



# CHAPTER 3

## ACRONYMS USED IN CHAPTER 3

<b>ABET</b>	Adult Basic Education and Training
<b>APEL</b>	Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning
<b>APL</b>	Accreditation of Prior Learning
<b>COSATU</b>	Congress of South African Trade Unions
<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>HSRC</b>	Human Sciences Research Council
<b>LET</b>	Learning from Experience Trust
<b>NCEA</b>	National Council for Educational Awards
<b>NCHE</b>	National Commission on Higher Education
<b>NCVQ</b>	National Council for Vocational Qualification
<b>NGO</b>	Non-governmental Organisation
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>NTB</b>	National Training Board
<b>NTSI</b>	National Training Strategy Initiative
<b>NUM</b>	National Union of Mine Workers

<b>NUMSA</b>	National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa
<b>NVQ</b>	National Vocational Qualification
<b>PLA</b>	Prior Learning Assessment
<b>RPL</b>	Recognition of Prior Learning
<b>SCOTVEC</b>	Scottish Vocational Education Council
<b>SETA</b>	Sector Education and Training Authority
<b>TAFE</b>	Technical and Further Education College
<b>UCT</b>	University of Cape Town
<b>USA</b>	United States of America
<b>UTS</b>	University of Technology, Sydney
<b>VET</b>	Vocational Education and Training

## CHAPTER 3

# INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING DEVELOPMENTS

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Traditionally RPL practices have been framed by *adult learning theory* and by *experiential learning* (Kolb, 1984: 16; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985: 19 - 20 and Rogers, 1986: 35).

During the twentieth century, thinkers such as John Dewey (1938), Jean Piaget (1951), Kurt Lewin (1952), Schon (1983), David Kolb (1984), Brookfield (1985), Boud and Walker (1990) have each stressed the critical importance of experiential learning to growth and development (see Chapter 1, section 1.2.2 as well as Chapter 2, section 2.3).

According to Lamdin (1997: 101) the roots of experiential learning can be traced back to Lewin (1952) and Dewey (1938):

*“Roots of experiential learning theory exist in Dewey’s (1938) insight that learning is a dialectic process integrating experience and abstractions, Lewin’s (1951) perspective that learning derives from here-and-now concrete experiences coupled with feedback loops, and Piaget’s (1951) analysis that learning involves accommodating concepts to experience and assimilating experience into concepts. Kolb (1984) synthesised these ideas into a rich framework which thoughtfully depicted learning as an active process of grasping and transforming information.”*

The basic premise of RPL that it represents sound educational practice and the notion that people learn by doing has been around for years (Cohen *et al*, 1994: 2).

According to Harris & Saddington (1995: 3)

*“...the experiential learning ‘movement’ originated in the United States of America in the radical and liberal critiques of traditional education mounted in the 1960s and broadly refers to a range of innovative and popular approaches used particularly with adult learners.”*

Simosko & Cook (1996: 10) mention that it is also possible to analyse a number of social movements to understand the origins of RPL:

*“For example, during the Middle Ages, the guild system required that the master determine when an apprentice was ready to move on to journeyman status and the journeyman on to master status. To no small extent this was a type of assessment and accreditation of prior learning.”*

However, in most countries RPL has traditionally been a relatively marginal practice in education and training conducted at a distance from the main business of the institution.

The following question needs to be asked: *What is so unique about RPL?* If it is acknowledged that experiential learning is so critical to human experience and so deeply embedded in many of the current traditions, RPL can force a person to recognise that any experience, whether formal or informal (or maybe even accidental) may provide a powerful learning opportunity for an individual. With proper assessment the outcomes of that learning experience can be formally recognised and credited.

## 3.2 RELEVANCE OF EXPERIENTIAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Experiential learning is about learners being in direct contact with what is being learned and is an approach to learning which encompasses reflection as a tool for making sense of and learning from experience. It has become almost a “movement” in education (i.e. extending beyond adult education), and has attempted to formalise the role of experience in learning (Harris, 2000: 22).

Weil & McGill (1989: 3) view experiential learning as

*“...a spectrum of meanings, practices and ideologies which emerge out of the work and commitments of policy makers, educators, trainers, change agents, and ‘ordinary people’ all over the world. They see experiential learning – with different meanings – as relevant to the challenges they currently face: in their lives, in education, in institutions, in commerce and industry, in communities, and in society as a whole. Across such diversity, however we discern four emphases for experiential learning. Each emphasis forms the basis for a cluster of interrelated ideas and concerns...We have chosen to refer to these clusters of people as ‘villages’....”*

### 3.2.1 THEORETICAL NICHE OF THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING WITHIN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

According to Harris (2000: 22) RPL has a comfortable theoretical niche within the experiential learning as one of the “four villages”. The four villages can be described as follows (Weil & McGill, 1989: 3):

3.2.1.1 *Village One* which is concerned particularly with assessing and accrediting learning from life and work experience as the basis for creating new routes into higher education, employment and training

opportunities, and professional bodies, i.e. the assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning.

3.2.1.2 *Village Two* which focuses on experiential learning as the basis for bringing about change in the structures, purposes and curricula of post-school education and training.

3.2.1.3 *Village Three* which emphasises experiential learning as the basis for consciousness raising, community action and social change.

3.2.1.4 *Village Four* which is concerned with personal growth and development and experiential learning approaches that increase self-awareness and group effectiveness.

Kolb's experiential learning cycle (see Chapter 1, figures 1.2 and 1.3) has been central to RPL methodologies. It is a cycle of growth and development that involves learners in an iterative reflective process starting from their experiences, reflecting on them, generalising from them and applying them in new situations. Thus, whilst a particular experience might generate a learning impetus, it is only after engaging in a process of observation and reflection, creating ideas and generalisation, and applying ideas to new situations that recognisable learning and understanding are seen to emerge. In short, experience by itself, does not promote learning. It leads to learning and learning to understanding. From understanding comes the ability to generalise and from that comes insight (Cohen *et al*, 1994: 12 - 13).

### 3.2.2 *THREE-STAGE MODEL OF REFLECTION*

Boud, Keogh and Walker (<http://led.gcal.ac.uk/APEL/Activities/Boud.htm>)<sup>1</sup> attempt to examine, in some detail, the process of reflection itself. They propose a three-stage model of reflection (see Chapter 1, section 1.2.2.1).

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<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from the Internet.

- 3.2.2.1 **Firstly**, the learner returns to the experience and rehearses what has happened in as much detail as possible.
- 3.2.2.2 **Secondly**, the learner attempts to recognise and accept the feelings generated by this experience – both positive and negative.
- 3.2.2.3 **Finally**, the learner re-evaluates the experience by analysing its meaning and relationship with existing knowledge.

They identify several aspects at this stage:

- (a) **integration** (seeking relationships amongst data and drawing conclusions through using a process of synthesis);
- (b) **validation** (determining the authenticity of ideas and feelings, testing for consistency, using rehearsal); and
- (c) **appropriation** (making knowledge one's own and part of a value system).

The stages in the three-stage model of reflection as described above, are not viewed as discrete stages but elements of a whole.

However, according to Weil & McGill (1989: 5), experiential learning remains a diffuse, somewhat incoherent concept that encompasses many different viewpoints and theories and refers to a wide range of disciplines and practices such as therapy; formal, non-formal and informal education; social and cultural work; community organisation and organisational development.

### 3.3 INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

According to Gawe (1999: 23) many institutions of higher learning all over the world have been assessing prior learning for over thirty years (United States, Canada, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom and Australia). The point of



departure for these institutions is the understanding that adults have generally learned a great deal from work experience, hobbies, community activities and volunteer work. The difference among the groups could lie in the manner in which the prior learning is assessed and credit granted.

In this study the focus will be on the developments in the United States, Canada, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom and Australia to establish which one or perhaps a combination of their various RPL approaches would best meet the diverse South African situations.

The driving force behind RPL developments in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland and Canada has been a mix of demographic, economic and social factors along with altruistic concerns amongst practitioners to take seriously the needs and interests of adult learners and to widen access to learning opportunities for reasons of equity. Demographic changes over recent years have led to institutions having to provide adequate services for adult learners if they were not to find themselves in acute recruitment difficulties. The economic impetus has been reinforced recently as a result of intensifying concerns at government levels regarding the skill level of the workforce as related to productivity and economic competitiveness (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 4).

### ***3.3.1 UNITED STATES OF AMERICA***

The G.I. Bill of 1946 represents one of the first examples of the use of RPL. Returning war veterans wanted their skills recognised by universities, and the G.I. Bill promoted these opportunities. It set an important precedent in establishing administrative flexibility for dealing with returning veterans. The prior learning was evaluated by each department, but still conformed to traditional course material (Olsen, 1974: 141).

In 1974 the Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning Project (CAEL) which was a three-year project (1974 – 1977), began in Princeton, New Jersey.

This project involved ten colleges and universities. There were three basic questions to be investigated during the three-year study (Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning, 1975: 11):

- 3.3.1.1 *“Is it possible to equate non-college learning with that offered in traditional college curricula?”*
- 3.3.1.2 *“If it is possible, can assessment techniques other than paper-and-pencil tests be used to evaluate the outcomes of this learning?”*
- 3.3.1.3 *“If such a system proves feasible, would it be possible to integrate the ensuing model in current educational programmes?”*

The outcomes of the project demonstrated that (Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning, 1975: 11):

- (a) *“It was possible to equate non-college learning with that of traditional college curricula.*
- (b) *It is feasible to use a wide variety of evidence in conducting valid and reliable assessments.*
- (c) *The emerging process could well be embedded in existing programmes and was of particular use with adults who were entering for the first time or returning to college or university with rich and varied experiential learning.”*

Based on these findings the Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning, set about finding valid and reliable assessment methods. Upon completion of the initial three-year research and development effort, the Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning began to operate under a new charter as a free-standing association of colleges and universities, named the *Council for the Advancement of Experiential Learning*. In 1985, to reflect the emerging implications of its initial commitments, it again took a new name, viz., *“Council for Adult and Experiential Learning” (CAEL)*. RPL became firmly established practice in academia in the United States of America in the 1970’s mainly due to the work of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 4).

Standardised exams, the challenge process, portfolio development and course evaluation are all recognised practices in the United States. According to Harris and Saddington (1995: 19) RPL is

*“...largely determined at individual institutional level. Each institution tends to conceive of its curriculum differently leading to a range of different interpretations of RPL.”*

As mentioned above, in the mid-1970s, the Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning led the pioneering research and validation efforts regarding the use of portfolio-assisted assessment as a process for determining college credit awards for learning acquired through experience. Results of a 1991 nation wide survey on Prior Learning Assessment practices throughout all the colleges and universities in the United States showed that 49 percent of the institutions reporting the use of some form of Prior Learning Assessment indicated they awarded credit based on comprehensive individualised assessment of prior learning. Of this group, 87 percent used the portfolio as the methodology for the assessment. Almost all institutions (97%) said the credit can be used at the undergraduate level, while a small portion awarded credits at the graduate level.

According to the UTS Training and Development Services (1995: 11), more than 1700 universities and colleges in the United States offer assessment and accreditation of prior learning and many have been doing so for over twenty years. Most have well-developed publicity and orientation programmes and offer academic advice. Many also provide specific courses of guidance for those students who need help in preparing and presenting their evidence of learning (often called portfolio development courses).

Colleges often produce guides showing how prior experiential learning should be presented and whether it will be treated as credit against named courses, programme equivalencies, which in the American education context is known as “bloc credits” (i.e. credit for all the units in a programme that relate to a particular subject/area of prior knowledge), general credit (i.e. credit that is not linked to a particular course - perhaps listed under independent study), or in some other way.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), now a major national professional organisation, has been dedicated to expanding lifelong learning opportunities for adults. Through collaboration with educational institutions, industry, government and labour, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) promotes learning as a tool to empower people and organisations. It has been active in initiating, developing, implementing and monitoring progress of RPL and providing training in RPL across the United States (Cohen *et al*, 1994: 6).

According to the UTS Training and Development Services (1995: 6) and Michelson (1996: 141 - 144) RPL has been used in the vocational areas in both the United States and United Kingdom

*“...as a training needs analysis tool, while concurrently helping people to value their experience and give them confidence in their ability to learn. These aspects have been particularly important in assisting the unemployed or those whose jobs are likely to be made redundant. It has also been used in joint industry/education ventures to assist those who have warning of potential redundancy. In the declining timber industry in the USA, RPL has enabled adults to gain entry to tertiary courses and acquire organisational and study skills through preparing documentation of their learning from experience.”*

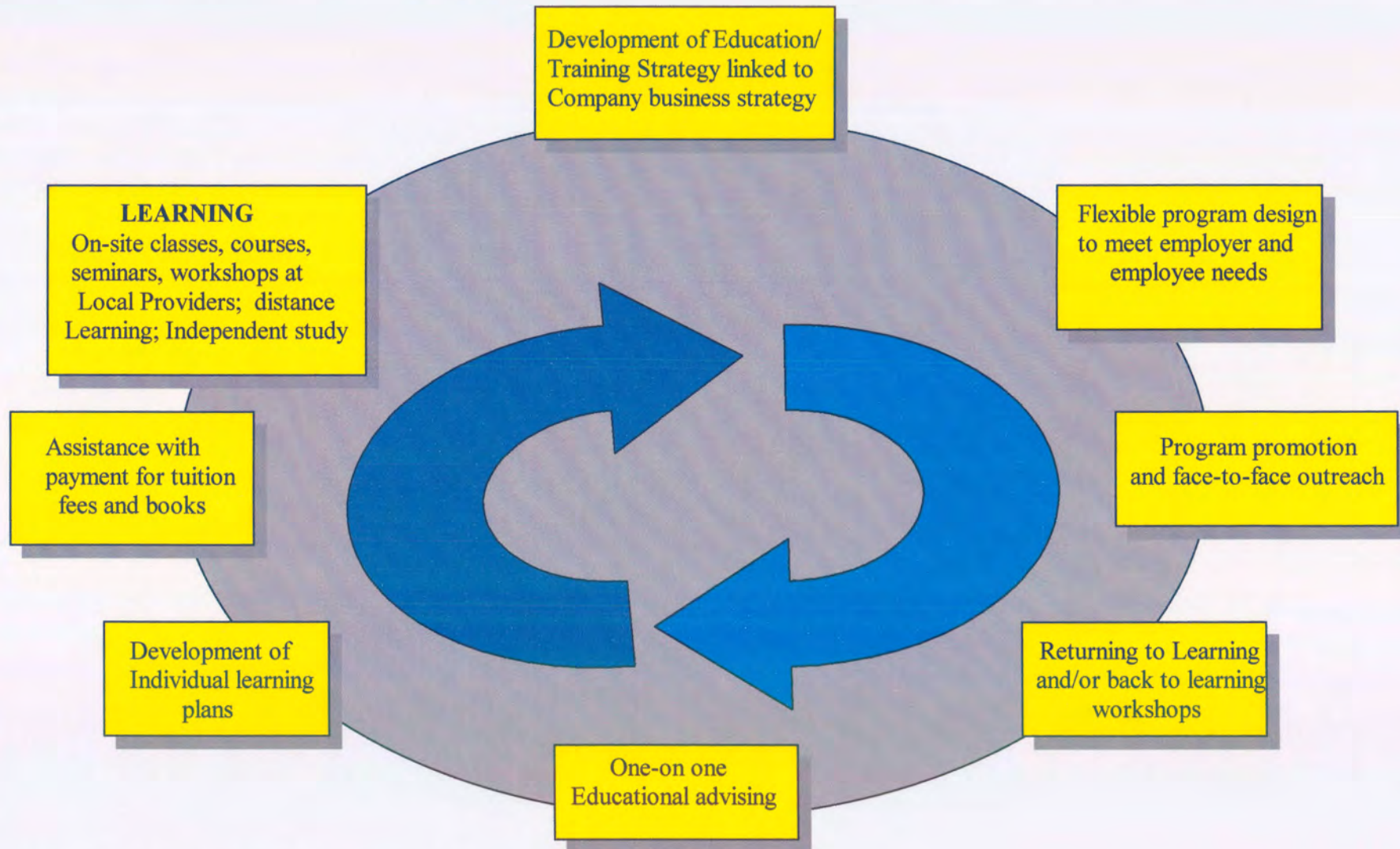
According to Simosko & Cook (1996: 12) great numbers of employers are becoming involved in the work, most often fostering RPL joint ventures with a wide range of educational and/or training providers (UTS Training and Development Services, 1995: 6). The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) is actively engaged in promoting these joint ventures to bring RPL and other educational and training programmes to people in the work place.

The key elements of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) approach to workforce development are displayed in figure 3.1.



FIGURE 3.1

## KEY ELEMENTS OF THE CAEL APPROACH TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT



Source: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 1994: 1

Today, on the average college campus, about two out of five students are combining their studies with working at full-time jobs, caring for young children, and carrying on other family and community responsibilities. More than one – third of college students today are 25 or older. In community colleges, the average age of students is 38. On most campuses, working adults predominate in evening and weekend classes (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 2000: [http://www.cael.org/pla/live\\_pl.html](http://www.cael.org/pla/live_pl.html))<sup>2</sup>.

Working adults who are returning to a learning environment often possess skills and knowledge gained through life experiences. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning helps employers and their employees to prepare for assessment of their non-collegiate learning by providing information on portfolio development, directing individuals to appropriate education institutions, and preparing them for a formal meeting with a faculty at those institutions. Figure 3.2 indicates the barriers to workforce learning that have been identified by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

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<sup>2</sup> Information obtained from the Internet.

**FIGURE 3.2**

**BARRIERS TO WORKFORCE LEARNING**

	INDIVIDUALS	EMPLOYERS
<b>PERCEPTUAL BARRIERS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Fear</b> of failure.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Anxiety</b> about change.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Negative experiences</b> in prior learning settings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Short-term</b> goals and planning.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Fear</b> that workers will take unfair advantage of education and training benefits; fear that workers will acquire new skills and leave the workplace.</li> </ul>
<b>RESOURCE BARRIERS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Time</b> to pursue learning after work hours.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Money</b> for transportation, books, childcare.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Information</b> about employers' skill needs and ways to meet those needs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Time</b> to research education and training options; time to implement strategies.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Money</b> to provide tuition reimbursement and/or training during working hours.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Information</b> about employees' current skill levels and the different ways of meeting employees' education and training needs.</li> </ul>
<b>STRUCTURAL BARRIERS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Poorly organised</b> service delivery system.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Education providers who <b>do not meet needs</b> of adult learners.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Inflexible workplace</b> organisation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Poorly organised</b> service delivery system.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Investment community's emphasis on <b>short-term profits</b> (e.g. through quarterly reporting).</li> </ul>

*Source: Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 1994: 1*

However, RPL developed in the United States and continues mainly for the purposes of academic credit, although greater numbers of employers are becoming involved through joint venture programmes. There is also a traditional commitment to mass higher and lifelong education.

### 3.3.2 UNITED KINGDOM

The assessment of prior experiential learning was introduced in Britain in the 1980s largely as an outgrowth of on-going work in the United States. They drew heavily on the work of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and on the support of key individuals within CAEL. A series of staff development study visits to the United States was planned at the beginning of the 1980s. All the tours took a similar format. During a week period some seven or eight American community colleges, liberal arts colleges and universities were visited to talk about the various ways in which the assessment of prior learning was being used. At the end of each visit participants focused on possible short and long term developments in the United Kingdom context (Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning, 1975: 11; Gamson, 1989: 12 - 14; Harris & Saddington, 1995: 5 and Simosko & Cook, 1996: 12).

Although RPL began in the United Kingdom as a means of gaining academic credit, it now has greater application to the workplace and the long-term unemployed. In 1981 the Manpower Service Commission published a review of vocational education and training called *A New Training Initiative*. It moved education further towards a market driven approach (UTS Training and Development Services, 1995: 11). According to Simosko & Cook (1996: 13) it stated the problem in unequivocal terms and provided a mandate:

*“Britain needs a flexible, adaptable work force to cope with the uncertainties which cloud the future. The technological revolution and the need to become more competitive present real challenges for as far ahead as we can see. Markets and prices for products, processes and service will continue to fluctuate. Firms and individuals must either adapt to change or become its victims.”*



The 1986 White Paper *Working Together – Education and Training* (Employment Department, 1986: 14 - 20) laid further groundwork for the introduction of APL and the competence-based assessment system.

According to Cohen *et al* (1994: 6), a social justice element has been of major concern in the initial implementation of RPL in the United Kingdom, particularly as practised by the University of East London's School of Independent Study. Other universities have adopted a more traditional purpose for implementing RPL, which was used for both entry and progression. They included Goldsmiths College at the University of London, the University of the South Bank, University of Lancaster and University of Leeds.

The Learning from Experience Trust (LET) is a United Kingdom equivalent of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) which was established in 1986. It is an independent charity with a social justice orientation aiming to develop ways in which people can make maximum use of their prior experiential learning. LET undertakes research and development work "*in the borders between the world of employment, life and leisure and formal education*" (Evans, 1992: 38). It also acts as a catalyst for changes within mainstream post-secondary education and training systems.

According to Harris & Saddington (1995: 20), there are *two* distinct national credit frameworks which have greatly influenced the way RPL has developed and is currently delivered. Both of the frameworks have enabled institutions offering RPL to move from being concerned with access for students without traditional entry requirements to being more concerned with credit towards qualifications.

At the *higher education level* the Council for National Academic Award's Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (CATS) covers 95% of the "new" universities. It is based on the principle that appropriate learning wherever it occurs, provided it can be assessed, may be recognised for academic credit towards an award (i.e. certificate, diploma, degree).

At *further education level* the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) system has established a set of industry-based occupational standards to which qualifications and training systems have been aligned.

In addition, RPL has been used successfully in cooperative ventures between industry and higher and further education. According to Evans (1987: 22) the aim of the **higher education research** was to “... *negotiate, establish, monitor and appraise schemes for the assessment of prior learning*”. **The further education research**, with an emphasis on vocational education, conducted two studies to ascertain the feasibility of using evidence from prior learning to achieve vocational qualifications. According to Harris & Saddington (1995: 5)

*“...the studies confirmed that RPL could be a useful tool in this regard and identified several positive factors – that RPL saves learner time; that it allows learners to be in greater control of their own learning and development; that it can build on individual strengths towards earning a nationally recognised qualification and that the process challenges organisations and institutions to be more flexible in their learning and assessment practices.”*

RPL has also been used in the workplace context with managers. In initial research that was conducted by the Management Charter Initiative (Simosko & Cook, 1996: 16) it was found that very few British managers over 35 years of age have had any formal management training or development, nor did they expect to receive any.

During 1989 the Employment Department supported a special project based on national competency standards for managers that was implemented (Employment Department, 1990: 19). This project was designed to help managers:

- 3.3.2.1 recognise their strengths *and* weaknesses;
- 3.3.2.2 receive formal recognition towards national management qualifications;
- and

3.3.2.3 take greater responsibility for their own development and education as managers.

According to Simosko & Cook (1996: 17) 400 managers completed the RPL process over a nine-month period and almost all earned credit towards a recognised management qualification and some were able to earn the full award.

As an outcome of the success of this project, the concept of APL was integrated with all of the Management Charter Initiatives under the banner of “*Crediting Competence*”. Managers throughout the United Kingdom are now able to have their skills and knowledge competence-assessed and recognised in the form of credit towards national qualifications.

It was in Scotland, however, that some of the significant changes were implemented initially. The acceptance of criterion-referenced assessment led to the achievement of credit no longer being tied to fixed periods of study and, hand in hand with this was a decision to implement a modular structure.

The White Paper *Working Together – Education and Training* (Employment Department, 1986: 14) made provision for the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) which was to take the lead in the reform of vocational qualifications which were to be based on nationally recognised standards of competence. In 1987 the Manpower Services Commission mounted an exploratory study and then two major feasibility projects to investigate the potential of applying APL processes to National Vocational Qualifications and, also in Scotland, National Certificate modules. The NCVQ as well as the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) both endorsed the concept of RPL (which they called APL) and recommended implementation procedures (SCOTVEC, 1990: 13 – 14).

Over the last decade or so approaches to RPL in many countries have changed. Figure 3.3 on the following page maps the shift in the portfolio development approach to RPL in the United Kingdom as the concept became embedded in the National Vocational Qualifications Framework.



### FIGURE 3.3

#### COMPARISON OF SELF-ORIENTATED AND OUTCOMES-ORIENTATED PORTFOLIOS

SELF-ORIENTATED	OUTCOMES-ORIENTATED
Portfolio created as a learning process.	Portfolio as product.
Structured by a sense of identity defined and extended through past, present and future.	Structure by existing knowledge of job or by qualification specification.
The self is explored as a process for its own sake, including areas considered private.	Presents aspects of self at present summed up to fit needs of job or qualification.
Emphasis on life experiences with focus on what has been learned from them without preconceptions about vocational or occupational relevance.	Includes lists of competencies and aptitudes appropriate to the job/qualification.
Holistic	Specific to end purpose.
All-inclusive. May or may not contain materials that will be useful in applying for jobs or gaining qualifications.	Edited for a specific purpose.

Source: Harris, 2000: 23

Practices associated with the development of the *self-orientated portfolio* draw directly from Kolb. Adults describe their experiences, reflect on them, analyse and organise them, identify the learning from them, document that learning, and (optionally) seek some form of external recognition or accreditation for it.

In Britain, North America and elsewhere, underemployed and unemployed people report

*“how much they value the opportunity to identify and reflect on all they know and can do, whether or not they achieve a qualification. Not surprisingly, improved self-confidence, so necessary to breaking the cycle of underemployment or unemployment, has been a natural outcome for many people completing the process as part of ‘returning to learning’ programmes”* (Simosko & Cook, 1996: 19).

As a result of all the developments regarding APL, Butterworth (1992: 39) argues that in the United Kingdom, the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) evolved with the notion of frameworks for credit and qualifications. APEL approaches fall into two models:

**(a) The credit-exchange model**

In this model credits are awarded for informal learning through the assessment of competence.

**(b) The developmental model**

In the developmental model the applicant explores his/her personal experience following a series of reflective exposures like keeping journals, interviews and writing biographies.

However, irrespective of which model is to follow, APL is regarded as the vehicle through which employees turn their workplace experience and training into qualifications.

### 3.3.3 AUSTRALIA

Although RPL in Australia is still in its early stages, it is already in place in a number of universities, both as an option for admission to a course or for advanced standing or credit within it. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of the Australian universities that responded to a 1992 questionnaire on RPL were able to identify a number of RPL initiatives that had taken place in various fields of study (Cohen *et al*, 1994: 3 and UTS Training and Development Services, 1994: 12).

While it is clear that few have RPL policies and procedures formally in place, a number have policies in draft stage and many are using RPL in an *ad hoc* fashion. Several universities have also initiated pilot projects for trial RPL assessment procedures, or plan to do so. Responding to the questionnaire, several universities indicated awareness of RPL and the need to introduce or (where already in place) further develop RPL (Cohen *et al*, 1994: 3).

In Australia RPL for credit is divided into two broad kinds: **learning acquired in a credentialled context other than a tertiary institution, and learning acquired in a non-credentialled context such as through work or life experience** (Gawe, 1999: 23).

RPL is also widely accepted and used in the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system. It is underpinned by the existence of industry-competency standards and competency-based curricula. These standards are linked to salary payments (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 6). In restructured awards, employees earn more salary as their skills and educational levels increase rather than as a result of time served. By altering the basis on which promotions and pay rises are determined, incentives have been positioned to encourage employees to develop their skills and knowledge (UTS Training and Development Services, 1995: 13).

According to Harris & Saddington (1995: 24), the TAFE system encompasses all education and training which is not higher education (apprenticeship training,

vocational diplomas, adult continuing education). TAFE is organised around a competence-based credit framework.

Industry and unions are also anxious to recognise the competencies of the workforce. There is close collaboration between TAFE, higher education providers and industry (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 25).

However, the Federal Government's aim over the last couple of years has been to reform vocational education and workplace training in order to assist Australia to become more internationally competitive. Fortuitously, these current changes in industry and education in Australia are readily conducive to the development and implementation of RPL (UTS Training and Development Services, 1995: 12).

In attempting to address some of these problems the Federal and State Governments have initiated a number of policies which bring together education, employment and industrial relations reforms. These policies attempt to change obsolete work practices, provide incentives for workers to develop skills and ensure that skills developed through both on and off the job training are those actually needed in industry.

According to UTS Training and Development Services (1995: 12) the major changes include:

- ❑ *“development of performance indicators based on Best Practice principles;*
- ❑ *award restructuring with a reduction in the number of job classifications*
- ❑ *job redesign;*
- ❑ *clearer definition of career paths within and across industries; and*
- ❑ *encouragement of multi-skilling to establish a more efficient and flexible workforce.”*

These micro-economic reforms, by recognising more than formal educational qualifications, were designed to remove unnecessary barriers to the free movement of labour both within and between organisations and industries. If only formal off-the-job learning is recognised, the direct training costs of award

restructuring will be prohibitive and ignore substantial relevant experience and learning.

Persson (1995: 2) mentions that national initiatives have to be developed and implemented to increase efficiency in the vocational, education and training sector. Some of these developments are:

- ❑ *“devolving responsibilities to ‘best practice’ bodies such as TAFE colleges and moving away from regulation;*
- ❑ *simplifying national structures and improving national co-ordination;*
- ❑ *piloting a ‘user choice’ approach to entry level training;*
- ❑ *allowing enterprises to select the most suitable provider for their off-job training; and*
- ❑ *improving the information services to participants in the system.”*

According to Persson (1995: 2) a national system of Vocational Education and Training (VET) must offer individuals a wide choice of training pathways. In order to meet industry’s needs for more highly skilled workers as well as to ensure fair and equitable pathways for all clients, the VET system, is faced with many challenges.

Until recently, lack of recognition of skills and qualifications has discouraged people from moving between and within states, and combined with the lack of career paths in many occupations, there has been little incentive for people to develop skills while remaining in an occupation. This in turn has led to an under-skilled workforce and an industrially uncompetitive position for Australia.

These changes have led to an interest in developing practices to measure and record competency assessments which are portable and applicable to a wide range of industrial contexts.

Many awards have been completely rewritten to include the principles of participative practices regarding the devolution of power and authority to individuals to manage their own job within a framework. The newer awards also



include a clearer delineation of career path progression from unskilled to trade to paraprofessional to professional status (UTS Training and Development Services, 1995: 13 and Persson, 1995: 2).

At the heart of these policies is the promotion of national competency standards for occupations in Australia. It is envisaged by Commonwealth and State Governments that these standards will form the basis for all other components of the training and vocational education system including curriculum development, delivery, assessment and accreditation.

According to UTS Training and Development Services (1995: 13), efforts are under way to change the education and training systems so that they can:

- “deliver competency to the standards expected in employment by the industrial parties;*
- integrate on and off the job training;*
- provide portability of qualifications across the country and across the industry;*
- recognise the outcome of training no matter where or when it took place; and*
- recognise flexible time periods for acquiring competency.”*

Social justice issues are evident in the preliminary findings of RPL initiatives of Australian universities. At least four higher education institutions are developing RPL arrangements in their programmes for Aboriginal students (Cohen *et al*, 1994: 5).

### **3.3.4 CANADA (ONTARIO)**

In Canada, RPL is developing on a provincial basis. In Ontario major modifications to the college system are currently underway. In 1991, the Minister of Colleges and Universities established an advisory committee to advise him on the development and implementation of a system of prior learning for Ontario's colleges. A series of implementation recommendations have been

published which outline developments for the three years beginning in January 1993 (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 7).

Ontario's colleges of applied arts and technology have been actively implementing Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) since 1993 when the provincial government mandated it for all courses as part of ministry-approved programmes. Special support for the initial three years of implementation ended during 1996 along with the mandate of the provincial Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) advisory body (Matthews, 1997: 6).

Following the end of targeted grants for supporting a position of local PLAR facilitator, the first challenge to the colleges was whether or not to allocate funds to maintain the position. Individuals in these positions were essential to the acceptance and expansion of PLAR. As the college's contact person, the facilitator supported the work of the local PLA advisory committee, helping to develop college policies around PLA and related issues such as learner orientation and advanced standing, and assisting in staff training. They also promoted PLA internally and externally to the community, responded to information requests and supported learners as they progressed from initial orientation to assessment of portfolios or challenge evaluations (Lizotte, 1997: 13).

According to Lizotte (1997: 13) their involvement was certainly a key to the rapid increase in the number of assessments of prior learning which took place during the three-year initiative. There were 741 assessments reported in 1993-1994, growing to 2 767 assessments in 1995-1996 - almost a four-fold increase. Although the level of activity is still small in relation to the size of the province's college system, this remains a significant increase.

Today, all colleges offer PLAR upon request, although the level of activity varies considerably among institutions and, respectively, within programme areas. In most colleges, students now approach departments directly with their requests for PLA, in some cases after having received guidance from central college service, such as the Registrar's Office or the Counselling Office.

According to Lizotte (1997: 13), PLAR has become

*“... a prominent selling point for the colleges in the key area of contract training. Today’s employers are wary of paying for duplicate training and are requiring colleges to provide clear outcomes of training programs, with flexible assessment prior, during and at the end of training. Several important training agreements have integrated recognition of prior learning as a key component.”*

Another important development during the initial three-year period was the establishment of a PLAR network through which facilitators were able to support one another while collectively boosting their pool of expertise.

Due to the financial implications of education costs, students are more conscious of the cost of educational services they receive. As a result thereof any duplication of learning is no longer acceptable. Post-secondary education itself is becoming more competitive as society embraces globalisation, the knowledge economy and lifelong learning. In this challenging context, relevance, flexibility and cost-effectiveness define successful college offerings (Lizotte, 1997: 18).

The three-year provincial PLAR initiative paved the way for Ontario colleges to establish a key tool for making lifelong learning a reality. The next few years will tell which colleges were able to capitalise on this investment. With continued advancement of PLAR, colleges will remain the “trainers of choice” for Ontario’s labour force.

### **3.3.5 IRELAND**

According to Harris and Saddington (1995: 6) RPL developments in Ireland have followed a similar path to the developments in the United Kingdom, starting with a study tour organised by the Irish National Council for Educational Awards (NCEA) in co-operation with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) and the United Kingdom Learning from Experience Trust to the United States in 1986. A working group was established to formulate a policy on RPL

for the NCEA. This policy was published during 1993. Subsequently senior academics undertook intensive training and pilot projects were initiated. RPL is now fully in operation in the non-university sector of higher education in Ireland (FAS International, 1996: 3 – 5).

Ireland does not have a national credit framework at the higher education level, although the NCEA has the role of encouraging, promoting and co-ordinating higher education outside the universities. Most curricula are based on learning outcomes. RPL within this sector is largely undertaken using the portfolio development approach supplemented by assessment interviews and additional assessment activities as required (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 24).

At the vocational level, Ireland has developed a certification framework, which in many ways is similar to the United Kingdom's National Vocational Qualification system due to the fact that it is based on industry standards, and has a competence, skills and modular focus. At this level, Ireland's Training and Employment Authority (FAS) has undertaken a special project in RPL with the purpose of developing a generic computer-based expert system which allows for qualifications to be awarded for prior and experiential learning (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 24).

FAS is a statutory awarding (certification) body in Ireland. The FAS certification structures provide both for certification of skills achieved in formal training courses, at work and in other Lifelong Learning situations. The overall approach to certification of FAS is enshrined in a Certification Framework which is designed to accommodate RPL. The FAS Certification framework is displayed in figure 3.4 on the following page (FAS, 1996: 3 - 5).

**FIGURE 3.4**  
**FAS CERTIFICATION FRAMEWORK**

<b>FRAMEWORK</b>	
<b>SKILLS FOCUS</b>	FAS certifies skills and skill levels, rather than certifying courses.
<b>MODULAR FOCUS</b>	Modular training is matched by modular assessment programmes.
<b>COMPETENCE FOCUS</b>	The emphasis is on practical and personal skills as well as related knowledge – not just knowledge alone.
<b>INDUSTRY STANDARDS</b>	Industrial endorsement is essential for national recognition of vocational training awards.
<b>ASSESSMENT BASED ON CRITERION-REFERENCED STANDARDS</b>	Each assessment is presented in terms of key objectives identifying the skills and knowledge which need to be achieved for certification purposes. These performance standards are derived from business requirements.
<b>LOCAL ADMINISTRATION AND MARKING</b>	Training, assessment and certification are subject to national monitoring to assure the reliability and integrity of the system.
<b>ACCESS TO CERTIFICATION FOR ALL TRAINEES</b>	Trainees are strongly encouraged to avail of certification at the appropriate level.
<b>PROGRESSION BASED ON FAS SKILL LEVELS</b>	In determining FAS training levels, skill levels in industry and EU training levels are used as benchmarks to assist progression.

*Source: FAS, 1996: 5*

These principles focus on the certification of skills rather than the certification of courses. As such, certification is available for acquisition of skills whether achieved in formal courses, on-the-job or in informal settings. The modular focus provides either for full certification or part credits. Candidates can then be directed in their further training towards full certification. The competence-focus emphasises the skill and vocational nature of the certification while the industry-based, criterion-referenced standards provide the links to labour market needs. According to Technikon SA (1996: 6), FAS activity in RPL stems “...*from a policy of widening access to certification*”.

RPL in FAS is referred to as “taking credit”. It is “taking credit” for what you know and can do.

It is clear from the above-mentioned developments that RPL has a well-established history in the countries discussed. RPL in South Africa is still in its infancy stages. The growing South African literature as well as the RPL developments internationally should be utilised to establish which one or perhaps a combination of the various RPL international approaches would best meet the diverse South African situations.

### **3.4 NATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS (SOUTH AFRICA)**

In 1993 the National Training Board, a tri-partite statutory body established in terms of the Manpower Training Act (Act No. 56 of 1981), began a process of negotiation between four national stakeholder groupings: employers, trade unions, education and training providers and representatives from the national Department of Education and the Department of Manpower. This process, which involved approximately one hundred and fifty people nominated from across these constituencies, culminated in the publication of the *National Training Strategy Initiative* (NTSI). The NTSI enumerated twelve principles on which a future education and training model should be based, and central amongst these is:

*“Recognition of Prior Learning – Education and training should through assessment give credit to prior learning obtained through formal, non-formal and informal learning and/or experience”* (Working Group 9 of the National Training Board, 1994: 2).

The NTSI did not itself expand on this principle to any great extent. However, RPL was an area identified as needing substantial further research and development.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, section 1.1, *formal work* on the *Recognition of Prior Learning* (RPL) in South Africa began in June 1994 when the National Training Board (NTB) established a sub-committee to address assessment issues. Prior to this point there were various initiatives at national and local levels, although they often were not officially referred to as RPL. Comparative international research and an investigation into the current status of RPL in South Africa was undertaken. This culminated in the production of several documents (Harris & Saddington, 1995: 7).

RPL has already appeared in all the major education policy documents, namely the White Paper on the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP White Paper, African National Congress, 1994: 9), the National Training Strategy Initiative – Working Group 9 of the National Training Board (1994: 3), the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education, 1995: 16), the South African Qualifications Authority Act (Act No. 58 of 1995: 5) and the Policy Document on Adult Basic Education and Training (Department of Education, 1997a: 25).

The National Education Policy Act (Act No. 27 of 1996: 1035) stipulates that every person has a right to “...*basic education and equal access to education institutions*” regardless of age, gender, racial origin, religious persuasion, sexual orientation or disability. That means that everyone has access to programmes, examinations and assessment. The assessment system for the Education and Training sector - of which RPL is a sub-set - is “...*the cornerstone of*

*transformation activities and programmes*” (Department of Education, 1997a: 117).

The radical potential of RPL has been given greater immediacy through its introduction in South Africa. Nkomo (1991: 309) argues that the post-apartheid dispensation will require profound social, political and economic transformation, but “*perhaps more daunting*” will be the task of challenging the epistemology of apartheid, that is, its embedding in formal and informal knowledge structures that were then used as justificatory strategies. In challenging traditional divisions of knowledge and, with them, divisions of labour and of power, RPL is potentially an important tool in deconstructing that epistemology. Due to fact that RPL insists,

- ❑ *firstly*, that socially useful knowledge is gained through active engagement with the world and,
- ❑ *secondly*, that work is our primary means of engagement. It recognises workers as creators of knowledge and thus encourages, according to Nkomo (1991: 309), “*...a re-conceptualization of knowledge-power relation*”.

Simultaneously, and in spite of this radical potential, RPL has evolved both academically and vocationally within quite conservative constraints. While recognising alternative sources of knowledge, academic RPL has, according to Michelson (1996: 143)

*“...never challenged the university as the sole legitimate arbiter for what is or isn’t creditable. It has therefore not proved an opportunity to enrich academic learning with alternative ways of knowing or to value knowledge for its difference from rather than its similarity to academic expertise”.*

Academic RPL in most institutions is on a “course-equivalent” basis. According to the University of Ohio (1995: 7), the process that students have to undergo for the External Student Programme consists of



*“...analysing and document [their] learning and then matching that learning to...University courses. The portfolio of learning thus assembled is then submitted to appropriate faculty members who evaluate the learning to determine if it matches what they teach.”*

Little attention has been paid to the shift from university to corporation as educational authority.

### **3.4.1 RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN THE VOCATIONAL SECTOR**

Since 1994, numerous projects regarding RPL have been embarked upon in the vocational sector.

Between June and December 1995, FAS and the Building Industry Training Board carried out a pilot project for RPL in the construction sector in South Africa. The National Training Board (NTB) and the respective Industry Training Boards have estimated that some 4 – 5 million South Africans would benefit from the process of RPL (Sonnendecker, 1995: 3). The project focused on Bricklaying and Carpentry given the extent of informal skills in this sector and also to give an impetus to the housing programme which is a key part of the Reconstruction and Development Programme. The project was carried out in Bloemfontein and focused on unemployed people from the nearby townships as well as the formal sector.

In the pilot project 315 candidates were screened and registered. Two hundred and sixty seven (267) of these candidates were advised. Two hundred and two (202) of the remaining candidates were tested of which 161 were awarded skill certificates and 19 were awarded full craft qualifications. The pilot project was successful in meeting its objectives and showed that RPL could work in the vocational sector in South Africa. It was the first project to be completed in the education and training area of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (Technikon South Africa, 1996: 9).

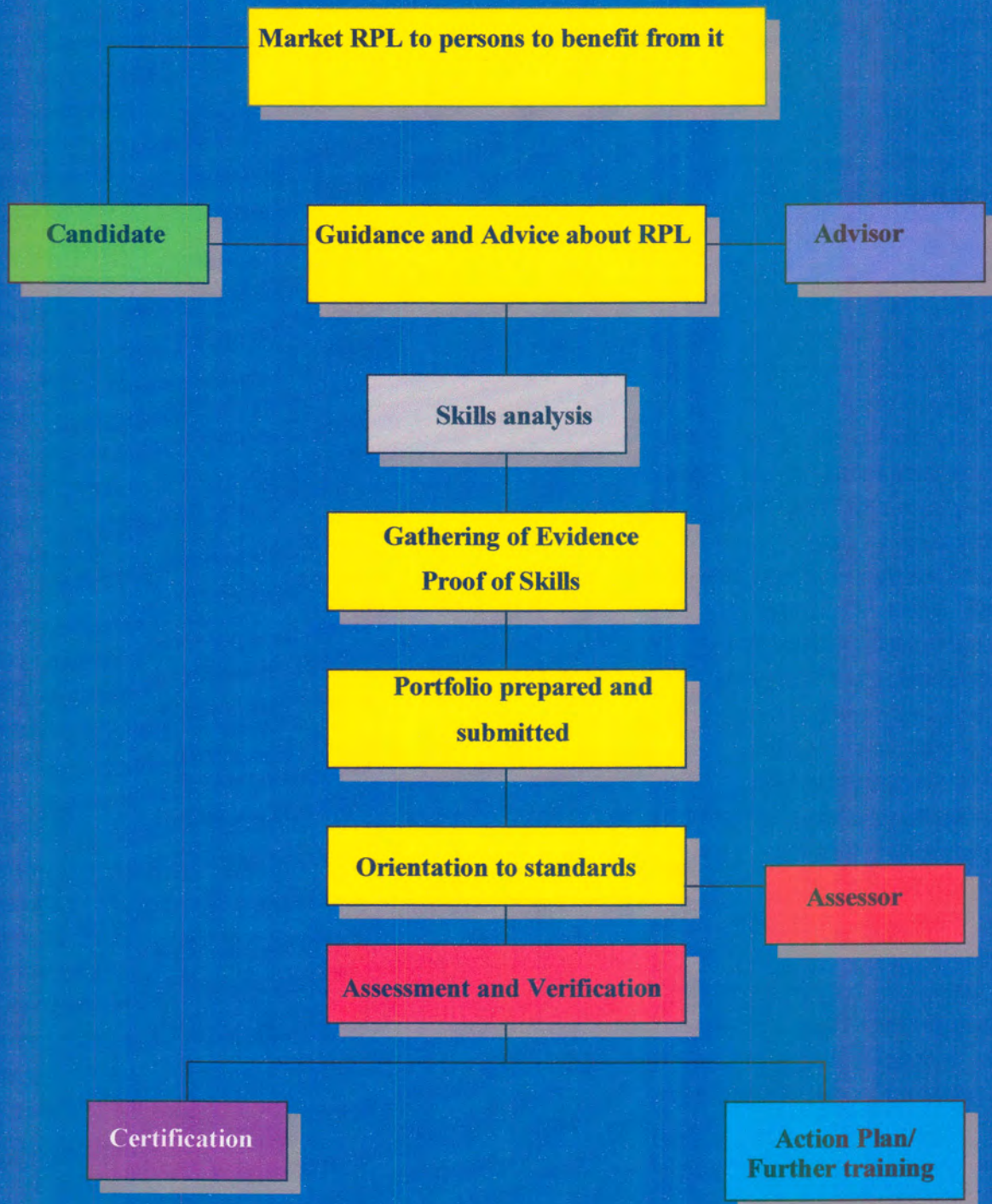
The experiences, outputs and models resulting from this pilot project form the foundation for the expansion of RPL in the construction and other sectors on a national basis. Training programmes for RPL Advisors and Assessors were developed and implemented. This resulted in certified and motivated RPL practitioners capable of managing the essential advisory and assessment process of RPL.

Links were also made with the Free State University to widen the context of the Bloemfontein project.

The RPL process as developed by the Building Industry Training Board in collaboration with FAS is displayed in figure 3.5 on the following page. Please note that in the diagram the availability of RPL facilities, Advisors, Assessors, Assessment Tests and Funding were taken for granted (Sonnendecker, 1995: 10).



**FIGURE 3.5**  
**THE RPL PROCESS**



Source: Sonnendecker, 1995: 12

Upon completion of the pilot project numerous recommendations were made of which the following are essential for the successful implementation of an RPL model (Sonnendecker, 1995: 11):

- ❑ For the RPL model to be sustainable it should be implemented as an integral component of the National Qualification Framework (NQF).
- ❑ Accreditation criteria and procedures should be developed that impact on institutions and RPL practitioners to provide a standardised model for delivery of RPL on a national basis, involving other Industry Training Boards (Sector Education and Training Authorities, hereafter referred to as SETAs)<sup>3</sup> (Department of Labour, 1999: 2) and delivered in a de-centralised cost effective system.
- ❑ The RPL process should be expanded in order to include trades and occupations in other Industry sectors.
- ❑ The Industry Training Boards (SETAs) and other approved Institutions should be assisted with the development of National Standards and Skill Test Programmes necessary to extend the accessibility of the RPL system to skilled workers in South Africa.
- ❑ Industry linkages with the RPL process should be consolidated through the provision of an on-the-job development period for successful RPL candidates to enable them to further develop their skills and experiences.

Industries should also keep in mind that employers will be responsible for upgrading staff skills and qualifications. According to the Skills Development Levies Act (Act No. 9 of 1999: 6), *“every employer must pay a skills development levy from 1 April 2000 at a rate of 0,5 % of the leviable amount and from 1 April 2001, at a rate of 1 % of the leviable amount”*.

This places a demand on companies to demonstrate the success of their training programmes in order to qualify for subsidies from the Department of Labour. The assessment and recognition of prior learning will be central to the cost-effectiveness of this scheme because the tangible evidence of learner

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<sup>3</sup> SETAs have replaced the former Industry Training Boards

achievement and accumulation of credits will be utilised to qualify companies to obtain subsidies to augment internal training programmes in the field of continuous education and training.

### ***3.4.2 WORKERS' EXPERIENCES OF THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA***

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) has played a “*pivotal role in ensuring that RPL assessment be included as a key principle of the reforming education and training system in South Africa, as RPL is seen to be an important mechanism for redressing past injustices and inequalities*” (Lugg *et al*, 1998: 1).

COSATU embarked upon a RPL research project during 1997. The project used a social research approach to learn more about RPL in the workplace and to develop an RPL policy from workers' experiences of RPL in their industries. COSATU realised that in order to change social structures for the better, and to correct the distortions of the past, it is critical to include the knowledge of those people who have been oppressed in a situation (Shuttleworth, Somerton & Vulliamy, 1994: 2 - 4). The research focused on the RPL pilot projects that were undertaken by

- ❑ the **National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA)** from 1993 – 1996; and
- ❑ the **National Union of Mine Workers (NUM)** from 1995 – 1997.

It seems that COSATU identified the RPL research projects due to several reasons. *Firstly*, RPL processes had taken place in several industries and COSATU wanted to use their members' experiences in these processes to gain a better understanding of the perceived successes and problems with RPL. *Secondly*, COSATU already had a broad RPL policy and wished to use the understanding and information gained through the research to develop more detailed policy (Lugg *et al*, 1998: 6).

### 3.4.2.1 NUMSA PROJECT

In 1993 NUMSA and the automotive employers agreed to negotiate around an industry-wide skills-based grading system and training system. It was agreed that unit standards would be used to describe the skills and knowledge against which workers would be assessed and for which they could be trained and recognised. In 1995, the automotive industry employers and NUMSA agreed to a one-time RPL process in which workers would be assessed in terms of their current competence.

The purpose of the project for NUMSA was to allow workers to progress through the grading system by demonstrating and, where necessary, increasing their skills and knowledge. NUMSA envisaged that the project would prove their members' skill and identify those who were eligible for a grade and wage increase and, that they could use the process to further NUMSA's demand for training (Lugg *et al*, 1998: 204).

Once the framework for the RPL process was agreed upon, the Automotive Training Board was given the responsibility for implementation. It was agreed that adaptations of Australian unit standards would be used to assess workers' job-related skills. The Training Board ran a workshop to adapt the Australian unit standards, and a three-day short course to prepare one union and one employer representative from each company involved in the RPL process. Company-level implementation was supposed to be carried out by a joint committee within the company.

Each company identified and trained its own assessors. The companies also developed their own assessment tools from the adapted unit standards. The RPL process took place over a six-month period which started in April 1996. Workers were assessed by an oral examination and on-the-job observation. A shop steward was supposed to be present at each assessment. Workers were given their results in the form of a number of credits which were used to determine their level in terms of the new grading system.

### 3.4.2.2 NUM PROJECT

During 1995, a pilot RPL process was implemented on a mass scale during which NUM workers were assessed for basic language and mathematical skills against the interim national communication and numeracy standards at ABET levels 1, 2 and 3. According to Lugg *et al* (1998: 7) NUM agreed to the project for two main reasons:

- (a) *“First, it provided an opportunity for members to have their language and maths skills recognized and nationally certified.*
- (b) *Second, involvement in the RPL project could strengthen NUM in the negotiations for an ABET agreement in that company“.*

The **outcomes** of the projects of the two Unions show a similarity in that the vast majority of the workers who went through the RPL process did not receive any direct benefit.

During the research process of COSATU, it became clear that there were many instances during which workers and management had gone into the RPL process with quite different intentions. Management spoke about wanting to do a skills audit so that it would have a reliable profile of the plant. The context that management painted was one which spoke about the needs and requirements of the globalising context of production, the need to be internationally competitive and the requirements from the parent company located in Asia or Europe. Much of this translated to developing a multi-skilled workforce. This dilemma of management is on-going in that training interventions are necessary to develop multi-skilled workers which in turn translated into higher wages (Lugg *et al*, 1998: 5).

COSATU, however, advocated for an integrated education and training system which focused on both worker empowerment and industrial development. From the point of view of individual workers, the focus of emphasis and discussion was consistently on availing themselves for RPL assessment, for improved material

conditions of increased pay, for acknowledgment of their skills and abilities, for acknowledgement of their contribution to the company by being re-graded, and for having increased opportunities for training and advancement in the company. When such material and personal advancement did not emerge from the RPL process, morale plummeted in an environment already low due to retrenchments in a shrinking industry (compare Cooper, 1998: 9 - 10).

According to Lugg *et al* (1998: 9) the experience of NUM and NUMSA and its members has important implications for both the ideological frame within which RPL is understood and the establishment of practical policies and procedures.

- *“First, it indicates that labour and other progressive sectors of South African society must be vigilant concerning what standards are applied and what methods are used to assess against those standards.*
  
- *Second, the ability of RPL to serve the interests of workers cannot simply be assumed, but must be concretized within particular practices that both create a supportive environment for workers and assure that workers are heard in the establishment of RPL policy.”*

### **3.4.3 THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR**

RPL is provided for as an integral part of education and training provision in South Africa. The White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education, 1995: 15) states that

*“...an integrated education and training approach linked to the NQF will open doors of opportunities to people whose academic or career paths have been unnecessarily blocked because their prior knowledge and work experience have not been assessed and certified, or because their qualifications have not been recognised for admission to further learning, or for employment purposes.”*



The National Education Policy Act (Act no. 27 of 1996: 1037) stipulates, as a guiding principle, that the education and training policy in South Africa shall be directed towards, *inter alia*, providing opportunities for and encouraging lifelong learning, as well as recognising the aptitudes, abilities, interests, *prior knowledge* and *experience* of all learners.

The Assessment Policy for Grades Reception (R) to 9 and ABET states that

*“...recognition of prior learning is an important application of assessment in ABET. It is intended to provide learners with the recognition of existing competency regardless of where, how and when it was acquired”* (Department of Education, 1998c: 8).

The policy on **adult education and training** further emphasises that

*“...recognition will be given to prior learning and experience which learners have obtained through formal, non-formal and informal means”* (Department of Education, 1997a: 25 and Department of Education, 1997b: 116 – 117).

Policy documents are clear on the role of RPL in the **further education and training** band as well as the **higher education and training** band. According to the Education White Paper 4 (Department of Education, 1998a: 33), the Department of Education, *“...in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour, SETAs and interested NGOs, academic institutions, will develop a framework for the recognition of prior learning”* with regard to **the further education and training** band.

In respect of **higher education and training** the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997f: 29) states that

*“...the Ministry [of Education] strongly supports the developmental work and pilot projects that will help institutions develop criteria to assess*

*applicants' prior learning and experience, so that those with clear potential to succeed in higher education can be admitted."*

Outlining the implications for adopting an outcomes-based NQF, the Technical Committee on the revision of *Norms and Standards for Educators* (Department of Education, 1998b: 12) maintains that

*"...the NQF provides a means of recognising prior learning. This opens the way for learners who may have informally acquired knowledge and skills to proceed with studies relevant to their level and need, without [necessarily] having attained the formal qualification, which would previously have served as a requirement for entering a learning programme."*

This Committee further argues that on-going professional development of teachers has to be achieved through a system that can recognise appropriate prior learning and experience. It recommends that institutions (higher education and training providers) should pay particular attention to developing an education system that can assess learners' prior competence and develop the administration that allows them to credit them with such competence (Department of Education, 1998b: 135).

These policy statements on RPL clearly indicate that RPL is applicable to all NQF bands.

#### **3.4.3.1 RESEARCH PROJECTS UNDERTAKEN IN THE EDUCATION AND TRAINING SECTOR**

##### **(a) RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME IN THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING**

This project started in mid-1996 and ended in September 1999. It was a joint venture between the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the University

of Cape Town (UCT) (Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies) and the Peninsula Technikon.

The overall aim of the project was to investigate RPL as an alternative access mechanism into higher education, particularly for those adults who have historically been excluded. As such RPL was seen as a practice that had the potential to contribute to redress and affirmative action. There has been little research on RPL in South Africa to date although RPL is a hallmark of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The rationales and associated research questions for the project were as follows (University of Cape Town, 2000: <http://www.uct.ac.za/dpts/adult-ed/rpl/rplpoj.htm>)<sup>4</sup>:

- “that RPL might be a way to address the legacy of apartheid education;*
- that the current educational policy context may facilitate the development of RPL;*
- that the global social and economic changes and the resultant shifting boundaries between forms of knowledge and sites of knowledge production present opportunities for the development of RPL; and*
- that individual higher education institutions may be reviewing their access/admission policies in such a way as to be open to taking account of prior learning.”*

Beyond the above rationales a set of hypotheses was also developed. Activities were divided into different phases.

**(i) PHASE 1:**

The main activities in phase 1 (September 1996 – June 1997) were:

1. The commissioning of international case studies on RPL practices.

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<sup>4</sup> Information obtained from the Internet.

2. The writing of an academic paper seeking to gain a deeper understanding of RPL policy and practice internationally over the last 20 years.
3. The commissioning of an academic paper investigating the relationship between RPL and mainstream curriculum and teaching/learning practices.
4. The writing of a second paper seeking to address questions of an RPL approach and methodology.
5. The undertaking of situational analyses in two fields: firstly, the professional development of adult educators/trainers and secondly, community nurses.

Phase 1 research led to the identification of two sites for empirical work.

## **(ii) PHASE 2**

During phase 2 (June 1997 – April 1998) agreements and detailed research questions were drawn up with the two sites and the following empirical work was undertaken:

### ***Adult educators/trainers***

The site for phase 2 work with adult educators/trainers was UCT (Department of Adult Education and Extra-Mural Studies). A curriculum was developed which could be utilised for RPL and a process was designed and implemented to widen access to the Advanced Diploma Course for Educators of Adults. This included:

#### **(aa) Design of a curriculum to facilitate the RPL process**

- further conceptualisation of RPL within the Department;
- marketing the RPL opportunity;
- selection of candidates;
- identification of criteria for assessment of candidates;
- development of curriculum content and materials to be used; and
- associated administrative work (e.g. negotiating formal admissions with university administration).

**(bb) Implementation of an RPL process**

- delivery of an orientation workshop for potential candidates;
- three consultations with each individual candidate;
- delivery of an RPL programme;
- assessment of candidates' portfolios (involving departmental staff as moderators);
- post-assessment debriefing of candidates.

***Community***

The site for phase 2 work with community nurses was the Peninsula Technikon (Department of Public Health) with a focus on post-basic level. The project Situation Analysis (phase 1) revealed the need for a different RPL process in the field of nursing. The formal and regulated nature of the field generally (plus Technikon Regulations) necessitated a longer preparatory phase prior to the development of RPL processes. Although it was not appropriate to develop a full curriculum and process at this point in time, elements and aspects of RPL were designed and implemented. These included:

**(aa) Design**

- a review of current selection and interview procedures; and
- the formulation of access criteria.

**(bb) Implementation**

- researching the prior learning of a sample of community nurses (through interviews);
- the development of a "challenge test" to further research the prior knowledge of all of the 1998 applicants to the Bridging Diploma for community nurses; and

- ❑ further lobbying and capacity building which included the establishment of a provincial interest group, the holding of seminars and meetings leading to the conceptualisation of a wider RPL project.

### **(iii) PHASE 3**

Phase 3 of the project (May 1998 – September 1999) was concerned with the development of a conceptual guide and an implementation guide for RPL – linking theory to practice and including principles, practices, assessment methodologies, roles and responsibilities, institutional issues (including policy development and implementation strategies), candidate support, curriculum implications and evaluative criteria.

The final report regarding this study is not yet available.

### **(b) THE DEVELOPMENT OF A MANAGEMENT DEGREE PROGRAMME FOR ADULT WORKERS**

The development of a Management Degree Programme for Adult Workers initiative came about during 1996 when a Task Team was appointed comprising representatives from business, industry, provincial government, NGOs and education institutions (University of the Free State, 1996: 1 - 2). The Task Team facilitated discussions with employers from the Free State region, organised labour, academics from the University of the Free State and specialists from abroad regarding the development of such a programme.

In the current stage of social transformation and political transition in the country, the need to train and empower managers in business and other organisations, with leadership skills, are critical. Addressing this need is a key element in taking the country through this difficult stage in its development. The fact that so many adult workers had no or limited access to formal training opportunities in the past, makes this all the more pertinent in the community (University of the Free State, 1996: 1). The research project departed from these premises.

The idea is to provide an educational experience that serves as a foundation for creative, co-operative and independent individuals in management positions in South Africa. Each student will have the opportunity to cultivate a capacity for understanding leadership and management development by participating in demanding educational and life experiences during the degree programme.

The learning process will take the learner through a natural development from discovery to integration, to application to synthesis and sharing of knowledge. Learners will be required to reflect on their experiences (Interview with Professor Bennie Anderson, University of the Free State, 8 May 1998). Learning will take place in both organised activities on campus and in the workplace. The outcome of learning will be documented, assessed and evaluated by both the student and the review procedures.

This programme was implemented with effect 1 January 1999. To date no progress or evaluation reports regarding this programme are available.

### **(c) ACCESS PROJECT**

The Access Project was funded by the Joint Education Trust (JET) and managed by the Management of Schools Training Programme (MSTP). The aim of the research was to evaluate whether access to the Further Diploma in Education (FDE) should be opened to school managers with a matric + 2 (M + 2) qualification, given that they perform the same functions as other school managers with a M + 3 or higher level (Musker, Host, Botha, King, Nkondo, Shalem & Slonimsky, 1998: 5).

The research was conducted through interviews with educators in relevant tertiary education programmes, a literature review, case studies in eight schools and by simulating an assignment task typical of tertiary studies in the field of educational management. In total, twenty school managers participated in the research as respondents.

At the heart of this study is the principle of RPL for educators. At the level of policy, RPL is a key principle of the NQF to be pursued across sectors. Currently, the only way to “upgrade” educators’ qualifications is through formal courses of study, and the life and work experience of M + 2 school managers is not taken into account for entrance into tertiary institutions or for qualification purposes. A fundamental feature of this project is that it examined the extent to which there are manifest differences in actual competency levels (rather than qualification levels) between M + 2 and M + 3 managers.

Through analysis of both the written assignments and the case studies, no difference was found between the management competence of the M + 2 and M + 3 school managers who participated in the study.

**(d) RPL DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NATIONAL CENTRE FOR CURRICULUM RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT (NATIONAL DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION)**

Although RPL has appeared in many policy documents since 1994, the Department of Education has not yet formulated a policy on RPL. In view of the existence of this gap, the National Centre for Curriculum Research and Development (NCCRD) set in motion a consultation process that would serve as a basis for the development of a conceptual framework for RPL.

During the conceptualisation of the project, it was agreed that the project should consist of four phases, namely (Department of Education, 1999a: 2):

- Phase 1:** Policy analysis
- Phase 2:** Literature review
- Phase 3:** Empirical investigation
- Phase 4:** Framework Development

This project is still in its initial phases. A draft report on policy analysis regarding RPL has been compiled. A report has also been completed on the theories of learning and the recognition of prior learning with a focus on



implications for South African Education and Training. This project still has a long way to go before policy on RPL for the education and training sector in South Africa will be formulated.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

Prior experiential learning is deeply connected to a context, therefore, any treatment of it will benefit from drawing on that view of mind as far as the conditions in each sector allow. RPL is only just beginning to be theorised in this way and the South African context presents opportunities to develop and extend this work. Such approaches may be *“a key to helping to ensure that RPL lives up to the equity claims made in its name and do not become alternative means of exclusion”* (Harris, 2000: 35). This can all too easily occur if there is no two-way relationship between the mainstream context and the recognition of prior learning and if the process becomes an un-problematized one-way one, whereby learners simply have to translate their prior learning into formal learning.

RPL policies have direct economic implications, both at the level of the diversion of labour on the ground and in the kinds of economic and social democracy a given society entertains. However, whether the issue is the national economic development or the promotion of social justice, not only economic power is at stake. Also at stake are the kinds of knowledge we value and who we tell ourselves we are. According to Michelson (1996: 151) it is enough to use assessment schemes

*“...to allow some women, some non-whites, some workers into the enchanted authoritative circle, or must we challenge the criteria through which some knowledge and not other knowledge is legitimated, as feminist and anti-racist theory has tried to do and value knowledge that is not necessarily available from the position of institutionalised authority?”*

In slightly other terms, experience is another word for history: whose experience counts, whose experience is remembered, whose experience attains the status of exemplary. RPL is about the stories a society chooses to tell about itself. It is a way of negotiating the politics of memory, which are always more about the future than the past. The New York City poet Langston Hughes carried with him a deep sense of the relationship between our memories and our choices (Michelson, 1996: 152). He wrote:

*“So we stand here,  
at the edge of hell  
in Harlem  
And look out at the world  
What we ’re gonna do  
In the face of  
What we remember.”*



# CHAPTER 4

## **ACRONYMS USED IN CHAPTER 4**

<b>ABET</b>	Adult Basic Education and Training
<b>ETQA</b>	Education and Training Quality Assurance Body
<b>FNTI</b>	First Nations Technical Institute
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>RPL</b>	Recognition of Prior Learning
<b>SAQA</b>	South African Qualifications Authority

## CHAPTER 4

# PRINCIPLES ESSENTIAL TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING MODEL

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

According to Cohen & Whitaker (1990: 43) successful assessment of experiential learning depends first on the identification of quality standards and then on the development of procedures and processes to assure that the standards are met. They raise the following questions regarding this:

- ❑ *“Who sets assessment standards?”*
- ❑ *“What are the vital elements of quality assurance?”*
- ❑ *“What assessment methods are most effective?”*
- ❑ *“What administrative procedures are most conducive to successful assessment?”*

Rutherford (1995: 10 – 11) supports these remarks by adding that although there are a number of assessment systems throughout the world, the most effective systems have the following in common (Fletcher, 1997: 71 – 72):

- ❑ *“They are transparent. The method of assessment, make up of the system and the standards against which assessment is being carried out are clear to anyone who looks at them.*
- ❑ *They are valid. The system provides realistic proof of competence, that skills for example, have not been assessed using only a written examination.*
- ❑ *They are reliable. Different assessors in varying locations can make the same judgement about the same candidate based on the same evidence.”*

These features do not relate to how the assessment is carried out in as much as that they can provide a wider view of how well the process worked within the assessment system. According to Rutherford (1995: 11) the system needs to have in place processes that allow assessors to clearly understand and follow the same route to successful assessment outcomes. To achieve these, a good assessment system will have built into it quality assurance processes that ensure that these features remain constant.

According to Simosko & Cook (1996: 97) assessment can be regarded as the critical activity on which the RPL system rests. The credibility of the outcome depends almost exclusively on the validity, reliability and fairness of the assessment process. Therefore, it is essential that when an RPL system is designed, it should adhere to principles of good practice in assessment.

The development of a practical RPL system(s) in South Africa is dependant on important principles. These principles can be summarised as follows (Rutherford, 1995: 122, Harris & Saddington, 1995: 26 and Cohen *et al*, 1994: 13):

- Quality assurance mechanisms.**
- Efficiency of the RPL system.**
- Equity and access.**
- Validity and reliability of the RPL system.**
- Transparency of the RPL process.**
- A curriculum based on explicit learning outcomes to be utilised for the RPL assessment.**
- Training of key players including their selection and monitoring.**

These principles will be discussed in the following section.

## 4.2 ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING MODEL

### 4.2.1 QUALITY ASSURANCE MECHANISMS

In the simplest terms, quality is all about giving people a product or service that meets their needs and expectations. Recognition of Prior Learning services will only be credible if they meet with *quality assurance* measures. According to Fletcher (1997: 85) there is little point in developing and introducing an RPL system

*“...unless an effective quality assurance model is put in place to ensure that standards, and the credibility of the system are maintained.”*

One of the central aims of the new education and training system is to ensure that all education and training provisioning meets minimum quality standards. Without the development and implementation of mechanisms for assuring the quality of learning achievements – standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework – learners will continue to be disadvantaged by receiving certificates of achievement which have little credibility or value (Department of Education, 1997b: 165).

The South African Qualifications Authority Act (Act No. 58 of 1995) as well as the Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies Regulations (SAQA, 1999: 1) provide the enabling and regulatory framework for implementing the quality assurance systems and processes required by the National Qualification Framework. Quality can be regarded as a process and quality assurance, quality management and accreditation are not products (SAQA, 1999: 6).

According to the Criteria and Guidelines for ETQAs (SAQA, 1999: 6), the quality process includes the following critical points:

- ❑ **The product or outcome**, for example the awards; achievement of standards or qualifications; accreditation;
- ❑ **The inputs**, for example learning provision; programmes; learning and learner resources; life or experiential learning; and
- ❑ **The process**, for example the quality of the learning and assessment interactions; the quality of the monitoring and auditing interactions.

Experience has shown that there are a number of steps that should be followed for RPL to be effectively implemented. RPL can improve the *quality* of education by protecting or clarifying the standards of assessment in courses (Rutherford, 1995: 199 and Cohen *et al*, 1994: 14). *Quality*, therefore, refers to the quality of the *processes* as well as the quality of the *outcomes* or the *products*.

The *processes* involved in RPL are not only related to *the way assessments are carried out*. They also include a wide range of other activities relating to the preparations for these assessments and their expected outcomes. A number of principles should be adhered to when carrying out RPL to ensure that the processes are put into the context of quality assurance. These principles are (Rutherford, 1995: 216):

- ❑ *“All assessors should have the necessary experience.*
- ❑ *All assessors should be trained to, and consistently perform at, the same standards.*
- ❑ *The element and performance criteria must be the focus of the assessment.*
- ❑ *Any assessment must first and foremost meet the needs of the workplace.*
- ❑ *The skills and knowledge gained as a result of the assessment must be usable over a wide range of situations.*
- ❑ *The system should be as simple as possible.*
- ❑ *Candidates should always have a right to appeal against an assessment decision.”*



The achievement of the desired outcomes or products is dependent on the tools used to obtain a successful result when carrying out the assessment. These tools are according to Rutherford (1995: 201) and Cohen & Whitaker (1990: 45):

- ❑ *“the competency standards against which the candidate is assessed;*
- ❑ *the resources used by the assessor and the candidate;*
- ❑ *the qualification obtained as a result of successful attainment of the required results; and*
- ❑ *the way in which an individual’s personal or professional circumstances support the assessment.”*

All the above-mentioned RPL principles as they relate to the products and processes, should be applied to all assessments and the systems implemented to support them.

#### ***4.2.2 EFFICIENCY OF A RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING SYSTEM***

Although RPL has costs attached, it can potentially save time and money for students, employers, the different educational sectors and ultimately the community. According to Cohen *et al* (1994: 14) RPL is *efficient* to provide a quality qualification in a shorter period of time by assessing and recognising an applicant’s relevant prior learning. The costs of unnecessary over-learning both for the community and students can be considerable.

According to Rutherford (1995: 220) an effective RPL system does not need lengthy, and in some cases complicated test design or statistical analysis techniques.

*“For the process to be understood by everyone, not only those taking the academic approach, everything from the way the standards are written to the way recommendations are made for certification must be couched in simple language and follow an easily understood system.”*

An *efficient* RPL system has certain benefits (refer to Chapter 2, section 2.6). According to Cohen *et al* (1994: 14) these are for:

#### **4.2.2.1 STUDENTS**

RPL means

- the possibility of obtaining a qualification in a shorter period of time;
- paying reduced fees;
- expending fewer resources; and
- decreasing the opportunity costs of education.

#### **4.2.2.2 EMPLOYERS**

- RPL involves positive partnerships between industry and educational institutions, both with the goal to develop qualified expertise in appropriate fields in a shorter time.

#### **4.2.2.3 INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT**

- For academic staff, the spin-off from RPL over time may well be more cost-efficient assessment methods that can be applied to a variety of applicants and courses.

#### **4.2.2.4 COMMUNITY**

- Community costs are reduced by the increased portability of recognised knowledge and skills, and the reduction of time spent in institutionalised training and education.

*Efficiency* is of major importance for the RPL system to function properly.

#### 4.2.3 EQUITY AND ACCESS

*Equity and access* are cornerstones of government policy. Women learners, women with special needs, youth with special needs, disadvantaged learners with special learning needs and those from lower socio-economic or minority ethnic backgrounds are encouraged to participate voluntarily in ABET programmes or to enroll in further and higher education (Department of Education, 1997a: 9 and Le Roux, 1995: 1 – 7, 19).

RPL offers a second chance for many groups targeted by equity policies in a way that recognises the knowledge and understanding they already have and thereby shortens the time needed to fulfill formal requirements (Cohen *et al*, 1994:15).

Unlike other forms of assessment, there are no educational, demographic or cultural reasons for anyone to be denied the opportunity to be assessed in an RPL system. Nor are there time limits on how and by when an individual is to be assessed, or mandatory requirements for attendance at any higher and further education or private provider's training and education programmes, or pre-requisites that must be achieved, before any part of the assessment can be carried out (Rutherford, 1995: 221).

The principles of *equity and access* require that all unnecessary barriers are removed to enable anyone with the desire and the motivation to achieve the highest level of personal achievement. The processes of a typical RPL system ensure that no barriers are put in the way of anybody seeking assessment against established standards, and the most important aspect of these processes, the quality assurance, will ensure that this will never be allowed to happen.

#### **4.2.4 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY OF A RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING SYSTEM**

##### **4.2.4.1 RELIABILITY**

According to Rutherford (1995: 12) **reliability** refers to

*“...how predictable the outcome of any assessment is. No matter how often an assessment is carried out, or how many other assessors judge the same evidence, the results should always be either the same or very close to it.”*

An RPL system is only of real value if assessors in different locations would make the same judgement about the same candidate based on the same evidence (Fletcher, 1997: 72).

**Reliability** operates at two levels (Freeman & Lewis, 1998: 24):

- that of the individual assessor*
- that of a number of assessors.*

A “**reliable**” assessor makes the same decision on a particular assignment whenever he/she marks it. This means that any trained assessor would reach the same conclusion about a person’s achievement of a particular outcome. Assessors, advisors and any other staff involved in the assessment system also play a part in ensuring reliability of the processes.

Recognised standards at a national level ensure reliability of assessment and RPL assessment will only be **reliable** if the assessment covers all the learning outcomes (Freeman & Lewis, 1998: 24). Without reliable assessments, there can be no comparability of credentials (Department of Education, 1997d: 12).

High quality standards are fundamental to *reliability*. A well-designed RPL system contains tests of *reliability* through quality control and monitoring of the process (refer to section 4.2.1 above). While the individual is being assessed against widely recognised and accepted standards, the people responsible for ensuring a successful outcome are themselves performing these functions at a set of competencies equally as widely accepted. According to Rutherford (1995: 13) these standards “...*provide uniformity and ensure reliability of all assessments carried out anywhere.*”

#### **4.2.4.2 VALIDITY**

*Validity* is an essential principle for RPL assessment. It measures what it claims to measure and what is important to measure (Freeman & Lewis, 1998: 26). A well-planned assessment is one in which the assessor and the individual being assessed are clear on *what is to be assessed* and *what evidence needs to be generated* (Sieborger & Macintosh, 1998: 11).

According to Cohen *et al* (1994: 19) *validity and reliability* are widely-accepted fundamental principles of assessment. In RPL, the *validity* of the assessment procedure is vital for the credibility of the student’s results and that of the institution.

To meet the *validity* requirements, several aspects must be included which are no different to assessment expectations for enrolled learners (Freeman & Lewis, 1998: 27 and Cohen *et al*, 1994: 19). They are:

**(a) CURRICULUM VALIDITY**

The outcome must be defined and worth achieving.

**(b) CONTENT VALIDITY**

Content validity confirms that assessment includes an appropriate sampling of the content and that the method used must be an appropriate way of assessing the performance.

**(c) FACE VALIDITY**

The assessment must seem credible to students and other stakeholders - checking that the assessment procedure appears to be appropriate.

**(d) TYPICAL AND INDICATIVE VALIDITY**

The performance assessed must be an acceptable measure of the outcome.

**(e) PREDICTIVE VALIDITY**

This confirms that candidates awarded accreditation through RPL will be able to perform as well as those selected by other means.

In addition to *validity and reliability*, issues relating to the evidence that a candidate produces, in relation to maintaining assessment standards, have also been identified.

When considering evidence that a candidate submits, the assessor will ask a question such as “*What does this evidence tell me about the individual’s performance?*” (Fletcher, 1997: 73). An assessor would need to be satisfied that:

- (i) the evidence collected from the assessment activities or pieces of evidence that are in the portfolio could be related directly to the learning outcomes being assessed;
- (ii) the evidence demonstrated clearly that learning/performance outcomes had been met; and
- (iii) that there was enough evidence.

(Department of Education, 1997d: 12; also refer to Chapter 2, section 2.9.2.3 (i); (ii); (iii) & (iv).)

To achieve and maintain *validity* throughout the RPL process means assessors and other key staff have to identify what standards are used and how to select the most appropriate assessment method. They should also understand that there may be a need for more than one method to be used to ensure competency while at the same

time understand how much evidence is enough or where more is needed (Rutherford, 1995: 12).

However, Freeman & Lewis (1998: 29) caution assessors that it is sometimes tempting to sacrifice *validity for reliability*, by concentrating only on what can most easily or consistently be measured.

#### 4.2.5 *TRANSPARENCY*

In order to obtain maximum results during an assessment every aspect of the process must be clearly seen and understood by all concerned. The RPL process should be *transparent*, i.e. it should be clear to all the candidates. According to Rutherford (1995: 11) the

*“...assessment must be based on standards that are accessible, achievable and have real meaning for both the organisation and the end-users. The methods of assessment, and their purposes, should also be clearly understood by everyone, including the candidate.”*

The methods of assessment, make up of the system and the standards against which assessment is being carried out need to be clear. Candidates will have to be informed of exactly what will be required of them.

Assessors can be held responsible for fair assessment in terms of explicit criteria. According to Lubisi, Wedekind, Parker & Gultig (1997: 14 - 15) outcomes that are registered as part of unit standards on the NQF will be open to public scrutiny and will be reviewed on a regular basis.

Fletcher (1997: 72) mentions that

*“...if standards are accessible, easily understood and have real meaning to the users, and if the assessment plans and methods are well thought out then roles and responsibilities are more easily conducted.”*

#### **4.2.6 CURRICULUM BASED ON EXPLICIT LEARNING OUTCOMES TO BE UTILISED FOR THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT**

When carrying out any assessment, the two most urgent areas needing identification are *the people to be assessed* and *the standards against which their assessment will be carried out*.

According to Harris & Saddington (1995: 27) there is international consensus that RPL is extremely difficult to operate without a curriculum based on explicit learning outcomes:

*“A learning outcome statement specifies the knowledge, skill and/or attitude that a person is expected to acquire in a given curriculum framework, enabling both teacher and student to know in advance what it is that students are expected to know and be able to do.”*

Simosko & Cook (1996: 32) mention that

*“...the process of setting standards becomes a prerequisite to offering a sound service. Whether the standards are called ‘learning outcomes’ or ‘competence-based’ standards or anything else, it is imperative that clear statements are in place and that all those involved in the assessment process – candidates, advisors, assessors, mentors and subsequent trainers or teachers – understand and can use the standards.”*



A crucial issue in the recognition of prior learning is the attainment of certain outcomes which have been made explicit. In courses in which learning outcomes are specified and where standards are clearly established and easily identifiable in relation to set criteria, all assessment processes including RPL would automatically take these into account. This includes those courses using a competency-based format.

A key role of RPL assessment is to determine whether or not these outcomes have been attained (Lubisi *et al*, 1997: 14). The emphasis will not be on the particular content of the programme, the methodology used, the duration of the programme or even whether there was a programme. The emphasis will, instead, be on what a candidate knows and can do (Department of Education, 1997c: 11 - 12).

According to Harris & Saddington (1995: 27) the South African NQF can be regarded as a fundamental means of ensuring that South Africa's education and training is integrated and co-ordinated.

#### ***4.2.7 TRAINING OF KEY PLAYERS INCLUDING THEIR SELECTION AND MONITORING***

Implementing flexible assessment strategies that embrace the concepts of RPL offers significant challenges for those responsible for staff development (Simosko & Cook, 1996: 151).

##### ***4.2.7.1 SELECTION OF KEY PLAYERS***

An effective RPL system carries with it certain functions beyond those of just the assessor and the person being assessed. According to Rutherford (1995: 21) these functions

*“...not only allow for cost and resource efficiency but also the assurance that every aspect of the assessment is covered by internal and/or external staff dedicated to the task.”*

Rutherford (1995: 23) mentions that regardless of their size and how they are structured, the following key players and their functions are common to all RPL systems:

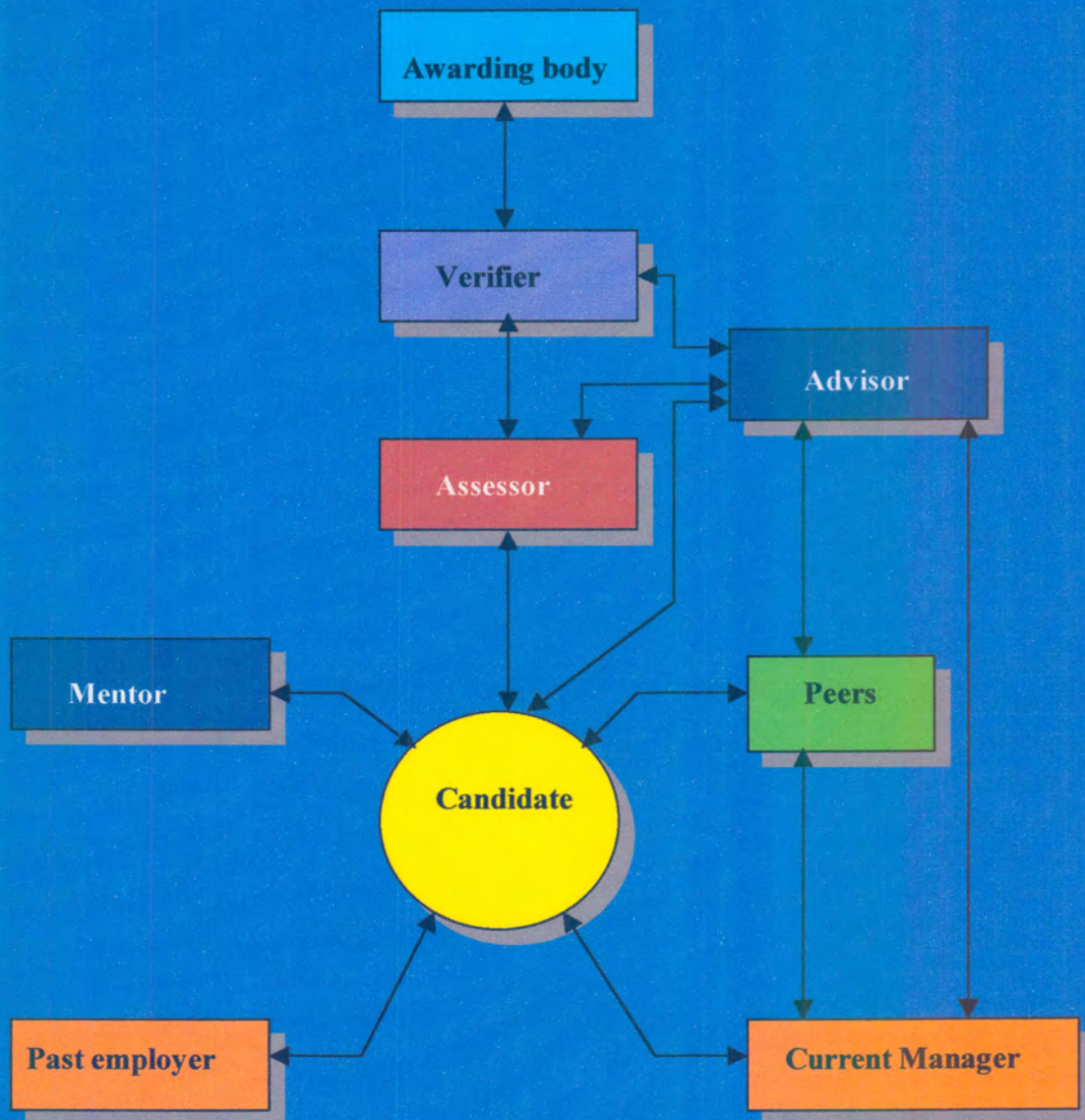
- (a) “A candidate – the person to be assessed.*
- (b) An assessor – someone to assess him or her (the candidate).*
- (c) An advisor – the provider of advice and assistance to both the assessor and the candidate.*
- (d) A verifier – someone who can maintain an overview of quality of assessment processes (including the assessment itself) being carried out.*
- (e) The candidate’s manager or supervisor – the person to whom the candidate either directly or indirectly reports.*
- (f) A mentor – another employee, either senior to or a peer of the person being assessed, who is acknowledged and respected by the candidate as a provider of advice and guidance, particularly during the assessment.*
- (g) Peers of the candidate.*
- (h) Past employers/managers/supervisors – those who may be able to provide supporting evidence of competence for the candidate.*
- (i) Independent assessors – to carry out assessments where no in-house expertise exists or when independent assessment is needed.*
- (j) Awarding body – the institution having overall responsibility for the quality of the standards and awarding the relevant certificate or qualification as a result of successful assessment.”*

The interrelationship between the key players in the RPL process is displayed in figure 4.1.



FIGURE 4.1

THE INTERRELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KEY PLAYERS  
IN THE RPL SYSTEM



Source: Rutherford, 1995: 25

The assessors play a very important role in RPL process. SAQA has established a Standards Generating Body that will develop unit standards for assessors (SAQA, 1999a: 9). Once these unit standards have been approved, they will be registered on the NQF. A person interested in becoming an accredited assessor will have to be competent in the specific outcomes of these registered unit standards. According to Fletcher (1997: 86) the following criteria are also very important when selecting an assessor:

- (i) Experience in the occupational/educational role.
- (ii) Experience in supervision/ line management.
- (iii) Willingness to undertake assessment.

#### **4.2.7.2 TRAINING OF KEY PLAYERS**

Training of RPL key players is vital. The training will incorporate the system and the processes. According to Rutherford (1995: 108) the training of key players in the RPL process should be aimed at one important objective which is to produce persons who can effectively carry out their function within an RPL system. The training event is designed to enable people to understand the importance of the role activity in order to deliver a range of advisory and assessment services and the procedures which need to be followed.

Simosko & Cook (1996: 167) mention that for the staff development to be effective,

*“...the training should reflect the needs of the staff to be trained and must include organisational policies and an adequate commitment of resources by senior management. The training programme should be based on principles of andragogy, rather than pedagogy, and as such needs to be experientially based.”*

Assessors need to understand several aspects of the RPL system (Fletcher, 1997: 87) which can be listed as follows:

- (a) the principles of RPL assessment;
- (b) what makes RPL different from other forms of assessment;
- (c) using standards of competence;
- (d) rules of assessment;
- (e) rules of evidence;
- (f) methods of assessment;
- (g) room for flexibility;
- (h) roles of assessors and individuals;
- (i) the quality-assurance structure in which the assessment system operates; and
- (j) benefits of the RPL assessment system.

Staff development is essential to the successful implementation of flexible assessment services. Every role player will be trained in the specific functions that he/she will be responsible for. According to Simosko & Cook (1996: 167) by the end of the formal training period, all key role players should be able to move back into their organisations to implement the service.

#### **4.2.7.3 MONITORING OF KEY PLAYERS**

The process of monitoring assessment is usually called *verification* and entails the checking of the on-going quality of the service (Simosko & Cook, 1996: 146). Monitoring and evaluating the RPL system are essential activities that should be conducted on a regular basis. Simosko & Cook (1996: 146) argue that due to the fact that

*“...success is so dependent on maintaining the clarity and effectiveness of each stage in the process, the quality of monitoring and evaluation will*

*require the involvement of everyone connected with the service: advisors, assessors, support staff, managers and the candidates themselves.”*

Each assessor has to be monitored to ensure reliability of the RPL assessment, i.e. that the same judgement would be reached by more than one assessor when the same collection of evidence of competence is assessed (Fletcher, 1997: 87 - 88).

Effective evaluation and monitoring is seen as one key to the complex issue of improving the following:

- (a) quality and efficiency of education and training;
- (b) quality of educational management; and
- (c) quality of educational attainment.

(Department of Education, 1997e: 12)

According to Simosko & Cook (1996: 146) the RPL service can only be monitored effectively if the providing centre

- (i) identifies what regular, on-going information needs to be collected, and
- (ii) sets performance indicators so that the information collected can be judged against these indicators.

During monitoring and evaluation information will be collected, analysed and interpreted to determine whether the RPL service or programme is meeting its overall objectives (Department of Education, 1997e: 8). By monitoring and evaluating the service on an on-going basis, the organisation will be well placed to address critical issues and improve the overall service and the effectiveness of the staff.

The essential principles for RPL assessment as described above should not be seen in isolation from the minimum standards required for an effective RPL system as well

as the assessment practices and methods (see Chapter 2, sections 2.8 and 2.9) which can be utilised for the recognition of prior learning. These principles are all inter-linked and if they are carefully adhered to, assessors can be assured of both the rigour and the credibility of their assessment choices.

### **4.3 BARRIERS TO THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT**

Adult learners in general have a number of barriers to overcome when accessing the post-secondary educational system. These barriers may be personal or physical, situational and institutional which not only deny fair access to the assessment system; they can actively discourage some people from even attempting to gain a recognised qualification. These observations stemmed from the experiences of many educators who shared their thoughts during various educational conferences and meetings (FNTI, 1994: 52).

#### ***4.3.1 PHYSICAL, PERSONAL AND SITUATIONAL BARRIERS***

According to Rutherford (1995: 221) most physical barriers are not put into place to intentionally deny access to assessment. Many are put up as a result of the work of cultural conditions that emanated at the time the programmes of facilities were first developed.

The physical and personal barriers take the form of (Rutherford, 1995: 222 and FNTI, 1994: 53)

- locations where start-up workshops, assessment or top-up training is carried out that are inaccessible to persons with physical disabilities
- the financial situation or poverty that can limit their attendance

- facilities and equipment of resources that don't take into consideration visual or hearing limitations of candidates
- mental health problems that the candidate may experience
- work commitment that the candidate may have so that he/she cannot visit the assessment centre
- very low-self esteem that the candidate may have
- cultural values or gender casting that forbid him/her from going to the assessment centre
- transport difficulties where the assessment centres are not within walking distance and no transport is available to the centres
- centers that are located in a remote area which cannot easily be reached
- lack of assessment centres in the rural areas
- lack of information
- candidates having family responsibilities
- the family of the candidates that have negative attitudes towards the RPL process
- the family of the candidates that have different priorities than the candidates
- the schedules of the classes which make it impossible for some candidates to visit the assessment centre
- workbooks etc. written in language unfamiliar to candidates (including terminology, processes etc. as well as difficulties experience by those with non-English speaking backgrounds)
- assessors who are unwilling to travel
- non-modularised training courses and programmes run by further and higher education providers
- certification processes that are either not in place or which are ineffective
- limited range of options to gain additional training or learning, especially in the rural areas
- assessment that is tied more to the provider's curriculum than to the endorsed standards
- inefficient or insufficient standards



- lack of user friendly assessment material, including workbooks and, where appropriate, computer-based assessment.

In order to overcome all the above-mentioned barriers, they first have to be identified. With a concerted effort these barriers can be removed from the assessment process, making it much more accessible for everyone interested.

#### ***4.3.2 INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS***

These barriers are created due to a lack of understanding the working of the RPL process as well as its benefits.

The barriers can be identified as follows (Rutherford, 1995: 222 – 223 and FNTI, 1994: 53):

- a lack of organisational policy towards RPL;
- admission criteria that are too strict and that make it difficult for the candidates to be accepted;
- lack of management and higher level support and commitment to the processes;
- lack of transferability of skills and experience to either the college or university system;
- lack of flexible scheduling of classes to accommodate adults on shift work and with childcare responsibilities;
- staffing levels within the educational system prevent smaller classes and provide less time for counselling and other help;
- lack of available vocational counselling;
- staff training and development policies and activities that are not linked to organisational objectives;
- the absence of bilingual/bi-cultural staff;
- inappropriately or insufficiently trained/motivated staff allocated to functions;

- ❑ lack of remediation and upgrading of the programmes;
- ❑ insufficient budget allocation to overall training and assessment needs;
- ❑ lack of cross-cultural sensitivity on the part of educational staff at all levels;
- ❑ general discrimination and racism which sometimes occur on the basis of a name or accent;
- ❑ the tendency of educational programmes not to take culture into account;
- ❑ other training and development activities used in the assessment process that are not competency-based nor modularised;
- ❑ RPL policies and procedures developed without wide input and consultation with staff, management and, where appropriate, clients;
- ❑ management's unwillingness to release staff, both assessors and candidates, or to devote time to the implementation of systems and feedback mechanisms;
- ❑ inter- and intra-organisational rivalries and fears of commercial or personal gains through participating in the processes (whether it be in the development, piloting or use of the standards); and
- ❑ support to RPL that is either inappropriate or given only for hidden political, industrial or commercial reasons.

Rutherford (1995: 223) mentions that overcoming these barriers completely

*“...may not always be possible, nor even practical, but identifying them enables assessors and candidates to use methods of assessment that can bypass them thereby avoiding discrimination against anyone seeking assessment.”*

Liebler (1999: 1) makes the following remark regarding barriers that adults will experience:

*“An essential quest of the midlife adult is a search for the meaning beyond the clutter and confusion of life events. This desire for deeper understanding*

*is further accelerated by the postmodern world demand for schooling in intricate and multi-faceted thinking competencies.”*

The barriers explained above could be experienced as a crisis which can be regarded as an unstable time during which an individual has the choice either to energise additional resources in order to grow or to resist change with such force as to stagnate or increase vulnerability.

#### 4.4 CONCLUSION

Based upon experiences of other countries it is important to note that RPL will be perceived as something new by many academic staff and, therefore, this innovation will arouse concern (Cohen *et al*, 1994: 36). The need for information and clear policy guidelines will precede the need for staff development and training programmes in RPL assessment techniques.

According to Lockett (1999: 77) it will be unwise for South African institutions to begin to try recognising the experience and learning of others without first becoming aware of and interrogating their own experience and learning and the assumptions on which these are based.

*“It is only once we are aware of the effects of our own situatedness, interpretive frames and discourses, that we will be able to appreciate the differences between ours and others’ experiences and learnings and be less confident about presuming to judge the latter. This might lead us to accept that our and others’ learning are incommensurable and that learning and adapting by both assessors and assessees will be necessary before we are able to ‘recognise’ each other” (Lockett, 1999: 78).*