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**RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL):  
IN SEARCH OF A VALID AND SUSTAINABLE MECHANISM  
FOR  
SOUTH AFRICA**

Dissertation

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by

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## PREFACE

I became interested in Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in November 2000 when I joined the South African Qualifications Authority, a statutory body established to oversee the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework. This body, at that stage, commissioned a study that ultimately led to the development and approval of a national RPL policy. I was fortunate to have been part of the intense process of consultation and consolidation that led to the adoption of the national RPL policy in June 2002.

RPL appealed to me for a number of reasons: the tremendous promise held by a process whereby all learning, regardless of how and where it was attained, captured my imagination. Here seemed to be a mechanism whereby the contributions of ordinary South Africans to communities, workplaces and society at large can be validated and affirmed. It is a process that can be incredibly empowering to the individual.

From the outset it was evident that RPL was seen as one of the key deliverables of the National Qualifications Framework, but that it was no further forward than the level of conceptualisation and debate. I felt the need to investigate how policy could become practice.

RPL in South Africa is in its infancy. Yet, good practice is already emerging and I believe the trickle will shortly become a flood as RPL is implemented in a more systemic manner. For me it is exciting to contribute to the body of knowledge that is emerging around RPL and to be part of a process that may touch the lives of thousands of ordinary people who have never stopped learning and now, increasingly, have the opportunity to be recognised for their contributions. I hope that this study will generate increased interest and take-up of a very worthwhile cause.

Ronel Heyns

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## SUMMARY

### RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING: IN SEARCH OF A VALID AND SUSTAINABLE MECHANISM FOR SOUTH AFRICA

*On its own, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is not a solution to either inequalities or unemployment, but it is an important strategy to address access to education and training for those previously excluded (SAQA, 2003a, p. 31)*

This study deals with the search for valid and sustainable mechanisms for the implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa. Some of the elements that facilitate implementation include stringent quality criteria and common benchmarks that build trust in the process and ensures the protection of the integrity of the system. In an education and training system, which is subject to intense change, RPL has an important contribution to make to the opening up of access to education and training for individuals previously denied the privilege.

## KEY WORDS

Recognition of prior learning  
Experiential learning  
Legislative and regulatory framework  
Access  
Redress  
Accountable practices  
Quality criteria  
Enabling environment  
Fit-for-purpose assessment instrument  
Practicability and sustainability

## LIST OF TERMS, ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

### A

Advanced standing	Status granted to a learner to access a level of learning at a level higher than the logical next level of education and training
Advisor	A practitioner who is responsible for assisting a learner with the identification and matching of learning against particular unit standards, learning outcomes and qualifications
APA	Accreditation of Prior Achievement (UK)
APCL	Assessment of Prior Certificated Learning (UK)
APEL	Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning (UK)
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning (UK)
Applied competence	Competence that reflects ‘foundational’, ‘practical’ and ‘reflexive’ knowledge
Assessor	A practitioner who is responsible for the assessment of the achievement of learning outcomes
AVCC	Australian Vice-Chancellor’s Committee
Awarding body	The body awarding the qualification

### C

CAEL	Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
CAPLA	Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
CBT	Competency-based Training
CEDEFOP	European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training
CETA	Construction Education and Training Authority SETA
Challenge exam	A formal examination. Usually used in the context of RPL to determine the underpinning theoretical knowledge and understanding of a candidate claiming credits towards unit standards and qualifications
CHE	Council on Higher Education
Competency	The skills and knowledge needed to perform a particular role
Competency-based Training (CBT)	Training based on the desired competencies required for a particular task/role
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions

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Credentialed Learning achieved through formal education or training (Australia)

Criterion-referenced

Training Training based on pre-determined criteria for units of learning

Credit The value assigned to a unit of learning – one credit is the minimum, representing at least 10 notional hours of learning

Credit transfer Transfer of credits towards unit standards and qualifications, usually between two (or more) institutions

CTP Committee of Technikon Principals

CUP Committee for University Principals (also known as SAUVCA)

## **D**

DoE Department of Education

DoL Department of Labour

## **E**

ETQA Education and Training Quality Assurance body

EVC Erkennen van Verworven Competenties (Netherlands)

ETDP Education and Training Development Practices SETA

Experiential Learning The knowledge and skills people have acquired through life and work experience and study, which have not been formally assessed through any educational or professional certification

External moderator (External verifier) A practitioner responsible for the process which ensures that assessments of the outcomes described in unit standards and qualifications are fair, valid and reliable, usually associated with an ETQA

## **F**

FAS Irish Training and Employment Authority

FET Further Education and Training (also FE)

FOTIM Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis

FSHFETT Free State Higher and Further Education and Training Trust

## **G**

GET	General Education and Training (also GE)
GETC	General Education and Training Certificate. The first formal exit point on the NQF (NQF level 1)

## **H**

HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education
HET	Higher Education and Training (also HE)
HRDS	Human Resource Development Strategy

## **I**

Internal moderator (Internal verifier)	A practitioner responsible for the process which ensures that assessments of the outcomes described in unit standards and qualifications are fair, valid and reliable, usually associated with a provider of education and training
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## **J**

JET	Joint Education Trust/Joint Education Services
JMB	Joint Matriculation Board

## **L**

Lifelong learning	A framework that asserts that people learn, both formally and informally, throughout their lives and that this kind of learning could be credit-bearing in terms of registered unit standards and qualifications
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## **M**

MERSETA	The Mechanical and Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority
Multi-purpose	A provider/institution who is offering qualifications covering a range of learning fields

## **N**

NCEA	National Council for Educational Awards
NFROT	National Framework for the Recognition of Training



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NPDE	National Professional Diploma in Education
NPHE	National Plan for Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSB	National Standards Body
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
<b>P</b>	
PHEI	Previously disadvantaged higher education institution
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment (USA)
PLAR	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (Canada)
<b>R</b>	
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa)
<b>S</b>	
SAFCERT	South African Certification Council
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SAUVCA	South African Universities Vice-Chancellors' Association
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
Single-purpose	A provider/institution who is offering learning programmes in primarily one field of learning. Associated with a particular Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA)
<b>T</b>	
TAFE	Training and Further Education (Australia)
<b>U</b>	
Umalusi	General and Further Education Quality Assurance Council
Un-credentialed	Learning from work experience and/or life experience Learning (Australia)
UNISA	University of South Africa
<b>V</b>	
VAP	Validation des Acquis Professionels (France)