whereby knowledge can be acknowledged regardless of where it originates. Michelson wants to use RPL to accommodate contested knowledge. Both interpretations are used in this paper, because workplace knowledge, according to some, is contested knowledge especially if the individual does not have an academic background.

Analysing the interaction between formal qualifications and informal learning in the workplace Eraut (2002) found that the processes seem to be complementary to each other. Eraut, with his concept of "mutual enhancement" says that the interaction between formal and informal learning depends on the purpose and nature of the qualification, the types of work and the nature of the working context. Work-based learning and learning for a qualification could integrate at the point of use. The use of formal
knowledge based on a qualification enhances the quality of informal learning in the workplace, but at the same time, experience can be used to modify formal knowledge. He found that mature students with relevant prior knowledge and following a formal course thinking critically and systematically about their workplace practices could succeed with the guidance of concepts encountered in the formal educational contexts (ibid).

Experience with guidance is in line with Bernstein's view that a language has to be acquired, leading to a `gaze` within a horizontal knowledge structurein a particular field (Bernstein 1999). Using Bernstein's idea of a `gaze` the importance of theory is discussed below in an attempt to understand how interpretation of knowledge claims of the RPL applicant, could be understood by the academics.

4. RPL APPROACH AT CPUT

The RPL assessment process made use of the academics that run the B Tech in Project Management programme. The process consists of a test and panel interview to determine whether an individual can be given access to the programme or not. The entry requirements state that a candidate should have obtained a National Diploma or any three year degree or `equivalent` as well as three years relevant working experience. The RPL assessment is based on the `equivalent` and the relevance of the working experience.

The test consists of six questions based on a case study. The test requires the candidates to indicate how they would plan and implement a project to build a community centre. They were asked to: compile a project brief; discuss the role of stakeholders; discuss the four stages of the project life cycle; the importance of team composition; elaborate on the important characteristics of a project manager; and how to manage risk. In 2008 a numeracy section was added to the test because the academics involved were of the opinion that RPL candidates should demonstrate an ability in numeracy, because the B Tech in Project Management has some financial and calculus requirements.

The test is followed by a panel interview which is conducted informally. The interview is used to get to know the RPL candidate. The types of projects that the candidates manage are discussed in a fair amount of detail. If the candidate made mistakes in the test, the interview is used as an opportunity to discuss these. It has happened that a candidate has corrected an answer during the interview and if they can explain why the correction has been made, it was accepted by the academics.

1.1 Collection of information

Due to the nature of the researcher's work, this person is exposed to the interpretation and application of the RPL process within CPUT on a daily basis. This results in direct and indirect evidence being included in the study. The direct evidence is the RPL applications and the documentation generated. The indirect evidence is comments made in meetings, in e-mails or on the telephone. This means that
even comments made in the passage or over a cup of tea had an impact on the findings.

The documentation of the RPL assessment process is one of the main sources of information for this study. The documentation that is part of the RPL application including CV and background information of the applicants was used in addition to the test that was written by the applicants to determine the knowledge claim before entering HE.

One-on-one interviews were held with three academics who lecture on the programme and are involved in the RPL assessment. Two sets of questions were asked: The first set of questions dealt with the RPL application itself and the motivation for the assessment method that is being used. The aim of these questions was to determine what knowledge it is that the academics are looking for during the RPL assessment. In addition, the importance of Project Management theory was discussed and the impact of workplace experience was analysed.

The second set of questions was about the RPL candidates and their performance in the course. Their contribution to the classroom interactions was discussed and how they were coping with academic work. The aim was to understand the academics’ interpretation of workplace knowledge in the classroom and in the formal course. What was important was to determine if there was opportunity for the re-contextualisation that Bernstein and Barnett talk about. If there is space for re-contextualisation, what was then the extent to which that space accommodates both the academic and the RPL candidate?

1.2 Findings

Before the findings can be discussed the motivation for the RPL assessment needs to be discussed. In the one-on-one interviews with the academics involved, the rationale for using a test and interview was discussed. The test is seen as a fair and valid way of evaluating candidates. According to one of the academics: "The test is a baseline assessment of the candidate’s knowledge and interaction with project management in practice and in industry. In addition he said that, "the focus of the panel interview was to (evaluate) the interaction of the candidate with project management on a daily basis."

The answers by the academics did not indicate an awareness of any RPL approaches such as the credit exchange model or the learning and development model. As a department, they decided on their own approach to assessing RPL applications and used a test because this is an assessment method they are familiar with.

1.3 Before entry into Higher Education

The RPL test and interview as part of RPL assessment provides a space for the applicants to substantiate their knowledge claim. What knowledge do they present? The RPL applicants have
learnt how to run and manage a project of reasonable size in the workplace through adhering to organisational systems and procedures, learning from others and attending short courses. The fusion of all these knowledges is now presented as part of the knowledge claim for entry into the B Tech in Project Management.

4.3.1 The “importance” of theory

When an individual applies for access into the B Tech: Project Management, the successful completion of short courses is used as a screening mechanism. One of the academics pointed out that having completed short courses indicates if the person will be able to make the transition from the workplace to the academic environment.

However, besides as a screening mechanism, the role short courses play in providing evidence of knowledge is not clear. The academic involved explained that he was looking for skills, i.e. budgets, knowing when a project starts and stops. When asked about the importance of theory in the test, the academic explained that he is not interested in theory or jargon like Gantt Chart. The answer is interesting because if one looks at the questions in the test, they do require some background knowledge of theory: the question about project phases does require the applicants to indicate that they are aware of the project life cycle.

It is not clear from the academics what could be regarded as sufficient knowledge about the project management phases in the test. There seems to be a contradiction here: on the one hand, some background theoretical knowledge is required, but on the other hand, this is not seen as important.

When the test was analysed, it led to confusion because no answers were being marked as incorrect. The test elicited quite different answers to the questions. The academics seemed to mark everything correct, although criteria used for marking were different. The assessment criteria for the test are not clearly spelled out. Sometimes marks were allocated to the test, while other results were just competent. This situation is problematic, because there seem to be neither consistency regarding the marking of the tests, nor is moderation done on the tests.

How is this test regarded as meeting the entry requirements of the B Tech? Based on the analysis so far, there is no clear answer to the question due to vagueness of the answers of academics and the contradiction found with the test. This makes the interpretation of the knowledge claim difficult.

4.3.2 Ability to cope in Higher Education

While doing the RPL assessment, all three academics interviewed said that they look for two things: scope and ability. One of them explained it as follows: it is the applicant’s ability to grasp the scope so that they can deliver a project, I am more interested in ability than theoretical knowledge; the
applicants must be analytical in (their) thinking – that is why numeracy skills are important.

The workplace experience is discussed in the panel interview. It is an opportunity to find out how many projects the RPL candidate is involved in, the type and size of the projects, and how many people they coordinate. Sometimes lecturers will know the people RPL candidates work with and the interview is used to check truthfulness. The interview is also used to discuss the interpretations of Project Management and what is defined as a project within the context where the candidate works. The broader the managerial experience of the RPL applicant, the better opportunity for success. One of the academics reflecting on an RPL candidate commented: “Being more mature, having five to ten years of what they have been up to, they usually come in and fly!”

The emphasis that these academics place on the ability to cope with studies at the level of NQF 7 is very interesting. The impression was created that they regarded the completion of short courses as very important. But during the interviews with them, emphasis is placed on academic acumen and the ability to study. This approach is in line with the approach of Shalem and Steinberg (2006: 99), preferring both "a prospective and retrospective action" within RPL assessment.

If theory is not that important, which seems to be the approach of the academics, such view is in line with the SAQA definition of RPL. RPL is described in the SAQA Act (Act 58 of 1995) as: “Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements” (SAQA 2002). The academics give the applicants opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge “howsoever obtained”.

The concept of "equivalence" as part of the entry requirements has not been elucidated due to the RPL process. What has become clear is that the academics seem to be more concerned about the RPL applicant’s ability to cope with studies at fourth year level than the knowledge they already have gained.

1.4 After entry into Higher Education

The academics involved in the RPL assessment also lecture on the B Tech programme. The question of knowledge claim after entry into Higher Education plays an important role in the interpretation of RPL students’ performance in the course and their interaction in the class.

4.4.1 Interaction in the class

The six RPL candidates who participated in the study attended the part-time classes for Project Management which has a total of 70 students - which is a relatively big class. All six RPL students graduated since the start of the study.
Due to the size of the class, keeping track of the RPL candidates was not done formally. Informally the academics made comments that “the RPL candidates were not dropping out, but the others are! and “the RPL candidates are better than the others!” - indicating that they do monitor the RPL candidates casually.

The academics were asked if the RPL candidates were experiencing learning problems and they indicated that the problems experienced were the same for everyone – the problems did not apply to the RPL candidates only. The academics pointed out that the majority of students in the part-time class had not studied for some time and everyone struggled to get into “the academic swing of things.” It is interesting that the students seem to cope after a while although no formal support is provided by CPUT to part-time students.

Talking about the participation of the RPL candidates in the class, academics commented that the RPL candidates “are impressive guys – a pleasure to have them in the class.” Having RPL candidates and students with work experience in the class was beneficial for everyone – to the academics and to the other students in the class. One of the academics mentioned that they have debates “between industry and Government (employees)” The class becomes a learning space for everyone.

4.4.2 Interpretation of workplace knowledge in the academy

Talking about the assignments that the students are required to do, one academic commented that “their work experience (RPL candidates) gives them an edge,” because they use their work experience in group assignments. He said that “one can say they have ‘cloned’ their work for the group assignments to a certain extent because the figures they present are realistic, legal requirements are correct and the project is developed realistically – the requirements for the workforce have thus been met. Another academic pointed out that the type of projects they are involved in influences the assignment they submit with a better expanded view of a project.

The academics were asked if they thought that the RPL candidates had any views about Project Management that were either affirmed or challenged during the course. The academics did not think so, and added that the opinions of the RPL candidates were not different from those of a student with a National Diploma or a B Tech: “What they have done in industry has pointed them in the same direction.” This comment made a contribution to the findings that the RPL process is valid, enhancing the knowledge claim being made by the RPL candidates.

It is interesting to see how the academics embraced the RPL candidates’ experience and knowledge from the workplace. Focusing on realistic projects and referring to some of the assignments, they support the use of workplace-based knowledge in the assignments, and providing space to use workplace knowledge. The RPL candidates support this approach (unknowingly) through their
experiences and practical knowledge.

This appreciation of workplace knowledge is in line with the concept of situational knowledge. The interpretation of the academics is in line with Michelson’s (1996) approach that knowledge can originate from anywhere, as well as Barnett’s approach that knowledge can be associated with particular tasks (2006).

What counts as knowledge? In the interviews with the academics, emphasis was placed on cognitive skills, theory, experience, workplace-based learning and maturity. The question now arises what knowledge is this? Or is it only about an ability to cope with studies in Higher Education? What role does re-contextualisation play in this process? Re-contextualisation does take place on the side of the RPL candidate to the benefit of themselves and the learning process in the classroom.

The “toolbox of applicable knowledge” (Barnett 2006: 147) seems to be appreciated in the classroom and in the assignments by the academics. This is not the case in the curriculum because the curriculum is a set framework with little flexibility to include workplace knowledge. In some of the assignments analysed in this study, space is not always provided for Project Management knowledge to be applied. The Strategic Management 4 assignment is such an example. In this assignment the students were required to apply specific templates to corporate companies. The assignment did not deal with projects at all and does not provide the opportunity for the RPL candidates (or any mature students with work experience) to apply workplace knowledge in the academic environment.

4.4.3 Academic results

All the RPL candidates who participated in the study graduated during the course of the research. The results were analysed and two RPL candidates managed to get distinctions. Compared to the class averages, the results vary: Two of the RPL candidates are above the class average while one is below the class average. The remaining RPL students are on par with the class average.

5. KNOWLEDGE CLAIMS - A CONCLUSION

Having analysed the findings, the conclusion can be drawn that the knowledge claims before entry into Higher Education are interpreted differently than knowledge claims made after entry into Higher Education.

5.1 Before entry into Higher Education

CPUT has an RPL policy which is being implemented. The Management Department has developed its own method of assessment which is not explicitly linked to any specific RPL model. Emphasis is placed on the ability to cope in Higher Education rather than to use a learning and developmental
approach. If the department would use a learning and developmental approach, an opportunity would be created to prepare the RPL candidate for both the RPL assessment and the studies within Higher Education.

The knowledge claims made during RPL application are valid based on the fact that the RPL candidates pass the course - they do well academically. One can conclude that the assessment process enables the department to select RPL applicants who will pass the course, and in some cases achieve high marks.

5.2 After entry in Higher Education

Once the RPL candidates are on the programme they use their work experience extensively in the classroom, and to a lesser degree in assignments and exams. The assignments were described as realistic by the academics.

In Higher Education, the RPL candidates may struggle with academic language, writing skills and research, but these problems are not unique to the RPL candidates. These problems seem to be overcome after the first semester of study.

The knowledge of the RPL applicants prior to entering Higher Education and the knowledge that develops once they participate in the B Tech in Project Management interact and resonate with each other. It is a matter of cross-pollination - they both support and enrich each other. This is in line with what Eraut (2002) called mutual enhancement.

Listening to the academics, the impression is created that the University is being enriched too, although to a limited extent, by practical experience and knowledge from the workplace. The influence of the RPL candidates knowledge within Higher Education is limited to the classroom and the academic who is willing to give it space. Workplace knowledge does not influence all the subjects or the curriculum in a clear manner during the course of this study.

RPL is seen as something outside the academy. Knowledge seems to be acknowledged from various sites and origins as part of the RPL application in line with Michelson’s concept of situational knowledge (Michelson 1996). Once the knowledge holder is within Higher Education the knowledge is expected to fit into the academic framework. There is little space to use and apply the knowledge from outside academia.

There is little opportunity for the knowledge to influence the curriculum. The “gaze” described by Bernstein (1999) does seem to be present, especially during the RPL application itself, and also in the classroom. It is not clear to what extent the “gaze” influences the development of assignments or even the curriculum. One of the academics pointed out that the B Tech: Project Management is a
course based on the application of theory in the workplace. The RPL process should influence the process the other way around, using workplace knowledge to influence theory.

The development of the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) is an opportunity for both RPL and the inclusion of “contested knowledge” (Michelson: 1996). The re-curriculation process that is being undertaken especially with the Universities of Technology provides academic staff with an opportunity to reflect on how RPL will be implemented within their respective fields.

In addition, the development of the HEQF can provide an opportunity for knowledge from the workplace to be included in the curriculum. If this opportunity is used, situational knowledge can be used to broaden the basis from where knowledge originates.
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Resourcing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): human resources for RPL and institutionalising RPL

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to demonstrate that the practice of Recognition of Prior Learning (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 the related quality assurance. The paper is based on an initial brief reflection on theories of what constitutes learning and knowledge, and how these should be assessed. The concept of reframing is considered and how reframing is necessary to grow wider understanding and acceptance of RPL. Three situated learning projects implemented over a period of seven years in the insurance industry are used as the basis to qualitatively demonstrate that RPL on a large scale can work, that there is no one size fits all and that there are lessons from which much can be learnt and applied. A new focus is premised through this paper 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 capitalizes 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, brings a new equilibrium into how non-formal, workplace and informal learning are recognised to the benefit of South African society and other developing societies at large.

1. INTRODUCTION

South Africa faces significant challenges to address the skills revolution efficiently and cost-effectively, to benefit youth, unemployed graduates, and disadvantaged groups. The notion of RPL has been part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) discourse since the inception of the South African NQF, and remains strategic in the national and global context of work and learning, skills development, and career path advancement.

A few decades ago the United Nations Education and Science Council (UNESCO) raised educational challenges resulting from unequal or very limited education opportunities and gender and race discrimination. These challenges in turn affected opportunities for decent work and education for all and impacted on sustainable development and economic growth of developing countries, especially African countries. Today the tremendous rate of change in market trends, product sophistication, and
technology has resulted in a growing disjuncture between what the education and training system is supplying to offset scarce and critical skills required for economic and social growth. There is a growing labour market need for skilled people who can maximize learning opportunities wherever they may present themselves, to meet the demands of a rapidly changing global economy. These educational challenges foreseen by UNESCO decades ago are not very different from the challenges to the learning system confronting us today; the urgency of addressing them is becoming of greater importance.

Stephen Billet’s essay ‘Negotiating self through changing work’ cited by Farrell and Fenwick (2007), discusses how individuals’ sense of self mediates the impact of work transformations brought about by economic and social globalisation. Billet notes in studies examining the lived experience of contemporary workers, a complex pattern of social and personal imperatives emerges. An intertwining and negotiation between the press of the social world (i.e. changes to work activities), and personal agency and intentionally shapes how individuals view their work, their sense of self as workers, and consequently, how they gauge the impact of change (2007).

This paper (Resourcing Recognition of Prior Learning: Human Resources for RPL and Institutionalising RPL) is underpinned by a broader research project which explores the role of the RPL as a social entrepreneurial initiative of large scale transformational benefit within the enabling environment created through a NQF. The focus of this paper is pragmatic and is about resourcing and institutionalising RPL. It is contextualized within three situated learning practices reflecting RPL praxis over a period of seven years. The paper concludes that although RPL cannot be applied generically to all situations, there are generic elements of quality assurance, accreditation of providers, and principles of assessment which underpin the conceptual design of a specific pedagogy and language for RPL.

The three situated learning examples provide information on RPL design, practice and implementation and inform what resources are necessary for RPL to happen. The three examples also speak to the discourse on institutionalising RPL, by providing qualitative evidence of the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ this can be done. The paper takes RPL as a practice beyond the theoretical, into policy design, piloting, broad implementation, evaluation, refinement and recording of achievements. The three vignettes underscore the centrality of the NQF, and the associated regulations, as key enablers for these RPL assessment projects to have happened.

2. CONTEXT AND REFRAMING

2.1 Context

The context of this paper was the critical skills development need in the insurance industry, in response to new regulatory requirements for the industry, and the response of the Insurance Sector
Education and Training Authority (INSETA) to this critical need. Traditional formal learning and assessment approaches would not have supported the sector’s need; however the proposed RPL solution was widely accepted as a viable and ethical solution.

2.2 Reframing

Reframing, in its purest form, is an applied thinking technique where the individual is requested to examine something from a completely different perspective, from their usual comfort zone. (daVinci Institute 2011). Reframing our thinking about RPL would result in changed behavior; what we say would translate into actions that reflect the stated intentions. In the current frame what we say about RPL and what we do are not the same. We say:

- NQFs recognise the contribution made by lifelong learning and work experiences translated into credits through RPL comparable with those obtained through formal schooling, further education or Higher Education;
- RPL addresses the visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment;
- RPL approaches must be viable, sustainable and credible; and
- Credible and ready institutions should conduct RPL assessment.

We do:

- Approach RPL to scale with caution;
- View RPL praxis with concern or skepticism;
- Speak about its cost, bureaucracy, length of time to deliver, institutional unreadiness;
- Question its validity and sustainability; and
- View RPL assessment as somehow inferior.

The argument is that formal learning is not the only form of learning that has value. Non-formal learning refers to learning that happens in the workplace, in communities, in internships, apprenticeships, and in the context of professional continuing education and development (CPD). Informal learning refers to the type of learning which happens in communities, families, society, and cultural environments. Much of it is tacit learning as well. The discourse is bigger than where the learning happens and what its construct is. The discourse extends to what knowledge is valuable, and what knowledge counts.
Formal education is no longer well enough equipped to fulfil the growth in expectations and learning and skills development needs of individuals and communities in the rapidly changing global society and changing economies. There is a growing demand by adults and young people for recognition, validation and formal awards for the knowledge, skills and competences they have acquired in a variety of learning contexts, including non-formal and informal learning environments. Fenwick (2010) views the critical problem being mistaking learning as a single object, when in fact it is enacted as multiple objects, as very different things in different logics and practice. Traditional forms of education which have been based on formal schooling, college and university education resulting in qualifications awarded for these learning programmes, have discounted the value of learning acquired by millions of people through formal and informal workplaces, in communities, and the informal education sector.

Fenwick (2010) refers to what she terms the ‘knowledge wars’ about what non-formal and informal learning is. She highlights the conflicts unfolding around what counts as really useful and most important knowledge, and argues that educators have a crucial role to play in declaring the importance of knowledge that builds healthy, sustainable communities and human beings (in Walters, 2010). She points to alternative forms of knowledge that can be developed, and argues that ‘just about everyone everywhere agrees that within all these globalized spaces knowledge is becoming central, and educational purposes have become entwined with economic demands.

Colley, Hodkinson and Malcolm’s consultation report concludes that

> boundaries between formal, non-formal and informal learning can only be meaningfully drawn in relation to particular contexts; it is often more helpful to examine dimensions of formality and informality and ways in which they interrelate; and there are wider historical, political and economical contexts to learning.

Non-formal and informal learning is described by Colardyn and Bjornavold (2004: 69) as

> the entire scope of knowledge and experience held by an individual, irrespective of context where the learning originally, and comprises learning, skills and competences acquired outside formal education and training.

An Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) report (2010) describes RPL as validation and formal awards for the knowledge, skills and competencies (people) have acquired in non-formal and informal learning environments, to better equip them to have decent work. Illeris (2009: 5) speaks about ‘life long, life wide and life deep’ learning in various contexts and time frames.

The results of the failure to address timeously recognition and validation of non-formal and informal

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learning as part of mainstream education practice, has resulted in significantly disparate and unequal education and training access opportunities for large portions of the populations of countries in Africa. This has exacerbated the problem of skills and labour market mismatches, and joblessness. Recognition and validation of prior learning achieved through non-formal and informal learning pathways is viewed as an integral part of the broader theme of lifelong learning, and of the lifelong learning cycle. The recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning has relevance not only in regard to education and training policies but also to related challenges of poverty-reduction, job-creation, employment and social inclusion (CEDEFOP 2008).

3. HUMAN RESOURCES AND INSTITUTIONAL READINESS

3.1 The underpinning role of SAQA and the NQF

The advent of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act, which provided an enabling legislative framework to work with RPL as an assessment method, also provided the impetus to implement the three situated learning projects described in this paper. The three RPL projects are based on factual accounts of the initiation, implementation, solutions and lessons learnt about large scale RPL interventions. What becomes evident is that RPL when contextualized in the broader education and training design and delivery processes, has transformative value, can be replicated to scale and can have significant benefit for a community or sector.

The three situated learning practices described in this paper are:

- The INSETA/ Independent Examinations Board (IEB) RPL project for Communication/ languages and mathematics literacy, which took the form of a portfolio of evidence and a summative assessment;
- The first Financial Advisors and Intermediary Services (FAIS) Project with a professional body in the insurance industry and a distance-learning university as partners, which took the form of a RPL written assessment based on case studies; and
- The INSETA/Large Company Pilot project, which took the form of a portfolio of evidence building and one-to-one summative oral interviews.

3.1.1 Policy framework

SAQA published the policy document “The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African Qualifications Framework” in September 2002. This was followed in 2004, by the “Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning.” Both these documents comprise a sound research and conceptual framework base. These policy documents formed the basis from which the three projects were eventually developed and informed the implementation plans for the
RPL projects. RPL is defined in the National Standards Bodies Regulations (No 18787 of 28 March 1998) as “Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements.” This definition makes clear a number of principles in the development and execution of RPL:

- Learning occurs in all kinds of situations - formally, informally and non-formally;
- Measurement of the learning takes place against specific learning outcomes required for a specific qualification; and
- Credits are awarded for such learning if it meets the requirements of the qualification.

The process of recognizing prior learning is about:

- Identifying what the RPL candidate knows and can do;
- Matching candidate’s skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification;
- Assessing the candidates against those standards; and
- Crediting the candidate for skills, knowledge and experience built up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past.

Principles of good assessment for RPL should not be an add-on; but rather integrated into the learning programme, and also an integrated feature of quality assurance policies (SAQA 2002).

SAQA’s document, RPL in the context of the NQF (September 2002), cites the following principles to be applied in an RPL approach; RPL should:

- Address the visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment; and
- Be viable, sustainable and credible.

The document lists transformational features of RPL which include:

- A holistic approach: RPL is not a purely technical process, but individualized and contextualized, learner centred and developmental;
- Developmental and incremental approach to implementation: RPL must be able to use existing infrastructure and resources, and work towards measurable targets; and
• Different contexts for RPL implementation: common criteria for quality assurance are difficult to implement in different contexts.

3.1.2 **Generic elements of human resource and institutional readiness for RPL**

From the praxis some generic elements related to human resource readiness and capacity became evident. These included having:

• A qualified and competent RPL coordinator and facilitator/s of the assessment process;
• Professional and qualified learner support, including career advisory and career pathway support;
• Recognised, and accredited assessors and moderators, to ensure the first levels of quality assurance happen credibly; and
• Data manager/s to capture the learning achievements of the candidates for submission and recording on the National Learners Record Database (NLRD).

Institutional readiness required institutions to demonstrate that they had at least the following:

• A clear and lived by vision and mission for recognition and validation of prior learning;
• Credible and sustainable Governance and administration;
• Institutional integrity;
• Institutional effectiveness measured through both output and credibility of the quality assurance processes;
• Accreditation to offer a range of qualifications in the form of feasible and sustainable learning programmes;
• Relevant and significant student support;
• Access to information and learning resources, physical resources, financial resources; and
• Relevant, effective and efficient policies, guidelines and other resources.

4. **THE THREE SITUATED LEARNING PRACTICES**

4.1 **First RPL initiative: Implementing Learnerships: INSETA/IEB RPL Pilot Project**

4.1.1 **Project partners:**

• The Independent Examinations Board (IEB);

• A large international auditing firm which was the Insurance SETA Sector Education and Training Authority (INSETA) Project Office;
• A specialist NQF Consultant; and

• INSETA Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) staff.

The National Skills Development Strategy I (NSDS I) required all Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) to register and implement learnerships for employed and unemployed learners. These learnerships were to address the identified scarce skills needs in the insurance industry; the scarce skills having been identified by the companies in response to their Workplace Skills Plan (WSP) reports to the INSETA, and then reported in the annual updated Sector Skills Plan (SSP) of the INSETA. The concept of a learnership was new to the insurance industry. To advocate the positive returns on investment for companies to participate in the learnership programme, the INSETA had to provide information about what they were, and how they would be implemented, and the benefit to both the company and the learners. Key issues clarified were that:

• Learnerships are a way to achieve a qualification, which is registered on the NQF, and comprise theoretical, simulated practical and work place learning components;

• They are delivered by accredited education and training providers, and in the actual work places;

• They are for a fixed period of time;

• They contractually bind the company, the provider and the learner for the period of time to complete the three components of learning that make up the learnership;

• There is significant financial reward to companies participating in the programme, as they could deduct legislated amounts from their pre-tax profits, for each employed and unemployed learner in a learnership; and

• They also receive a learnership grant from the INSETA, to cover training costs, and a basic stipend cost for the unemployed learners.

4.1.2 The infrastructure to implement the learnerships was in place:

• The INSETA had approved RPL, assessment, moderation and provider accreditation policies;

• Insurance qualifications had been registered on the NQF, against which the learnerships could take place. A lot of work had been undertaken in the SETA, in partnership with the industry, through the Standards Generating Body (SGB) for Insurance, to develop and register insurance-specific qualifications on the NQF;

• There were also accredited education and training providers to deliver the theoretical components of the core and elective components of the qualifications;
There were registered facilitators, assessors and moderators to facilitate the learning, assess it and moderate the outcomes of the assessments;

- Learning material was developed in a specially designed project, which could be used by the learning programme providers as a basic minimum set of material;

- Funding through the INSETA discretionary fund was available; and

- An international accounting firm were project managers, who worked together with the learnerships division to implement learnerships.

4.1.3 Implementation of the INSETA/ Independent Examination Board (IEB) pilot project

As the learnership programme moved from plan to implementation, a few challenges arose, which necessitated implementing a partnership project with the IEB. Melissa King describes the project in a paper titled “From Policy to Implementation: Reality Challenges” (King 2003: 4) delivered at a JET RPL conference. She writes,

“The INSETA raised its concerns about the fundamentals with the IEB. These concerns took three forms:

(i) Who would provide and who would quality assure the fundamentals in their qualifications for those who did not have equivalent credits;

(ii) How could they be assured that equivalent credits (i.e. senior certificate symbols) were in fact equivalent and represented the levels of language competence and math literacy competence required by their industry; and

(iii) How could they standardize the achievement of financial literacy as required credits across all their qualifications?

King (2003) also reports that the implementation of learnerships was slow; the insurance sector had not had previous exposure to apprenticeships, on which the learnership concept was loosely based. INSETA’s escalated its advocacy campaign to companies to increase uptake resulting in about 250 people being accommodated in learnerships at the time of the pilot project. The Insurance industry had stringent selection criteria for unemployed learners to be accepted onto the learnership programme. These included a basic requirement of a Grade 12 certificate, with two languages and Mathematics, but they did not need insurance knowledge. The employed people entering the learnership programme similarly had to have completed formal study at Grade 12 level which included the fundamentals; they had the added benefit of already having insurance knowledge.

Beyond the basic selection criteria required by the companies, INSETA still wanted to know that learners had actual knowledge and competence in language and maths, and financial literacy, which was not a Grade 12 subject at the time. The IEB advised an initial pilot project comprising a RPL route to assess the fundamentals and financial literacy. The pilot project used portfolios of evidence
(PoEs), in 7 different work places/ companies applied to 130 learners. At the time King delivered her paper at the JET conference, 80 learners had been assessed.

4.1.4 Issues and challenges which emerged in the pilot project

4.1.4.1 Legal challenges

The project identified the possible legal challenge which could arise if a candidate’s RPL assessment for NQF level 4 unit standards in languages and maths devalued the already achieved Senior Certificate achievements. The candidates were informed that their Senior Certificate results would not be changed, and that there was no legal necessity to issue unit standard based credits to replace the Senior Certificate equivalences (IEB 2003). The RPL assessment was in some ways an anomaly in that RPL was used to assess learners who already had the legal equivalence of competence in the subjects. However, assessing the learners’ competence against the standard in the NQF level 4 unit standards satisfied the INSETA requirement to evaluate the actual knowledge and competence in language and maths, and enabled INSETA to consider solutions where gaps were identified.

4.1.4.2 Equivalence

It was recognised that Senior Certificate or Grade 12 symbols can represent a wide range of competences, whereas registered unit standards pin competence at a particular level (IEB 2003). It was also widely acknowledged that learners who have a Grade 12 or Senior Certificate can present lower levels of knowledge, skill and competence than NQF level 4 when assessed in language and/ or Mathematics. This was the reason INSETA had wanted the project to explore the equivalence issue more thoroughly. The pilot showed interesting results in that:

- All the learners (the majority of whom were not first language English speakers) achieved the language standards to a high level;
- Those who had been in the workplace for a while, as opposed to those who had newly left school, coped better with the workplace application language uses which are built into the unit standards, and which were part of the RPL assessment; and
- Those who had math in their Senior Certificates did not achieve competence in the NQF level 2 math literacy assessment, primarily because they were not familiar with the problem-solving contextualized applications of those standards to the insurance environment.

The implication of the findings is that the acceptance of equivalence means that learners with unit standard credits and learners with Senior Certificate credits have, in fact, different levels and kinds of competence in the fundamentals even though they have achieved the same level of qualification. INSETA developed a strategy to address this differentiation, in an attempt to bring the homogenous group in the learnership to the same level of competence as a starting point for the rest of the
programme. INSETA recommended that in future programmes, irrespective of achievements and formal recognition of Senior Certificate or other NQF level 4 language and maths achievements, each learnership programme starts with a basic non-credit-bearing refresher course in communication/language and maths literacy. However, all learners would need to do financial literacy as a formal part of assessable credit-bearing learning.

4.1.4.3 Support issues for RPL in the learning programme implementation

The pilot project underscored that RPL is not an event, but a process, which requires preparation, a range of support mechanisms, and could engender positive consequences and attitudes. Different contexts within which RPL happens also require different support mechanisms to the RPL candidates.

In the planning for the learnership programme, it was evident that very little attention had been paid to including the fundamentals in the programme planning; the presumption being that the candidates had already achieved the fundamentals in other programmes. Financial literacy was not considered in the programme planning, yet it was a compulsory component of the qualification. Little thought had been given conceptually to how the fundamentals would be assessed and credited, as many of the providers were not accredited to assess the fundamentals. INSETA addressed these issues by:

- Implementing the non-credit bearing bridging programme;
- Developing learning material for mathematics and financial literacy (FL);
- Requiring FL to be formally delivered and assessed in the programme; and
- For those learners who did not have the fundamentals, INSETA required either formal learning and assessment to be built into the programme, with such candidates starting earlier than others, or that RPL assessment be formally implemented by an accredited provider, such as an FET institution or adult learning centre or the IEB.

The pilot highlighted that the degree of support candidates receive in the workplace from the company, line managers or supervisors, and how enabling the environment is, is directly linked to feelings of happiness or satisfaction with the RPL process. Those left to “sink or swim” on their own, have more negative feelings about RPL, and this clouds the achievement. If RPL is chosen as an assessment method to ensure continued employment, as opposed to RPL as a mechanism to validate access to further or higher learning, then different emphases and support are required. To evaluate how successful the RPL initiative has been is also measured according to the purpose of the RPL intervention, i.e. continued employment/promotion or access to further learning opportunities.

Unemployed learners were far more enthusiastic about the RPL process and their learnership in general than those currently employed by their companies. This was attributed to employed learners having to juggle job pressures and/or unsympathetic managers with the demands of the RPL process.
Some managers viewed the RPL process as an irritation, as they thought it would be a “quick set of challenge tests” (IEB, 2003). INSETA addressed this challenge by implementing an improved advocacy and orientation programme for learners, employers, and learning programme providers, before implementing the learnership programme. All participants were also given assurances of ongoing support from the selected learning programme provider, who was seen as the core implementer of the learnership and where the RPL intervention resided.

4.1.4.4 Technical RPL issues

Assessment of learning programmes offered formally through institutional learning creates opportunity for ongoing assessment or continuous assessment. RPL assessment may not provide opportunity for this to happen, as the nature of RPL assessment is different. The challenge found in the RPL project was that, because RPL does not follow a formal curriculum delivery, it is not feasible to assess every specific outcome according to each assessment criteria in the qualification. This sort of assessment relies on continuous or ongoing assessment to make it feasible, efficient and cost-effective. A more pragmatic approach has to be adopted in RPL assessment, without undermining quality assurance and validity principles. The pilot project took the view that RPL assumes competence and knowledge, albeit obtained through other means than formal learning, and that evidence that represents integrated outcomes is acceptable. This model was adopted by INSETA, and has worked across the INSETA RPL projects.

The project took two years to complete, as some of the learners took much longer in completing their formal learning in the workplace. This hampered the RPL assessment completions, especially for those that had to be formally assessed for the fundamental unit standards, and those who needed to do additional work to obtain their credits for the fundamental component. However, the success of the learners, the lessons learnt along the way, and the implementation of solutions, to overcome the challenges identified in the pilot project were used to build the next level of INSETA RPL policy and programmes.

4.1.4.5 INSETA and the Concessions for languages and math literacy

Following on from the findings of the IEB project, INSETA ETQA realised the need to formalise in a policy document the concept of concessions for recognition of languages and maths literacy. SAQA had also approved the concession approach adopted by INSETA. The first concession document as it became known was written in 2003. In the first concession document, INSETA recognised learners’ achievements in the fundamentals for credit towards a Grade 12, only those learners who had achieved a C symbol in higher grade language, and an E in higher grade Mathematics. These restrictions were soon to be seen as barriers to those who had been disadvantaged in the previous apartheid education and training system, and became a contested issue. INSETA also noted the finding of the IEB project, that there was often a disjuncture between the achievement in the Senior Certificate and the symbol achieved at school, and what the learner achieved in an assessment against the fundamental unit standards of the qualifications registered on the NQF.
To avoid legal contestations, exclusionary processes, and resistance by providers and learners to engage with the fundamental component of the qualification, INSETA revised the concession document, in 2004/2005, to fall within the legal parameters of what the Department of Education required as a pass mark in languages/communication and Mathematics. To avoid criticism that we had ‘dumbed down’ the requirements for concession, INSETA required all learners to participate in a refresher or bridging programme of between 40 to 80 hours, at the beginning of their formal learnership programme. To assist in implementing this, we identified a project partner, for a project named INSMAT (INSETA material development project), through which basic curricula and learning materials were developed for all the fundamental unit standards and later for the rest of the unit standards of the NQF registered qualifications.

In further revisions of the initial concession document, INSETA mapped the specific outcomes and assessment criteria of the NQF levels 2 to 4 qualifications to the curricula in the Department of Education (DoE) NATED documents, and other curriculum statement documents. This was to ensure that the concession policy was tight enough to only allow concession for what could be ethical and valid RPL assessment. A final Concession for Communication, Financial Literacy and Mathematical Literacy NQF level 2–4 policy documents were approved by the INSETA Council in May 2007, and became widely used.

4.2 Second RPL initiative: Public-Private partnership: the first FAIS project with a professional body and a distance university as partners

4.2.1 Project partners

- A professional body in the insurance industry the assessment partner;

- A distance-learning university, (logistics partner);

- INSETA FAIS Project Team;

- A large international auditing firm (INSETA Project office);

- Consultants;

- INSETA ETQA division; and

- Outlearning.

4.2.2 Context and process

In November 2002, the Financial Advisors and Intermediary Services Act, Act 37 of 2002 (FAIS Act) was promulgated by the Minister of Finance. The accountable and responsible statutory body for the
regulation and implementation of the FAIS Act is the Financial Services Board (FSB). This act required all people working in financial planning or giving financial advice, to achieve a stipulated number of credits from a formal qualification registered on the NQF, by a cut-off date of 31 December 2004. The advisors were categorized according to the level of advice and the type of product they worked with. For example, a person brokering funeral policies was a Category A financial advisor and would need to accumulate 15 credits from the NQF level 2 Insurance certificate by 31 December 2004. If a person gave financial advice for complex products, they were classified as a Category C financial advisor, and would need 30 credits from the NQF level 5 qualification. Those who worked in banks, insurance or the accounting profession related to financial advice and planning were required to comply. The eventual intention stipulated in the Act, was that each already employed advisor or planner would eventually achieve the whole qualification at the respective level for that category of person and product, by a cut-off date which was to be advised. The date was 2011.

The FAIS Act impacted on the entire sector for which the INSETA had skills development responsibility. Based on sector skills plan research, the number of affected employees was set at about 40 000 brokers, or financial advisors/planners. The Sector Skills Plan (SSP) research revealed that about 70% of people working in the sector had at least a Grade 12 qualification, and that the majority of the employees were between the ages of 30 and 45. In other words, it was a relatively young sector with employees who had achieved at least an NQF Level 4 qualification. INSETA recognised that the sector's employees would never be able to achieve what was being required of them through the FAIS Act if they were not engaged in the RPL pilot project. We recognised that learning had happened in many different kinds of situations, and that the learning had happened formally, non-formally and informally. We also recognised that we would be breaking new ground as it were, in the size and scale of the application of what became termed as the "FAIS project" which would be premised on implementing RPL assessment principles across the board for achievement of the initial number of credits. It was especially the validity and credibility of assessment that had to be protected in a planned RPL assessment project.

The INSETA already applied concession or recognition for Communication, languages, Financial and Mathematical Literacy achievements at Grades 11 and 12 levels, to brokers, advisors and financial planners in the sector. This meant that those who had a recognised Grade 12 achievement in any of these subjects, and could provide INSETA ETQA with the endorsed certificate as proof, would be granted credit for those subjects towards the achievement of the qualification. This already amounted to 56 credits of the 120 credits required to achieve a certificate at any of the NQF Levels 2, 3, 4 or 5 for which the newly developed insurance qualifications were written. A first policy document was written titled Concession for Communication, Financial and Mathematical Literacy NQF level 2 to 4, and published in 2003. This was refined in May 2007.

A project team was established to develop a project plan which was submitted to the INSETA Council, and significant funding was approved to fund the project. A professional body in the insurance industry
was nominated as the external assessment partner, and a distance-learning university managed the logistics for the national assessment, and the collating of results. The project comprised three phases, namely:

- The awareness campaign;
- The qualifications equivalence matrix component; and
- The RPL assessments.

4.2.2.1 The awareness campaign

The FAIS Act, No. 37 of 2002, was greeted with concern in the industry, as many financial advisors, and companies were concerned that failure to comply with the Fit and Proper component of the Regulatory Act, would lead to significant job losses, and loss in income to the insurance sector. The INSETA, together with the BANKSETA and the Finance, Accounting, Management Consulting and other Financial Services SETA (FASSET), had been written into the FAIS Act, by virtue of their function as ETQAs. The so-called columns three and four of the Financial Services Board (FSB) Board Notice 91 of 2003, sets out the Determination of Fit and Proper Requirements for Financial Services Providers. Part III of the Determination requires an applicant for a license to act as a financial services provider, to have achieved the minimum academic standard, qualifications or professional status applicable to that subcategory as stated in Column three of that table; and will after licensing comply with the conditions/restrictions as indicated in Column four of that table (if any) (FSB Board Notice 91 2003). It also requires the qualification to be achieved must be registered by SAQA on the National Learner Record Database (NLRD). It also requires the achievement to be quality assured and certificated by INSETA, BANKSETA or FASSET, whichever category of financial advice was being regulated.

The national awareness campaign was undertaken by the INSETA project team. An extensive road show programme was launched, with the cooperation of all the industry professional bodies and members’ associations. The purpose of the campaign was three-fold:

- To provide general information about FAIS;
- To explain the Fit and Proper Determination, and the concepts of the NQF, quality assurance, ETQA, and NLRD; and
- To introduce the RPL project itself which would comprise the development of the qualifications matrix, and the RPL assessment.

The nature of the road show was interactive, which provided opportunities for question and answer sessions. Media coverage was generated with positive support from respected industry and other
national print media such as the Personal Finance, and the Financial Advisors News, the Financial Mail. Radio slots were booked with regional radio stations, to extend the message to rural areas, in all provinces. Brochures were printed and widely distributed through the INSETA regional coordinators and through professional bodies and associations.

It was particularly important to clarify the role of INSETA ETQA, what the NQF was, and what RPL assessment was, in the context of the project. A lesson learnt was that a clear and simple message, which "removed the fear" from what people had to achieve, meant that they would engage more readily and positively with the project. In January 2004 INSETA had 90 000 hits on its website, which was up from the 31 000 hits in December 2003; an indication of the awareness campaign's success. Another success indicator was the unexpected 11 584 financial advisors enrolled for the first national assessment due to be conducted at the end of March 2004. So successful was the first round of RPL assessments, that a second round of RPL assessments was conducted in May 2004, with 5000 financial advisors enrolling for the RPL assessment.

It may be asked why the awareness programme was important to an RPL project. Simply put, the concept of RPL was not widely understood by the insurance learning public. They were also not au fait with the NQF and what the implications of columns three and four of the Fit and Proper Determination were for them. They had always achieved credits for insurance in-house programmes and the professional bodies in the insurance industry provided courses and examinations for them to remain professionally competent. It was important to eliminate as far as possible the plethora of confusion that existed, hence the awareness campaign.

4.2.2.2 Qualifications Equivalence Matrix

It was important that the learners would understand that they would achieve credit for recognised programmes or qualifications they had already achieved, if these were relevant to their world of work. The FAIS project commissioned a qualifications equivalence matrix of existing insurance and other qualifications, which established thresholds for fit-and-proper determination. To guarantee the impartiality of the entire process, an independent research company, Outlearning, was contracted. They strove to ensure that in mapping equivalence they embraced the principle of inclusivity and created pathways for previously disadvantaged individuals (PDIs).

Initially 132 qualifications that relate to the insurance industry were mapped on a matrix and valued in terms of the unit standards that were part of insurance qualifications registered on the NQF. The aim of this component of the project was to determine the status of all historical and current formal qualifications available to industry practitioners. In the preamble to the matrix, the service provider wrote that "this pioneering initiative by the INSETA is arguably a world-first and was inspired by a determination to provide support and assistance to industry stakeholders (Matrix, 2003). The first step was to guide Outlearning in the concept of mapping, and to orientate them in the development and design of unit-standard based qualifications and whole qualifications. This task was undertaken
as part of the ETQA function and before the matrix was published it was verified and signed off.

The INSETA Sector Skills Plan underscored the fact that 70% of financial advisors already had a qualification at or higher than Grade 12, and that many of them had industry-equivalent qualifications. It was clear that the equivalence matrix was in itself a form of RPL. Financial advisors with university degrees or other recognised qualifications could continue practising without the need to write the RPL assessments, although many of them wrote the assessment, to benchmark their knowledge against the current content of the unit standards assessment criteria and specific outcomes. INSETA took cognizance of the fact that regulatory legislation similar to that of the FAIS Act had been promulgated in England and Australia. In these countries many practitioners were forced to leave the industry because of non-compliance. The equivalence mapping tool would prove to be an extremely beneficial RPL tool to some people, or a credit accumulation tool to other South African insurance-industry stakeholders.

4.2.2.2.1 The philosophy behind the mapping

The underlying philosophy of the Equivalence Map was to create a user-friendly equivalence matrix that not only incorporated insurance-specific qualifications but broad based banking and financial qualifications that have relevance to the financial advisory sector (INSETA 2003). It had to withstand scrutiny that the end-product was aligned to all SAQA rules, regulations and requirements; hence the stringent quality assurance process carried out. It had to be user-friendly and accessible, which resulted in a web-based portal on the INSETA website, and it had to assist industry practitioners with a multitude of possible queries, which resulted in the establishment of a dedicated Outlearning Call Centre.

4.2.2.2 Practical Implications

The methodology used by Outlearning included:

- Working with key role-players in the industry;
- Inviting public input through a national media campaign run over three weeks;
- Using professional bodies and SAQA's database to extract relevant qualifications;
- Aligning all qualifications with NQF registered insurance qualifications and unit standards;
- Presentation of draft matrix for broad consultation to the industry; and
- Sign-off from INSETA Education and Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) body.

The methodology used to compile the matrix made it simple to add to the matrix at any stage, should the need arise. Although the matrix was eventually the place from which financial advisors could
identify if they had relevant qualifications or credits, Outlearning advised that it would be good practice for advisors to undertake the RPL assessment, which would be based on the NQF registered insurance qualifications, particularly to update and/or refresh existing knowledge.

In the process of obtaining information about existing qualifications, and mapping them, there were interesting findings. These guided decisions to get to the final equivalence map:

- Historical qualifications proved difficult to align with existing unit standards; some courses such as the Multimark III and the Certificate of Proficiency (CoP) and the Intermediate Certificate of Insurance (ICI) were mapped by the ETQA division outside of the Outlearning mapping, as a different methodology was followed to map these qualifications;

- Unit standards to cover all training within the sector had not been written yet; these were identified for urgent development through the Standards Generating Body (SGB). The decision was taken to allow the first round of RPL assessment to cover only the existing unit standards, to ensure financial advisors had basic 15 or 30 credit compliance by the end of 31 December 2004;

- Tertiary Institutions had either discontinued certain programmes which had previously been on offer, as they merged with other HE institutions, or formed new institutional types, such as Universities of Technology, and had to streamline their learning programme offerings in accordance with Department of Education programme sustainability criteria. This created a space for private providers, and work place providers to move into the market to deliver insurance-specific qualifications for FAIS purposes;

- Incomplete tertiary qualifications, where only a first year had been passed, were not awarded credit in the equivalence map;

- Industry association membership or being an associate or fellow of a professional body was not seen as a qualification, for the purposes of the equivalence map;

- Short courses and in-house training provided by insurance companies were excluded from the equivalence mapping process. However, current in-house programme mapped to unit standards and accredited as a skills programme by INSETA ETQA were mapped for equivalence;

- Short workshops or seminars were not eligible for credits on the equivalence map;

- International qualifications were initially excluded in the first equivalence mapping, as they were too difficult to map effectively. It is only now, with the development of global moves towards NQFs and regional qualifications frameworks and referencing, that such mapping would possibly prove to be cost-effective and beneficial to the industry; and
• To overcome some of the challenges with international qualifications, the industry was advised to make use of the Centre for the Evaluation of Educational Qualifications (CEEQ) (now Directorate Foreign Qualifications Evaluation And Advisory Services (DFQEAS) which is a SAQA Directorate to conduct credential evaluation.

4.2.2.2.3 Application of the Equivalence map to gain recognition of prior learning for credit

With the equivalence map signed off, and available on a web-based portal, the Outlearning call centre in place, and the INSETA FAIS project office implemented, the equivalence map was launched to the broad insurance learning public. Criteria for recognition of equivalence and ultimate recognition by the FSB, (which was responsible to license the financial advisors who had achieved the requirements of the Fit and Proper Determination), were drafted, worked, and accepted by the industry.

The principle to keep the process user-friendly, accessible and simple underscored the criteria and processes. INSETA ETQA required financial advisors to provide their certified copies of the original qualifications, to a distance-learning university, the professional bodies in the insurance industry or the INSETA FAIS project office. These institutions endorsed the equivalence and logged the learners’ achievements in accordance with the FAIS requirements, on a database. The database was accessible to the FSB. Financial advisors could also use the compliance officers in their respective companies to endorse the equivalence, and report this directly to the FSB. It is estimated that about 10 000 financial advisors made use of the equivalence map, to obtain either partial or full credit for FAIS purposes.

4.2.2.2.4 Reliance on SAQA accreditation of INSETA ETQA

SAQA’s accreditation of the INSETA Education and Training Authority (ETQA) function was core to the equivalence mapping, accreditation of learning programme providers and assessment, moderation and awarding of credits to the learners. The SAQA accreditation enabled INSETA ETQA to perform all the functions that resulted in the first FAIS RPL project’s successful implementation.

The SAQA regulations R1127 (for ETQAs) (RSA:1998) and R452 (for Standard Setting) (RSA: 1998) were key enablers to implement the project. The construct of unit standard based qualifications registered on the NQF were the core of the Fit and Proper Determination of the FAIS Act. The regulated establishment of National Standards Bodies (NSBs) and SGBs, through which industry and professional qualifications could be mapped, were direct enablers for the project to happen and for RPL to be considered as the way to assess the prior learning and knowledge of 40 000 people in an industry. This in itself reinforces the significant influence of the NQF.

4.2.2.3 The RPL assessment phase

This phase comprised a number of activities, and sub-projects, which would deliver the end-product - a learner with credits for FAIS compliance, as well as assessed knowledge, skill and competence at
the relevant qualification level. An initial funding grant of R 6 million was allocated to the project to implement the RPL assessment. Activities included:

- Development of basic learning material to cover the existing unit standards registered on the NQF, as part of the registered qualifications;
- Setting up of the website and portals to include registration information and access to register on-line;
- Design and moderation of the RPL assessment tool;
- Logistics related to examination venues, invigilators, transport of papers, marking venues etc;
- Standardisation/giving of raw assessment data; and
- Final awards, and credit uploading.

4.2.2.3.1 Learning material development

INSETA instituted a separately-funded project, called INSMAT (INSETA material project), the purpose of which was to design basic learning material in accordance with the NQF registered unit standards which would form part of the first RPL assessment. The specific outcomes and the assessment criteria in each registered unit standard were used to define the core of what had to be covered in the learning material. Each set of learning material was arranged according to the registered qualification and unit standard number. A facilitators’ guide and a learners’ guide were developed for each unit standard. Useful hints were also added to the material. The material was evaluated by industry specialists, and members of the SGB before submission to the ETQA for approval, and dissemination through a web-based portal.

4.2.2.3.2 Web-based portals

To simplify registration for the assessment web-based portals were designed through which learners would enroll. The registration and payment for the RPL assessment was managed by the distance-learning university. Those learners who could not access the portal, could use the INSETA FAIS project call centre and register telephonically with assistance from the help desk. One of the challenges faced was that initially we did not know how many learners would register for the RPL assessment, and this in turn would affect the numbers and locality of venues, number of RPL assessment questionnaires printed, transport arrangement for the papers, numbers of invigilators etc. Through the portal, daily updates were possible to ensure that sufficient budget was available and that there would be sufficient papers delivered and writing venues available. The distance-learning university also tracked registrations and sent weekly updates to INSETA.
Design of the RPL assessment tool

INSETA had decided to use a 'once-off' written RPL assessment paper, based on a multiple choice set of questions comprising mini case studies. Allowance was made for learners to use calculators. Printed versions of the FAIS Act were supplied by INSETA at examination venues. Industry specialists were used to design the case studies per paper, and these were moderated by specialists. Criteria were set for the design of the papers. These included that the case studies had to assess the specific outcomes in the unit standards and use the assessment criteria as guidelines; test what learners knew, not what they did not know; the questions must be phrased in simple language; no negative questioning; examples to be South African, and not euro-centric; and questions to be unambiguous. Despite these criteria, significant challenges arose:

- The questions were complex, and badly phrased;
- The questions did not follow the specific outcomes or assessment criteria in the registered unit standards;
- Eurocentric examples were used almost exclusively;
- Negative questioning methods were used extensively;
- Complex and often incorrect language was used to phrase the questions;
- Careless editing mistakes were made;
- Unrealistic examples were used, that would not assess the learners' knowledge or competence; and
- The questions would not engage people who did not have English as a home language, and who were from rural areas or previously disadvantaged contexts.

Of the 950 questions set, in 6 papers, many had to be revised, with up to eight revisions in some cases. Model answers which would make up the multiple choice component, and be the basis of the marking memorandum, were either too narrow, incorrect or simplistic, and not relevant at all. The assessors who set the papers did not use peer review to decide on possible correct answers. The level 5 qualification questions were either too difficult for the level, and more suited to a level 7 qualifications, or too easy. This was an indication that many people who had completed the assessors' or moderators' courses, had completed an academic exercise, with insufficient understanding of the practical implications of what assessment entails, and how to structure a question paper to ensure it would be relevant, valid, and authentic.

The questions were referred to experienced lecturers at the College run by the professional body and
to professors in insurance studies at selected universities. They checked the content for correctness and peer reviewed level. More satisfactory results were achieved in a short space of time. This underscored the view that the integrity of the questions and how they were asked, relied as much on professional educators and lecturers to design the questions, as it did on industry input in terms of the content of the questions and correct answers.

4.2.2.3.4 Logistics

The partnership with the University was ideal. The University had the logistics to print thousands of examination papers, deliver these to all venues countrywide, enlist professionally qualified invigilators, and ensure as much security as possible in the storing, distribution and collection of scripts from examination venues. They used their marking system for the multiple-choice marking, and delivered the raw data to the INSETA ETQA, in a simple and user friendly format. Over 11 000 learners wrote the first RPL assessment, and the raw data was available to INSETA within two weeks of the assessment having been written.

4.2.2.3.5 Standardisation

The raw data provided to INSETA ETQA had to be quality assured and decisions made about obvious anomalies and inconsistencies in results achieved. For the March assessment, there had been no previous assessments of this scale, or in the format of RPL multiple choice case study questions, which could serve as a basis from which to apply standardization processes. The INSETA ETQA took the route of validating the results for questions where there could be no contestation about the average achievement of the group of learners at the particular level, when judged against criteria such as validity, relevance and reflective of the level descriptors. Where there were significant numbers of ‘failures’ in particular questions, or significant numbers of achievements in others, these questions were considered for their validity, and whether the ‘failures’ were because the question was too ambiguous, the model answers in the multiple choice were too generic, or ambiguous, and whether the level of the question was too high for the level of learner and level of the qualification. Similarly where there was a 100% achievement, the questions were considered if they were too easy. The INSETA ETQA adjusted only about 3% of the achievements upwards, after consultation with the professional bodies. The standardisation exercise became a benchmark for the May 2004 RPL assessment, and proved to be useful, in that it proved to provide a consistent basis against which to standardize further national RPL assessments.

Of the total number of learners in the March and May 2004 RPL assessments, the March pass rate was 83% and the May pass rate was 81%. The distance-learning university academic staff were consulted as final arbiters with the INSETA ETQA, to ensure that these results accurately reflected the achievements of the learners, and reflected the integrity of the assessment.
4.2.2.3.6 Final awards and credit uploading

This was the area where most challenges were experienced. Once the INSETA ETQA had approved the results, and these were published in national media, the task of uploading the individual learners' achievements to print statements of credit, and to the NLRD had to be completed. The University was designated to do this. The first challenge was that the university was not an accredited provider, whereas the professional body college was accredited. The professional body did not have the IT mechanisms and support to carry the database of learners' achievements. The University could not upload the achievements because they were not accredited. INSETA ETQA pursued a memorandum of understanding with the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC), to overcome this barrier. Another significant barrier at the time was that the NLRD was also not set up to accommodate uploads of skills programmes, or part qualifications. The NLRD accommodated the upload of qualifications only. To make matters worse, the professional body College closed its doors in 2006, before the learners' achievements had all been uploaded. The University now had all the records, but eventually they and the professional body managed to upload all the achievements of the part-qualifications onto the INSETA database, for future recording on the NLRD.

Whilst this state of affairs was most unsatisfactory, significant lessons were learnt. Complex arrangements require solid contracts, before any events happen. In an article in the April edition of the FA News magazine, the CEO of the professional body is quoted as saying, "The students records were in danger of being lost when the College of Insurance - a former division of the professional body - closed down in 2006. When the College closed down in 2006, the professional body took it upon itself to collect all the student information and meet the closed College's obligations to its former students.

4.3 Third RPL initiative: The INSETA/The Company Pilot project

4.3.1 Project partners

- An RPL Consulting company;
- A large international auditing firm as INSETA project managers; and
- INSETA ETQA.

4.3.2 Reasons for the pilot project

The first INSETA FAIS RPL assessment project had propelled INSETA ETQA forward as a recognised port of call for assist companies, brokers and financial advisors to become FAIS compliant. INSETA ETQA encouraged the sector to see the FAIS interventions as more than just compliance; to rather engage with the FAIS legislation, in the spirit of the legislation, which was to professionalize the
industry as well. Most financial advisors, however, just wanted to be compliant with the minimum requirements by the end of 2004.

The Company approached the INSETA with a request that a RPL process be developed which would be more than a written assessment for the minimum number of credits, and would enable people to use RPL to obtain the whole qualification, at level 5 of the NQF. The target learners were all people in senior positions in the organization; either regional or sales managers or broker consultants, supervising large teams of financial advisors. They also came from different educational backgrounds and levels. A pilot project was launched using RPL through portfolio of evidence building methodology, for 15 people. The lessons learnt in the pilot project could be applied across the industry.

4.3.3 Demographics of the pilot group

The Company is a large short term insurance company, and is part of another larger holdings company. It is classified as a large company (having more than 150 employees) and it is a levy-paying stakeholder to INSETA. The company training division had membership on the INSETA Standards Generating Body (SGB), and had membership in the Education Training Quality Assurance (ETQA) committee of INSETA. In other words they understood the concepts of the NQF, and had bought in fully to the development and design of unit standard-based qualifications. This became an important factor when we met with the pilot group, as the training division was able to smooth the way when necessary, for the process to unfold.

The group itself comprised 15 white males, from various educational, language and geographical backgrounds. These factors also played a role in the implementation and success of the pilot project, as the individual demographic differences had a bearing on the delivery of the RPL process. They were not novices in the industry, being senior people in their fields, and came with significant success in the world of financial advising. This, too, impacted on the delivery of the RPL assessment process.

4.3.4 The context and elements of the RPL assessment methodology and tool

The design of the methodology and the type of assessment tool was an interactive process, with the training division of the Company, the INSETA ETQA and the consulting firm. The various types of RPL assessment methods were evaluated for suitability, within the brief of the project and within the corporate culture that existed in the Company. The Company’s brand is identified with integrity, professionalism, good corporate governance, and leans more to the conservative than adventurous corporate image. The candidates who would be the pilot group, were senior managers, and had to show that the achievement of the qualification had validity, relevance, merit, and would satisfy any peer review that may be applied to the assessment and final award of the qualification. The decision to adopt a portfolio of evidence (PoE) and final face-to-face interview for the RPL assessment process was considered suitable for the candidates and for the company at that stage.

It was decided to customize a generic RPL portfolio of evidence type methodology, to suit the pilot
group, the budget and the given time frames of the project. The project had to be delivered within 6 months, from start to certification. Consideration was given to the need for each candidate to achieve a number of credits by 31 December 2004. The following components comprised the model for the RPL PoE assessment:

- A portfolio of evidence learner guideline and checklist, to be used in the introductory meeting with the group;
- Agreement about the format of the orientation session, the building of the PoE and the face-to-face interview and final oral assessment had to be reached;
- The format in which the PoE would be presented was agreed;
- The self assessment grid was developed;
- The type of evidence required for the PoE was agreed; and
- The format of the face-to-face interview and final oral assessment was agreed.

4.3.5 The process of conducting the RPL assessment

The candidates were not familiar with the NQF, assessment and RPL concepts and terminology, and how these were linked to the achievement of a qualification. They were not aware of the process undertaken by the Insurance sector Standards Generating Body (SGB) the process to have the qualifications approved and recorded on the NLRD. Due to the lack of actual RPL implementation practice on which to build our methodology an induction programme was developed covering theory of the NQF, RPL, assessment, Portfolio of Evidence building, and general discussion about the RPL process the candidates were to undertake.

Preparation for the programme was crucial to the eventual success of the programme. Sets of slides and notes about each of the themes were designed and presented. The Company’s training division organized the session. We were introduced to the 15 candidates who were requested to express their feelings about the programme, and ask questions. The following happened:

- The group was initially hostile towards the project;
- They believed that they had all the knowledge required to be licensed, and the formalization of their knowledge in this way was unnecessary;
- They viewed the FAIS Act as a way to remove certain gender and race groups from the sector, to replace them with equity employees;
- They viewed the project as an intrusion into their already overloaded work schedules; and
• They questioned our ability to implement the project as we were not financial advisors, and would not understand the intricacies of the insurance industry.

There was initial uncooperative resistance by some of the candidates. The approach we took was to remain objective and empathetic and to listen. We realised that most of the hostility resulted from the fact that they were feeling threatened by new concepts, new legislation and threats to retain their right to practice their profession. Essential to the success of the project was an understanding of the resistance to change felt by the candidates. We had to get them to trust us, themselves and the process through clear communication about the process, and their chances of success. The first theme presented was the generic background to the NQF, and what the terminology meant, integrated assessment and RPL assessment as a methodology. These three presentations were based on the SAQA policy and criteria documents regarding assessment and RPL.

The second theme was more practical and pragmatic, and comprised discussing the document, Portfolio of Evidence Guidelines and Checklist process to assist the candidates to understand how to build a PoE, and how to present the evidence. This was supported by the portfolio of evidence grid for the qualification against which they would have the RPL assessment. Each unit standard, the specific outcomes and the assessment criteria of each were thoroughly discussed, until understanding was achieved about the knowledge, skills and competence levels that would need to be presented as evidence in the PoE. The candidates became partners in the process of learning, once they knew what would be expected of them, and how the evidence would be assessed. RPL as a process of assessment is not widely implemented in formal institutions of learning or workplace learning sites in South Africa. It is a departure from the traditional forms of assessment, which are associated with the achievement of a qualification. Because of this, RPL is viewed as a quick fix or the integrity of the achievement or award is somehow suspect. Perceptions and mistrust about RPL influenced the ease of the group to initially engage, but as they were partnered through the RPL process, they engaged more positively.

Individual face-to-face sessions were set up with each candidate, during which the consultant and facilitator identified the evidence that they would present, and identified the gaps and how to address these gaps. Each candidate set about collating the required evidence, which also comprised writing their experiences, and presenting these as mini-case studies. Supporting evidence of actual work-related documents was collated, each one speaking to a specific outcome required in the evidence grid. Candidates were encouraged to interact with the facilitator on a regular basis, and especially when they needed guidance or were unsure of what to do. The process of PoE building, with regular facilitation sessions took three months. At the end of this period, the PoEs were handed in to be assessed. Registered assessors were used to assess the PoEs. The PoE grid document, and an assessment marking memorandum were used by the assessors, and moderators to produce initial raw scores.

Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with each candidate. The PoE was discussed, and
an oral assessment about key themes relevant to the purpose of the qualification was conducted. Gaps in the evidence submitted in the portfolio of evidence were identified, and the candidates were given guidance on what further evidence was required. A further session was held with candidates who needed to add to the PoE, after which final assessment and moderation was done. Verification was conducted of the entire RPL process, to produce a statement that the assessment was valid, relevant, practicable, reliable, and had integrity. The candidates were then awarded the qualification, and certificated. Only one of the 15 candidates did not submit work, and remained hostile towards the project throughout.

4.3.6 Lessons learnt which open the discourse for a special pedagogy for RPL

The project was a success, with 14 of the original 15 candidates qualifying, and most qualifying with good results. Valuable lessons were learnt through this unique RPL project, which has been used since by education and training providers serving the insurance industry:

- The first lesson learnt, was that the NQF was an enabler for the RPL process to happen. The project was underpinned by the SAQA policy and criteria for RPL, the policy and criteria underpinning the design of a unit standards based qualification, and the inclusion of specific outcomes and associated assessment criteria which are part of the registered qualification. The unit standard-based format of the registered qualification on the NQF was a significant enabler, as the qualification could be taught and learnt and assessed in an incremental or modular way. This supports learners who learn in the work place, and whose assessment of their workplace learning, through the RPL assessment, has to be relevant to the outcomes and assessment criteria stated in the qualification. The relevance of the qualification was underscored by the fact that what the candidates did in their workplace was reflected in the specific outcomes of the qualifications. The assessment criteria made sense to them as well, because these would have been what they would have acknowledged as fulfilling the requirements of having knowledge, skill and competence for the particular sector and occupation;

- Second, thorough pre-RPL assessment preparation is essential. The preparation in this case, was underpinned by understanding the qualification, and contextualizing the specific outcomes and assessment criteria stated in the qualification. It was important to translate this understanding into the guidelines and templates supplied to the learners, and workplace mentors (who were the training division staff allocated to the project). The preparation directed the guidelines for portfolio building;

- Third, understanding the demographics of the learner group proved important in the approach and eventual success of the project. These were working, adult learners, who needed to obtain the qualification to retain a license to practice, but who had to manage work and learning constructively. The facilitator’s ability to manage objectively and knowledgeably, the resistance
to the RPL process, and to gain the trust of the learners in RPL as a valid and reliable form of assessment helped the project succeed. Creating a relationship of trust with the candidates is important. Preparing participants by allowing them to be partners with the facilitator and/or assessor in their learning pathway is an enabler to proceed with the RPL process and assessment;

Fourth the facilitator, assessor/s and the candidates need clear assessment guidelines and need to know and understand what will satisfy a valid and successful presentation of evidence towards a qualification achievement. This removes the fear and suspicion factor about RPL. It settles the candidates to produce evidence that is authentic, has integrity and underscores their sense of the value of learning they have gained in the workplace, and/or in the non-formal environment; and

Fifth the integrity of the quality assurance process, and eventual verification and recording of achievements is essential to provide other institutions, the workplace, and in this case, the FSB with the assurance that the candidates deserve the award of the qualification.

4.3.7 Unintended consequences from this RPL project, and lessons learnt

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many people saw RPL as a 'dumbing down' of assessment of qualification, or saw it as a 'quick fix'. Some large providers developed a range of RPL assessment tools and processes which were marketed to companies and learners as a solution to obtaining their FAIS credits. Examples of 'quick-fix' practices included telephonic interviews with learners, syndicate group work, where any learner in the group answers the question on behalf of the group, and the rest of the group achieves the marks. Other examples included an e-learning process, with no summative assessment, and no guarantees that the work delivered via the e-learning method, was the authentic work of the learner; and facilitator-based classroom delivery, where the learner manual was used to guide the learners to write answers. Stringent monitoring, external moderation and implementation of summative assessment as part of RPL assessment became imperative to re-establish the integrity of RPL as a process and to award credits or qualifications, where applicable. These measures underlined the need to have partnerships built on communities of trust in place which would be applied to those learning providers that offered assessment and awards through RPL. The concept of a type of 'professionalization' of RPL assessment providers and of a special pedagogy for RPL starts emerging, which can be the basis for future research in the RPL discourse.

5. Conclusion

Werquin (OECD: 2008) sounds a note of caution that the country experience has been quite mixed, with recognition processes often being marginal, small-scale, and not yet sustainable, and there are areas for improvement. Recognition and validation of non-formal and informal learning is not happening on any significant scale as yet. Mthuli Ncube (World Economic Forum 2011), the chief
Resourcing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): human resources for RPL and institutionalising RPL

An economist and vice-president of the Tunis-based African Development Bank told the World Economic Forum on Africa that African economies have made great strides in improving their economic environments - showing high levels of growth over the past 10 years - but there remain some key fissures that need to be corrected. These fissures are the mismatch between the training output from institutions and the skills needed in Africa, and as a result, between the needs of growing economies and the workforce needs. Can we still ask 'What if we do?' Should we not rather be asking 'What if we don’t?' Can we still defend that traditional approaches of learning and assessment are favoured while RPL is relegated as a less trusted and reliable way to achieve credits and gain access to learning. It takes us back to the need to embrace challenges about 'What knowledge counts' and to reframe our thinking accordingly. It could just be that by mainstreaming RPL within institutions a pipeline of skilled people could be developed to become active participants in previously exclusive work and economic activities premised on achievements of formal qualifications. As adult educators the words of Steve Biko ring true now more than ever:

In time we shall be in a position to bestow on South Africa the greatest possible gift – a more human face.
REFERENCES


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The use of competency conversation in summative assessments of prior learning

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"Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of witnesses.”
Margaret Miller (undated)

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates one innovation which may hold potential for RPL as an assessment method. It is an assessment method referred to as competency conversation (VETASSES 2009; Industry Training Authority 2010a), also referred to as professional conversation (a methodology for identifying individuals' knowledge and skills related to particular occupations. This 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.

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 propose criteria and strategies for promoting quality in RPL using competency conversation as an assessment method.

1. INTRODUCTION

When we have a conversation with another person, we do not always consider what we are learning about each other during the process. Afterwards, however, we might notice that the depth of our conversation, the degree of our own engagement, and what it meant to us, affects our judgment of how good the conversation was. Literature and social media reflect the important role that conversations play in our lives. In her popular book, The Art of Conversation, Catherine Blythe (2008) lamented the sorry state of our conversational arts in everyday life. In their research on knowledge-intensive conversations, Mengis and Eppler (2005) examined factors that influence the quality of
different types and functions of conversations held in the workplace. The advent of social media has been identified by a host of authors (e.g., Armano [January, 2011]) as a new frontier of conversation, which is having a significant impact on how we see the world.

Until recently RPL researchers and practitioners have paid little attention to conversation as an assessment method. In fact, scant notice has been taken of the literature on assessment generally and how it might inform RPL. This paper begins by introducing a fledgling RPL assessment method known as "competency conversation," which has been used for some time in Australia and recently adopted in Canada. It then proposes five strategies for ensuring the quality of RPL in the assessment of occupational competencies. Drawing on contemporary theoretical perspectives on quality in assessment in education, it outlines possible criteria and indicators of quality in RPL assessments. Finally, this paper makes some suggestions for using competency conversations in summative, occupational RPL assessments in South Africa.

2. COMPETENCY CONVERSATION

A review of the literature on RPL reveals a tradition of alignment between RPL and learning theories that emphasise the contribution of experience to the educational process (Gamson, 1989; Whittaker, 1989; Sheckley & Keeton, 1995; McGinley, 1995; Pouget & Osborne, 2004). Experiential learning theorists have long contended that experience is the most valuable means of gaining knowledge and skills. RPL practitioners have found support in the conceptual connections between experiential learning theories and the recognition of prior learning.

Some RPL researchers, however, have questioned whether traditional experiential learning theory offers the only means of understanding RPL and have explored the possible consequences of this relatively narrow theoretical approach. Fraser (1995), Harris (2006) and Breier (2011), for example, examine how an emphasis on reflection, an essential element of many RPL processes, privileges individuals who are already part of a culture of formal education. Others have proposed alternative, or additional, ways of thinking about RPL, arising from recent studies in knowing through experience (Osman, 2006), the role of discussion and negotiation in assessment (Peters, 2006) and the importance of non-academic knowledge (Michelson, 2006).

These discussions broaden the context in which RPL is seen to have value to individuals, organisations and society in general. However, they continue to focus our attention on learning and adult learning in particular. Few researchers or commentators have explored the literature on assessment theory and practice, even though the very name, at least in Canada — Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition® suggests that the assessment of prior learning is at least as important as its recognition. As a consequence of this omission (or perhaps rejection), assessment experts and their theories are not well represented in the RPL community, and our knowledge and use of assessment methods and tools have remained relatively static since the introduction of portfolio...
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assessment in the 1980s.

A recent departure from traditional RPL is the "competency conversation" which is in the early stages of evolution as a means of assessing occupational competencies. A review of educational literature reveals no published articles describing, conceptualising 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. Validation of the tools of competency conversation has been limited, but anecdotal evidence shows an enthusiastic response on the part of assessment agencies to this method of identifying individuals' work-related knowledge and skills.

Competency conversation is aptly named. It is a deep conversation between an assessor and a candidate about the candidate's learning. It differs from structured, semi-structured and open-ended interviews in the following aspects:

- The exchange is conversational;
- Evidence is not only verified but generated;
- Assessors do not present as experts, even though they are;
- A set of questions covering a range of competencies are provided as a guide, but how these questions are used is determined by the circumstances of each assessment;
- Initial questions are open-ended and holistic, and focus on the candidate's experience;
- Probing questions are used as the conversation proceeds to discover theoretical knowledge;
- Assessors are required to take into account the context in which the learning took place, as well as the achievement of expected competencies;
- The conversation usually takes place in the workplace, but it may occur in other settings; and
- There is a heavy reliance on the expertise of assessors.

Competency conversations are not stand-alone assessment measures; they are used as part of a process. They may take place following an evaluation of a candidate's documentation and be used to confirm initial findings and discover undocumented knowledge and skills. After the conversation, practical tests may still be necessary. Support is generally provided for both candidates and assessors, and procedures are flexible. For example, if a candidate is nervous, the assessor, after a brief discussion, may ask to be shown around the workplace and incorporate questions and demonstrations into the tour. This might be followed by additional conversation during which the assessor draws out evidence of competency, which may require documentary verification after the meeting. In this way, an assessment may continue past the initial formal meeting.
3. COMPETENCY CONVERSATION IN AUSTRALIA AND CANADA

The experiences of Australia and Canada provide us with an early indication of the strengths and weaknesses of competency conversation as a summative assessment method.7

3.1 Australia

Australia has a national qualifications system that identifies and articulates competencies for most occupations in the country. The recognition of prior learning is a key component of the system: individuals' competencies are recorded in a national database. The case of Queensland, Australia is illuminating because it has adopted a particularly systematic approach to RPL, which provides support for assessors and candidates.

For each occupational group, Queensland has developed an assessor kit with guidelines on conducting RPL. Competency conversation is presented as a fundamental component of the process. Assessors are encouraged to begin by identifying competencies that can be verified by a candidate's documentation. A competency conversation is then scheduled. A question bank is provided in the assessor kit, with "key points" to identify in responses. Assessors use the list of key points to formulate questions of their own or to contextualise or rephrase the suggested questions according to the candidate's particular line of work. The questions are not intended to be an exact "script" for the assessor to follow; instead, they provide guidance in determining the range of the candidate's skills, knowledge and experience in performing a particular task or function.

It is important that the conversation explore the connection between the candidates' experience and their competencies, so they are often initially open-ended and tend to be holistic. The discussion is contextualised (and the context is documented), so as to avoid the temptation to "tick and flick" a list of competencies.

Record of Conversation sheets are completed for each assessment and are used to determine whether the candidate demonstrates each competency in the required depth and breadth. In the comments section, the assessor notes the context of the discussion and the examples discussed by the candidate, and briefly analyses the judgments made about the quality of the candidate's responses. These notes are considered to be critical evidence in the assessment and must be retained on record.

Many educational institutions are registered training providers (RTOs) and, as such, are authorised to conduct RPL for the national qualifications system. There are also numerous private organisations that have been registered. Voc Ed Learning Group (VELG) and Vocational Education and Assessment

7 Unlike formative assessment, summative RPL is primarily used to validate existing knowledge and skills and to identify learning gaps.
Services (VETASSESS) are two private organisations that manage assessments and use competency conversation as part of their RPL process.

Voc Ed Learning Group (VELG). VELG is a private company that specialises in professional development and consulting. They conduct training in RPL assessments for RTOs in Queensland using the training packages issued by the state government. Competency conversation is a component of every assessment. VELG staff was closely involved in the Skills First initiative in Queensland and are experienced in the development of RPL assessor kits, the training of assessors and collaboration with employers.

VELG notes that, although several thousands of people have undergone assessor training and thousands of assessments have been conducted, there is no empirical research on the validity of assessments or their impact on individuals, assessors, institutions, or candidates’ employment or other circumstances.

Vocational Education and Assessment Services (VETASSESS). VETASSESS is another education and training assessment provider that takes a holistic approach to the competency conversation. VETASSESS is an assessment-only RTO and provides assessments of workers’ knowledge and skills in relation to the national qualifications system. VETASSESS is hired by employers to assess their current workers and also conducts on-site assessments of skilled workers in ten trades in India, the Philippines, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and the United Kingdom for immigration purposes. In an effort to further streamline RPL, VETASSESS has recently introduced a procedure for conducting competency conversations on the Internet.

3.2 Canada

In 2008-2009, the Industry Training Authority of British Columbia, which controls certification in the skilled trades, established the Multiple Assessment Pathways (MAP) project to offer skilled workers an alternative to writing certificate of qualifications examinations. A summative assessment process was developed for a test occupation (professional cook). The process was designed to evaluate all aspects of the applicant’s knowledge and skills and to identify any gaps in competency.

At the beginning of the project, the British Columbia Industry Training Authority retained the consulting services of VETASSESS to assist with project development and evaluation. The partnership was very successful. After consultation, the following process was established. The applicants would complete a self-assessment using the outcome-oriented occupational performance standards for their trade and submit a formal application. The Training Authority would perform a desktop analysis of documentation submitted in the form of a portfolio and evaluate applicants on the basis of a competency conversation, written tests and a practical assessment in a simulated environment.
The assessment process, including the competency conversation, is characterized by the following features:

- It relies on a competency-based model of assessment, which holds that written, multiple choice examinations are often poor indicators of practical skills;
- Assessments are designed to be holistic (i.e. an assessment of an entire undertaking rather than specific tasks or components). To this end, units of competency are often presented in combinations that more realistically reflect activities in the workplace;
- The process is evidence-based and allows for a range of methods of evaluation that are determined by each individual case. Competency conversations are one element of a more comprehensive process;
- Assessors are journeypersons in the trade. Strong emphasis is placed on assessors’ qualifications and training;
- Clear standards and procedures for making assessment decisions are in place; the industry-wide units of competency are adapted to the context of specific work sites;
- Supports are provided for both candidates and assessors, including an overview of the programme, a candidate guide, an assessor guide, and an assessor training book and occupational competency guide; and
- The continuous improvement and professional development of assessors is emphasised, and regular moderation practices are undertaken.

Throughout its course, the MAP project was subject to evaluation led by VETASSESS with input from all stakeholder groups. The evaluation was unanimously positive, though several areas for improvement were identified (e.g. the need for rubrics to guide assessors’ judgments and for more streamlined documentation).

The British Columbia project’s documentation includes a flow chart, training materials, sample questions for assessors to use during the competency conversation, discussion questions for moderation sessions, feedback from assessors following administration, and the forms used to record the conversation, rationale and decisions.

4. **EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Constructivist approaches to RPL stress the importance of providing individuals with the opportunity to actively demonstrate how they have come to understand the world based on their own experience. On this basis, portfolio assessments involving individuals’ reflections on learning activities have been a favoured method of assessment in formative RPL and a common practice in summative RPL. The element of reflection is considered crucial, as it enables the applicant to extract their learning from their experience and to construct meaning from new or problematic situations. Reflection encourages
individuals to challenge their assumptions and alter fundamental perspectives (Mezirow, 1978). A drawback to this form of assessment is that portfolios require complex understandings to be presented in written form. In the high-stakes circumstances of summative assessment where third-party decisions are key, this hurdle can be overwhelming for some individuals, particularly those whose learning is steeped in oral traditions.

Since there is no published theoretical or applied research into the efficacy of competency conversation to date, I am relying on the documented experience of Australia and Canada to show that competency conversation in RPL can perform a function similar to portfolio assessment, while accommodating applicants whose background features strong oral traditions or who do not have the communication tools normally associated with formal education. Competency conversation has been shown to not only present evidence of relevant knowledge and skills but also generate such evidence by triggering theoretical understanding, memories of knowledge application, and recognition of knowledge gaps (Industry Training Authority, 2009). Breier (2009) maintained that a third form of knowledge—practical wisdom—deserves greater recognition. Competency conversation may be a means of recognizing that wisdom as a component of occupational knowledge and practice because it encourages reflection before, during and after the conversation itself.

Including competency conversation in the pool of available RPL assessment methods and tools also opens the door to literature and research on conversations in organisations. For example, in an appreciative reading of the literature on knowledge-intensive conversations, Mengis and Eppler (2005) identified four lines of research into the relationship between conversation and knowledge processes, and they offered a framework for conversation management. An investigation of the relationship between conversation research and RPL could bring new insights to the use of competency conversation and to the RPL field generally.

5. QUALITY CONCERNS

Quality concerns associated with competency conversation stem, like those associated with most summative RPL practices, from an absence of quality measures that explicitly target assessment methods and tools. Although many accepted practices are likewise hampered, the new and unfamiliar status of the competency conversation, combined with this dearth of evaluative measures, raises legitimate questions about its internal integrity and external credibility.

5.1 Literature on quality in education and RPL

In the international context, there is scant literature dealing with quality in RPL from a theoretical perspective. Even Andersson and Harris's (2006) Re-theorising the Recognition of Prior Learning, which includes articles by the most well-respected theorists, researchers and practitioners in the field, does not directly address the quality of RPL measures, although the various theoretical perspectives
imply divergent views on what constitutes quality.

Published literature on quality in RPL from an applied perspective is more plentiful and specifies various principles, policies, codes and standards. Of particular interest here is the doctoral work of Motaung (2007) who adopted Nyatanga’s (1998) characterisation of quality, which draws on elements of total quality management (TQM) and quality management systems (QMS) as the basis of an evaluation of the quality of RPL services at the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria. Researchers and government officials have proposed a range of alternative ways to establish quality in RPL, but they do not address the quality of assessment methods and tools. The literature generally reflects an unexamined assumption that faculties are adequately prepared to conduct assessments and that methods used in the classroom are appropriate for individuals with prior learning.

By exploring the literature on assessment in education, we may find clues to determining quality in summative RPL, and competency conversation in particular. There is currently no widely shared definition of quality in RPL. Still, while different interpretations of quality are inevitable, there are certain characteristics attributed to quality that cross boundaries of vested interests and can be used to achieve a broadly accepted working definition. On this basis, I propose the following definition: quality in RPL is the establishment of an environment and the implementation of policies, processes and assessment practices that maximize individuals’ opportunities to fully and accurately demonstrate relevant knowledge and skills (Van Kleef, 2011). This proposed definition is simple but not simplistic. It contains important principles of accessibility, transparency, accountability and validity. It implies that standards of knowledge and skills will be applied, but it allows for negotiation in the determination of relevance. This definition focuses on the individual as the most important stakeholder and stresses the importance of allowing knowledge as constructed by individuals to emerge.

The theories and practices of competency-based assessment in education suggest five strategies that may be used to ensure the quality of RPL, and competency conversation in particular: applying the principle of fitness for purpose, setting clear standards of performance, situating competency conversation as part of the assessment process, providing supports for assessors and candidates, and engaging highly qualified assessors. These strategies are based on the work of Gibb (1993), Hager (1994) and Mueller (2005) on competencies and competency-based assessment, Baartman, Prins, Kirschner and Van der Vleuten (2007) on quality in assessment, and various researchers on the concept of fitness for purpose (O’Reilly, Cunningham and Lester, 1999; McDowell and Sambell, 1999; Baartman, Bastiaens, Kirschner, Van der Vleuten (2006); Baartman et al, 2007).

5.2 Applying the principle of fitness for purpose

When applied to assessment, the principle of fitness for purpose requires that assessment tools be congruent with the purpose for which they are being used. O’Reilly, Cunningham and Lester (1999) describe fitness for purpose as a single loop test of validity because it operates within the boundaries
set by the stated purpose, which, of course, raises the question of whose interests inform the purpose.

Some researchers (McDowell & Sambell, 1999; Baartman et al., 2006; Baartman et al, 2007) argue that fitness for purpose incorporates the purposes of various stakeholders. In RPL for occupational competencies, the primary stakeholders are candidates (who want to ensure that they have the opportunity to provide all relevant evidence of prior learning), regulators (who must ensure that successful candidates demonstrate safe practices), employers (who want workers with the knowledge and skills required for their workplaces) and the public (who are the candidates’ potential consumers).

The inclusion of stakeholder purposes when applying the fitness-for-purpose criterion also draws attention to the role that communities of practice play in assessment (Lave & Wenger, 1998) and reminds us that the process of judging whether assessments are fit for purpose is influenced by the power relationships among stakeholders.

5.3 Setting clear standards of performance

South African literature chronicles the tensions and difficulties that can be experienced in establishing an acceptable standards structure. The initial adoption of outcomes-based education in the school system did not meet expectations in the South African context. Still, the rejection of outcomes-based education does not require the abandonment of learning outcomes as an appropriate guide for judging individuals' knowledge and skills. Like most people, RPL candidates will later be assessed by their employers on their fulfillment of their job descriptions and occupational competencies in order to determine the conditions of and remuneration for their work. It makes sense to prepare candidates as fully as possible for these eventualities.

While setting criteria in the form of holistic competencies reflects a behaviourist approach to assessment, constructivist practices can also help to shape the design and delivery of RPL assessments. The influence of constructivism in competency conversations is evident: the conversations give candidates greater freedom to express the merits of their prior learning, and they promote authenticity by focusing on real-life situations that have personal meaning for the candidates. Assessors in competency conversations also adopt a constructivist approach: they provide prompts and probes through flexible questions, exercise professional judgment and supply substantive feedback. None of these elements are present in strictly behavioural assessments where the only acceptable answers are predetermined, delivery methods are inflexible, little assessor judgment is exercised, and very limited feedback is provided. Using constructivist theory to design and conduct competency conversations may be a useful way to facilitate the recognition of practical wisdom identified by Breier (2009) at the Colloquium on RPL for the Upgrading and Up-skilling of Teachers in South Africa in 2008.
It is internationally accepted that summative assessments of RPL are criterion-referenced. In most developed countries, these criteria take the form of learning outcomes (as in the case of Canada) or holistic competencies, which Gonzi, Hager and Oliver (1990) define as statements in which knowledge, skills, and, possibly, attitudes are integrated and expressed as performances at particular levels (in the case of Australia). In RPL for occupational recognition in South Africa, occupational outcomes perform this role. It will take some time to determine the success of South Africa’s recent decision to define learning as knowledge, skills and work experience and to use integrated assessment as the capstone. I argue here that outcomes that integrate and express knowledge and skills at particular levels are appropriate guides for relating individuals’ learning to public expectations of an occupation. Competency conversation is no different from other summative assessment methods in this respect. It provides grounds for candidates to reflect on their own understanding and for assessors to judge emerging evidence.

5.4 Situating the competency conversation within the assessment process

The question of where to situate a competency conversation in the RPL process implies that multiple assessment methods and tools will be used. Such an approach is supported by competency-based assessment theorists and researchers: no one is suggesting that competency conversation should be the only method of RPL assessment.

The use of a range of assessment instruments was encouraged by Gibb (1993), who argued that assessment of competencies cannot rely on performance alone. There must be sufficient evidence of underpinning knowledge as well, and this knowledge can be determined by evidence from contemporary and traditional means of assessment. For example, contextualized demonstrations that provide direct evidence of knowledge, skills and judgment might be employed in conjunction with standardised examinations such as multiple-choice tests in situations where required knowledge is less dependent on context or where highly contextualised assessments do not provide sufficient evidence of theoretical knowledge.

Messick (1994) also maintains that educators require an understanding of both traditional and contemporary forms of assessment. Hager & Butler (1996: 370) acknowledge the importance of the "scientific measurement model" in the assessment of relatively context-free knowledge but maintain that it is insufficient to assess the integration of knowledge and skills necessary for higher levels of performance. Their "judgmental model" of assessment evaluates learning first in simulated settings and then in real-life practice.

Mueller (2005) advocates the use of a combination of traditional and authentic assessment. Authentic assessment evaluates the individual’s ability to use previously acquired learning to perform tasks or solve problems by demonstrating meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills to real-life situations. Following the constructivist theory that learners construct their own meaning of the
world, Mueller contends that learners must have the opportunity to demonstrate that they have constructed meanings that fulfill learning expectations. He suggests that authentic assessment can be used as a single measure to demonstrate multiple skills or areas of knowledge, using the example of an essay, which can be read first for content, second for writing and communication skills, and third for evidence of critical thinking. In this way, assessments can be integrated and multidimensional, and can also become a source of meaningful learning since they provide tools for reflection—a view of assessment shared by Gardner (1987) and Kulieke, Bakker, Collins et al (1990).

Baartman et al (2006:154) also argues that, although new forms of assessment have been developed in education, "classic tests should not be ignored or discarded prematurely". They propose the integration of a range of assessment methods into competency assessment programs, which would include both newer, more contextualised, forms of assessment and classical methods.

All these researchers agree that, rather than choosing between competency-based and standardised assessments, it is better to employ both. The choice of the most appropriate method will depend on the context required to render quality results, thus fulfilling the principle of "fitness for purpose."

5.5 Providing support for assessors and candidates

To identify the types of support assessors and candidates may require to participate in a competency conversation, I consulted the resources developed by Canada and Australia, and the literature on the importance of professional judgment in education (Geach, 1957; Jones, 2006).

In both Canada and Australia, competency conversation is integrated into RPL assessments through formal policy, structured professional development workshops for assessors, candidate information sessions, candidate guides, assessor guides and training materials, assessment documentation, and moderation procedures used to ensure quality. Formal evaluations of RPL processes demonstrate the criticality of support rendered (Australia Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011; Industry Training Authority, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c).

5.6 Recognizing the importance of qualified assessors

Competency conversation relies heavily on assessor judgment (Industry Training Authority, 2009a; Australia Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011). This is not new: the strong reliance on assessors has been the subject of research on competency-based assessment in education. Geach (1957) contends that, in holistic competency-based assessment, assessors are required to make more judgments than in other forms of assessment and that these judgments are more complex. These judgments are the key determinants of quality in the assessment process and its outcomes. Knowledge of and skill in the chosen field and expertise in assessment methods are essential requirements for competent assessors. Assessors must also be aware of their own
unconscious or tacit knowledge, which is experience-, culture-, and gender-infused, and will inevitably influence their judgments (Polanyi, 1962). Jones (1999) sees this acknowledgement as a strength of competency-based assessment and argues that it is the necessary exercise of tacit knowledge and judgment that precludes assessment of practical knowledge from becoming a mere ticking of checklists.

According to Jones (2006), professional judgment in vocational education and training is becoming increasingly important, and its quality depends on six attributes: preparedness, collegiality, ability to work with a complex set of rules, seriousness of purpose, capacity to deal with predicaments and obligations, and pragmatism. These attributes are also key for RPL assessment. Strategies to support qualified assessors in RPL have included specialised training (Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2008); development of competency templates (CEDEFOP, 2009); codes of practice (Queensland Department of Education and the Arts, 2008); integration of professional standards into quality assurance measures; and self-assessment tools and processes, including mentoring, auditing, independent study materials, guides and other support documents (Amichand, Ireland, Orynik, & Potter, 2007).

These five strategies for ensuring quality in competency conversation must be considered in the context of broader, more difficult, issues of quality in RPL generally. These difficulties, however, can be addressed by drawing on the literature on competency-based assessment to develop quality indicators as a basis for selecting and evaluating RPL assessment methods and tools.

### 5.7 Quality indicators for assessment methods and tools

Quality indicators for RPL assessment methods and tools can be devised by drawing and building on three sources: the principles established by Hager and Butler’s (1996) judgmental model of assessment for education; the research literature on quality in RPL (Van Kleef, 2011); and Baartman et al’s (2006) quality criteria for assessment in education.

Table 1 below is a modified version of a model under development as part of my current doctoral studies on RPL for internationally educated nurses. The research is still in progress and may result in further modifications, but the model as it stands may offer a foundation for discussion in the South African context. The model uses occupational outcomes/competencies as the criteria for assessing prior learning. Assessment methods and tools are developed or selected based on the principle of fitness for purpose and their capacity to provide sound results. Both standardised and holistic competency-based assessment tools are considered. RPL-specific policies and procedures introduce an element of standardisation, which adds to the ease of application and promotes cohesion.

The criteria and quality indicators are based on the assumptions that RPL for occupational competencies is both summative and formative and that assessments take place over a period of
hours or days rather than months. The process is administered by trained assessors and advisors. Monitoring and evaluation are important components because they contribute to long-term credibility and sustainability.

Although this model for RPL quality is greatly indebted to Baartman et al (2006), it departs from their model and may be further modified during the course of my current research. One departure is the addition of a new criterion—the health of the community of practice—which recognizes the influence of communities of practice in organised occupations that has been noted by Lave and Wenger (1991; Wenger 1998). Another two other criteria have been combined (comparability and reproducibility of decisions). Also, each criterion has been redefined in the context of occupational registration. Finally, quality indicators have been added to clarify the definitions/descriptions and to provide guidance on how the criteria might be made operational.

Table 1: Possible criteria for and indicators of quality in occupational RPL

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Criteria definitions/ descriptions</th>
<th>Sample quality indicators</th>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptability</td>
<td>The extent to which stakeholder groups find the criteria and the RPL process, assessment methods and tools acceptable. Key stakeholder groups include occupational bodies, relevant educational communities, employers, unions and government.</td>
<td>Stakeholder support is tracked during the design and development of RPL and monitored as part of quality assurance activities. RPL-specific policies and procedures are reviewed for inclusion as quality criteria. There is a high degree of acceptability among stakeholder.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitive complexity</td>
<td>The extent to which an assessment includes the cognitive skills required to apply a competency, particularly the cognitive skills required to solve problems.</td>
<td>Knowledge, skills and judgment are integrated into competencies. Taxonomies are used in the development of competency language. Explanations of selected levels of required cognition are made available to stakeholders. Judgments are made based on inference by expert assessors.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cost and efficiency</td>
<td>The extent to which quality is linked to allocated resources.</td>
<td>Evidence of the links between quality and resources is gathered and made available to stakeholders. RPL-specific policies and procedures are used to streamline the process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Sample quality indicators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational consequences</td>
<td>The degree to which an assessment affects a candidate's learning.</td>
<td>Effects of assessments are tracked, including feedback from candidates on their decision-making following initial self-assessment and subsequent formal assessment.</td>
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<td>Fairness</td>
<td>The level of bias in favour of or against a person or group; the extent to which an assessment accommodates the needs of individual candidates.</td>
<td>There should be few or no allegations of discrimination. Candidates are permitted to demonstrate their competencies in different ways. The number of required assessments are explained. Feedback is provided after assessments. Decisions are written and include substantive reasons. The number and nature of appeals are recorded. RPL-specific policies and procedures contain fairness provisions.</td>
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<td>Fitness for purpose</td>
<td>The degree to which competencies, assessment methods and tools, and workplace applications are aligned.</td>
<td>Assessment tools reflect a balance of theory and application. Authentic and theoretical assessment methods are selected based on their relevance to the context. Evidence that justifies the selection of assessment tools is robust and made available to stakeholders.</td>
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<td>Health of community of practice</td>
<td>The effect of social relations across the neighbourhoods of the community of practice on the acceptability, cost and efficiency, fairness, meaningfulness, and transparency of assessments.</td>
<td>Setting up RPL, monitoring it and responding to problems are marked by a high degree of co-operation. Information sharing is common. Candidates experience a seamless registration process. Assessments by approved assessing agencies are accepted by regulators.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meaningfulness</td>
<td>The value that stakeholders place on assessments. Stakeholders include occupational bodies, relevant educational communities, employers, unions, governments and RPL candidates.</td>
<td>Tracking of stakeholder perceptions and their use of assessment results indicate positive responses. Candidate tracking shows high levels of uptake. Educators monitor the RPL process for implications for the curriculum. Monitoring by fairness regulators is positive.</td>
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<td>Reproducibility of decisions</td>
<td>The extent to which assessment decisions are accurate and constant over time and assessors. This criterion is close in meaning to the traditional criterion of &quot;reliability.&quot;</td>
<td>Competencies are the basis for assessment. Evidence is sufficient, current, at the appropriate depth and breadth, and confirmed as that of the candidate. Scoring occurs in a consistent way using the same criteria for all candidates. Conditions for all candidates are similar but if choice of assessment method or tool is made available, the choice is given to all candidates. Assessors and advisors receive RPL-specific training. Assessors engage in regular peer monitoring. Policies and procedures address quality assurance. RPL-specific policies and procedures establish guidelines for monitoring and evaluation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transparency</td>
<td>The clarity with which an assessment process is administered and relevant information is shared with stakeholders.</td>
<td>Competencies, scoring criteria, assessment process details, assessor qualifications, assessment decisions and appeal opportunities are shared through written information and advising services before, during and following assessments.</td>
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6. SUMMARY

In summary, competency conversation is a fledgling RPL method used in Australia and Canada that may offer some value to RPL in South Africa. It acknowledges a useful role for criteria that introduce design and delivery elements of assessment influenced by both behaviourism and constructivism.

To meet the challenge of ensuring quality in competency conversations, we can draw on contemporary learning theories on assessment, apply the principle of “fitness for purpose,” set clear standards, facilitate authentic expressions of knowledge and skills, provide supports for both assessors and candidates, and rely on the judgments of expert assessors. Quality criteria and indicators can be devised to design, develop and deliver credible occupational assessments that use competency conversations as part of the process.
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Section 4

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

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ABSTRACT

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.

1. BACKGROUND

The adoption and implementation of the Financial Advisory and Intermediary Services Act (FAIS), Act 37 of 2002, brought about a mind shift in the financial services industry regarding the importance of qualifications in the financial services industry. The FAIS Act prescribes that Financial Services Providers\(^8\) (FSPs) must be competent to provide financial services to clients. FSPs can be natural (sole proprietor FSPs) or legal persons. When the FSP is a legal person, it is represented by natural persons who fulfill specific roles in terms of the legislation\(^9\). These natural persons\(^10\) in the regulated environment need to meet competence\(^11\) requirements, which are further expanded on in the subordinate legislation, such as the Determination of Fit and Proper requirements for FSPs (Fit and Proper)\(^12\).

The role-players are found in various businesses and roles in the industry, ranging from the bank clerk to the agent of the insurance company, investment advisors, brokers and health care benefit advisors\(^13\). The competence requirements for the role-players within the financial services industry include qualifications for entry into the industry, and further /higher qualifications, which are

\(^8\) Section 8 of the FAIS Act
\(^9\) Benade et al Entrepeneurial law (special edition incorporating the new Companies Act manual) (2009) at 57
\(^10\) Sole proprietor FSPs, Key Individuals and representatives
\(^11\) Section 8 and 13 of the FAIS Act
\(^12\) First published as Board Notice 91 of 2003. The latest version was published in Board Notice 106 of 2008.
\(^13\) Hattingh et al The FAIS Act Explained (2010) at 1
appropriate to the financial services industry, within a specified period of time\textsuperscript{14}.

The FAIS Act was promulgated in 2002 and went into effect on 30 September 2004. Between 2002 and 2004 the financial services industry realised 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 ten 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 were in many instances over-optimistic, and that RPL is 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.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

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 will use RPL again in future.

The primary sample consisted of the two Sector Education and Training Sector Authorities (SETAs)\textsuperscript{15} active in the financial services industry, of whom two have been actively involved 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, which are 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

\textsuperscript{14} Section 5 of the Determination of Fit and Proper Requirements for Financial Services Providers, Board Notice 106 of 2008

\textsuperscript{15} Sector Education and Training Authorities
difficult to conduct the interview 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.

3. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY CONDUCTED WITH THE PRIMARY SAMPLE

3.1 Part 1: General queries about involvement with RPL

All respondents were requested to answer Part One of the questionnaire.

3.1.1 Respondents

Thirty-five institutions and individuals were contacted and asked for their participation. One SETA declined to respond due to their own research projects on similar topics. Two people declined to comment as they felt their involvement in RPL had been too limited to add information of significant value. Thirty-two respondents were willing to provide written feedback on an interview schedule.

The respondents represented the banking, insurance, wealth management, health services, securities and instruments and discretionary fund management environment. It should be noted that the numbers reported in terms of representation does not match the number of respondents, as some respondents function within companies that cut across more than one type of financial service environment.

3.1.2 Industry spread
Their affiliations ranged from internal training providers to compliance specialists. Most respondents represented training providers, then compliance, then professional bodies and industry associations, and one respondent represented a SETA.

### 3.1.3 Professional affiliations

![Professional Affiliations](image)

### 3.1.4 Specific involvement with RPL

Respondents were asked to describe their specific involvement with RPL in the financial services sector. The responses varied, but a common thread was that some institutions were involved in sourcing training providers who could provide RPL and learning interventions for their staff or clients, whilst other respondents were actually involved in the provision of RPL and learning interventions. Some of the responses highlight that the process was more complex than a mere provision of a learning intervention and support. Apart from the myriad complexities involved with the provision of learning interventions and RPL across a very diverse industry, providers were faced with the emotional reaction of the learner population. In industry there was a common understanding that the take-up of the learning interventions was a grudge purchase as learners did not willingly engage in the process. The only reason why learners and organisations engaged in this exercise was because they had to meet the requirements of Fit and Proper if they wanted to remain in the industry.

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16 Annexure A, pp 1-5
17 Fit and Proper, Board Notice 91 of 2003, Board Notice 91 of 2006, Board Notice 106 of 2008
Respondents were asked to indicate the number of learners for whom they managed or organize access to learning interventions using RPL:

3.1.5 Size of learner group

As can be seen from the responses, the majority (45%) of the respondents were involved with learner groups ranging between 101 and 1000, and this was closely followed by respondents dealing with groups larger than 1000. Some respondents dealt with smaller groups, but the majority dealt with large groups.

3.1.6 Qualification requirements of learners

It was clear that in the majority of instances (20) the needs were diverse, whereas one third (10) of the respondents indicated that they dealt with homogenous groups. Respondents indicated that the learning requirements varied from assisting people who did not have a matric certificate\(^{18}\) to learners who needed full qualifications or skills programmes at various levels.

This response reflects the diverse nature of the financial services industry, and the corresponding diversity of qualification requirements. The FAIS Act regulates advice and intermediary services rendered against defined financial products\(^{19}\). The qualification requirements differ according to the complexities of the financial products, ranging from Standard Eight (current Grade 10) as an entry level qualification requirement for persons rendering services against products sold under long-term Insurance Category A\(^{20}\) to a relevant Bachelor’s degree or equivalent qualification for persons

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\(^{18}\) School leaving qualification, set as an entry level qualification requirement for many product category specific requirements.

\(^{19}\) Act 37 of 2002, section 1

\(^{20}\) Predominantly funeral cover
appointed for the Discretionary\textsuperscript{21} environment.

The majority of respondents (17) indicated that they did not assist people who did not meet the entry level qualification requirements in the period 2002 to 2004\textsuperscript{22}.

Fourteen respondents indicated that they were required to assist people to meet the entry level qualification requirements during this period.

The responses were varied, indicating that numerous options were considered and used. One common thread referred to the Insurance Sector Education and Training Authority (INSETA); Insurance Institute of South Africa (IISA); University of South Africa (UNISA)\textsuperscript{23} once-off RPL examinations. These were widely used in the insurance industry. The respondents also indicated that they used various programmes to assist people to obtain the necessary skills programmes. The majority of providers and organisations focused on unit standards based qualifications, as they could break it down into skills programmes. One institution offered pure RPL programmes, but due to the high costs involved (R5 000 per programme) very few people used this option\textsuperscript{24}.

With reference to learners who entered the industry in 2008 and 2009 there was an interesting upwards trend in the requirements to assist people to obtain the relevant qualification. Twenty-seven respondents answered positively and five respondents answered negatively. This reflects the situation as understood in the industry, namely that more people met the entry level qualification requirements, but did not meet the requirement of an appropriate full qualification or skills programme.

The responses indicate that significant work was done on an individual (learner) level as well as at the organisational level. The context of the financial services industry must be recognised at all times, wherein there is a large number of sole proprietor FSPs and then a smaller number of large corporate, but they house large numbers of representatives\textsuperscript{25}. Planning was done at various levels, including compliance officers and external training providers who assisted both individuals and corporate clients, as well as internal training providers and compliance officers who conducted planning exercises for the organization, drilling down to individual level\textsuperscript{26}.

It is also useful to note that at corporate level more than one solution was used at the same time,
ranging from assisting people to complete qualifications they had already embarked upon, to offering skills programmes through both internal and external training providers, and using specific institutions to offer full qualifications.\(^{27}\)

### 3.1.7 The extent to which RPL was used to assist learners between 2004 and 2009

The responses indicate an interesting trend in the use of RPL to assist people to obtain the relevant qualification. The two groups, 2004 to 2007 and then 2008 to 2009, reflect the people who entered the FAIS environment initially (2004 to 2007) followed by the second group of entrants (2008 to 2009). The first group needed to meet the requirements of first Financial Services Board Notice 91 of 2003, and then the Financial Services Board Notice 91 of 2006. The second group needed to meet the requirements of Financial Services Board Notice 91 of 2006. Both these groups currently must meet the requirements as detailed in section 10 of Financial Services Board Notice 106 of 2008, and fall within the "transitional arrangement" requirements. They represent the only group of people who can choose to either obtain a skills programme that meets the requirements of content, level and credits as prescribed for the various financial product categories, or a relevant qualification. Various deadlines for obtaining this skills programme or qualification apply, therefore they are identified in terms of the period within which they entered the FAIS environment. As from 2010 all new entrants into the FAIS environment must obtain a relevant qualification, and they do not have the option to obtain a skills programme.\(^{28}\)

![Use of RPL](image)

### 1.1.8 RPL for 2004 to 2009

The responses were evenly divided between successful and not successful. The reasons cited for success included comments about the fact that it suited older candidates well, and that the language used was more accessible to second language learners. It also seems as if the scenarios and case

27 Annexure A, pp 8 - 11
28 BN 106 of 2010, section 10
studies used for RPL were more realistic and people could identify with them.

The reasons cited for not successful vary. One respondent indicated that the specific training provider\textsuperscript{29} selected could not support the learners in the process. Other comments highlight the fact that RPL requires a significant investment of time and energy on the part of the learner, and this was difficult to manage\textsuperscript{30}. This could relate back to earlier comments\textsuperscript{31} that indicate the emotional resistance of learners. It could be extrapolated that learners who already have an emotional resistance to the process could be uncooperative if the process itself is then cumbersome.

One respondent commented on the high cost of the process as an inhibiting factor, but this was contradicted by another response that indicated that it was cheaper than traditional training programmes.

Some of the corporate respondents indicated that they used RPL in a limited fashion, to lessen the impact of the work required for individuals. They arranged with academic institutions to recognise certain programmes already completed by the individuals against the specific qualification enrolled for.

A number of respondents indicated that plagiarism and copying of answers in portfolios of evidence was problematic. This required them to put in place checks and balances to ensure that they were receiving portfolios that could be attributed to one person only\textsuperscript{32}. Other responses refer to a lack of commitment on the part of the learner\textsuperscript{33}. Lack of support by the SETAs is also mentioned as a barrier to successful implementation. The issue of logistics and extra management work by the companies that employed the learners were also raised. This refers back to earlier comments about logistical impact\textsuperscript{34}.

The majority of respondents indicated that they would use RPL again, and many indicated that they were still using it. However, it must be noted that many respondents mentioned that it worked better for learners with more experience in the industry, and that it required good support structures. SETA requirements that made it difficult to implement, such as an insistence on formative assessments rather than an understanding of holistic assessment approaches were also cited as difficulties. An interesting point is that RPL works well for learners who dislike writing examinations. The time and effort required for RPL processes were raised more than once. The time and effort involved from a

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\textsuperscript{29} The name of the provider was given in the response, but was edited out, as it was felt that it could be incriminating to retain it in.

\textsuperscript{30} Annexure A, pp 11 - 13

\textsuperscript{31} See 3.2

\textsuperscript{32} Contraventions of this nature would not only have consequences in terms of the requirements of the institutions, SAQA and the SETAs, but would also lead to regulatory action in terms of the FAIS Act. Section 8 of FAIS and section 2 of Fit and Proper address the requirements of honesty and integrity, which is a tenet of the FAIS Act. People found guilty of plagiarism would contravene the requirements of honesty and integrity and can be "debarred" in terms of sections 14 and 14A of the FAIS act, prohibiting them from rendering financial services.

\textsuperscript{33} This relates back to comments made under 3.2 and 2.10

\textsuperscript{34} See 3.8
company to assist its learners, as well as the costs involved were cited as reasons why companies would not embark on a RPL process again.

### 3.1.9 Other issues raised

The logistical challenges are raised again as an important factor. Other factors highlighted include the requirement that there should be clear guidelines for how the RPL process works; good learner support; highly skilled and qualified assessors; and SETAs that understand RPL and support the process. It seems from some of the responses that training providers feel that SETAs do not understand RPL and insist on processes and requirements that do not support the SAQA guidelines on RPL.

### 4. PART 2: INVOLVEMENT WITH TRAINING PROVIDERS

Respondents were requested to answer questions in Part 2 only if they were directly involved with an internal or external training provider.

#### 4.1 Specific involvement with offering RPL

Two respondents indicated they did not offer RPL themselves, but engaged with other training providers and universities who did offer an RPL option. A number of respondents indicated that they experienced severe difficulties with the SETA to obtain approval to offer programmes via RPL, to the extent that one respondent indicated they did not try to obtain the approval anymore.

One respondent provided a detailed process for how they approach RPL, and gave very clear indications of what is required in the process.

A lack of assessors was cited as one of the reasons why RPL was not offered anymore. The nature of the learner population is also cited, where the learner population is young and does not have experience suitable to RPL activities. Other providers indicated that RPL is offered, but that a standardised summative assessment is used and not a Portfolio of Evidence (PoE), as this makes the process expensive. The administrative and logistical requirements were also cited as reasons why it was not offered anymore.

#### 4.2 How successful is RPL in South Africa?

The majority of respondents indicated that RPL was not as successful as it could be. The lack of SETA understanding was mentioned more than once as one of the reasons. Another reason was that learners were not sufficiently prepared or interested to participate fully. The structure of RPL and the processes required were cited as major reasons for less successful endeavours.
Several factors were mentioned as contributing to successful RPL processes. Again they listed good processes, a thorough understanding of RPL by the training provider, assessor and the SETA. Funding and access to it is important. Learner understanding and commitment is crucial. Access to assessors with specialist knowledge and expertise is important to successful RPL practices.

4.3 What are the main impediments to successful implementation of RPL?

Responses address a number of areas, relating to learners, providers, assessors and the SETAs. In relation to learners issues such as copying from one another, lack of commitment, lack of preparation and not understanding the process and work involved are listed. Issues relating to providers include unethical behaviour and unqualified providers\(^3\). The role of assessors is mentioned often, with issues ranging from lack of sufficient assessors; a lack of suitably qualified or experienced assessors; assessors who do not understand the process; and assessors who underestimate the requirements. The cumbersome processes are also mentioned a number of times.

A number of respondents are highly critical of the national processes and approach to RPL. The SETAs are mentioned again, highlighting the fact that SETA staff do not always understand the industry they serve, or RPL processes. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is also criticized for not providing sufficient guidance. One view was that the South African approach to RPL is based on international requirements and does not take the South African context sufficiently into account. Another view was that the RPL requirements for Higher Education is imposed on a further education and training (FET) environment. The cost of RPL processes is also cited as a major impediment.

The most important issues/ factors for the successful implementation of RPL:
Respondents were requested to provide five factors for successful implementation. Although the responses were varied, responses can be grouped as follows:

- Clear guidelines and uncomplicated RPL processes;
- Clear and sustainable assessment processes;
- Good candidate selection processes and buy-in from candidates;
- SETA support and understanding;
- Realistic pricing and access to funding;
- Access to good, skilled assessors;
- Learner support and guidance; and
- Good administration.

\(^3\) Reference to insufficient industry knowledge and expertise.
4.4 What differentiates the successful RPL candidate from the unsuccessful RPL candidate?

A number of responses were received, but one factor was mentioned often, namely the motivation of the learner. The learner who is committed is more likely to succeed. The learner who has a good support network at home and at work is also more successful. It is clear from the responses that learner support is critical, but the most important factors are inherent to the person. This includes self-esteem, drive, dedication and a willingness to learn and commit.

The final comments from the respondents mentioned access to assessors and good guidance for simple processes to follow. The cost of RPL was again mentioned.

5. RESULTS OF THE SURVEY CONDUCTED WITH PRIMARY SAMPLE

A survey was hosted on the Financial Services Board (FSB) website from September 2010 to 7 December 2010. A total of 190 people completed this survey.

5.1 Profile of the respondents

The majority of the respondents were individuals within the financial services industry in a regulatory role i.e. key individual, representative and sole proprietor with very limited participation from Human Resources and Training and Compliance Officers.

![Professional Role Chart]

The majority of participants fall into the 51 to 60 years of age range.

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36 www.fsb.co.za
37 Annexure B, pp 1
As the participants fall into the 51 to 60 years of age range it also makes sense that they had more industry experience, with the majority of the individuals having in excess of 10 years experience. The majority of participants were male.

5.2 Qualifications

The responses indicate that the majority of the participants entered into the financial services industry with only a matric certificate or an equivalent, but once in the industry they continued their studies to obtain an additional qualification(s). It is interesting to note that the majority of the participants made use of skills programmes to further their studies, which is an indication that the FAIS Act had a significant impact on the industry in terms of obtaining further qualifications post matric.  

38 One of the main objectives of the FAIS legislation is to professionalise the financial services industry, and part of this process is to require the industry to obtain further qualifications as part of the Fit and Proper requirements.
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<th>Highest qualification before you joined the industry</th>
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5.3 Home language

The responses indicated that the majority of participants were English and Afrikaans speaking.

5.4 Knowledge about RPL

The responses indicate that the majority of the participants heard about RPL in the industry (word of mouth) as well as from the FSB. The responses indicate that the sources of information that were
the least utilized were the SETA and the media. It is a concern that the relevant SETAs do not play a more prominent role in communicating information regarding RPL to the financial services sector, especially in view of the fact that the financial services industry had made use of RPL to a large extent and requires the support and guidance from the relevant SETAs.

Responses indicated that 51.5% of the participants made use of RPL to obtain a qualification or a skills programme, and 43.6% indicated that it was easy to understand the requirements to follow the RPL route. It is alarming that only 39% of the participants found it easy to obtain a training provider that offered RPL as a method to obtain a qualification. The relevant SETAs can play a much more prominent role in assisting the industry in identifying accredited and reputable training providers to assist with RPL.

The majority of the industry arranged RPL training themselves with only 11% of the training arranged by the SETA. Taking into consideration that a large proportion of the financial services industry consist of sole proprietors, it makes sense that they would make their own arrangements for training. This highlights the need for accurate and easily accessible information regarding RPL and training providers, and the important role that the SETA can play to support and assist the industry.

As a result of the FAIS legislation and the Fit and Proper requirements the FSB received many queries from individuals and organizations in the financial services industry regarding which providers to use to obtain further qualifications and what methods to use. The FSB do not promote any specific providers but provided as far as possible information regarding RPL.
The responses indicated that 46% of participants were able to choose the language in which they completed the RPL process, 36% were unable to choose the language and 18% did not know whether they could make a choice regarding the language of the RPL programme.

A total of 57% of the participants that were able to choose the language in which they completed the RPL programme were unable to choose the language of their choice, with 37% being able to choose English and 6% being able to choose Afrikaans.

The response to whether the RPL process took longer to complete than a normal training intervention resulted in varied responses with the majority of the participants being unsure whether RPL takes longer.

There is also an indication that participants did not enter into RPL programmes to obtain the entry level requirements to enter the financial services industry, but that they used the RPL programmes to obtain further qualifications. It is interesting to note that 46% of respondents did not obtain further qualifications only for the purposes of meeting the FAIS Fit and Proper requirements but for own
Support during the RPL process seem to be a problem as 34.2% of the respondents indicated that they did not receive support and guidance from the training provider concerned, and another 22.1% were unsure about the support they received.

65.7% of the respondents completed the RPL process successfully. Taking into consideration that most of the participants were between 51 and 60 years old with an excess of 10 years experience, it may indicate that RPL is a more successful process for more mature learners.

The responses indicate that various methods of assessment are used during the RPL process. A combination of assignments, portfolios of evidence and examinations is the most prominent method of assessment, with writing examinations and submitting assignments only (excluding PoE) being the second most popular method of assessment.
Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Financial Regulatory Environment

It is interesting to note that most participants made use of independent training providers to assist them with the RPL process (47.8%) which indicates that independent training providers require significant support from SETAs due to the important role they play in implementing RPL. A total of 33.7% of participants made use of industry associations and 18% made use of Universities.

The responses below indicate that an overwhelming 62% of participants paid for RPL themselves which indicates the importance of reasonable pricing for RPL. Only 1% received funding from the SETA which is evidence that more can be done to provide financial support to learners who are interested in using RPL as a method of furthering their studies.

The responses in the next two figures indicate that people did not necessarily enroll for RPL because of pricing of RPL services. The majority of participants did not know whether there is a price difference between standard learning programmes and RPL. The reason why they did not know the difference is
unclear. This may highlight the need for more transparent pricing options to ensure that learners are better informed about pricing and what they are paying for.

The response to whether participants will use RPL again was positive with the majority indicating below that they will use RPL again.
6. CONCLUSIONS

There are definite correlations between the responses from the two sample groups. Participants in the higher age groups tended to find the most benefit from RPL processes, as RPL recognises knowledge obtained through experience.

As indicated, there are language restrictions in terms of RPL. Although people could not exercise a wide range of choices regarding their language preference, the fact that RPL was mostly conducted in less "academic" language did make it more accessible for those who do not have an academic track record.

Support during the RPL process seems to be a problem. The primary sample emphasised that support for learners was crucial to the success of the RPL process, yet the feedback from individuals indicates that they received very limited support.

The responses also indicate that people did not necessarily enrol for RPL because of the pricing attached to it. The majority of participants did not know whether there is a price difference between standard learning programmes and RPL. This may highlight the need for more transparent pricing options to ensure that learners are better informed about pricing and what they are paying for. Access to funding or even knowledge about funding also seems to be limited; this may be an area for the SETAs to consider in the future.

According to the primary sample, RPL worked well for learners who dislike writing examinations. This is interesting because the methods of assessment used for RPL were predominantly exams i.e. the responses indicate that various methods of assessment are used during the RPL process. A combination of assignments, portfolios of evidence and examinations is the most common method of assessment (33%), with writing examinations and submitting assignments only (excluding POE) being the second most popular method of assessment (30%).
It is interesting to note that most participants made use of independent training providers to assist them with the RPL process (47.8%) which indicates that independent training providers require significant support from SETAs due to the important role they play in implementing RPL. If one looks at the feedback from the primary sample it is clear that training providers (both internal and external) feel frustrated with the SETA processes, and actually experience that the SETAs make it hard for them to provide services such as RPL. Similar sentiments of frustration were expressed about SAQA and Higher Education in particular. This could be a definite area for the SETAs, SAQA and other role-players such as the Departments of Education to address.

The results of the research are thus that RPL was used and is still being used within the financial services industry for the purpose of meeting the FAIS requirements. The use of RPL provided mixed results — in some instances it worked well, and in others it did not. 55% of respondents will use RPL again, which is more positive than negative; however, there are a number of areas that need further work for this to be sustainable.
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Section 5

Towards developing Recognition of Prior Learning systems
Towards a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) system in South Africa: Lessons from other RPL systems

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ABSTRACT

First, it is argued that recognition of learning is usually of a cross-institutional and/or cross-border nature. As regards recognition of individual qualifications, learning experiences (for example, degrees, diplomas, or periods of study) are validated by the relevant body with a view to facilitating the access of holders of these items to educational and/or employment activities. Two kinds of recognition, that for academic and that for professional purposes, are distinguished.

Second, it is argued that Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) concerns formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experiences. This aspect of RPL is discussed within a broad global framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

I will speak about Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the context of Higher Education (HE) with the acknowledgement that although HE is an important pathway towards employability, admission and access to HE is not yet fully equitable for all.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) fully supports the opening of access into HE to all based on merit. RPL is a means to this end. In addition, it is argued that RPL has the potential to serve as a bridge between academic traditions and the need for graduates to be employable outside academia. RPL can also promote a positive learning culture. By redressing the privileging of certain forms of knowledge, RPL can be said to encourage a culture in which learning is seen as an attainable and positive goal for every individual (City and Guilds Centre for Skills Development in Australia 2010).

2. CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS COMMON UNDERSTANDINGS OF RPL

While there is still no exact definition of RPL – sometimes even within a single country – I agree that while the concept may not have a common definition, a common approach or procedure is both possible and important: "Without some form of coordination or organisation to enable individuals to agree upon, monitor, and sanction contributions to the provision of a [collective] good, the good is underprovided" (Ostrom and Walker 1997:39).
In this spirit, I would like to contribute to the list the following definitions of Recognition, Academic Recognition and RPL from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO):

3. RECOGNITION

UNESCO’s Conventions on the Recognition of Qualifications refers to acknowledgement of (i) individual academic or professional qualifications; (ii) programmes of a HE institution (HEI); and/or (iii) quality assurance agencies, by a competent recognition authority that acknowledges certain standards and/or values with respect to special purposes that indicate the consequences of recognition.

Recognition is usually of a cross-institutional and/or cross-border nature. As regards recognition of individual qualifications, learning experiences (such as, degrees, diplomas, or periods of study) are validated by the relevant body with a view to facilitating the access of holders to educational and/or employment activities. Here, at least two kinds of recognition, those for academic and those for professional purposes, should be distinguished. Programme recognition generally refers to the recognition of a specific programme of study of one HEI by another. It functions on the basis of a peer-acknowledgement procedure and is meant to allow a student to engage in continued study at the latter institution or to exempt him or her from re-studying subjects and materials which are not significantly different in different HE institutions. With regard to institutions, recognition refers to the acknowledgement of quality assurance agencies or accrediting organisations, deemed to be trustworthy, efficient, and accountable institutions of quality assurance, following particular recognition standards set by the competent (often foreign) recognition authorities (UNESCO 1979).

1.1 Academic recognition

Academic recognition involves approval of courses, qualifications, or diplomas from one (domestic or foreign) HE institution by another for the purpose of student admission to further studies. Academic recognition can also be sought for an academic career at a second institution and in some cases for access to other employment activities on the labour market (academic recognition for professional purposes).

Regarding the European HE Area, three main levels of recognition are considered: as each has instruments attached to it (as suggested by the Lisbon Convention⁴⁰ and the Bologna Declaration⁴¹): (i) recognition of qualifications, including prior learning and professional experience, allowing entry or re-entry into HE; (ii) recognition of short study periods in relation to student mobility, having as the

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⁴⁰ The Lisbon Convention aims to facilitate recognition of qualifications amongst participating universities in Europe

⁴¹ The Bologna Declaration is a pledge by 29 countries to reform the structures of their higher education systems in a convergent way
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main instrument the ECTS European Credit Transfer System (ECTS); (iii) recognition of full degrees, having as the main instrument the Diploma Supplement.42

1.2 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Recognition of Prior Learning involves formal acknowledgement of skills, knowledge, and competencies that are gained through work experience, informal training, and life experiences.

I will begin with a global overview in order to frame examples of practice I have noted. It is in the global context that key drivers of RPL can be identified, namely:

- High demand for qualifications and acknowledgement of acquired skills is a result of the massification of HE;
- HE as one of the primary pathways to employability; and
- Public interest in opening access to HE as a means of improved national well-being.

The Recommendation on the Recognition of Studies and Qualifications in Higher Education, approved by the 27th General Conference of UNESCO (1993: 132), defines HE as including "all types of studies, training or training for research at the post-secondary level, provided by universities or other educational establishments that are approved as institutions of HE by competent State authorities."
The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2009, article 26, par. 1) states that HE shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit (UNESCO 2009).

The UNESCO (2001, 34) Revised Recommendation Convening Technical and Vocational Education states:

"Broad provision should be made for allowing everyone, whatever their prior qualifications, to continue both their professional and general education by facilitating seamless pathways for learners through articulation, accreditation and recognition of all prior learning and relevant work experience."

Although RPL is most often discussed with regard to vocational post-secondary education and in terms of recognition of skills, the expansion of expectations of HE around the world means that RPL is an issue throughout the post-secondary education sector. Furthermore, if we were to refer to RPL solely in the context of vocational education, there would remain room for speculation as to whether RPL should or could apply to academic HE, to prevent closing the door on RPL as a means to redress past inequities in access to HE.

42 The Diploma Supplement accompanies a higher education diploma, providing a standardised description of the nature, level, context, content and status of the studies completed by its holder (developed by the European Commission, the Council of Europe and UNESCO)
4. GLOBAL CONTEXT FOR RPL

The Communiqué published as of the 2009 UNESCO World Conference on HE (WCHE) states that "at no time in history has it been more important to invest in HE as a major force in building an inclusive and diverse knowledge society and to advance research, innovation and creativity" (UNESCO 2009: 2). In spite of this view, particularly following the economic crisis in 2008, HE is facing austere times all over the world. Institutions must accommodate more students and meet more expectations with fewer resources. RPL counts among these many and varied expectations of HE.

1.1 Rapid growth in enrolment: massification

The massification of HE has been described as the academic 'revolution' of the 21st century (Altbach, Reisberg and Rumbley 2009). Today's rising demand for HE exceeds by far the projections made at the 1998 UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education. In terms of student numbers, there are more than 150 million students enrolled in HE worldwide. China currently has 27 million students, more than any other nation; the United States has 18 million students; and there are around 15 million in India (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2010: 164).

Globally, enrolments have increased fivefold in less than 40 years. HE participation rates in the world as a whole have grown from 19% in 2000 to 26% in 2007 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2010). It is now predicted that the global demand for HE will expand from 97 million students in 2000 to 262 million students in 2025 (Bjarnason et al 2009). Meanwhile, although enrolment in Africa as a whole has risen at a faster rate than elsewhere (by some 66% since 1999), Sub-Saharan Africa (at 5.6%) still has the lowest participation rate in the world. The enrolment figures for South Africa followed a slightly different trend by declining until 2000 but have been increasing steadily since then (Council on Higher Education: 42). With an enrolment rate of above 16%, South Africa is classified among the 'massified' HE systems. In terms of access, HE systems enrolling less than 15 percent of an age cohort are considered 'elite' Systems that accommodate between 16 and 50 percent are 'massified' and systems engaging more than 50 percent of the age cohort are considered 'universal' (Trow 2006: 278).

Massification of HE is closely connected with the phenomenon of globalisation and the global economy: as countries and individuals recognise the need for well-educated workers and particularly as work places and required skill sets shift with shifts in the economy, education is understood as the primary pathway toward success in both national and personal. Research has shown that people who achieve HE degrees earn more money over their lifetimes than people without degrees. People with degrees are considered more employable in increasingly multicultural and complex economies. Furthermore, HE can serve as a 'passport' from lower social classes to higher.

There is a direct correlation between HE enrolment rates and overall national prosperity. The
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Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) argues that the participation of between 40% and 50% of young people in HE is a necessary basis for economic growth. While the United States of America (USA) has an 83% enrolment rate in HE (including enrolments at community colleges) and most wealthy and middle-income countries have enrolment rates of 30 percent or higher, the rate in low income countries where percentages at around 5% in 2000 rose to only 7% in 2008, show great differences in economic development potential (OECD: 102). The study (OECD 2010) also showed large demand for HE in low income countries. The analysis applies to South Africa as well, with the acknowledgment that large segments of the population either continue to be excluded from access to HE or often fail to succeed there if they do enrol.

Following the flood of students internationally, the landscape of HE has been dramatically altered. There have been major implications for HE and for society due to the sheer numbers of students as well as the increased diversity among these learners.

HE governance, management and the academic professoriate work under different pressures and circumstances in a massified system as a result of internationalisation, increased privatisation and new delivery methods, and in light of lifelong learning and RPL. Governance is the core aspect in the way institutions relate to their environments, their role in democratic society, and as essential resources for the global knowledge economy. Governance mediates the expanding relationships between the ‘internal’ and the ‘external’ dimensions of HE, including relationships between HE, business and industry. Institutional policy and daily management shape and re-shape the values to which an institution adheres or that it chooses to embrace. In the university sector, governance in its contemporary understanding is synonymous with a re-orientation away from an inward-looking perspective of a self-contained autonomous system to emphasise the embeddedness of HE (Fried 2005).

In massified HE systems, a balanced approach to institutional governance is needed: bureaucratic procedures to cope with the high influx of students, and good leadership or collegial decision-making that encourages academic staff to implement strategies designed for the good of the institutional whole (Shattock 2002).

1.2 Focus on quality

Assuring quality is a key challenge in light of the rapid growth of HE. Fortunately, the quality of HE usually declines as student numbers increase according to the inevitable logic of massification: students in massified systems of HE tend to receive less attention, fewer contact hours with faculty, and less mentoring and learning support.

Quality assurance in HE is an all-embracing term referring to an ongoing, continuous process of evaluating, assessing, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving the quality of HE.
systems, institutions or programmes. When access is expanded, HE must simultaneously pursue the
goals of equity, relevance and quality, as well as keeping costs at manageable levels in line with the
iron triangle of quality, access and cost (Daniel et al. 2009). Unprecedented demand for HE
necessitates greater cooperation among all parties to ensure that increases and diversification of
provision correspond with sustained or ideally improved, quality.

Quality assurance is now an undisputed priority at national, regional and global levels. At the 2009
UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, the Indian Minister of Human Resource
Development expressed his approach to quality assurance as all-encompassing:

"Quality Assurance Systems should encourage effective learning processes which are adapted to the
needs of various categories of learners. The systems should encompass not merely conventional
programmes in HE but also the borderless, private and continuing education" (Kapil Sibal 2009: 3-4).

The issue of quality is of particular importance in the context of massification with regard to equity of
provision across social and economic divides.

1.3 Promoting equal access to HE

The 2007 figures for South Africa indicate improvement in expanding HE to previously disadvantaged
populations; however, inequalities of outcome evidently persist, even if exact figures are difficult to
calculate (Council on Higher Education 2009).

Studies show that across the world, students from lower socio-economic classes, non-urban or
minority backgrounds who gain access to HE drop out in higher numbers than do their more
advantaged peers. Many of these students achieve access to HE but do not succeed there and thus
neither benefit from a HE degree nor give benefits back to society as intended. In the massified HE
sector, the mutual benefits to society and individuals can only be realised when not only access but
also success of all students is ensured.

5. RELEVANCE OF ACADEMIC HIGHER EDUCATION (HE)

The relevance of programmes and the employability of graduates are becoming ever more
challenging, particularly for traditional universities. Although HE has become the accepted route to
obtain the stamp of approval to qualify for high-level professions and positions of leadership, in many
contexts, the academic track continues to take precedence over vocational HE as a pathway toward
employment outside the university. Lacking consistent communication with their own graduates or
with employers in the local and global labour markets, the creators of curricula and shapers of
learning within universities do not necessarily take into account the goals and needs of professional
employability. As the main portal to professional employment, HE programmes and courses must
keep connected with the evolving requirements for skills and competencies in the workplace of a
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knowledge society. Indeed, employability ties together the areas of curricula and degree reform, institutional culture of quality, relevance, and social responsibility, while it also relies on the academic knowledge base, which is the backbone of traditional university studies. As RPL becomes a more accepted route to access HE, one positive outcome could be greater clarity around the practices and results of HE of every kind.

UNESCO places high priority on the connections between HE and society, specifically the employability of graduates. The advent of mass HE during the past decade has opened up opportunities for more people than ever before to benefit from post-secondary learning in order to contribute meaningfully to knowledge societies around the world.

6. LESSONS LEARNED FROM A VARIETY OF NATIONAL CONTEXTS

The following overview is based mainly on activities of the recently-formed Recognition of Prior Learning Network, established under the Bologna Follow-Up Group in September 2010. One of the founding purposes of the RPL Network is to build trust between countries and institutions by sharing information on RPL and quality assurance. Together with the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland, the RPL Network conducted a survey project on RPL throughout the 47 countries of Bologna Europe. The two organisations have published nearly 30 case studies on the Internet, which are available to the public at: www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/DEG/RPLcasestudies.asp

I have identified some general common practices across the case studies, in terms of how RPL is conducted in different national or institutional contexts. Naturally, the selection of RPL procedures and practices and how they are implemented are influenced by the scope, purpose and target group for a specific mode of RPL and whether the RPL is subject- or discipline-specific, conducted in vocational or academic contexts or whether it is department-specific or institution-wide, introduced at institutional level or propelled by national policy. That said, there is value in discussing specific practices in light of how they may inform or be adapted within particular countries.

7. COMMUNICATION

- Australia: over-hasty introduction of RPL was identified as part of the reason so few have applied for it. They did not take adequate time to explain to all parties the purpose, foundations, and value of the practice;
- Belgium: found it difficult to match expectations of the learners with the outcomes of an RPL procedure;
- France: information is delivered by HEIs and by information and guidance centres for validation of prior experience. After 7 years, the French are seeing a stagnation in the number of RPL

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43 The Bologna Process involves agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications across participating countries.
validations per year; they are planning a study to learn the causes; and

- Latvia: found it essential to provide all stakeholders involved with a clear explanation of the requirements for a qualification awarded on the basis of RPL.

Taking time to lay the groundwork for public awareness and understanding is important. Members of the government, quality assurance bodies, HE institutions, and also traditionally matriculated students need to understand what RPL is, when it is applicable and how it is assessed. Much of the resistance against RPL seems to arise from a misunderstanding of what it is and how it is regulated. Members of HEIs and mainstream students may find the concept unfair if they do not understand the standards that have been set and the measures in place to ensure that standards are maintained.

8. REMOVING BARRIERS TO RPL JARGON

Jargon or specialist-specific language is a danger in every field, not only for RPL. Yet since RPL in particular in South Africa and elsewhere needs to be understood and attract people from all ways of life, it is particularly important to develop user-friendly language for every aspect of the RPL strategy. This does not mean ‘talking down to’ or patronising anyone; it is a matter of remembering, as specialists, that not everyone lives, eats, and breathes RPL. Members of government, professors, students and potential RPL applicants all need to be able to pick up the concepts, requirements and specificities of RPL and be able to put them into their own words, explain them to people around them and feel that they own their understanding of RPL, its purposes and potential.

9. RPL TIED TO LEARNING OUTCOMES

RPL tied to learning outcomes relates to quality assurance as well as institutional conditions that allow RPL to take place. The following are examples:

- Luxembourg: assessors write a report on all competencies of the bachelor degree programme with which to assess applications. All qualifications of a bachelor degree programme are formulated in competences/learning outcomes as the standard used in RPL procedures;

- Scotland: Edinburgh Napier University ties RPL to learning outcomes for specific course credits. The disadvantage is: narrow focus that keeps some students out; and

- Scotland: University of West of Scotland ties RPL only to learning outcomes identified for the full degree, not to specific courses or modules, which are considered too restrictive. The disadvantage is that students who demonstrate competencies might miss out on information or knowledge specific to certain courses or elements of the degree programme.
10. RPL APPLICATION PROCESS: ELEMENTS FOR ASSESSMENT

RPL applicants are usually required to submit an application form, one or more written statements and a portfolio of supporting evidence and often undergo personal interviews and give oral presentations on their written submissions. Many countries are turning to technology to standardise the process as well as making it available to as many people as possible. The advantages in a technology-based approach lie in its efficiency - in cutting down on administrative and staff time and general accessibility. However, this approach presupposes that applicants have access to the Internet and that they use it as a tool for personal and educational development. Technology does not necessarily open access for all groups of people.

1.1 Support for applicants

Several countries provide individualised support to each applicant from the application form through to the end of the process (Canada, France, Scotland). This approach seems to resolve the problem of mismatch between expectations and reality; it helps applicants learn the language of the institution in order to explain their personal learning in ways that can be assessed for recognition. Individualised support is also time-consuming and costly. It requires a real commitment, not only on the part of the institutions but particularly from the RPL advisors.

1.2 Assessment of applicants

Professional standardised and substantiated assessment of RPL applicants’ work demonstrates that RPL has clear standards and does not reduce the quality of the qualifications awarded to graduates via RPL. Confidence in the process is bolstered when there is a fair and open appeal process available to applicants (as is the case in Norway, Ireland, and Scotland).

11. INSTITUTIONAL RPL UNIT

A central RPL unit within an institution gives centrality of purpose, expertise and information on RPL.

1.1 Luxembourg

The central RPL unit is often the first point of contact for applicants; it functions as a marketing tool to get employers and professional workers interested in HE. The RPL unit addresses questions of organisations and individuals, develops expertise and quality on RPL assessments, develops RPL tools and procedures in co-operation with educational departments of the institution, plans and organises RPL assessments and provides quality assurance including accreditation of RPL providers’ gains and disseminates further expertise on RPL, and supports Lifelong Learning policy. All RPL tools are available online, which enables the institution to gather statistics on applicants, such as their motivation for enrolling or withdrawing.
1.2 Scotland

At the University of West of Scotland, an RPL co-ordinator provides guidance to staff on the institution’s approved procedures for accreditation of prior learning. Written guidelines are also provided for staff and students.

12. QUALITY ASSURANCE

Quality Assurance (QA) directly supports open communication about the standards, values and contributions of RPL in any education system. One of the reasons for resistance to RPL stems from the dominance of the education system as the primary source of knowledge and knowledge acquisition. In addition, the fact that in several countries, students who enter HE programmes via RPL have difficulties to succeed in the institutional environment, lends credence to the belief that informal and non-formal learning is of a lower standard than formal learning. QA is the passkey for RPL to become an accepted access route to HE. In this vein, QA agencies should incorporate references to RPL procedures and processes in their guidelines, procedures and regulations.

13. RPL ASSESSOR TRAINING PROGRAMME

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands introduced a programme to enhance assessor professionalism and development. The programme has a strict structure and high standards, which are often difficult for aspiring assessors to meet. After 3 years, it is clear that those who meet the standards are highly competent as RPL assessors. More than 130 assessors have been trained via this programme. The institution provides support and training to others in the Netherlands. Members also give presentations and give recommendations based on their experience to other assessor certification programmes being set up in the Netherlands, perform training programmes for assessors and conduct a train-the-trainer programme for assessor trainers.

“The health of the HE sector is the surest sign of a society on the move. É HE leads countries to higher things. (Kamalesh Sharma 2010)

At the UNESCO World Conference on HE in 2009, it was stated â€œAt no time in history has it been more important to invest in HE as a major contributing force in the eradication of poverty, in sustainable development and in progress towards reaching ... the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All. (UNESCO 2009)

Education is a long-term investment; there is an inevitable time lag between changes made at political or institutional levels and the impact of those changes on individuals and society. This makes it imperative to make the investment sooner rather than later. The way we educate and the people we educate and, equally important, the people we fail to educate shape our society, the society of our children and of their children.
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Understandings and drivers of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Lessons from research internationally and...
in South Africa.

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ABSTRACT

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 the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC) 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 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 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 is 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 synthesize 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.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the above topic is addressed from the perspective of research that has been conducted. Although both authors are researchers of RPL in South Africa, this submission represents the Prior Learning International Research Centre (PLIRC) which has brought together researchers from eight different countries: Australia, Canada, England, France, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden and the United States. PLIRC is a small group at the moment and will probably stay that way in the short-term, although membership will be expanded by adding individuals who are lead researchers in other countries and by linking into other relevant research networks.

PLIRC has recently published a book on RPL research internationally. The book is called Researching the Recognition of Prior Learning is published by the National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) in the United Kingdom (Harris, Breier and Wihak, 2011) and follows an earlier book Re-theorizing the Recognition of Prior Learning (Andersson and Harris 2006). Each chapter in the new book offers a review of the research issues arising in each country. The authors were very rigorous, reviewing considerable amounts of research, over a hundred items in some cases.

This report has two sections: the first presents an overview of themes and lessons from the international research studies; the second discusses drivers, understandings and lessons from the South African chapter and locates RPL in South Africa in relation to practices elsewhere in the world.

2. OVERVIEW OF THEMES AND LESSONS FROM THE INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH STUDIES

Before beginning, it is necessary to point out that terminology and definitions are very unstable both within and between contexts - differing and shifting terms for assessment and/or the recognition of prior learning and different conceptions of what these mean, make international comparisons challenging. E.g. in the European Union (EU) policy world, there is a shift from the term ‘recognition’ to ‘validation’. In Scotland, there has been a move from ‘accreditation’ to ‘recognition’. In Australia there is a shift from ‘RPL’ to ‘credit’. Almost every chapter in the new publication uses a different acronym and even where the same term is used; the meanings attributed to it can differ. With this in mind, the following themes emerged:

2.1 Governments are embracing RPL as part of lifelong learning policy and national qualifications frameworks
What we see - especially in the chapters covering research in the OECD and EU countries - is extensive documented evidence that governments are embracing RPL as part of public policy, particularly with respect to lifelong learning, qualification frameworks, credit systems and the development of learning outcomes. This means that more sets of national principles and guidelines are available.

### 2.2 Redress to efficiency

In the process of being formalized in the above way, there is a noticeable shift in understandings: from RPL as a means to redress social inequalities to RPL in relation to economic efficiency, workforce development, labour mobility and the recognition of overseas qualifications. In short, more sharply articulated economic and demographic understandings and agendas for RPL.

This is particularly apparent in Scotland with RPL in the public employment sector and in Australia where there is an extensive project for the Australian Rail Industry called the Skills Recognition Framework. Canada is a country that is explicit about the need to grow its labour force through immigration, and RPL is seen as a way of supporting the portability of skills and knowledge. Other countries are using RPL with refugee populations (particularly in Europe).

### 2.3 Take-up is low

It is also the case that on the ground practice lags behind policy. Most countries report disappointingly low take-up of RPL, despite national systems, policy commitments and funding, and despite in quite a number of contexts - compulsory requirements that RPL be offered; e.g. it has to be on offer in France and in relation to qualifications and programmes registered on the Australian Qualifications Framework. This theme points to lacuna between policy and practice: RPL is far easier in policy than practice and South African is no exception in this regard.

### 2.4 Little uniformity in where RPL is offered within education and training systems

In some countries RPL is developing in relation to senior secondary qualifications; in others it is embedded in careers guidance services. In Sweden most RPL is in Further Education and Training, whereas North American countries have made most inroads in terms of RPL in Higher Education. Australia and some EU countries have seen some interesting developments in RPL in employment sectors in particularly in the Rail Industry. In summary, different understandings and different emphases characterize different places.

### 2.5 Some Higher Education institutions are more receptive to RPL than others
It is still the case that some Higher Education institutions are more receptive to RPL than others e.g. the newer ‘post-1992’ institutions in England and Scotland and the adult-friendly institutions in the US. Professional education in nursing and social work takes the lead in many contexts. The difficulties in implementing RPL in Higher Education have by no means been overcome internationally and we need to continue to develop intellectual resources to engage with the problems. South African research is leading the field in this regard, especially in debates around knowledge and RPL.

2.6 Increasing differentiation in types of RPL practice

There is increasing differentiation in types of RPL practice, most noticeably in Scotland where practical, development-focused research has led to a differentiation between formative RPL and summative RPL. Formative RPL is used in relation to hard-to-reach candidates enabling people to go through an exploratory process focusing on them and not on credit at least as a first stage. It has to be noted that Scotland has undergone an RPL renaissance as they have moved away the “remembered pain” of cumbersome portfolios to more streamlined approaches. There may be lessons for South Africa there especially for RPL candidates needing substantial time and support and who are not clear about their skill levels and future directions. Conversely, in Australia, RPL policy is moving practice towards summative, credit-focused processes and away from formative developmental provision.

Further differentiation is taking place in terms of course-based RPL and more generic approaches. The former tends to require some form of matching of prior learning against the specified content of modules and learning outcomes; the latter adopts broader notions of equivalence whereby prior learning and adults’ intellectual capacities are assessed against generic competencies or level descriptors, leading to the award of ‘general’ rather than ‘specific’ credit. Canada and the US provide exemplars of assessment against generic competencies. Assessing against generic competencies makes it possible to recognize valuable knowledge that is not taught in a formal way. But this then raises the question of how much of a qualification should be generic and ‘context independent’

Several chapters in the new book cite a shift away from ‘front-end’ post-enrolment RPL to procedures that take place further into an educational programme, allowing learners and facilitators more time to gauge their prior learning in relation to formal content. The South Africa, Sweden and Australia chapters report such practices and suggest that they are potentially more successful and effective than ‘traditional’ RPL.

2.7 Growing concern about quality assurance, reliability and validity, training of RPL assessors and facilitators

Finally, a cluster of concerns: the chapters in the new book report growing interest in quality assurance and in the validity and reliability of RPL assessment. These concerns are felt as far apart as Sweden, South Africa and Canada. Some of the early, and very valuable research into the validity
and reliability of RPL was undertaken in the USA, enshrined as ‘principles’ and subsequently used as a basis for ‘showcasing’ best practices. This research is hard to locate 35 years later, pointing to a real danger of losing sight of our existing evidence bases and islands of good practice.

Professional quality education and training programmes for RPL assessors and facilitators are being developed. These vary in size and scope. Some take an academic character; others orientate to occupational and national standards; some are one-off, in-house, skills-based programmes, and others aim to embed RPL modules into initial teacher training and continuing education for lifelong learning educators of various kinds.

2.8 The state of RPL research internationally

RPL researchers and scholars are few and far between. This was noted by all of the chapter authors. Undoubtedly, South Africa provides the international research community with quality theoretical and critical research, undertaken alongside policy implementation. This is partly because imported models of RPL have not worked well or straightforwardly here.

Although there is a fair amount of research internationally, the field could be termed fragmented. Importantly, research tends not to be cumulative. It does not build on what has gone before. This is something that really needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

We noted many small-scale qualitative studies e.g. case studies and evaluations of projects. Although the OECD and countries such as the US, Canada and Australia have conducted large-scale quantitative studies and some longitudinal research, much of it is descriptive rather than exploratory or predictive. Again, there is room for development here and a broadening of the type of research methodologies and methods that are used to learn more about RPL.

Finally, most of the research is undertaken by educationists — from social science backgrounds — but specialist RPL literatures and specialist understandings and interpretations of RPL are also developing e.g. RPL in health, particularly nursing, and RPL in different disciplines (reflecting the contours and practices of the discipline concerned). A growing number of RPL articles is appearing in professional journals — including Engineering and Management Studies. All of these — including RPL research based on economic and labour market theory — need to be brought together as an international resource. This matter is on PLIRC’s agenda.

In concluding this section, it is clear that there are documented and evidenced islands of good practice that bridges can be built from, but there is little evidence to date that national systems are fully operational. It is clear that RPL in South Africa has a lot in common with RPL in other countries, but it is also clear that the RPL field can continue to learn a lot from South Africa, where many of the complexities of RPL stand in stark relief. Finally, we reiterate the importance of a networked research
base so that together we can embed a research dimension in all of our practices.

3. **RPL IN SOUTH AFRICA**

3.1 **Origins**

RPL in South Africa, as a practice bearing that name, came about in the early 1990s as a result of a combination of global and local forces. Internationally there was movement towards outcomes-based, modularized education, lifelong learning needs and discourses, marketisation of Higher Education and national qualification frameworks. All of these were influences.

In South Africa, the democratic movement wanted to sweep clean the education policies of apartheid and provide meaningful alternatives. The trade unions and the African National Congress (ANC) demanded redress in education and the workplace, integration of education and training and opportunities for vertical and horizontal mobility. Business (in particular the Training Boards) wanted greater efficiency and a better trained workforce, at the least possible cost.

RPL appeared to fit the bill, even though unions and business had different motivations. RPL became a hybrid space in which the complexities of the education and training system could be temporarily forgotten, and worker and employer (if not educator) would be united by a single transformative vision.

3.2 **Understandings of RPL in South Africa**

Understandings of RPL in South Africa have undergone considerable change since its inception. In 1995, in the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act (Act No 58 of 1995), RPL became one of the 13 key principles of the NQF, associated particularly with objectives related to redress and personal and social development.

Since then conceptualisations of RPL have shifted from fairly narrow focus on unit standards or specific outcomes to a more holistic visions of RPL, as in the SAQA policy document on RPL (2002) which argues for a form of RPL that prevents assessment from becoming a purely technical application and looks for intrinsic rather than extrinsic value of someone’s learning within a particular context and the ways in which some forms of knowledge are privileged.

The shifts in understandings and emphases reflect the journey which RPL has taken and the tensions between the liberatory rhetoric of the unions and the practical realities of implementation. In the remainder of this paper we look at that journey and beyond it through the lens of research conducted and draw out lessons that should be taken into account when designing a national system.
3.3 Lessons

3.3.1. RPL implemented is not necessarily the same as RPL conceptualised

The research that first made this very clear was a participatory Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) project in which researchers monitored and analyzed the results of an initiative in 1993 in the automotive industry. Here employers and the National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) agreed on a form of RPL in which workers would be assessed against unit standards through an oral examination and on the job observation (Lugg, Mabitla, Louw and Angelis 1998). Less than 10 per cent were re-graded upwards, although none were downgraded. The second initiative involved the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM). More than 7 000 workers were assessed for basic language and mathematical skills against Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) standards. The results, where obtainable, were dismal, with very few workers receiving certificates:

é very few workers were regraded, received any pay increases or had an opportunity for training as a result of being RPL’d. (ibid)

Around the same time Cooper (1998) located RPL within a shift in trade union education from transformative to human capital discourses and said it had the potential to divide rather than unite workers.

3.3.2. The extent of educational disadvantage under apartheid and its ongoing legacy should not be underestimated. We also need to take the issue of language more seriously

There have been a number of studies that have shown that RPL processes assume i often without realizing it - a basic level of formal education. This is not surprising since most of the initial RPL how-to-do-it literature came from the USA (particularly CAEL i the Council for Adult Experiential Learning)) and the UK where such levels of education could be fairly safely presumed, given the state of their schooling systems. RPL barriers in those countries tend to relate to language issues, associated with immigration. In South Africa, language is also a huge issue i given that most RPL processes are in English which is second or third language to the majority. But we also have the issue that many of the adults most deserving of RPL have had very limited or poor quality formal education. Despite education reforms, this situation persists.

The issues are particularly stark in Higher Education, but also prevalent in workplace RPL. In her Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) dissertation on an RPL initiative in the SA insurance sector, Deller (2007) presents a model for RPL implementation in which one of the first steps is a self-assessment by the candidate as to whether he or she has sufficient knowledge and skills to proceed with RPL. The implementer then judges whether the individual has achieved sufficiently in the self-assessment to continue with RPL. If not he/she will be counseled accordingly and offered alternatives which will
most likely involve training to achieve the skills (2007).

A sample questionnaire on the website of Deller’s RPL company gives 10 points for formal education, 5 for learning in a non-formal training institution, 5 for work-place classroom training and no points if you have none of these (by implication, no points for informal learning). Higher points are given for work experience than life experience (e.g. hobbies, clubs, and family) of similar duration (5 or more years). Particularly high (30) points are given for ETQA/SAQA-approved courses with syllabuses, compared with non-approved courses. High points are awarded for a Standard 10 Certificate with Maths and English plus a statement from the employer.

If you score below 30: consider your options carefully – RPL may not be right for you. The implication is that only people perceived as RPL-ready should apply for RPL and to be RPL-ready one must have already benefited from formal education or work experience. This might be practically necessary, and is an international practice, but what are the implications for the transformatory principles thought to be associated with RPL in South Africa?

3.3.3. There is an RPL conundrum in upgrading programmes: how do you ‘recognize’ (accredit) learning that you also want to change? The answer is: you can’t

This became very clear in the RPL initiative associated with the implementation of the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) which was designed to upgrade the qualifications of 40 000 or so teachers. It was mainly a bureaucratic exercise, designed to address salary distinctions between two pay classes even though the teachers often taught at the same level. There was some RPL rhetoric associated with the process and consequently the academics responsible for implementation tried to offer a semblance of RPL. In the process they realised there was much for the teachers to learn and little they could ‘recognize’ in a context of very large numbers of candidates, no budget for classroom visits, and so on. As a result, the academics concerned tended to locate RPL relatively late in the programme, so the student-teacher could learn about academic expectations before considering their own prior experience and learning in relation to those expectations. This is similar to the model of RPL in SAQA RPL policy document of 2002.

3.3.4. Prior learning should be recognised, not just for credits or access, but also for its own sake, within the pedagogy or curriculum of a course, after entry, as well as pre-entry (‘rpl’ vs ‘RPL’)

The adult’s experience should be solicited and acknowledged in the course of a programme – in classroom interactions for example - and new knowledge should be presented in such a way that it
takes account of that experience and builds on it. This is difficult in a course involving people of varied educational levels and work experience but where it can be achieved; the educational experience is greatly enhanced.

3.3.5. Both ‘rpl’ and ‘RPL’ need to take account of the forms and structures of knowledge

It is not useful to think only of the currency of knowledge (that which is dominant and valued and that which is not) or the characteristics of the knower (he who is dominant versus she who is not) or to think of learning as merely access to a community of practice. Knowledge forms have structures which make it easy for some forms to be recognised and others not. Formal courses tend to favour general rules and principles and to recruit practical experience in a particular way. In real life it is done differently. The educator needs to know that.

3.3.6. RPL needs to recognise practical wisdom, especially in the professions

RPL tends to be conceptualised in terms of formal, non formal and informal education (that which is taught in a formal or relatively formal context, and that which is outside of any explicit training) and formal and informal knowledge (abstract/concrete etc). It would benefit from a tripartite conceptualisation of knowledge ņ recognizing practical wisdom as a third form of knowledge which cannot be readily articulated or recognised but is nonetheless very important, in professional practice as well as everyday survival.

As a starting point we need to pay greater attention to the third form of competence envisaged in numerous policy documents: i.e. reflexive competence, which was distinguished from practical competence and foundational competence. The term does not capture entirely the concept of practical wisdom ņ it misses the element of social and moral good and of knowledge - but the sense of flexibility in relation to changes and unforeseen circumstances is captured very well.

4. CONCLUSION

A national system needs to:

- Recognize the extent of educational disadvantage which means international models might not work here;
- Encourage forms of RPL and curricula that introduce new knowledge and recognize prior learning in parallel and in interaction. Here it is not necessary to build entirely new policy. Build on the developmental notion contained in the SAQA policy document of 2002 (which seems to be missing from the guidelines of 2004) and refer to the work of Volbrecht and Ralphs, among others for practical examples of how it might work. (See SAQA 2002; Volbrecht 2009; Volbrecht, Tisani, Hendricks and Ralphs 2006); and
• Assess realistically whether it is and should be meeting the needs of those marginalized from formal systems of work and education. It cannot replace the need for structured programmes for those whose formal experiences of work and education have been particularly limited. RPL should not be presented as a universal panacea and should not be seen in isolation from education and training more generally, especially in further education and training where it seems to have had limited influence to date.
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Bending toward justice

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ABSTRACT

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 inevitably 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 appears to be RPL’s failures as indicative of deeper forces in contention following South African’s transition to democracy.

1. INTRODUCTION

To begin with a bit of New York English, there was probably no way not to blow it. Too many things were happening at once. In the end, a victory for the African National Congress (ANC) was a victory for both democracy and neo-liberalism, for political freedom and economic rationalisation, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) became one among many half-measures in which idealism came up against multiple barriers as the realities of the new dispensation slowly sank in. There were so many stakeholders, so many stakes, and so many things at stake for one small though deeply important educational and assessment practice.

Many words have been said about RPL in South Africa, but perhaps the best single comment I’ve ever heard was that of Lynne Slonimsky of the School of Education at Wits. ‘RPL, she said, is the attempt to go back and intervene in history and to give people what a just society would have given them as a matter of course.’ (Slonimsky 2002) Such a goal was dazzlingly, gloriously ambitious and unachievable. It could only ever have been a standard to fail by. But one of the reasons I am going to argue this morning - to be optimistic moving forward - is that people understand how big RPL could be. That’s why there was so much resistance. Entrenched interests of many kinds understood that RPL was directly challenging lines of authority and structures of privilege that were based on the claim to know more and to know better.

The roll-out of RPL in South Africa has been disappointing on other, less grandiose registers as well. Far too few people have been RPL’d either into qualifications based on prior knowledge and skills or into opportunities for new education and credentials. I doubt that there is anyone in this room who...
doesn’t share the frustration of that. Could we have done more if we had wanted less? Sometimes I think so. Could we have done better if we had had greater insight and greater wisdom? It is undoubtedly so.

But at least there has been time to see where the problems are, and that’s another reason why I am optimistic. While more research is needed, and while important research is currently being done through the South African Qualifications Authority’s (SAQA) RPL research project, we already know a lot about what went wrong. The underlying issues are both structural and conceptual, and they have been articulated well in the excellent country reports prepared by SAQA for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), visit (Blom, Parker, & Keevy, 2007) and the OECD report itself (Gunning, Van Kleef, and Werquin 2009). A quick perusal of the findings of the report includes: failure to implement stated policies and procedures, lack of oversight by regulatory agencies, the 50% residency clause, matric requirements, the lack of formal policy in Further Education and Training (FET) sector, the absence of systematic funding arrangements, resistance on the part of academic staff, the lack of trust between institutions and sectors, management recalcitrance, and lack of a practitioner support network.

2. IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS

What follows are a number of the problems that I believe are already known:

2.1 Discrepancy between paper and reality: As the background report points out, many Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs), and educational institutions had RPL policies, but only a few implemented any plans or projects. There was a huge discrepancy between RPL as a national priority, indeed a belief in it as a central mechanism for redress, access, and economic development, and the limited number of local projects, assessment centers, and sites of practice.

2.2 Some of this was tied to the lack of funding mechanisms. It was never clear who was going to pay for RPL, but instead what appeared, correctly or otherwise, to be financial disincentives, colleges and universities saw themselves losing fees while at the same time having to hire new staff to handle RPL and related support services. Management saw itself taking time away from productive work -- and this in addition to the rather obvious disincentive that if you allow workers to earn additional qualifications, you will probably have to pay them more.

2.3 A byzantine bureaucratic structure that fragmented policy and practice and spread responsibility too widely. The bureaucracy was not only unwieldy in structural terms; it spread capacity, which was little enough to begin with, across the entire spread of industry, labour and Higher Education (HE). The impressive pockets of expertise that developed much of which is gathered in this room were each insufficient on their own.
If we focus for a moment, not on the broad structural and regulatory issues, but on specific RPL projects, we can identify:

### 2.4 Specific problems that plagued a number of initial attempts

Again, there is deep knowledge in this room of what went wrong. Typically, in workplace-based initiatives, workers had little access to information concerning the unit standards against which they were to be assessed, about how to prepare, about the process of assessment, or even, in some cases, about whether or not they passed or failed. Insufficient training of advisors and assessors was matched with insufficient attention to the social dimensions of assessment. The use of inappropriate assessment methods, in turn, was matched by the use of inappropriate languages and vocabularies within languages—

unit standards written in what Colin Bundy used to call isi-SAQA instead of the languages in which workers learn, use, and teach what they knew.

I think it’s worth focusing for a moment on one aspect of what went wrong on the workplace side, specifically:

### 2.5 Lack of effective and meaningful participation on the part of unions

As we know, RPL was labour’s agenda to begin with, but the lack of sustained expert participation weakened that agenda. Part of the problem was a lack of capacity at a moment in which labour had famously lost its most experienced and most knowledgeable leadership to three layers of government. But a lot of it, I think, was that there were just too much to do and too many bigger, life or death matters to worry about. We ended up with an overcommitted shop steward running in who hadn’t been to earlier RPL meetings, who hadn’t been briefed, and who wouldn’t in turn brief the equally overcommitted shop steward who would come to the next meeting.

But the problems went even deeper, in ways that were symptomatic of more basic tensions, contradictions, and competing social goods. That is, what appeared to be RPL’s failures as indicative of deeper forces in contention following South Africa’s transition to democracy.

### 2.6 Workplace relationships held over from apartheid

Patterns of authority, as we all know, do not disappear with a change in the law. RPL was contending with the legacies of apartheid: habitual forms of arrogance, authority, and intimidation; ongoing hierarchies of race, language and culture; and old forms of assessment in which workers—Black workers—are objects to be measured and found wanting rather than colleagues to be offered a long-overdue chance to demonstrate what they knew.

### 2.7 Contested relationship between forms of knowledge and communities of practice, both in workplace-based and academic RPL

In workplace-based RPL, this had a lot to do with unit standards. I remember a lot of people worrying back in 1996 and 1997 that RPL was being tied to a naïve and uncritical belief in the ability of unit standards to capture and I use the term advisedly—the complex meld of head, hand and heart knowledge that constitutes human labour. They were right
to worry. Two things have become increasingly clear. One is that unit standards, especially those
developed outside of South Africa, build in standards of performance that have little to do with how
work actually gets done and the knowledge it takes to do it. Second, it has grown increasingly clear
to South Africa that, as Allais et al. (2009) argue, you cannot express the complexity of human
knowledge in small fragmented pieces expressed in language and, having done so, expect everyone
to have the same understanding of what they mean. Thus RPL ended up being seen as dependent on
unit standards, as if a fair and equitable engagement with how to recognize knowledge and skills
required the impossible task of breaking all of them into their constituent parts.

In the HE sector, the situation was different but no less fraught. There are, of course, many profound
differences between formalised academic knowledge and workplace knowledge, between implicit and
explicit theory, and between forms of spoken and written literacy. We have learned over and over that
informal learning is often tacit, implicit, and interdisciplinary, that it cannot be captured in inflexible
disciplinary delineations any more than it can be captured in unit standards. But in some cases
these real differences became, not a fascinating opportunity to engage with the question of what is
worth knowing and who gets to say, but rather a call to the gatekeepers to defend the gates. I don't
wish to overstate this -- I was there, and I know how much good will and careful analysis went into
these debates. But again, I believe that the legacy of apartheid took its toll. South African academics
were left out of fifty years of engagement as epistemological rigidities were yielding elsewhere to
hybrid knowledge and communities of practice. Thus, real issues concerning academic preparation
and ways of knowing were made infinitely more difficult.

2.8 Different conceptualisations of the purpose of RPL. 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.

The tensions between those two conceptualisations related directly to different agendas concerning
RPL. The goal of upgrading of skills among South African workers was seemingly an objective around
which all sectors of the society could unite; this ostensibly unitary goal was reflective of multiple
conflicting agendas, among them:

• Rationalizing 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
• Recognizing 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.

Those are deeply different understandings, not only of the purposes of RPL and whose interests RPL
was to further. Those are deeply different conceptualisations of social existence that reflect differing notions of the social contract and of differing understandings of the relationship of the worker to her/his work, the individual to the society, and of the citizen to the state.

In any event, that is my list of the moment. My point is that we begin anew with a lot of analysis and research already completed. I want to spend a moments talking about the other good news and then end with a few recommendations.

We all know and this is also part of the good news that excellent policy is already on the books. Up to now, it has been honoured mostly in the breech, but it is there. Quality procedures have been designed. Clear principles of assessment have been articulated in document after document: fairness, validity, currency, transparency, validity, authenticity, and sufficiency. There are also, as the OECD team recognised, islands of excellent practice. Finally and again this is good news --, there is a difference between scepticism and cynicism. Scepticism is anticipatory; it fears that something will not be as good or true as is claimed. Cynicism is retrospective; it says that something has already been proved to be bad or untrue. There is still a great deal of scepticism about RPL in South Africa, but there isn’t cynicism. The country is not filled with stories of people being awarded qualifications they hadn’t really earned, or people being RPL’d based on falsified evidence, or people being harmed by the incompetence of those who had been RPL’d into life-or-death positions. We begin, not with a history of bad practice, only insufficient practice, with ‘islands of good practice.’ We can live with scepticism it only challenges us to do better at proving the case.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

As we take up that challenge, I would offer the following recommendations:

3.2 Very focused research tied to new projects: Certainly, more research is needed as well as support for an ongoing critical dialogue among those who research, those who practice, and those who make policy. Still, my first recommendation is: don’t put off new RPL projects and spend the next five years doing research. Yes, we need to know who is doing what, and how, and why. Yes, we need to know more about RPL as Alan Ralphs (2008) calls a specialised pedagogical device. But that research is underway. I think additional research should be focused on a few very specific questions: What worked, and why? What should have worked but didn’t, and why? We need to go back to and figure out what stopped them from being a success. We need to fix those things and then try it again.

3.3 Connect important RPL projects to the development of the FET sector: My understanding is that, at least in the current workforce, most RPL candidates find themselves on NQF levels that equate to FET. That sector is in desperate need of capacity building and institution building in all
kinds of ways, but the economic agenda laid out by President Zuma in early 2011 (Mail&Guardian 2011) will require resourced, well-planned attention to the FET colleges. As the country report recommends, the FET colleges need dedicated RPL staff, procedures for fair assessment and quality assurance, staff training, and workplaces and community partnerships (Gunning, Van Kleef, and Werquin, 2009). All such efforts at institution-building and capacity building should have RPL as a central component.

3.4 Align RPL projects to the current economic agenda. Third, while we are on the subject of the current economic agenda, I think that agenda is excellent news for RPL. Many of the economic growth areas named are served by people with vast pools of informal and experiential learning. Local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, women’s knowledge, rural knowledge all play a part in green tourism and agriculture. Similarly, however badly the RPL pilots in construction and mining went, they are also industries that rely heavily on the officially unrecognised knowledge of workers, and the fallout from the RPL pilots in those industries included important insights and lively, insightful analysis of the use of workers’ and indigenous knowledge in the workplace. We need to bring RPL back into focus in those sectors. And we need to make sure that the state is held to account this time and that funding set aside for development in those sectors includes funding for RPL.

3.5 Fourth, don’t reinvent the wheel. Because of work previously done through the Joint Education Trust and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and funded by the Ford and Kellogg Foundations and through the work of academic staff at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), University of Cape Town (UCT), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), University of the Free State (UFS), University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), University of South Africa (UNISA), and elsewhere, South Africa now has high-quality advising materials, assessor-training materials, RPL workshop curricula, and model policies and procedures. It would be very much worth it to collect them and bring forward what is transferable.

3.6 Centralize resources, including human resources. If we have done nothing else in fifteen years, we have developed a strong pool of experienced, knowledgeable, visionary South African experts in RPL. We need to centralize those human resources so that each stakeholder group can draw on specialists with standing and credibility who can be seconded to institutions, companies, unions, communities, and SETAs, provide knowledge and credibility in the short term, develop further capacity in the long term. Yes, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) needs to train all its shop stewards in how to represent RPL candidates effectively, but it also needs a single RPL office, with dedicated staff, who can go out to sectors as RPL projects are designed, implemented, and evaluated. Yes, the FET sector needs to ensure that their academic and advising staff understands RPL, but it also needs a single sector-wide office to offer help and expertise.
3.7 And finally, **go big**. This is not the time for a few small, experimental pilot projects. We need centralized nodes of funding, a way of drawing on monies already committed through the skills levy, bursaries, job development funds. We need to learn from previous attempts at large RPL projects. We need one or two large, transparent, well-resourced projects, each of which brings together a strong SETA, one or more strong unions, functional educational institutions, and private or public employers who are ready to move ahead. Success in one or two large projects will win trust and inspire others.

4. **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

To end with another bit of New York English: Let’s get real. This is not about the research. It’s not about the models of excellent practice. It’s not even about the money. South Africa has all that, or can find it. It’s about the will.

We will never go back and intervene in history, not the long, sorry history of human inequity or the mixed history of RPL over the past fifteen years. But we can learn from the past and find resolve for the future. As Martin Luther King once said, “The arc of history is long, but it bends toward justice.”

When I began coming to South Africa in 1995 to work on the introduction of RPL, everyone was keen to know what we were doing out in the big, wide world, and I kept saying I don’t count on us to show you what to do. South Africans know better than any of us that hierarchies of knowledge support and are supported by all the other hierarchies of power and privilege. You know better than any of us that human dignity requires acknowledgement of the undervalued knowledge and skills that power both depends on and ignores. You will do things with RPL here that the rest of the world will learn from.

I still think that is true.
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A case study on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): reflexive practice in continuing education for teacher development

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ABSTRACT

Reflexive learning has the potential to maximize 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.

It is argued that in the current policy frameworks, Continuing Education through in-service learning is being downgraded 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 (HEIs). 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.

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.

1. INTRODUCTION

The SAQA call for papers in October 2010 on the need to revisit Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was a well timed inspiration for reviewing the implications of RPL in the light of the Higher Education Qualification Framework (HEQF) changes. From my perspective as an Academic Coordinator of a large in-service teacher development programme primarily servicing socially disadvantaged teachers and schools, the actual and potential role, manner and means of RPL to offset such inequity was politically and pedagogically pertinent. I therefore used the opportunity to consider possible implications of RPL within the Continuing Education Sector in which I work at the University of
KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) in this institutional and social space in time. Building on this experiential knowledge –a la Living Education Theory (Whitehead 1989) and Living Learning (Figlan et al. 2009) - I constructed a simple questionnaire to help consider our ‘case’.

Experiential learning includes reflective learning from the present and past (Boud and Walker 1990; Criticos 1989; Fenwick 2001; Kolb 1984; Leitch and Day 2000). It is a form of learning from and for doing. 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. When reflective practice is dialogically developed through (especially critical) theoretical engagement, it becomes reflexive, impacting on critically conscious praxis (Bourdieu and Passeron 1973; Freire, 1970, 1973; Lather 1994; Quin 2009).

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.

In the new policy frameworks (DoE 2008; DHET 2011) continuing education through in-service learning programmes is generally 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, using 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 (HEIs). 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, and competitive individualist values.

This case study was intended to investigate 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; within the context of prevailing discursive practices nationally.
and institutionally that are arguably prejudicing such practices in a way that discriminates against the students and RPL pedagogies, thereby affecting negatively teacher development possibilities appropriate to the South African social context and transformation for equity and democracy. The case-study uses a basic ecosystemic framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979) to map the findings of a force field analysis (Lewin 1943) informed by numerous small research studies on multiple aspects of continuing education at UKZN (EDDEIR Hons 2010; Quin and Ngcobo 2010) including in particular a study done for the purpose of this presentation described in more detail below.

What emerged from the study were indications of the need for greater attention to the realm of experiential learning in general, suggestive of greater engagement with Adult Education discourse in particular, in the further development of delivery and pedagogy of adult in-service teacher-students, in order to capitalise on their particular resources, as well as those offered by the nature of in-service learning. In the language of development approaches in respect of education Ŵ to work with RPL from a people-primacy assetbased, rather than professional deficit based perspective (see for example Youngman (2000) and Child-Advocacy-Project (2009)).

2. CONTEXT OF THE CASE

The context of the case study is the Continuing Education (CE) Sector at UKZN. Continuing Education is the current title applied to that section of the Faculty of Education that is responsible for in-service, undergraduate non-degree programmes. In terms of school teacher development, the full qualifications offered have been the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE: NQF Level 6) and the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE: NQF Level 5) in terms of the 1995 National Qualification Framework (NQF)44.

The National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) provided upgrading qualification access to teachers with a minimum of a one year qualification and/ or five years of teaching experience. The ACE had a threefold purpose to upgrade, retrain and/ or specialise teachers in schools to become fully qualified and/ or more competent teachers.

At UKZN, we typically offer 10 Ŵ 12 ACE specialisations part-time, through mixed-mode delivery over a two year period at learning centres and main campuses across KZN. There are usually between three to four thousand students studying on the ACE at UKZN at any one time. The motivation for the development of this comprehensive programme was a clear commitment to social transformation through educational access to the most physically and socially marginalised and disadvantaged educators. They have typically been delivered by committed academics coordinating large student cohorts and tutor teams. The work itself is generally out of alignment with mainstream university processes such as timetables, hours, means and mode of delivery. The value and quantity of the work

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44 The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is a Framework on which standards and qualifications, agreed to by education and training stakeholders throughout the country, are registered. It came into being through the South African Qualifications Authority Act (No. 58 of 1995, Government Gazette No. 1521, 4October 1995)
and students are relatively invisible: the time spent on delivery, doing such things as materials development, tutor training and travel to centres, the lessons outside of normal hours and away from main campuses, the part-time programmes over two years all contribute to a lack of visibility and/ or recognised status attributes associated with quantities of research papers and students with full-time funding from throughput and output. But for those who work in these programmes, a primary sustaining feature is the directness of the impact of the development work. Between one contact session and the next, teacher students are applying their new learning and reflecting on this experience for further learning again in the following tutorial day.

With the advent of the new Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education (TEQF) (DHET 2011), these programmes changed place in the progression of programmes leading to fully qualified status and/ or access to postgraduate study. They have been down-graded. The Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) has been changed into an Advanced Certificate: Teaching (ACT), which no longer upgrades to fully qualified teacher status, nor provides access to postgraduate study. Instead, teachers qualifying through this route must now do an additional qualification in between, the Advanced Diploma in Education (ADE). Even then, in terms of academic progression, it only provides direct access to (barely existent) postgraduate diplomas, and no longer Honours, as used to be the case with the ACE.

3. CONCEPTUAL MAPPING OF THE CONTEXT OF THE CASE STUDY

The inserted rough ECOMODEL (ecosystemic model derivative from Bronfenbrenner, 1979) indicates some of the factors at various levels that are/ have been impacting on these changes. It is by no means comprehensive – merely a fairly superficial illustration indicating, at a glimpse, some of the dialectical dynamics playing into the context. For example, one such missing factor at the micro level that I personally think has had a fairly direct bearing on this case are issues such as the separation of academic disciplines in education, such as Adult Education from Teacher Education Professional Development, reinforcing the political disparities across the development paradigm differences, rather than cross-fertilising the disciplinary distinctions. Another, pertaining to the individuals in the Centre, is related to the above-mentioned space of working outside the mainstream, and then getting the demoralising status down grade and doubling up of qualification requirements on top of the already full adult lives of students and tutors alike.

45 The idea is nested, concentric layers like those of an onion - as a result of which the flavour from one layer pervades the other layers, particularly the ones immediately next to it. So an individual at the Centre is strongly and obviously affected by face to face interactions with people in the Micro layer, and certainly impacted upon, but less obviously and immediately so, by say policies of institutions in the Meso layer; and hegemonic ideologies in the Macro layer of the national and/or global society. Conversely the agency of the individual can also impact back through the layers, more easily more potently within the closest sphere of influence.
4. THIS STUDY IS IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION:

How do academics within the UKZN Continuing Education Sector use reflexive practice as in/for RPL?

5. BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION TO THIS QUESTION

Reflexive practice entails the individual concerned considering things from their perspectives in the world. It is after all the individual, at the centre of an ecomodel, whose practice is being reflected upon. The ‘x’ in the suffix ‘- that is, is reflexive as opposed to simply reflective - that indicates a critical social contextualisation of such an individual.

Taking this framing as a starting place in answering the research question of this study, I consider my own experiential reflexive prior learning practice that needed recognition in order for me to do the work I have been doing in Higher Education. For me, at the centre of my own ecomodel, which grows in commonality with others in the South African context, the further out one goes in the layers, my understanding and attachment to RPL came from my history in the context of South Africa over the past 50 years. It is related to beginning my adult life as an Adult Educator....luckily a la Freire with a few learners who firmly believed in participatory learning practices to remind me of my baby place in the process of lifelong learning...despite the facilitator role!

As a result, RPL has always been strongly associated with experiential learning (1) as learning
method (as opposed to assessment related; and (2) (critical) reflexive praxis as basic intentions/purposes of learning.

But right now the motivations of the research are the following:

- The primary driver of the TEQF and our search for solutions to reduce the overlong NQF ladder in order for students to:
  - Access relevant and academic postgraduate study (if desired);
  - Become fully qualified teachers; and
  - Be competent teachers.

- The above are synonymous with
  - Critical, reflexive practitioners who can access required learning [individually and institutionally in terms of physical and intellectual access];
  - Accessible spaces; and
  - Subject specific content.

- My related need to question my assumptions of how we as teacher developers, in the Continuing Education Sector at UKZN at least, understand and use concepts such as:
  - RPL;
  - Experiential learning; and
  - Reflexivity.

We all see ourselves as employing between one and all three of these ‘mechanisms’ in some form or another — thus begging the question of what we mean by the concepts and consequently the implications for our work in in-service teacher development.

6. THE CASE STUDY

6.1 Literature

Besides general theoretical literature on key conceptual terms referred to in the introduction above, I used papers from the previous South African Department of Education Colloquium on Recognition of Higher Learning held at Kopanong in December 2008 to compare notes in thinking about the issues and concepts in the field. My adult education activist predilection leads me to gravitate toward the articles of those whom I perceive as coming from some or all of activist, lifelong learning, or adult education backgrounds, from this collection and related Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) free press downloads, Ralphs (2008), Breier (2006; 2008), and Harris (2000). I found here much accord with issues and conceptualisations having being experiencing some provincial isolation and
alienation in our own professional community within our institution. It’s connected to the sadly growing sense that you are coming from a prejudiced deficit place if you’re still an activist educator who thinks transformation is about social justice and equity as opposed to the socially accepted hegemonic norm referenced performance bar that indicates progress.

These texts confirmed my sense of the need to re-look at the related concepts because of the multiple perspectives they potentially convey in very different education and development agendas. I got a sense of there being key terms/ concepts but with a lack of common meaning of the terms in respect of RPL in our context in South Africa.

The resulting research questions guiding the study were:

- What are indicators of understanding and use of reflective practice — how and why?
- What are the barriers and enablers for these uses? That is, what would a force-field analysis of the context across the layers of an eco-model look like and show?
- What are the implications regarding RPL and the NQF for Continuing Education teacher development at UKZN?

### 6.2 Data gathering instrument

Ten ACE and two NPDE Specialisation Coordinators in the Continuing Education programmes were asked to answer a self-reflective survey questionnaire to this effect. The seven respondents (1 NPDE and 6 ACE) covered most of the specialisation spectrum from science, through language and library, to social justice and core education modules and NPDE General Education and Training (GET). The questionnaire generally asked for understanding and usages of RPL and the related concepts. Some examples of the questions are:

- How do you understand/ think about a) the concept of ‘prior learning’ and b) ‘recognition of prior learning’?
- Does the notion of reflexive practice have any particular pertinence to or resonance with your understanding of RPL?
- Do you/ have you recognised consciously or previously unconsciously ‘prior learning’ in the form and content of your CE offering? (Please also see below to avoid you the trouble of repeating yourself and noticing the difference between recognising as ‘seeing’ and recognising as ‘doing’).
- If yes , to any degree: How or in what ways do you incorporate ‘prior learning’ in the form and content of your offering?
- What barriers and enablers do you experience in doing so?
6.3 The findings with a brief discussion

The main findings are that:

- We mostly don’t have commonality of understanding of these concepts;
- There is little or no sound and confident understanding of them (pretty much covering the full range or meaning and interpretations as in the RPL conference itself); and
- This is despite everybody having claims of using the key concepts/ terms.

So, clearly, the concepts are definitely not being used to structure in-service educator development (INSED) courses.

Important themes that seemed to emerge were:

- RPL is primarily seen as assessment as opposed to developmental - which would more accurately use RPL as evaluative to inform incremental experiential learning building on existing learning and knowledge in the process facilitating greater valuation of self, and more holistic knowledge incorporation, through acknowledgment of culturally and institutionally indigenous contextual learning; and
- Non-purposeful confluences/ alternations between reflexive, reflective and experiential learning, in terms of both purpose and methods of application the what and how being generally vague and unarticulated. This is related to the above, but understood as lack of capacity on the part of providers to deliver in pedagogically appropriate ways in consideration of social identities and contexts of students.

But, importantly, in terms of usage, ALL USE the concepts as mechanisms in one way or another. From a positive angle, this could mean that there is commonality of motivation, but not of discursive praxis; and/ or less happily, it could mean that the terms are used opportunistically to mix and match delivery and qualification requirements. (My worry with the latter is its potential to contribute to a cynical devaluation of these important concepts and mechanisms, which are already subordinate academic discourses, for many reasons, but pertinently perhaps because their whole human development potential is contrary to the neoliberal efficiency production mode of being, doing and learning).

For example, while some people understand RPL as a mechanism for access, related to redress, it was addressed only as direct exemption based on previous formal qualification level and years of experience in the field. This is certainly not necessarily a bad thing, particularly because it means there is no assessing measurement against alien criteria. The so-called reflective portfolio requirement is in reality perhaps more of a technical data gathering competency task requirement, rather than a reflective learning task. [In other words, perhaps there is some learning in doing that it is
it at an appropriate academic or professional level as opposed to a facilitated reflexive learning opportunity that engaged the full experiential learning cycle process?].

For others, RPL is seen as simply idealistic even if ideal impracticable assessment of previous in and non-formal learning.

Another response was that RPL was not used for accreditation, but for informing the pedagogical approach as experiential learning which was used sometimes synonymously with reflective learning practice, even reflexivity, sometimes interchangeably apparently to describe the same thing by different people from different discursive traditions. This would obviously seem to be epistemologically related, but generally in a fairly superficial and/or inarticulate way possibly indicating a sense more than a conscious developed praxis [é not that all intuitive application is necessarily bad or problematic at allé]

None of this is surprising really. Experiential learning and reflexivity are closely linked to each other and both to RPL but they do have different meanings in different application contexts, let alone in different pedagogical discourses. For example, experiential learning in much RPL speak is more likely to refer to previously learnt from non-purposeful and/ or non-recognised teaching sources é informal and non-formal as opposed to Adult Education and Social Justice Education discourses where experiential learning is more directly conceived of as a part of the reflective learning cycle of real or simulated experience é as See, Judge Act and Act, Observe, Reflect, Analyse respectively.

While having no intention to dismiss the importance of intuitive teaching, when the key concepts relevant to RPL and experiential learning are not critically, consciously employed, they can be a) useless, as in no real reflective practice and therefore professional educator learning is taking place, and b) seriously problematic (as clearly and validly pointed out at the RPL conference) and even damaging to the whole project of learning as empowerment, because of the potential for reinforcement of internalised inequalities such as patronage or senses of inferiority. If there is no reflection and analysis of the link between why or how a particular individual within a particular context succeeded or failed at a particular task, the possibilities are ripe for stereotypical
conclusions based on observation showing how the already socially empowered thrive or survive, while the already socially disadvantaged flail or fail.

The illustration below presents the findings of a quick Force Field Analysis brainstorm of the context in response to the question: what are some of the forces impacting on reflexive practice facilitation? Primarily it indicates that while there are many depressing forces working against such a pedagogical trajectory, mostly linked to a neoliberal approach to education development, the weight of these, together with our collective experiential learning from historical struggle, have the potential to bring together education for liberation veterans now in positions of institutional power and influence with grassroots movements and demands for people centered, contextually appropriate education.

7. CONCLUSION

Potentially then, there is a renewed opportunity to reclaim RPL as a tool for greater social justice and equity in and through education by both as assessment and development of prior and existing experiential learning through the application of a more coherent and rigorous understanding of reflexive praxis. Such an approach is helpful in seeking a critical, contextual response to the discriminatory added burden of the TEQF to traditionally and currently marginalised teachers typically the educators of disadvantaged learners in marginalised contextual spaces.

This has led to the recommendation for our own context in Continuing Education Teacher Development that we use the hiatus period between programmes as a period of necessary development of Teacher Education providers to already practicing teachers. Inter alia, to do so by critically constructive engagement with Adult Education discourse vis-a-vis Teacher Development, with concentration on how to facilitate critically reflexive teacher learning (as developmental RPL) because it is what all teachers need anyway for professional practice and related lifelong, ongoing contextually relevant learning, and as a contextually appropriate approach to teacher development in our context.

The thing that I really like about this direction is that it shifts the onus away from our in-service teacher-students being assessed on the deficit model typically attached to still qualifying adult learners, to the responsibility being on the socially and institutionally acknowledged and empowered HEI providers of teacher development - an appropriately upside-down approach for the outside-in model for an inclusive approach to education that is transformative for social equity. In this way, hopefully in its fullest sense (Paulo Freire, 1992/2004), the curriculum change processes become not only non-punitive to teacher-students, but instead this qualification upgrade/catch-up demanded by the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) process facilitates within teacher development provision an appropriate developmental process that is actually helpful and valuable to the teachers themselves, as well as their learners and by association of course, our society too.
REFERENCES


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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)

Dr Elizabeth Smith,
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ABSTRACT

Research was initiated to evaluate RPL performed during the past 12 years of implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

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 experiences of current and past RPL processes at the University of South Africa (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.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects the findings of three surveys conducted over a period of nine years (2003–2011) at UNISA in which a variety of responses were obtained from three groups of RPL users:

- RPL finalists (students whose RPL process had been finalised);
- RPL practitioners: assessors, advisors and
- Staff of the RPL department at UNISA: RPL Academic Coordinators.

2. THREE SURVEYS CONDUCTED

The purpose of the three surveys was to:

- Compile a user-friendly strategy for implementing RPL at an Open and Distance Higher Education Institution;
• Test the strategy which has been in use since 2000 against user responses from two further surveys to ascertain whether any fundamental aspects of the 2000 strategy have changed. The matrix is available upon request.

2.1 Survey 1: 2003: RPL finalists and RPL assessors at UNISA

At UNISA, RPL finalists were identified who had undergone the RPL assessment and accreditation process. Coded questionnaires were handed to them to be responded to. These responses were analysed. Focus group interviews were also held with RPL academic assessors (academic staff of the university responsible for RPL assessments in their departments), and a literature review was conducted covering five research reports: three South African; one Canadian and one American. These were respectively: Osman (2002); Strydom (2002); Groenewald (2003); Van Kleef (1999) and Flint (1999).

Osman’s report (2002) explores RPL case studies at four South African universities and examines the experiences of students and academics. Strydom’s report (2002) provides a framework for inter-institutional collaboration as a way for institutions to deal with access demands placed on them individually and as a way of saving resources. Groenewald’s report (2003) documents several shortcomings in co-operative education deduced from the perspectives of five institution-based programme managers and five enterprise-based representatives. Van Kleef’s report (1999) documents the activities of RPL learners in seven Canadian colleges over a five year period and compares them to a sampling of traditional students; identifies learner characteristics and analyses the effect of RPL on learners and institutions. Flint’s study (1999) documents outstanding practices in six American Higher Education institutions which identify them as adult learner-friendly institutions. RPL is high on the agenda of adult learner-friendly institutions.

2.2 Survey 2: 2008

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic staff of the College of Science, Engineering and Technology at UNISA: six interviews with senior managers and four interviews with lecturers from various departments within the College. The respondents were academics holding degrees ranging from B Tech degrees to doctoral degrees. Their work experience ranged from four years to forty two years and they held positions from Junior Lecturer to Chair of Department.

2.3 Survey 3: 2010

A target group of combined RPL advisors and administrators was surveyed by means of questionnaires; individual interviews were held with UNISA RPL assessors in the Colleges of Law, Applied Natural Sciences and Science, Engineering and Technology at UNISA.
A focus group interview was held with the total UNISA RPL staff component as at June 2010, comprising the RPL Manager, RPL administrative officer and four RPL Academic College Coordinators.

3. EMERGENT THEMES

Interpretation occurred across questions and sets of data. Seven themes which have implications for an RPL strategy at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) emerged from categorising and analysing respondent feedback. For each theme, conclusions were drawn, which were later interpreted as implications for an RPL strategy. These are:

Theme 1: Value of RPL
Theme 2: Process
Theme 3: RPL candidate profile
Theme 4: Regular personal contact, interaction, communication
Theme 5: Staff reluctance to participate in RPL
Theme 6: Flexible assessment
Theme 7: Limited knowledge of RPL

4. DISCUSSION OF THEMES

4.1 Theme 1: Value of RPL

4.1.1 General Summary

The value of RPL was emphasised by all groups of users, although each group focused on different aspects. First, Academic assessors saw the value of the process within institutions and in the present economy; second, RPL finalists emphasised benefits to the individual. Assessors felt that the RPL process gives structure to a previously haphazard process—granting credits to candidates within HEIs. Further, they felt it meets the South African Qualifications Authority’s (SAQA) instruction to HEIs to transform this sector. They see it as a recruitment tool since it is a confidence booster to returning-to-learning adults and it offers a shorter, cheaper option to gaining a qualification. Finally, it was seen as a rich source of further research.

Commenting on the value of RPL, RPL finalists emphasised a shortened curriculum, affirmation of worth by self and colleagues, improved theoretical knowledge adding value to workplace performance, and motivational influence on returning-to-learning adults. RPL was seen as an equaliser erasing past historical lack of opportunity.

All in all, user responses indicated that RPL is a value-adding process to individuals, the institution and to the national workforce.
4.1.2 Detailed discussion and analysis of responses

When "value" of RPL was described in RPL finalist responses, the following three categories emerged: shortened curriculum; self-affirmation; and improved theory applicable to workplace. All respondents rated RPL as being of high value in both their jobs and in their lifelong learning paths. A typical response is: "I think it is valuable to see what the value of your experience is."

4.1.3 Shortened curriculum

Respondents defined the concept shortened curriculum in terms of two aspects: shortened study time and financial benefits to the individual:

First respondent: "saved me a considerable amount of study time, which I am now applying to my other subjects"
Second respondent: "I have benefited in terms of time and cost."

A shortened curriculum and the accompanying financial savings have been identified internationally by non-traditional learners (RPL candidates) as two of the most important benefits of RPL (Van Kleef, 1999:22, 28; Flint, 1999:58).

RPL finalists indicated a further benefit: they feel that "making up for lost time in their studies and broadening my focus and helping me see the bigger picture in the candidate's chosen area of study," indicate that this shortened study time is a factor which allows candidates who consider themselves under-qualified or even failures to catch up with their peers who had the advantage of studying earlier in their lives:

Third respondent: "one sees the value of your experience in terms of skills which are more valuable than book study."
The general feeling was that the value of their expertise and experience was proven during the RPL process, creating a positive attitude towards their studies:
Fourth respondent: "RPL motivated me to continue my studies; get somewhere."
Fifth respondent: "my academic results after RPL were well above average, proving the RPL process a success."

This adds an interesting dimension to views of RPL scholars quoted earlier (Smith 2003) who posit that RPL probably only benefits those already advantaged, not those whose learning originated at a distance from formal education. It would seem that RPL finalists in this study do not support this idea, and feel that earlier disadvantaged status is eliminated by means of RPL.
4.1.4 Self-affirmation

In terms of responses received, self-affirmation was described in terms of three factors: (a) motivation to continue studies; (b) recognition received for skills and knowledge; and (c) an opportunity to rise to new challenges. Respondents commented:

First respondent: RPL motivated me to go on with my studies. It felt like I am getting somewhere again.

Second respondent: Na hierdie proses sien ek kans vir my graad. (After this process I see my way clear to completing my degree) (researcher’s translation).

However, recognition was also received from external parties such as the workplace and the impression was gained from respondents that this recognition contributed to improved self-esteem:

Third respondent: I received recognition for my skills and knowledge I already possess.

Fourth Respondent: Job wise it helped me getting a bonus that I would not have received.

Fifth respondent: This provides me the opportunity to excel career wise.

Opportunities to rise to new challenges were emphasised by a number of respondents.

Sixth respondent: It enabled me to identify latent strengths and to confront opportunities that are available to me and it seems that this increased self-knowledge brought about by the RPL process is an important aspect of self-affirmation.

The notion of self-affirmation has been reported by international learners as a valuable benefit of an RPL programme (Van Kleef 1999), especially if interpreted in tandem with the internationally documented fact that prospective adult learners are often apprehensive and fearful of failure (Flint 1999). If one considers the profile of the typical RPL candidate in South Africa (Smith 2003), this self-validation becomes even more valuable as it has the effect of enhancing the candidate’s understanding of learning as a lifelong process and assisting him or her to identify what is needed in order to achieve personal, career and academic goals (Flint 1999).

4.1.5 Improved theory applicable to workplace

Most respondents could see the benefit in their workplaces of RPL and accompanying top-up training. Two typical responses are:
If this is read in conjunction with the category shortened curriculum (4.2.1 above), one can deduce that affirming self-worth, improving theoretical knowledge and making up for lost time which were identified by respondents as valuable contributions of the RPL process, are steps towards equity and transformation in Higher Education. This is echoed by Osman (2003) who maintains that individuals who are marginal within Higher Education seek ways to transform the contexts in which they find themselves so that they may transform and deepen these contexts.

It seems from the responses received that some measure of equity and transformation are valuable spin-offs of a well-planned, user-friendly RPL strategy.

4.2 Theme 2: Process

4.2.1 General Summary:

There was consensus among academic assessors at UNISA that the RPL process as currently practised at UNISA is credible. Four reasons for credibility of the process were identified:

- The screening process;
- A panel approach to assessment;
- The ultimate stamp of approval of higher decision-makers within the institution (Faculty Executive Committees and Senate);
- Sufficient checks and balances ensuring a rigorous process.

However, RPL was also perceived to be an expensive, slow process and regular communication and planned training programmes for staff were suggested.

From the responses received, slow was used in two different ways by the academic assessors: (a) The RPL process is slow to gain momentum and (b) a slow turnaround time of the process. Reasons were mainly perceived to be limited/insufficient human resources allocated to the UNISA RPL function. The implication for an RPL strategy at an HEI is that in order to deliver a satisfactory service, sufficient resources (human and financial) must be made available to ensure that processes are well-run by sufficiently trained staff.

Academic assessors commented on the slow turnaround time of the RPL process as being student-unfriendly. This contrasted with candidates' perspectives gathered during the survey — candidates interpreted user-unfriendly to mean insufficient communication between the RPL office and
It would seem that in terms of the difference in perspectives regarding user-friendliness mentioned above, RPL candidates attach great value to regular communication with the RPL office and less value to the turnaround time of the process. This could be due to the fact that RPL candidates at UNISA are encouraged to register formally for at least one subject in their chosen qualification while they are awaiting the outcome of the RPL process. Consequently, they do not lose precious academic time.

User-friendliness of UNISA’s RPL process for learners and for assessors was an important discussion point. In terms of responses received from academic assessors, user-friendly was described in terms of RPL assessor perspectives as not lengthy, adequately advertised; understandable, face-to-face and suited to the candidate profile.

4.2.2 Detailed discussion and analysis of responses

Regarding quality assurance, academic assessors had definite ideas about how this should be implemented in RPL. RPL should be a systematic process, and aspects such as the distinction between RPL for access and RPL for advanced standing in the university sector should be carefully handled. When designing an RPL process for an institution, both academic and administrative perspectives should be brought to bear on the process as a whole, since this will provide much-needed specialised academic expertise coupled with the practicalities of careful and cost-effective administrative procedures.

High standards should be maintained throughout the RPL process and international best practice as a norm is recommended where applicable:

First respondent: "I'm considering "benchmarking" against international systems" (Researcher’s translation).

Benchmarking is defined by Flint (1999) as finding and adapting best practices and he suggests benchmarking not only among peer institutions, but also outside one’s own industry or discipline in order to bring fresh perspectives to bear on one’s practice.

Respondents mentioned one of the benefits of a structured RPL process as regulating and documenting previously haphazard assessment and accreditation practices:
Respondents felt that RPL should be factored into induction programmes for new staff and if this response is read in conjunction with Category F of the questionnaire (staff reluctance), such induction programmes could become opportunities for motivating staff to become involved in RPL practices.

When commenting on the initial screening and the assessment processes at UNISA, a respondent felt that these could contribute towards eliminating expensive dishonest practices which could easily become rife in South Africa:

| Third respondent: Unscrupulous practices under the guise of RPL |

The respondent felt that if RPL is responsibly practiced it would necessitate the use of level outcomes to assess against. The respondent warned against crediting motivation rather than competence and suggested that RPL candidates’ ability to study in isolation be assessed as an important factor for success in formal studies.

A further limiting factor in the current UNISA RPL process was felt to be the multilingual approach to RPL. This was identified as a problem as academic assessors could not see the reason for a multilingual approach to RPL if the medium of study at the institution was limited to English and in some cases to English and Afrikaans. The perceived danger of multilingualism in the RPL process was verbalised as:

| Fourth respondent: If he cannot speak understandable English, you are setting him up for failure, as you know that he ultimately must pass the subject |

Osman (2002) sees academic literacy as one of the indicators for potential success at the university since the learning environment is strongly textual. The present study indicates that her conviction is true not only of university learners but of learners in all sectors of higher and further education and training and that a successful RPL strategy should include this developmental aspect. Strydom’s findings (2002) indicate that there is no simple answer to South African issues surrounding multilingualism of learners and point to the fact that this aspect must still be examined and debated in Higher Education circles in the quest for widening access.

Accountability was linked to credibility of RPL processes and emerged strongly as a category. A valuable contribution was made regarding the accountability of the process by a respondent identifying inherent dangers of standards of assessment for RPL which are too high or too low. Since the measure of success of an RPL process is the academic progress of the candidate, assessment should be approached realistically. This response strongly supports the use of the concept of minimal competence originally espoused by Simosko (Smith 2003).
A successful RPL process was described by academic assessors in terms of the following factors:

- Number of applications received;
- Number of candidates granted RPL credits;
- Good academic progress of candidates;
- Support given by the RPL office to academic staff;
- Eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic red tape from the process;
- Agreement with the findings of the RPL assessment by higher decision-makers within the institution;
- RPL being perceived within the institution as a credible process;
- External recognition and acknowledgement by national bodies such as SAQA; and
- acknowledging that RPL is a rich source of future research as in the following research subjects identified by respondents:
  - Impact of RPL on the company;
  - Impact of RPL candidates on the workplace;
  - Impact of RPL on academics.

Although academic assessors were convinced of the value of RPL as confirmed by the fifth respondent who states that, “RPL is at the heart of the whole university… they perceived a measure of safety in having to submit RPL findings and recommendations to higher decision-makers (e.g. the divisional executive committee and the institutional Senate) for the ultimate seal of approval:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sixth respondent:</th>
<th>When it goes to the Executive Committee of the division but there no discussion at this stage takes place because they trust the decision of the faculty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seventh respondent:</td>
<td>Senate in my mind protects my lecturer and in that regard I support it</td>
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</table>

These sentiments could be an indication of insecurity around the RPL process on the part of RPL assessors, even though it is espoused by the institution.

An innovative idea for further utilising RPL within academic institutions was expressed by one of the respondents:

| Eighth respondent: | when applying for professorships, university staff should be expected to present portfolios |

4.2.3 Areas for development

Areas for development in the current process were: slow turnaround time of RPL assessments; a lack of faculty brochures containing learning outcomes and self assessment guidelines; and RPL systems not yet aligned with institutional systems.

These three shortcomings were directly linked by respondents to a shortage of staff in the RPL section/agency within UNISA; insufficient resources both physical and human; and placement of RPL within the institution.

4.4 Theme 3: RPL candidate profile

4.3.1 General Summary

When viewed by academic assessors RPL candidates have a specific profile: their practical experience is often excellent and theory is often lacking. This manifests as:

- Candidate knowledge which evidences a gap between practical skills and theoretical knowledge.
- A need for candidate support which is built into an RPL strategy and should comprise:
  - An initial screening of the candidates RPL applications considering the many RPL candidates that have unrealistic expectations possibly resulting in disappointment and a waste of time and effort for both assessors and the assessed.
  - Portfolio development classes as an aid to identifying suitable evidence and compiling a portfolio.
  - Access to guidance by subject matter experts during the preparation of candidate evidence (and not just assistance by RPL staff). This is especially valuable when the choice of assessment tools is made.
  - Guidance and support different from that given to traditional learners.

4.3.2 Detailed discussion and analysis of responses

Although Flint (1999) warns of the danger of categorizing adults into one group, RPL candidates were seen by academic assessors as having a profile which differs from that of traditional learners. This manifests in candidate knowledge with identified gaps between practice and formal learning:
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)

First respondent: “He can work with it. He can operate it, but he cannot design the thing. The mathematical calculations he will never pick up. The majority of people don’t have it.”

This necessitates a careful approach, this assessor feels that:

Student profiles are sometimes strongly competent or not yet competent, but the majority fall in-between these two, and assessment must be carefully done and individual profiles must be carefully analyzed.

Second respondent: “And now you have to start looking at your subjects or modules individually and see what he is lacking that he can catch up with. That becomes far more problematic to my mind.”

As a result, an individual approach is needed when working with RPL candidates.

Third respondent: “It’s a reality that one must look at their profiles.”

Although some RPL finalists were perceived to be coping well, others were seen as having difficulty with making the transition from informal/ non-formal to formal studies. As a result, RPL assessors feel that RPL finalists require some form of mentoring. This is especially true if they are studying through distance education. The fourth respondent suggested: “Face-to-face contact with paper-based guidelines.”

Many RPL candidates are existing students, and are perceived by academic assessors to be mature and disciplined:

Fifth respondent: “In our environment in Correctional Services Management it provides the opportunity for people who are in senior positions without qualifications to enter on a higher level to start with qualifications.”

Osman’s findings (2003) echo this. She sees RPL candidates as being strongly motivated, focused and disciplined. However, RPL assessors pointed out that RPL candidates often:

“Have limited language skills, and require specific guidance, especially regarding portfolio classes; academic guidance; good reasons for rejection of applications, and opportunities for personal contact with staff.” (Sixth respondent).
Individual assessment and customised training interventions were stressed once more:

Second respondent: 
and now you have to start looking at your subjects or modules individually and see what he is lacking that he can catch up with.

Several respondents felt that after the initial screening process, strategies should be built into RPL practice for closer contact with subject matter experts as well as with RPL advisors and that academic staff members should be available in an advisory capacity.

Eighth respondent: 
s are missing a step in our current strategy after screening there should be contact with academic staff to prepare their portfolio. They struggle with what is good evidence.

There must be an outreach from academic staff.

4.4 Theme 4: Regular personal contact, interaction and communication

4.4.1 General Summary

Both groups of users emphasized the role of regular personal contact, interaction and communication in the RPL process.

Contact was described as follows:

- Academic assessors stressed the role of proactive outreach and mentoring to ease the transition for non-traditional learners between informal/non-formal learning and formal learning;
- RPL finalists described personal contact in terms of two aspects: first contact with the RPL office; continued support throughout the RPL process; and regularity of feedback to candidates were considered to add value to the RPL process;
- Lack of feedback was seen as a direct cause of anxiety experienced by RPL candidates;
- RPL finalists perceived value in personal contact at academic level, such as interaction between learners and staff or between learners; and
- Peer collaboration and study groups were seen to contribute greatly towards minimising anxiety. This minimisation of anxiety plays an important role in ensuring that adult learning is successful (Smith 2003).

Subject orientation sessions and introductions to lecturers were also perceived to add value to the learning process. It seems that even in distance-education situations, being able to put a face to a subject or process has a strong reassuring influence.

4.4.2 Detailed discussion and analysis of responses

Personal contact was described by RPL finalists in terms of two aspects: first contact with RPL staff and continued support such as the availability of a mentor:
First respondent: the first thought of RPL is scary... I think that the staff can try to relax the student...

Second respondent: I think by employing an effective mentoring process people coming through an RPL process would be integrated into the mainstream quicker.

Flint (1999) documents the importance of the initial meeting in an RPL process and suggests ways in which the advisor can overcome the RPL candidate’s initial fears by: discussing the candidate’s goals; demonstrating that informal/non-formal learning is valued; treating him/her with respect; and providing accurate information.

Great emphasis was placed by RPL finalists on regular contact between the RPL staff and learners in order to keep the candidate informed:

Third respondent: Always make contact with students... inform students about their progress in studies; keep learners informed of the outcome of their application (RPL).

Fourth respondent: Students sometimes tend to be anxious when no feedback is given timeously.

A number of RPL finalists’ responses suggested closer communication between academic staff and candidates, even to the degree of paying candidates visits at their workplaces:

Fifth respondent: The academic staff should improve their communication and the academic staff must visit their RPL students at their work places.

These responses sound a warning to RPL practitioners. RPL candidates' insecurity around formal studies is often a result of experiencing knowledge as something which has its locus of control firmly embedded in the realm of academia. In view of this, it would seem that the person/s in the RPL process with whom the candidate has contact are perceived by respondents to add value to the process. This indicates that an invitational even pro-active approach should be followed by all staff involved in RPL. This in turn has implications for staff training especially frontline staff and helpdesk assistants. It would seem that the first contact with the candidate is crucial to the success of the RPL process. Candidates should be actively welcomed and relaxed (see above response). Flint (1999)

46 An invitational approach has been defined by Purkey and Novak (1996: 3-4) as a democratically oriented, perceptually anchored, self-concept approach to the educative process, based on inter alia the following principles: people are able, valuable and responsible and should be treated accordingly; educating should be a collaborative, co-operative activity; people possess untapped potential in all areas of human endeavours and this potential can best be realised by places, policies, programmes and processes specifically designed to invite development and by people who are intentionally inviting with themselves and others personally and professionally.

Everything in and around educational institutions (including people) is never neutral; it is either cordially summoning or shunning.
posits "high levels of communication and especially one-to-one communication if an institution hopes to meet the needs of its adult learners successfully.

Empire State College manages evaluations of prior learning over the phone or by computer (Flint 1999) and RPL assessors at UNISA have reported conducting panel interviews telephonically if the candidate is in a geographic location which makes personal interviews difficult. If personal contact is not possible at an Open Distance Learning (ODL) institution, as is often the case in South Africa, where distances are vast and resources are few, telephone contact is a good substitute.

These findings are corroborated by Osman (2002) who indicates a similar finding. Students in her study felt alienated by administrators who did not know them as students and they experienced these officers as inflexible and insensitive.

Personal interaction is described by respondents as being interaction between learner and staff; between learners and tutors; or between learner and learner. It may take the form of tutorials offered in learners' geographical areas; subject orientations and meetings with lecturers; and encouragement by academic staff for learners to further their studies and forming study groups.

Verbs used by respondents to indicate RPL finalist perspectives on personal interaction such as encourage; explain; meet; know; assist; give; and visit strongly emphasize learners' perspectives that immediacy and even a dialogic approach should form part and parcel of support given by academic staff. Groups and face-to-face sessions were high priorities voiced by candidates.

Flint (1999) stresses the importance of personal contact in all forms: from mentoring to portfolio development courses and peer collaboration since adult learners need a supportive climate to function well. Peer collaboration is especially important since adult learning is enhanced when anxiety is minimised and experimentation is encouraged.

Van Kleef's research (1999) shows that although orientation sessions are freely available in the seven Canadian colleges in which RPL practices were researched there is no reason to believe that attending orientation sessions is a determining factor for success among learners who apply for assessments. Yet Flint (1999) points out that prospective learners need a great deal of information about their envisaged studies but cannot absorb it at one sitting and therefore must hear concepts of competence-based programmes several times phrased in consistent terminology if they are to grasp key concepts. This has implications for RPL in South Africa where many prospective learners are second or third language speakers of English (Smith 2003) and this strengthens the case for personal contact and mentoring.
A sub-theme which emerged regarding candidate support was RPL finalists’ perceptions of what constitutes valuable preparation for formal study and which elements they felt would facilitate bridging the gap between informal (non-formal) learning and formal learning. Responses indicated that when viewed in retrospect the following aspects indicated in Table 1 were considered most important to ensure success in the transition between informal (non-formal) learning and formal learning:

**TABLE 1** Aspects ensuring success as a learner (n = number of responses)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects ensuring success</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portfolio development course</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning strategies</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual support</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career counselling</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing skills</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research skills</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job readiness skills</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial aid</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An unexpected finding of the responses to this question was that learners placed a higher priority on the development of skills (portfolio-building, research, writing and job-readiness); and career counselling as preparation for making the transition between informal (non-formal) learning and formal learning than they placed on external factors such as financial aid.

**4.5 Theme 5: Staff reluctance to participate in RPL**

**4.5.1 General Summary**

Perceived reluctance on the part of academic colleagues to apply RPL or become involved in the RPL practice emerged strongly from responses by academic assessors. The reasons given were: i) RPL being an add-on to already over-burdened academic staff; ii) a lack of understanding of the RPL process; and iii) limited knowledge about RPL. These have a negative effect on staff buy-in to RPL. Research by Groenewald (2003) and Osman (2002) supports this perception. Groenewald (2003), states that academic staff are set in their ways and reluctant to move out of their comfort zones. Osman (2002) identifies insecurities of staff ìwhose traditional role has been that of teacherì

However, academic assessors reported that there is a lively interest in the practice of RPL in industry.
The single faculty at UNISA (one of four) where there was a dedicated faculty of RPL at the time of the research in 2003. An interested academic staff member separate from the RPL office and reporting directly to the Faculty Dean indicated that there had been considerable progress in RPL in that faculty in the following areas: increased buy-in from colleagues; inclusion of RPL in lecturers' KPA's (Key Performance Areas); and improvement in the standard of assessment reports.

A single institutional champion within an institution is seen as only part of the answer. An RPL champion dedicated to RPL within each faculty will do much to advance the process.

4.5.2 Detailed discussion and analysis of responses

Limited knowledge was defined by academic assessors in terms of limited knowledge of RPL in South Africa as a whole and not only limited to UNISA. Respondents felt that external marketing needs to be done, in order to make other national stakeholders aware of the benefits of RPL. They described lack of knowledge of RPL in two ways: first, intra-institutional ignorance among staff which they felt could be rectified by sustained training and communication; and second related industries' ignorance which necessitates academic institutions' outreach to industries and aligned marketing campaigns and recruitment drives. Respondents felt generally that all aspects of the South African economy and related training institutions are unaware of the options which RPL has for them:

First respondent: "You can see the companies like it ... sometimes they are even surprised when I tell them what RPL can do for you as a company but also for the learner..."

This is consistent with Osman's findings (2002) that RPL should be made available widely to students and her suggestion that written information could be disseminated via workplace organisations such as unions and professional organisations. Internationally, marketing RPL to the broad public and awareness training within the institution are seen to be crucial in the success of any RPL process (Van Kleef 1999). An interesting finding of her study is that there is usually a higher level of awareness of RPL among those learners who attend university/college full-time due to more frequent contact with college services. This has an important implication for an RPL strategy in South Africa since by its very nature RPL usually targets mature learners who prefer to study part-time.

Community awareness RPL programmes could be planned in tandem with recruitment drives, and RPL information should be made available at institutional registration venues and helpdesks during registration cycles.

Limited knowledge of RPL was linked by respondents to a second factor - staff reluctance - and as a result, the respondents felt that RPL is under-utilised at HEIs. They felt that staff training would solve
this problem:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second respondent:</th>
<th>Some are negative, lack commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Third respondent:</td>
<td>Staff training is crucial</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fourth respondent:</td>
<td>People must be positively drawn into the RPL process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A valuable suggestion for a solution to the problem of staff reluctance emerged here:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fifth respondent:</th>
<th>It should be built into the institution’s performance assessment system and institutional recognition should be given for lecturers involved in RPL.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In this discussion, respondents felt that all staff members should market RPL and therefore be well-trained in it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Sixth respondent: | Dosente kan gesensiteer word t.o.v die bemarkingsmoontlikhede vir hulle eie studentetalle (Lecturers can be sensitised regarding recruitment possibilities for their own student numbers) (researcher’s translation). |

### 4.6 Theme 6: Flexible assessment

#### 4.6.1 General Summary

The need for flexible assessment in RPL practice was emphasized throughout by academic assessors: they feel that this contributes to the success of an RPL process. However, flexible assessment was only seen as an option if it does not compromise academic standards. There was general agreement among respondents that when choosing assessment tools for RPL, staff should try to strike a balance between the individual needs of the candidate and the requirements of the lecturer and the course. Assessment tools should be ŉ chosen to suit the profile of the candidates but ŉ should not ignore lecturers’ preferences and situational context. For this reason, academic assessors strongly motivated the assessment of prior learning against clearly formulated learning outcomes. After assessment, customized training interventions were mentioned which should match the individual candidate’s profile.

When read in conjunction with the category Accountability in RPL of the questionnaire, it becomes clear that there is a fine balance between accountability and customization, and the researchers suggest that this distinction be built into an RPL strategy.

Flint (1999) rates flexibility as one of the most important themes pervading best institutional practice along with responsiveness to needs, adult-centered learning and communication. Further, he mentions it as one of the five characteristics of assessment best practice along with clarity, integrity, empathy and efficiency.
4.6.2 **Detailed Discussion and analysis of responses**

The RPL candidate profile and nature of the subject being assessed were emphasized in this discussion about flexibility:

First respondent: "It also depends on what the student prefers because I think it is also important to get information from the student as to what will suit that person best, because not everybody is good in writing and sometimes the person is maybe better in giving an oral expression of what he has learned and done so far. So one must also determine what the needs of the learner are.

Second respondent: "Ja, I think you are right, it will differ from subject to subject.

Third respondent: "So your assessment methods… (uhm)… you must look at two things there. Firstly it depends on the preference of the lecturers. Secondly it depends on the nature of the subject.

A respondent in the Engineering Faculty suggested a greater emphasis on self-assessment by means of learning outcomes published in a user-friendly booklet to aid the candidate’s self-assessment:

Fourth respondent: "What we have in mind is to compile a booklet with a detailed syllabus and then at least one past paper. You then hand that to the student so the student can go back home, have a look at the syllabus and see if it is on the standard he thinks he is. He then sits the exam. If he fails it’s his responsibility because he made the choice.

4.7 **Theme 7: Limited knowledge of RPL**

Respondents mentioned a widespread lack of knowledge about RPL in all sectors of South African society especially in education and training. Among most respondents there was consensus that there is a need for an information drive on RPL within institutions and for the broad public, since at the moment, RPL is perceived to be totally under-utilized. Coupled with this is a need for increased RPL training of academic staff.

Academic assessors stressed that institutions should be pro-active in their outreach to industries and communities. The benefits of RPL should not be limited merely to formal study: learnerships, short courses and Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) could also include RPL initiatives.

5. **IMPLICATIONS FOR AN RPL STRATEGY AT HEIS**

A successful RPL strategy should show a balance between user-friendliness and academic rigour (Smith 2003). The following factors to be included in an RPL strategy for HEIs emerged from user responses obtained in the study.
5.1 From the perspective of the RPL finalist, user-friendliness can be assured by incorporating the following into an RPL strategy:

- Regular communication between RPL staff and candidates;
- Opportunities for interaction with RPL staff and with academic staff;
- Optional face-to-face courses on portfolio development;
- Additional optional training in research skills, writing skills and job-readiness skills, and
- Learner support and career counseling.

5.2 From the perspective of the academic assessor academic rigour and accountability can be assured by incorporating the following into the strategy:

- A responsible screening process;
- A panel approach to assessment;
- Final approval of the process by higher order institutional decision-makers;
- Sufficient checks and balances to ensure that the process is academically rigorous; and
- Sufficient quality control mechanisms to ensure accountability of the process.

5.3 To overcome staff reluctance for embarking on RPL, an RPL strategy should include:

- Measures to give staff some form of recognition for participating in RPL processes, such as making it part of their Key Performance Areas (KPAs);
- Regular training in the RPL process;
- Appointing faculty champions of RPL.

5.4 Assessors should be flexible in their choice of assessment tools. Assessment tools should:

- Fit the profile of the candidate, the situation and the context;
- Offer fast-tracking in terms of theoretical knowledge in cases where candidates have shown themselves to have mastered the practical skills (applied knowledge) but lack theoretical underpinning.

6. INCORPORATION OF USER PERSPECTIVES IN THE RPL STRATEGY

User responses added a new perspective – the voice of the clients - to the RPL strategy for HEIs and are manifested in the final column, Procedures, of the matrix (See ANNEXURE A).
7. **BARRIERS TO RPL IMPLEMENTATION AS SEEN BY RPL STAFF**

This section is based on 2010 responses received from staff at UNISA’s RPL department ten years after implementation of the first RPL case in 1999 (Janakk 2011). Much of what is said in this section about institutional support for adult learners echoes findings by Castle, Osman and Munro (2006). These include: slippage between policy and institutional response, rhetoric at institutional level, and (lack of) support on the ground for adult focused initiatives, and very little incentive for academic staff to adapt their teaching practices and curricula for adult learners. Castle, Osman and Munro (2006) conclude that despite its considerable success, institutional support for adult learners remains isolated and undervalued in the broader University community.

Responses from RPL staff at UNISA in 2010 indicate that RPL is a silo with little or no impact on the rest of the institution and little recourse in times of change. The following are the main emergent themes.

8. **INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO SUCCESSFUL RPL PRACTICE: PLACEMENT WITHIN UNISA**

- The RPL Department at UNISA’s placement within the institution is seen as a major barrier: RPL Academic coordinators are placed within the Directorate of Student Admissions and Registrations, reporting to administrative line managers with no training or experience in RPL, and on post levels equal to that of registration clerks;
- Rigidity and inflexibility of systems and structures impede scheduling of challenge exams and therefore have a negative effect on shortening the time taken by the RPL process;
- A lack of commitment and understanding of RPL at UNISA at most levels — from Top Management to junior administrative staff; and
- A lack of physical and human resources results in dealing with RPL candidates in open plan offices;
- A lack of confidentiality and generally being so bogged down with administrative issues results in very little time to offer the candidate the support needed.

9. **COMMENTS:**

9.1 Even after completion of the RPL process, students come back to the RPL section for help throughout their studies. They admit it’s not your job but relate the approachability of friendly RPL staff as the magnet. RPL staff is generally seen to remove anxiety during the whole study experience and quickly become the trusted allies of the RPL candidate/student.

9.2 Since the conclusion of the studies cited above, the following progress has been noted at UNISA:

9.2.1 Exposure by the RPL staff to the entire registration process resulting from their placement in the Directorate: Student Admissions and Registrations, has led to RPL staff increased
understanding of the systemic barriers confronting registration staff. This knowledge has proved invaluable in pre-empting bureaucratic problems and ensuring \textit{acceptable} RPL documentation and evidence of assessment.

9.2.2 Increased personal contact between RPL staff and academics has broken down some staff reluctance to RPL, notably in the College of Economic and Management Sciences. The lack of commitment and even mistrust of the RPL process at many levels of the organisation has been turned around by personal contact with RPL staff, who champion the process and who mainly have post-graduate degrees in the relevant field.

9.2.3 Because of close contact between RPL staff and registration staff, the RPL process has gained credibility. A degree of trust is gradually being built.

9.2.4 It takes time and determination to build a credible RPL office within an HEI.
REFERENCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY


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Email: esmith@unisa.ac.za
ANNEXURE 1

An extract from the matrix is set out below (FIGURE 1). The complete matrix is available upon request (Smith, 2003: Chapter 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPECIALISED ACTIVITIES</th>
<th>LEVELS</th>
<th>FUNCTIONS</th>
<th>PROCEDURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLAN RPL</td>
<td>INSTITUTIONAL</td>
<td>Commit to RPL</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Research RPL models</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Customise RPL practice for SA conditions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Plan at macro level</td>
<td>Formulate institutional RPL policy</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Identify decision-makers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Address institutional staff issues:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Adapt staff job descriptions to include RPL responsibilities</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Assign responsibility for the RPL function to specific person/s</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Plan at micro-level</td>
<td>Design processes for assessment, accreditation, record-keeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Design at micro level</td>
<td>Design documentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Design management information systems e.g. databases, record-keeping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CANDIDATE</td>
<td>PLAN AT CANDIDATE LEVEL</td>
<td>PLAN INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION</td>
<td>CONDUCT FIRST MEETING WITH CANDIDATE</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Listen carefully</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Ascertain candidate’s exact needs</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Advise where necessary</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage meetings between candidate and academic staff</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Discuss further meetings</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Use an interpreter if necessary for non-mother tongue speakers</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Document successive procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Communicate regularly with candidates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPLEMENT RPL</th>
<th>INSTITUTIONAL</th>
<th>IMPLEMENT RPL PROCEDURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Candidate tracking process</td>
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<tr>
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<td>• Screening process</td>
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<td>• Assessment process</td>
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<td>• Verification process</td>
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<td>• Ratification process</td>
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<td>• Record-keeping process</td>
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<td>• Feedback process</td>
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<td>• Update records process</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGENCY</th>
<th>RPL PROCEDURES:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Manage</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maintain</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Adjust</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CANDIDATE</th>
<th>IDENTIFY CANDIDATES’ RELEVANT PRIOR LEARNING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Schedule contact between RPL staff, candidate and academic staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Refer candidate for portfolio-writing programmes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify candidates’ relevant new learning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Assess candidates’ relevant learning against learning outcomes/unit standards | **Academic procedures**  
Establish learning outcomes, standards, criteria and principles. |
| **Academic procedures**  
- Choose assessment technique or a combination of techniques e.g. portfolio assessment, interview, challenge exam, site-visit, project, assignment, demonstration  
- Suggest fast-tracking of studies where relevant  
- Avoid assessment pitfalls |  |
| **Administrative procedures**  
- Maintain documents  
- Update candidate credits  
- Communicate with candidate  
- Keep candidate informed. |  |
| **Accredit candidate learning**  
Provide post-accreditation care to candidates and where relevant, to other stakeholders such as requesting organizations |  
- Refer candidates for learner support and career counselling where necessary.  
- Refer candidates for training in research skills, writing skills and job-readiness skills where relevant |
| QUALITY ASSURE RPL | INSTITUTIONAL | Benchmark processes and procedures against international and national standards, client needs and ISO 9000 |
| AGENCY | Review RPL regularly, improve, document and communicate changes | • Conduct periodic institutional reviews<br>• Conduct periodic inter-institutional peer reviews<br>• Monitor standards of assessment and accreditation<br>• Conduct longitudinal learner monitoring |
| CANDIDATE | Ensure uniform standards of assessment across disciplines | • Adequately train/oversee training of assessors in all subject fields in RPL principles and use of assessment tools<br>• Ensure trained RPL assessor presence in all interviews/random samples<br>• Ensure uniform standard of assessment reports<br>• Ensure uniform standard of feedback correspondence<br>• Monitor success rates of RPL candidates and investigate deviations<br>• Insert checks and balances in administrative process to eliminate errors (eg correctness of subject codes, correct entries on academic records etc) |
| CANDIDATE | Monitor candidate satisfaction with process and/or outcomes of assessment | Request feedback from candidate on the assessment and accreditation processes |

**FIGURE 1: 3rd PHASE OF A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR AN RPL STRATEGY**
List of presentations alphabetically by author

Appollis, J. (Helderberg College). Do learners accessing Higher Education through alternative routes need more support than those who enter via conventional routes? (Page xx)

Botha, E. (Intertrain Consulting). Practical Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) interventions within the Manufacturing and Engineering, Forestry and Chemical sectors. (Page xx)

De Graaff, F. (Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Evaluation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) applicant’s knowledge claims into fourth year study. (Page xxx)


Hall, C. (Association of Accounting Technicians). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at the Association of Accounting Technicians (AAT). (Page xx)

Harris, J. (Prior Learning International Research Centre, Canada); Breier, M. (University of Cape Town). Understandings and drivers of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): lessons from research internationally and in South Africa. (Page xxx)

Lloyd (Steenekamp), S. (South African Qualifications Authority). Resourcing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): human resources for RPL and institutionalising RPL. (Page 138)


Michelson, E. (State University of New York ï Empire State College). Bending toward justice. (Page xxx)

Nel, J. (Mentornet). A holistic approach to Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). (Page xxx)


Pampallis, J. (Special Adviser to the Minister of Higher Education and Training). Opening Address of the national Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Conference. (Page x)
Pieters, W (Association for Project Management SA and International Project Management Association). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) alignment with qualification and certification programmes. (Page xxx)

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 xx)


Sitas, A (University of Cape Town). Why are we so disabled? Higher Education and the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Challenge. (Page x)

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 237)

Snyman, M. (University of South Africa). Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): putting policy into practice in a case study for learner support. (Page xx)

Themane, MJ. (University of Limpopo). Experiences and lessons on the use of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in accessing Higher Education at the University of Limpopo, South Africa. (Page xx)

### Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABET</td>
<td>Adult Basic Education and Training</td>
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<td>Adult Learner Friendly Institute</td>
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<td>ANOVA</td>
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<td>Independent Examinations Board</td>
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<td>IHRG</td>
<td>Industrial Health Resource Group</td>
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</table>
Acronym | Description
---|---
ISETT SETA | Information Systems, Electronics and Telecommunications Technologies Sector Education and Training Authority
INSED | In-Service Educator Development
IT | Information Technology
IPFA | Institute for Public Finance and Auditing
ICAEW | Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales
ICAS | Institute of Chartered Accountants in Scotland
IISA | Insurance Institute of South Africa
INSETA | Insurance Sector Education and Training Authority
INSMAT | Insurance Sector Education and Training Authority material development project
ICI | Intermediate Certificate of Insurance
IALS | International Adult Literacy Survey
IPMA | International Project Management Association
ISO | International Standards Organisation
JET | Joint Education Trust
JSTC | Junior Secondary Teachers’ Certificate
KPA | Key Performance Area
KPI | Key Performance Indicator
LPP | Legitimate Peripheral Participation
MUT | Mangosuthu University of Technology
merSETA | Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority
MBA | Master of Business Administration
M Ed | Master of Education
MAAT | Member of the Association of Accounting Technicians
TEQF | Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education
MAP | Multiple Assessment Pathways
NCV | National Certificate Vocational
NIACE | National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education
NLRD | National Learners’ Records Database
NPDE | National Professional Diploma in Education
NSC | National Senior Certificate
NQF | National Qualifications Framework
NSA | National Skills Authority
NSF | National Skills Fund
NSDS | National Skills Development Strategy
NUMSA | National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa
NUM | National Union of Mineworkers
NVQs | National Vocational Qualifications
<table>
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<td>Quality Management System</td>
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<td>Recognition of non-formal and informal learning</td>
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<td>SADC</td>
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<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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