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

Dissertation

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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
Credentialed Learning achieved through formal education or training (Australia)

Criterion-referenced 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 Verworwen Competenties (Netherlands)
ETDP Education and Training Development Practices SETA
Experiential 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 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

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

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

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

P

PHEI   Previously disadvantaged higher education institution
PLA    Prior Learning Assessment (USA)
PLAR   Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (Canada)

R

RPL    Recognition of Prior Learning (Australia, New Zealand, South Africa)

S

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)

T

TAFE   Training and Further Education (Australia)

U

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

V

VAP    Validation des Acquis Professionels (France)