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

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by

Johanna Petronella Heyns (Ronel)

**Supervisor**

Prof. SJ Howie

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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)

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*This study aims to describe current international and national practices in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and to identify mechanisms that will ensure that RPL is a credible and valid process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This is done against the background of a call for the widening of access to education and training for adults internationally, but particularly in South Africa. In South Africa, many of these adults were prevented from accessing education and training as a result of unjust educational policies of the Apartheid regime and therefore, RPL in this country has, in addition to its purpose of providing improved access to education, a socio-political redress purpose.*

In this chapter, an introduction to the research will be given and the central research problem will be described within its context (1.1). This will be followed by a discussion of the purposes and significance of the study for the implementation of a system of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa (1.2). The research questions are briefly introduced in 1.3. In 1.4, the characteristics and some limitations to the study are described. Finally, the structure for this dissertation will be outlined at the conclusion of this chapter (1.5).

#### 1.1 Problem in its Context

In 2002, a ministerial study team tasked with the review of the implementation of the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF), made the point that (Department of Education [DoE] & Department of Labour [DoL], 2002):

Of all the expectations placed on the NQF, the aspiration for a system of recognition of prior learning (RPL) was perhaps the most significant; hence the failure to establish any large-scale provision for RPL has been one of the greatest causes of current disappointment with NQF implementation (p.86).

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This disappointment stemmed from the expectation of stakeholders in education and training that a system whereby people's prior learning can be formally recognised against registered South African qualifications could facilitate Human Resource Development (HRDS) imperatives and play a significant role in the transformation of education and training in this country.

In addition, recognition of prior learning in South Africa is seen to be a key strategy to address the following issues:

- Redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities;
- Equitable access to education and training; and
- Lifelong learning as a principle for enhancing the participation of adults in education and training.

Yet, RPL in South Africa has not been implemented widely. Some of the reasons may be that RPL is being introduced in a time of intense change: education and training are being restructured in fundamental ways, both in terms of a more equitable distribution of infra-structural resources and in terms of the very structure and purpose of qualifications, the curricula, learning programmes and approaches to assessment. All of this is taking place within a vacuum of guidelines as to how to implement RPL. This has resulted in the view that RPL is a threat to the integrity of education and training, as standards will have to be lowered to accommodate learners who were not eligible for admission to formal learning programmes in the past.

For RPL to succeed, implementation strategies need to be developed that will withstand intellectual scrutiny and enable non-formal and informal learning to be recognised in relation to formal qualifications in a valid and credible manner. Such strategies must generate the commitment and support of education and training practitioners and institutions and must ensure that the integrity and quality of education and training are protected and enhanced (SAQA, 2002a).

## 1.2 Purposes and Significance of the Study

It is within this context that this study aims *to describe current international and national practices in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and to identify mechanisms that will ensure that RPL is a credible and valid process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF)*. This implies that the study will comprise an exploratory descriptive component and a component where mechanisms for the successful implementation of RPL are proposed.

Internationally and in South Africa, Recognition of Prior Learning is part of the larger debate around ease of access to education and training as a mechanism for up-skilling and multi-skilling a workforce. Therefore, in most of the countries where RPL has been implemented, improved access to further learning is linked with the economic development needs of the country. As in South Africa, internationally education and training is costly and the implementation of RPL is considered to be a cost-effective process whereby people's learning may be recognised and credited. People who have achieved learning through experience may be given access to education – not on the basis of preceding qualifications, but on the basis of what they can demonstrate in terms of their learning. This removes the need for people to attend full-time programmes and is, therefore, a saving in terms of time and cost.

Also, in addition to the commercialisation of learning (in terms of a call for more responsive and relevant learning programmes in relation to the workplace), there seems to be the recognition that the way in which learning is viewed is changing: increasingly, institutions are acknowledging that they are not the sole repositories and distributors of 'knowledge' and that informal/non-formal experiential learning are as valuable and credit-worthy in terms of formal qualifications as learning achieved through sitting in a classroom. In these countries, RPL is therefore integral to the understanding of 'experiential learning'.

It should be noted, though, that the notion that 'people learn by doing' is a principle that has been around for centuries – the so-called 'experiential learning' methodology.

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In many disciplines this is an integral part of training. In medicine, teaching and other action-learning environments, internships are a pre-requisite for professional registration and the right to practice. Whereas in these examples, learning by experience is an acceptable (and required) form of learning, RPL requires that we acknowledge that learning can be achieved from the opposite end of education and training; i.e. by learning by doing first, and then formalising skills and knowledge into a qualification, much like the apprentice who is progressively exposed to more complex tasks and with experience and learning, becomes a master artisan (Simosko & Cook, 1996).

This study therefore also intends to look at systems whereby experiential learning, as the type of learning at the opposite end of the education and training spectrum, can be viewed as academic currency for the purpose of awarding credits.

From the literature review it is evident that debates about RPL are ongoing, particularly around the credibility of RPL processes. For this reason, implementers of RPL internationally have developed stringent quality assurance guidelines as a way in which to assure the relevant authorities that RPL is not a 'sale of qualifications' or an 'easy way' of achieving credits towards registered qualifications.

For this reason, this study will therefore investigate in particular the quality assurance mechanisms used internationally, with a view to contextualise a quality assurance framework for RPL within the South African education and training environment.

It should be noted that a single, co-ordinated quality assurance process of education and training is a relatively new concept in South Africa. Only recently were bodies established, which are responsible for the quality assurance of education and training provisioning. The Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) cover all the economic sectors, as well as the Higher Education (HE), Further Education (FET) and General Education and Training (GET) bands. A key criterion for the accreditation of their constituent providers is a comprehensive quality management system. Such a quality management system should encapsulate all the activities relating to teaching and learning, including policies and review mechanisms to gauge the extent of the successful implementation of these. From the literature it seems that

where RPL has been implemented in other countries, the establishment of quality assurance criteria as a mechanism to ensure the credible and valid implementation of RPL is seen to be key. The literature review therefore highlights these quality assurance criteria.

This study is significant for South Africa for the following reasons:

- It aims to identify and describe national, contextualised practices for the implementation of RPL in South Africa.
- It wishes to contribute to the national and international debates regarding the recognition of experiential learning, access and redress.
- It intends to identify accountable practices that will ensure the credibility of RPL processes and may also have an impact on the quality assurance processes and mechanisms of providers generally.

Moreover, this study will also contribute to education research in South Africa in general, particularly in the implementation of educational policies that have as their purpose the transforming of education and training from an Apartheid system to a system responsive to the needs of the learners, the economy and the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS).

Finally, this study has a contribution to make to other developing countries trying to break free from colonialist education and training, as well as developed countries that because of changes in their workforce demographics, are implementing processes according to which people's learning can be recognised and workers can become more mobile.

### 1.3 Research Questions

This report therefore intends to answer the following critical question:

*Which mechanisms are needed to ensure that recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a valid and sustainable process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)?*

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In keeping with the aim of this study, namely to describe current international and national practices in the implementation of RPL and to identify mechanisms that will ensure that RPL is a credible and valid process, the following supporting questions were used:

- *What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?*
- *What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?*

The first supporting question therefore explored international and national characteristics of RPL systems:

*What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?*

A key element of, particularly, valid systems seem to be a high level of accountability. In the literature, this accountability is expressed as pre-defined quality criteria, which underpin every activity related to RPL. Such quality criteria cover the following activities: the establishment of policies and procedures, assessment, staff training, and resources and fees charged for RPL services.

In addition, issues of practicability and effectiveness, in the light of the criticism that RPL is resource intensive and too sophisticated to implement, are discussed.

The second supporting question addressed the elements needed for a sustainable system:

*What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?*

This question deals in particular with fit-for-purpose assessment approaches and instruments and the sustainability of RPL over time. The main focus of this study is to identify mechanisms for the successful implementation of RPL. A preliminary analysis from the literature indicated that South Africa already has the tools and structures needed for the implementation of RPL, but that these would have to be consolidated into workable, cost-effective models and approaches. This question addressed these issues in particular.

#### 1.4 Characteristics of the Study

This research report is built upon a common international understanding of the need for increased participation of adults in education and training. The recognition of prior learning is seen to be one of the mechanisms for achieving this.

However, whereas international RPL initiatives have similar purposes for implementation, i.e. a widening of access to education and training for adults, RPL in South Africa is also linked to a 'redress' imperative in terms of which people who have been prevented from entering education and training in the past can now access education through RPL. This socio-political directive complicates the implementation of RPL in South Africa: implementation is therefore not only about finding appropriate mechanisms for recognising and crediting prior learning, but also about suspending our doubt about the preparedness and abilities of candidates, particularly in the light of the 'inferior' education, the only education available to an overwhelming section of the population in the past.

The doubt about preparedness of candidates seems to be exacerbated by the tension that exists between education and training, where training is considered to be 'skills' focused and, therefore, lack the underpinning theoretical knowledge required for the successful completion of a qualification. Because thousands of applicants for RPL will come from 'skills' focused environments, it is critical that a balance is struck between the notion of 'access' as entry to further education, 'redress' as acknowledgement and valuing of prior learning, and the protection of the integrity of the system.

In a survey undertaken by the Joint Education Services (JET) in 2000, it was found that a very small number of providers have taken on the challenge of conceptualising and operationalising RPL (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001). The picture has not changed significantly since the time of that survey. Providers of education and training who have implemented RPL in South Africa are therefore being scrutinised and have a vested interest in reporting positively in terms of their RPL initiatives.

Finally, RPL in South Africa is an innovative, but largely untried, concept in education and training. This makes it difficult to determine trends and to gauge success rates, simply because it has not produced enough data for longitudinal and comparative studies.

### **1.5 Structure of the Dissertation**

Chapter 2 describes the legislative and regulatory framework within which RPL in South Africa was conceptualised and expressed. Many Acts and regulations came into being after the 1994 democratic election with the distinct purpose of enabling the transformation of education and training in this country. The extent to which such Acts, regulations and policies agree on the purposes and uses of RPL, will be explored in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 provides a review of the literature. Most studies explored emanate from initiatives implemented in developed countries such as the USA, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and France. However, a number of RPL initiatives have also been undertaken in South Africa. These studies will also be described.

Chapter 4 discusses the research questions, the conceptual framework resulting in operational research questions, followed by the research design, including the sample, research instruments, data collection and data processing procedures utilised for this study. In addition, the research methodology and research procedures for this study are presented.

The results of the first operational question are addressed in Chapter 5. This chapter deals with the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system. The results are based on the elements for such a system, emerging from international and national case studies and from the focused questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews.

Chapter 6 addresses the second operational question; i.e. the elements that are required for implementing a sustainable RPL system. It addresses in particular the

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key areas of practice upon which there seems to be international agreement for the successful implementation of RPL. This chapter focuses on an outcomes-based approach as a basis for RPL and fit-for-purpose assessment approaches to be utilised within the context of the South African education and training system.

Chapter 7 provides a summary of the main findings. In addition, conclusions are drawn and recommendations made for further research, particularly in relation to the implementation of RPL in a systemic manner.

## CHAPTER 2

### **ACTS, REGULATIONS AND POLICIES IN SOUTH AFRICA**

*Since 1994, with the establishment of a new democratically elected government, the South African education and training system has been under intense scrutiny. It is particularly in education and training that the Apartheid regime found some of its strongest expression. For this reason, South Africa's new democracy has seen the promulgation of a number of new Acts with the purpose of transforming education and training to be more inclusive of all the learners, including adult learners, of the country. The transformation of education and training has a number of objectives, which include the development of a system more responsive to the needs of the economy, individuals, and society at large. In addition, transformation processes also intend to eradicate past unjust educational policies, particularly policies that prevented people from accessing education and training. Recognition of prior learning is considered to be an important mechanism for opening up access to those previously denied the privilege of quality education. For this reason, in all the new education Acts, explicit and implicit reference is made to the widening of access to non-traditional learners.*

In this chapter, the education Acts, national policies and regulations are analysed to highlight the extent to which there is legislative and regulatory coherence and agreement on RPL and on all the aspects of its implementation.

As seen from the Acts and regulations and other formal publications, RPL seems to have become an integral part of the psyche of South African education and training. In the ministerial review (known as the 'Study Team' review) of the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (DoE & DoL, 2002), the slow progress towards the systemic implementation of RPL is mentioned as one of the current disappointments in the NQF. However, many of the Acts and regulations were formulated and promulgated long before the Study Team review of 2001/2002. The legislative and regulatory framework for the implementation of RPL, therefore, already exists.

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In 2.1 the first education Act promulgated after the 1994 elections, the South African Qualifications Authority Act, no. 58 of 1995, in particular its supporting regulations, policies and guidelines, is discussed. In 2.2, the Skills Development Act, no. 97 of 1997 and its regulations will be discussed. 2.3 will deal with the Higher Education Act, no 101 of 1997, the Education White Paper (1997, DoE, No 3), as well as the draft New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education, (also known as the NAP) (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2001). In 2.4, the Further Education and Training Act (No 98 of 1998) and policies are briefly explored.

### **2.1 The SAQA Act, Regulations, Policies and Guidelines**

The South African Qualifications Authority's *National Standards Bodies Regulations* (Number 482 of March 1998), in particular, are specific regarding Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). These regulations provide an overarching definition of RPL and are explicit about the inclusion of RPL in the development, design and construction of qualifications. For example, the requirements for the registration of qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) make clear that a qualification shall:

indicate in the rules governing the award of the qualification that the qualification may be achieved in whole or in part through the recognition of prior learning, which concept includes but is not limited to learning outcomes achieved through formal, informal and non-formal learning and work experience (p.6).

This means that every registered qualification, in principle at the very least, can be achieved through recognition of prior learning.

The Education and Training Quality Assurance Bodies Regulations (1998) relating to the SAQA Act are equally explicit about RPL, but from a quality assurance point of view: in the criteria for accreditation of providers, a provider may be accredited if it has the necessary “policies and practices for the management of assessment” (including RPL) (p.7).

In addition, SAQA as the body responsible for the development and implementation of the NQF has developed a national RPL policy, namely: The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework, (SAQA, 2002a). In this policy, RPL in the South African context refers specifically to the facilitation of “access to, and mobility and progression within education, training and career paths; and redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities” (p.9). The policy puts forward a set of quality criteria as minimum expectations for the development and implementation of RPL. (The criteria are discussed in Chapter 3 – refer to Table 3.4) Further, a guidelines document, The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (2003a) was developed with the purpose of aiding implementation at the level of the education and training provider.

## **2.2 The Skills Development Act, Regulations, Policies and Guidelines**

The Skills Development Act (No 97 of 1998) provides for an institutional framework for the implementation of national, sector and workplace strategies with the purpose of improving the skills of the South African workforce. The drive behind the development of processes for the Recognition of Prior Learning emanated mainly from the needs of the labour force to achieve recognition for learning and skills attained through work and life experiences, particularly as these people were prevented from accessing education and training by unjust educational policies of the past. This Act is explicit about the need for redress. One of the purposes of this Act is “to improve the employment prospects of persons previously disadvantaged by unfair discrimination and to redress those disadvantages through training and education” (p.4).

Under the Skills Development Act, statutory bodies with the responsibility of assuring quality education and training in designated sectors were instituted. These bodies are known as Sector Education and Training Authorities’ (SETAs). The SETAs have to facilitate development and implementation of RPL processes for the workforce in their sectors and quality assure the processes. Together with the Act, the SETAs are powerful drivers for the implementation of RPL. (Some SETA initiatives are discussed in Chapter 3.)

### 2.3 Higher Education Acts and Policies

The Higher Education Act (No 101 of 1997) states its position on access and redress in the preamble to the Act, namely that it is desirable to “REDRESS past discrimination and ensure representivity and equal access” (p.2).

However, it is in the Education White Paper (A programme for the transformation of Higher Education, No 3 of 1997), that these principles are expressed explicitly, namely that the “higher education system must be transformed to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities” (p.2).

The White Paper (No 3 of 1997) goes further to say that the Ministry [of Education’s] vision is that of a transformed, democratic, non-racial and non-sexist system of higher education that will promote equity of access and a fair chance of success to all who are seeking to realise their potential through higher education, while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities.

In addition, the White Paper (No 3 of 1997) proposes that a single, nationally coordinated system will enhance the broadening of the social base of the higher education system in terms of race, class, gender and age. It is intended that a new system will cater for a considerably more diverse body of learners than in the past. The White Paper states that higher education will open its doors, in the spirit of lifelong learning, to workers, professionals and adult learners in pursuit of multi-skilling and re-skilling, whose access to higher education was thwarted in the past.

The White Paper (No 3 of 1997) also suggests that such a system will enable the removal of “obstacles, which unnecessarily limit learners’ access to programmes, and enable proper academic recognition to be given for prior learning achieved, thus permitting greater horizontal and vertical mobility by learners in the higher education system” (p.8).

Further, in the White Paper’s (No 3 of 1997) discussion of admission and selection procedures, the issue of RPL is highlighted, in the statement that the Ministry of

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Education “strongly supports developmental work and pilot projects which will help institutions to develop criteria to assess applicants’ prior learning and experience, so that those with clear potential to succeed in higher education can be admitted” (p.15).

The Council for Higher Education (CHE) is the statutory body established to provide a single nationally coordinated system of higher education. It also has the task of managing quality assurance and quality promotion in higher education and, as such, is similar in function to the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs). For this purpose, the draft New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education (CHE, 2001) was published in December of 2001. This document is still in draft form, awaiting the outcome of the Study Team review of the implementation of the NQF. Nevertheless, the position of the CHE in terms of RPL is clear. It uses a comprehensive description of RPL, namely:

RPL is a way of recognising what individuals already know and can do. RPL is based on the premise that people learn both inside and outside formal learning structures (including learning from work and life experience) and this learning can be worthy of recognition and credit ...RPL is used extensively by those seeking: admission to a course, advanced standing for a course; or credits towards a qualification. It can also be used by those seeking entry to a particular field of employment; promotion or self-development.

The draft New Academic Policy (NAP) distinguishes between two types of RPL: the recognition of accredited learning and the recognition of prior experiential learning. The second type of RPL, in particular, is seen to be facilitated by the development of a common standardised currency in terms of the level of qualifications and the credits awarded to such qualifications. In the words of the policy, higher education institutions “will need to develop appropriate, consistent and quality assured RPL policies, practices and assessment instruments based on the specification of entry requirements and learning outcomes” (p. 104).

This position echoes the critical aspects identified in the literature; i.e. a quality assured process, and common criteria for the evaluation and assessment of prior learning.

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However, despite the Higher Education Act and the draft New Academic Policy's clear principled expression supporting the recognition of prior learning, at least two current statutory regulations are inhibiting the development and implementation of RPL within the public and private higher education institutions.

### *2.3.1 Matriculation with Endorsement as Entry Requirement to Higher Education*

In 1918, the Joint Matriculation Board (JMB) came into being as a result of a Royal Charter establishing the first South African university in 1873, with the purpose of governing the entry of candidates for first degree studies at the university. Its statutory obligations were to:

- Determine the minimum statutory requirements for first degree studies at South African universities;
- conduct the matriculation examination as the norm examination for university admission; and to
- maintain equivalent standards at various senior certificate examinations leading to university admission (South African Universities Vice-Chancellors' Association [SAUVCA], 2001).

This statute determined the criteria according to which candidates were granted access to higher education up to 4 September 1992, when the JMB was dissolved. The norm-determining and norm-equivalating functions were transferred to the South African Certification Council (SAFCERT) which was, in its turn, replaced by Umalusi (the General and Further Education Quality Assurance Council), in 2003. The function of determining university admission was transferred to the Committee of University Principals (CUP), also known as The South African Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA).

These old statutory regulations have had a profound effect on admissions to higher education. In the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (SAQA, 2003a), the following observation is made:

Many institutional practices have emanated from the deeply entrenched view that only an elite few may have access to education and training, particularly in higher education (chapter 1).

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Nevertheless, when the Matriculation Board of the Committee of University Principals came into being, a key change, with the purpose of opening up access to larger numbers of non-traditional learners, was affected. This is known as the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption, which makes provision for the admittance of non-traditional students. It reads as follows (SAUVCA, 2001):

Certificate of conditional exemption by virtue of certificate issued by the senate of a university.

- (1) The Committee of Principals shall issue a certificate of conditional exemption to a person who, in the opinion of the senate of a university, has demonstrated, in a selection process approved by that senate, that he or she is suitable for admission to bachelor's degree studies, which certificate shall be valid for admission to that university only.
- (2) The issuing of such a certificate shall be provisional and shall not entitle a university to claim a subsidy for the person before a certificate of complete exemption is issued to him, or her, but shall nevertheless entitle the university to admit him or her to bachelor's degree studies and to award credit(s) towards a degree of that university for work completed towards the degree.
- (3) Where the senate of a university certifies that a holder of a certificate of conditional exemption issued in terms of this paragraph has completed one full credit of instructional offerings, the Committee of Principals shall issue a certificate of exemption to him or her dated from the date of coming into operation of the certificate of conditional exemption (p.54).

This statement could be viewed as a form of recognising prior learning, but is applicable only to candidates who have completed their final year of schooling (grade 12). 'Non-traditional' students therefore refer only to learners who have a school leaving certificate, but without the minimum requirements for entry into a university. In this way, the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption does not cover the thousands of learners who were prevented or discouraged from completing formal schooling.

### 2.3.2 *The 50% Residency Clause*

The 50% residency clause emanates from the same old statutes (Joint Statutes, 1918), and while this clause was not originally intended to be used in terms of RPL, it is now used to avoid awarding formal credits to learners who meet most (or all) of the requirements for a particular qualification as evidenced through the assessment of prior learning. This clause was developed to facilitate credit transfer between institutions of higher learning where a learner wanted access to an institution other than the institution where he or she was first enrolled (i.e. when relocating), or when study was interrupted. Essentially it means that even if a learner meets all of the requirements for the achievement of a qualification through the recognition of his/her prior learning, that learner still has to complete 50% of the qualification with the new institution before the institution is willing to award a qualification.

While the Joint Statute has been repealed by the Higher Education Act (Number 101 of 1997), “The joint statutes and joint regulations and rules made in terms of the Universities Act, 1955 (Act 61 of 1955), and the Technikons Act, 1993 (Act 125 of 1993), continue to exist until the date or dates contemplated in subsection (2)” of the Higher Education Act. These currently pose important inhibitors to the development and implementation of RPL, particularly in higher education.

## **2.4 Further Education Acts and Policies**

As in the Higher Education Act, the Further Education and Training Act (Number 98 of 1998) states its position regarding redress and access in the preamble to the act. It is in the National Curriculum Framework for Further Education and Training (DoE, 1999), however, where more direct reference is made to recognition of prior learning:

Access to the FET band can be gained through the General Education and Training Certificate (GETC) or equivalent qualification corresponding to NQF level 1, as well as by other means, e.g. via recognition of prior learning (RPL) processes (p.4).

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In the discussion of the principles underpinning the new approach to further education and training, the issues of redress and access are referred to explicitly:

The policy Framework for Curriculum Development is based on principles that arise out of the need for redress, access, equity and quality; and drives all national policies for the reconstruction and development of education and training (p.14).

A large section of the Framework is devoted to assessment of prior learning and is highlighted as important, especially in the FET context. RPL in the FET band serves, a variety of purposes; namely it intends to:

- promote continuous learning by allowing learners who can demonstrate achievement of outcomes to progress along a learning path, irrespective of the learning context;
- allow learners to earn credits towards a qualification in less than the usual time where this is feasible;
- assist adults to capitalise on their accumulated prior knowledge and skills and thereby reduce the amount of time needed to fulfil qualification requirements;
- benefit women and those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, who may be able to demonstrate ability even though they may lack formal qualifications;
- enable learners wishing to diversify from one learning field to transfer between programmes;
- facilitate re-entering into FET programmes; and
- benefit adult learners by making available alternative routes to education and training, whilst enabling mobility in career and learning pathways, (DoE, 1999)

However, the development of RPL policies and systems has been slowest in the public FET sector. To date, no formal policy that will govern RPL at FET institutions has been drafted.

## 2.5 Conclusion

The Acts, regulations, policies, frameworks and guidelines discussed in this section represent the most important sample of the new legislative and regulatory frameworks for a transforming education and training system in South Africa. It seems that the conceptualisation, particularly regarding RPL as an important mechanism for redress and the opening up of access, have taken place and that, in principle, these formal pieces of legislation and regulation are in agreement in terms of the need for RPL in many different contexts and bands. There seems to be coherence and a common understanding of the possible purposes, and certainly of the benefits of RPL, for education and training in the wider context. However, a cautionary note seems to creep into discussion about RPL, both in the draft New Academic Policy (CHE, 2001), as well as in the discussion document: The National Curriculum Framework for the FET (DoE, 1999). In the Higher Education context for example, it is noted that:

...RPL remains a highly contested area in higher education. A key issue in the RPL debate is the nature of different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing, and whether or not RPL can serve as a catalyst for the transformation of the higher education curriculum (p.104).

Likewise, but on a more practical level, the National Curriculum Framework for FET indicates that “RPL still needs to be researched for its effective utilisation” (p.32).

This study therefore hopes to assist in taking RPL from a principled decision to practice. It hopes to do so by: firstly describing the conditions that will enable providers and practitioners to develop a framework for implementation; and secondly, by proposing ways in which standardised criteria, including quality assurance criteria, will assist in the assessment of prior learning in a credible, valid and sustainable manner.

## CHAPTER 3

### LITERATURE REVIEW

*The literature review focuses on the emergence of the characteristics of a valid and sustainable system for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in South Africa. These characteristics are based on national and international studies and are underpinned by one of the principles and key objectives of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), namely that of a highly accountable system. A valid and sustainable system seems to point to the need for well-defined structures, policies and quality assurance mechanisms. The extent to which the emerging education and training system in South Africa has already put such structures in place is compared with best practices in countries where RPL has become an integral part of their education and training.*

In this chapter, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is placed within the international debate of ease of access to, and increased participation of adults in education and training and the credibility of mechanisms that facilitate this. In 3.1 a general overview of RPL and its purposes is presented. The extent to which there is a common understanding of RPL internationally, is explored in 3.2. The emergence of the characteristics of a valid and sustainable system is discussed in 3.3. This section also starts to address the first supporting research question: *What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?* A preliminary analysis by means of a comparison between national and international approaches is presented in 3.4. Also, in 3.4, some answers emerge to the second supporting research question: *What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?* are emerging.

#### **3.1 Overview: RPL and its Purposes**

Recognition of prior learning originated in the United States of America (USA) shortly after the Second World War, with the passing of the GI Bill of 1946. There, the aim was to enable returning soldiers who had gained considerable knowledge and skills in active military duty to receive credits for learning thus acquired. The

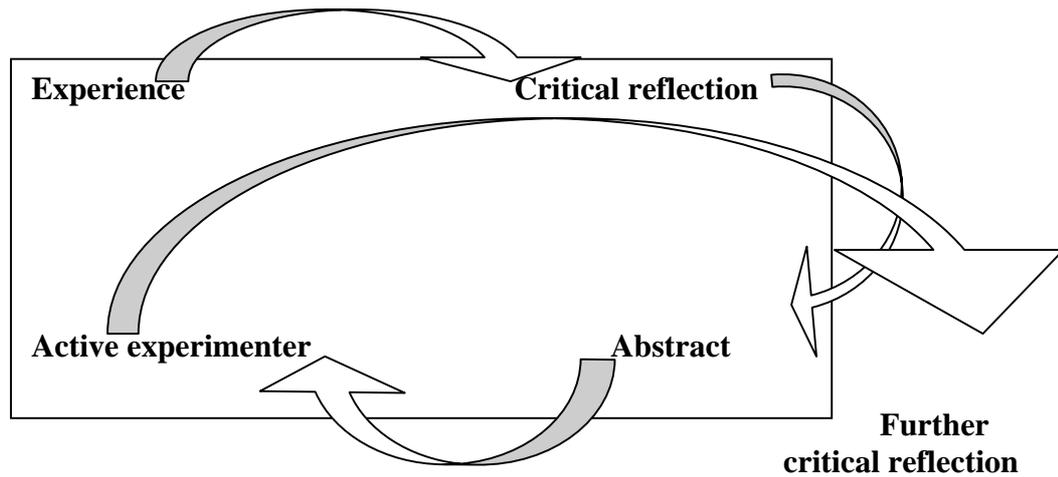
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principle upon which their learning was recognised, was the acknowledgement that people learn in formal and informal settings outside of education and training institutions, and that such learning could be equated with the learning acquired in formal institutional environments. Their learning could therefore be formalised through the award of credits or exemptions for parts of the qualifications (SAQA, 2002a, Appendix C).

This principle has been accepted in all the countries where RPL has been implemented. A simple scan of the names given to the process of recognising prior learning in the different countries indicates high levels of agreement (see Table 3.1) Yet, in most cases it became evident that equating prior experiential learning with the agreed learning encapsulated in discipline-based curricula is not a simple process. Despite the fact that, in most of the countries investigated for this study, RPL has been implemented for two decades or more, one common approach to the assessment of prior learning has not been agreed on. This may possibly be because the notion of ‘experiential learning’ as a theoretical perspective only became prominent with the experiential learning theories of David Kolb in 1984 (in Kelly, 2003).

Kelly (2003) describes ‘experiential learning’ as activities in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied. Experiential learning typically involves not merely observing the phenomenon, but also doing something with it, such as testing the action and interaction to learn more about it, or applying the theory to achieve some desired result.

On the face of it, experiential learning, as a part of “traditional classroom learning” in “cooperative education, internship, and other fields and laboratory programs” (Whitaker, 1989, p. 1) is not problematic. Presumably, such ‘practical’ applications would be subject to pre-defined assessment approaches, in line with the requirements for the curriculum. Kolb’s four elements in the experiential learning cycle describe his view of how this could enhance learning, and much of these principles have been absorbed in education, particularly in terms of the need for learners to become more ‘reflective’. Figure 3.1 represents the learning cycles which, according to Kolb (in Kelly, 2003), will support and deepen learning:



**Figure 3.1. Kolb's experiential learning cycle**

Experiential learning, according to Whitaker (1989), is about:

1. acting and observing
2. understanding the effects of the action in a specific instance
3. understanding the general principle
4. applying the general principle in new circumstances (p. 3)

Experiential learning (or learning by experience) is considered a key principle according to which prior learning could be assessed and recognised. The argument is that learning by experience enhances understanding and transferability of knowledge and skills. Experiential learning should, therefore, be an important part of formal curricula. However, the assessment of prior experiential learning, not as part of a formal curriculum - i.e. "to identify the level of knowledge of skill that has been acquired" (Whitaker, 1989, p. 2) regardless of how and where it was acquired - has been a topic of intense debate since RPL was first conceptualised.

Much research therefore, also in South Africa, where RPL is gaining prominence as a key mechanism for redress and transformation in the new education and training system, has been conducted on 'how to assess prior learning'.

Two major approaches to the assessment of prior learning emerged in the eighties and nineties – the "credit exchange model" and the "developmental model" (Butterworth,

1992, p.41). These two models are based, according to Butterworth, on two contrasting views of knowledge:

### *3.1.1 A Credit-exchange Approach*

The term “credit-exchange”, or competence-based model for the recognition of prior learning, was coined by Butterworth (1992, p.40) and is described as “the ability of the individual to perform certain job tasks or roles to a pre-defined standard” (p. 41). This type of RPL is usually closely associated with a consumer-orientated and utilitarian view of experiential learning, i.e. it looks at market-related performance as it matches or ‘fit’ prescribed outcomes. It has an “extrinsic, economic use-value” (Harris, 1999, p. 127). The only experience likely to be recognised is that which agrees with particular content of the curriculum. Luckett (1999) maintains that it is likely to be practised in the natural and applied sciences and in industrial training and workplace contexts.

The critique of this approach is in terms of the lack of engagement with the nature of knowledge. RPL undertaken in this manner challenges the “site of knowledge production”, but not “what counts as knowledge and who produces it” (Luckett, 1999, p. 71). This is a very common view of RPL, even in South Africa where extensive implementation of RPL has not yet taken place. The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) warns against the “purely technical application, dislocated from a particular individual and broader context” (p.12) where knowledge is decontextualised and discrete parts of a qualification are assessed.

Harris (1999) also suggests that credit exchange (or the “Procrustean” model as she calls this approach, p. 127) “disguises cultural and political connotations and assumptions about people and their contexts of learning. Knowledge, skills and experience are standardised and formalised with whatever falls beyond the purview of ‘standards’ being rendered invisible” (p. 127).

Other critique of this approach to RPL includes the notion that tasks, particularly tasks at the lower levels of occupations, “can be reduced to a set of repeatable procedures, and that the social context in which the job is performed does not need to be included as part of the assessment” (Butterworth, 1992, p. 40). Butterworth suggests that such

a “reductionist and atomistic” approach (p. 43) is not appropriate for the assessment of prior learning gained in complex occupations such as teaching, nursing and social work, and that it trivialises the “complexity of decisions and judgements required by the individual in such contexts” (p.45).

### 3.1.2 A Developmental Approach

Butterworth (1992) then proposes an improved approach to RPL – that of the developmental model. In this model, the emphasis is not on the matching of competence with pre-agreed standards where, if a successful ‘fit’ is established credit is given to the learner, but rather on what the learner has learnt through the experience. Evans, (1992) maintains in this regard:

The insistence throughout must be that the experience of a student is significant only as a source of learning. The intellectual task of moving from a description of experience to an identification of the learning derived from that experience is demanding. But if it cannot be accomplished, there is no learning to assess, however important to the individual that experience may have been (p. 7).

This approach was developed with the emergence of Kolb’s (in Kelly, 2003) ‘experiential learning’ theories. More importantly, Kolb’s ‘learning cycles’ were increasingly used as the preferred approach to determining prior learning. This model links the ‘critical reflection’ stage (see Figure 3.1) that takes place during experiential learning with the ‘identification of the learning derived from that experience’.

However, Harris (1999) suggests that as in the case of the credit-exchange model, the nature of knowledge is not challenged. At most, the developmental model is “a translation device, a one-way bridge-building process” (p. 130) between different knowledge forms – that of experience, and that of “canonical bodies of knowledge” (p. 130) so prevalent in higher education.

Therefore, the articulation of ‘equivalences’ between experiential and formal learning is highly contested unless the experiential learning fits into the hierarchical disciplinary knowledge. In addition, yet again, RPL assessment is on discrete parts of the curriculum and the curriculum *per se*, and the knowledge underpinning the curriculum is not challenged.

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Luckett (1999) similarly maintains that through a developmental model (she calls it the “hermeneutic paradigm”, p. 71), learners are taught to “recontextualise their prior learning and experience in terms of academic norms” (p.72). She also points out that it is often the case that not the prior learning but rather “the possession of academic literacy, a reflexive discourse and the appropriate cultural capital” (p. 72) enables learners to achieve credits.

Therefore, the two most prominent models for the assessment and recognition of prior learning seem to be most likely to empower the already empowered; i.e. those learners who have had sufficient exposure to discipline-based learning, in addition to experience, to engage with a RPL process. Harris (1999) describes this situation as follows:

Prior learning is valued largely in terms of its similarity to pre-existing conceptions of ‘desirable’ knowledge and skill.... The gatekeepers have widened the gates slightly in terms of greater flexibility regarding the site of knowledge production but care is taken not to let any actual ‘outsider knowledge’ slip through unnoticed (p. 132).

The South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) Teacher Education Team (2002) in a paper dealing with RPL delivered at a conference in Kenton, Muldersdrift, (November 2002), agrees with this view:

...although some developmental forms of RPL help to develop the student – rather than simply assessing existing levels of competence – they are still flawed because they do not engage with the need for institutions to transform their academic programmes and curricula to take account of ‘other’ knowledges ... which are usually invisible in the academy (p. 6).

Osman and Castle (SAARDE conference University of the Free State, 2001a), maintains that the developmental model prevails in higher education precisely “because it represents a pragmatic and systematic approach to the ‘portability’ of prior learning...it does not threaten institutional autonomy, standards, or existing ways of organising curricula” (p.3).

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Therefore, candidates for prior learning may find themselves in a situation where their informal learning is often viewed as irrelevant and inappropriate to formal learning situations. The range of ‘acceptable’ prior learning is limited to those aspects that fall within the codes and prescriptions of institutions which limitation serves to maintain the *status quo* in pedagogy and curricula.

Harris therefore proposes two more ways in which we can view RPL. These are discussed in 3.1.3 and 3.1.4.

### 3.1.3 ‘Radical’ RPL

“Radical RPL” (Harris, 1999, p. 133) is closely linked to “societal transformation, liberation and redress” (p. 133) for the common good of the collective. This approach found strong support in the pre-1994 election period in South Africa. However, where the collective rather than the individual becomes the focus, Harris (1999) warns that radical practices have the tendency to “exclude diversity, obscure difference and silence the voices of those falling outside the dominant (albeit alternative [‘radical’]) grouping” (p. 134), thereby resulting in an almost reversed ‘racism’, in which only the experience of the emancipated group, counts as knowledge.

Lockett (1999) refers to this kind of RPL as “the critical paradigm” (p. 72), where knowledge is understood to be “politically interested as well as socially constructed” (p.72). The assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the curriculum are challenged, particularly from an emancipatory point of view; i.e. the “experience, especially that of oppressed classes and groups would be viewed as authentic”(p.72).

However, both Harris and Lockett agree that ‘emancipatory’ RPL, from the point of view that learning from experience can “lead to social and political transformation, has all too often not been realised” (Harris, 1999, p. 134).

Harris’s (1999) final proposition for a RPL model is called the “Trojan-horse approach” (p. 134).

3.1.4 “Trojan-horse” RPL

The “Trojan-horse” (p. 134) approach calls for “an enquiry into the social construction of knowledge and curricula” (p. 135) in ways in which both experiential knowledge and discipline-based knowledge move closer to (and complement) each other. A two-way bridge needs to be constructed whereby practice-based learning and discipline-based learning feature equally strongly, in far more flexible ways than in traditional curricula, through a “mutual engagement and critique, a new shared language for understanding knowledges and modes of meaning” (p. 135). Osman and Castle (2001a) maintain that university educators “accept that experiential knowledge is distinct from academic ways of knowing, and that learning that occurs in a variety of contexts is not always transferable, but. ...that they may be interdependent rather than exclusive” (p. 4).

Such an approach makes it possible to determine knowledge equivalence, whereby ‘general credit’, rather than specific, discipline-based credit, is awarded (Harris, 1999).

The South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) Teacher Education Team, (2002) describes this model as “transformational” (p. 6) and an approach whereby RPL seeks to “recognise non-formal and experiential learning for itself rather than attempting to articulate and match such knowledge and learning with knowledge prevalent in the receiving institution” (p.6).

Therefore, the debates seem to indicate that “knowledge is [not] universal, externalised, decontextualised and value-free” (Harris, 1999, p.126). Traditional ways of viewing experiential learning as “neutral and available to rationality”, i.e. to transform experience into a one-on-one relationship to the types of knowledge required in discipline-based learning, are not possible or not even the correct position to take. Harris maintains that experiential learning is “partial, socially constructed, highly contextualised” (Harris, 1999, p. 126).

The Trojan-horse approach therefore poses challenges to “the way we teach, what we teach, when we teach, and what we think is worth teaching” (Osman and Castle, 2001a, p.3) and furthermore, challenges the validity of curricula in general.

Lockett (1999) suggests “we should not attempt, via RPL, to strip learners of their particular identities.. and turn them into “universal knowers” (p. 73) who are capable of “true self knowledge” (p.73); we should rather assist with “the negotiation of two worlds – the world of experience and the world of the academia” (Osman and Castle, 2001a, p.2).

### *3.1.5 Purposes of RPL*

It is against the background outlined in the previous sections that RPL in South Africa is developing. RPL in South Africa is of particular importance to numerous stakeholders in education and training, including the labour movement, which represents a large number of economically active adults. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) for example, as a labour organisation representing a large constituency, supported the development of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) because it promised to set up systems that would result in the “development of workers through making access to education and training much easier” (COSATU, 2000, p.iv).

In addition, the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS) as well as the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) are initiatives that have foregrounded increased adult participation in further and higher education as key principles in achieving their objectives. RPL is considered to be an important vehicle for facilitating the access of adult learners to further and higher education.

The following figures from the 2001 Central Statistical Services (October 2001 Household Survey) point to the possible target markets:

- 8,4% of people in SA have an education level above grade 12;
- 20,4 % of people in SA have grade 12;
- 30,8% have some secondary schooling;
- 6,4% have completed primary schooling;
- 16,0% have some primary schooling; and
- 17,9% have no schooling.

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These statistics clearly highlight the need to implement processes that will facilitate the movement of adult learners from Further Education and Training into Higher Education and Training (20,4% and 30,8% respectively) and from General Education and Training into Further Education (16,0%).<sup>1</sup>

From the point of view of legislation, skills development and human resource development initiatives, it seems that RPL has become an integral part of the psyche of South African education and training: the two key Acts, the South African Qualifications Act (No 58 of 1995) and the Skills Development Act (No 97 of 1998), and their supporting regulations make clear reference to RPL and its foreseen benefits.

In other formal policy documents emanating from a range of education and training authorities some of the following ‘purposes’ of RPL are described. In the South African Qualifications Authority’s RPL policy (2002a) these purposes include:

- The personal development and/or certification of current skills without necessarily proceeding into a learning programme, if the candidate so chooses;
- Progression into a learning programmes, by using RPL to fast-track progression through the learning programme;
- Promotion in a work-situation; and
- Career or job re-direction.

In addition, providers of education and training in South Africa are increasingly, having to define the purpose of RPL within their contexts. The purposes may include (from The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL, 2003a):

- Granting *access*, which is described as providing ease of entry to an appropriate level of education and training in a manner, which facilitates progression;
- *Placement*, which has as its purpose to, through diagnostic assessments, determine the appropriate level for candidates wanting to enter education and training;

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<sup>1</sup> The 17,9% of adults without basic education and training are not the focus of this study, but this does not suggest that these adults do not also have skills and knowledge worth recognising in terms of unit standards and qualifications.

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- *Advanced status*, which means to grant access to a level of a qualification higher than the logical next level following on the preceding qualification;
- *Advanced standing*, which is to award credits towards a qualification for which a candidate has registered;
- *Credit*, which is to award formal, transferable credits to the learning that meets the requirements of the part or full qualification; and
- *Certification*, which, for the purposes of a qualification, certify credits attained (2003a, p. 24).

Some of these purposes differ only in nuance, but what is important is the context within which RPL will take place. Yet, the institutions for Further and Higher Education, which are at the coalface of RPL implementation, are highly distrustful of the abilities and skills of these groups of learners and, to a large extent, doubt whether such learners will be able to meet the requirements of registered unit standards and qualifications without huge concessions needing to be made to accommodate them. This seems to be exacerbated by the tensions that exist between education and training, where training is considered to be ‘skills’ focused and therefore lacking the underpinning theoretical knowledge required for the successful completion of an academic qualification. In addition, the processes whereby prior learning is to be assessed and validated seem to be unclear. Providers are unsure as to how RPL should take place.

The SAQA RPL policy: The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework, makes it clear that: “The candidate seeking credits for previously acquired skills and knowledge must still comply with all the requirements as stated in unit standards or qualifications” (2002a, p.4).

However, despite the assurances given in the policy, in the absence of clear guidelines as to how RPL should be implemented, institutions have been hesitant to initiate RPL processes.

### 3.2 A Common Understanding of RPL

In South Africa, the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is defined by the NSB Regulations (1998) as follows:

Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirement (SAQA, 2003a, 7).

In the countries where RPL has been implemented, the following descriptions are used:

**Table 3.1**

*International Descriptions, Abbreviations and Acronyms for RPL*

Country	Abbreviation	Description
United States of America	PLA	Prior Learning Assessment
England	APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning (over-arching term)
	APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
	APCL	Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning
Scotland	AP(E)L	Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning
Ireland	APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
Canada	PLAR	Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition
Australia	RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
New Zealand	RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
The Netherlands	EVC	Elders Verworwen Competencies
France	VAP	Validation des Acquis Professionels (Recognition of Experiential Learning)

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These descriptions seem to indicate that the principles whereby South Africa defines RPL are similar to those used in other countries; i.e. that people's prior learning can be recognised and credited, regardless of how it was achieved.

The literature review has been based on studies done in the United States of America, (where RPL has its roots), in England, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and France. In addition, a number of South African initiatives have been explored and are included here. As there are there are no hard and fast rules as to how prior learning should be assessed, much has been done to try and standardise the approach to RPL, rather than the actual assessment of it. For that reason, rules for the process of recognition of prior learning have become almost as important as the process itself – much of which has emerged from practice in the USA and England. These rules are useful in terms of the quality assurance of RPL and go a long way in ensuring that RPL is a credible and valid process, but do not necessarily reflect the models and debates underpinning the processes. The most influential quality assurance process has emerged from the United States:

### 3.2.1 *United States of America*

In the United States of America, RPL was introduced with the G.I. Bill of 1946, where Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) enabled war veterans to achieve recognition for their skills built up outside of formal institutional education (SAQA, 2002a, Appendix C).

In 1975, the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning Project (CAEL) located within Princeton University undertook a research project with three basic questions to be investigated:

1. Is it possible to equate non-college learning with that offered in traditional college curricula?
2. If it is possible, can assessment techniques other than paper-and-pencil tests be used to evaluate the outcomes of this learning?
3. If such a system proves feasible, would it be possible to integrate the ensuing model in current educational programmes?" (Simosko & Cook, 1996, p.11)

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This project involved ten colleges and universities during the research period. The project demonstrated that PLA was indeed a feasible mechanism to recognise the skills and knowledge of (particularly) adult learners who wished to enter or return to higher education, bringing with them a host of rich and varied experiential learning. Today more than 1200 colleges and universities in the USA offer RPL (PLA) services.

As a result of this and other projects in the USA, a set of quality criteria was developed for prior learning assessment. These quality criteria include two categories of standards. The first category (1 – 5) deals with the assessment process, and the second category (6 – 10) with administrative contexts. They are (Whitaker, 1989):

### Assessment:

1. Credit must be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. Credit should be awarded only for the appropriate college-level learning.
3. Credit can be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
4. Appropriate subject matter and academic experts must make the determination of competence levels and of credit awards.
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic (or other) contexts within which it is accepted.

### Administration:

6. Credits and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be transparent and prominently available.
8. Fees for assessment services should be based on services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
9. All staff involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
10. Assessment instruments and tools should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served

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These quality criteria have been used extensively and have had a significant impact on the development of RPL systems in other countries. Initiatives in South Africa have also adopted and adapted these principles, most notably the Committee for Technikon Principals (CTP) in their policy on RPL (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001), particularly with regard to the quality assurance and review of assessment.

### 3.2.2 *England*

Assessment of prior learning (APL) was developed in England in the eighties. In England, APL includes Accreditation of Prior Experiential learning (APEL) and Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL).

A number of APL projects were established under the leadership of the 'Learning from Experience Trust', with the purpose of opening up access to higher education for adults. The main thrust for these developments emanated from the British government's call for "a more flexible, adaptable workforce; training programmes that were more responsive to the needs of employers and individuals; [and] greater access to education and training for greater numbers of people" (Simosko & Cook, 1996, p.13).

In South Africa, the original drive for the development of a system whereby people's prior learning may be recognised and credited emanated from the labour movement, most notably COSATU and its affiliates. It seems to mirror the call for greater access. In the COSATU publication *Learning and Work: Recognition of Prior Learning* (2000) the following statement is made:

RPL has the potential to allow learners that have been denied formal recognition for their learning, the opportunity to attain this recognition. Through RPL, it is intended that learners will be able to access further opportunities both in their career and to further education & training (p. iv).

As in the USA, a set of 'good practice' principles ensures the credibility of the English system. These include a description of 'malpractices to be avoided'. The malpractices include:

- Granting credits for the length of time served or just for experience and not for the learning which may take place as a result of experience.

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- Basing fees for the development of portfolios etc. on the number of credits awarded.
- The failure to focus on specific credits and programmes.
- The failure to separate the role of the RPL advisor from that of the assessor (called APL in England)
- Promising RPL services without the regard for resources, staff development and expertise in the area.
- Inconsistencies in RPL practice: offering uncoordinated and inauthentic services.
- The failure to be transparent and to publicly declare in advance the rules, regulations and criteria used for RPL assessment.
- The failure to provide a justified transcription of RPL outcomes, including sufficiency of evidence as part of quality assurance.
- The failure to give feedback to applicants.
- Promising credits and/or admission to programme before assessment takes place (not checking authenticity of claim) (Nyatanga, Forman & Fox, 1998).

In addition, the following ‘guiding principles’ have been identified as good practice. They are very similar to the quality criteria developed and established by Whitaker (1989).

They include macro (or administrative) quality criteria, namely:

- The institution should have a clear RPL (APL) policy, which is translated into operational structures.
- Marketing and publicity strategy.
- Staff development at macro as well as micro quality level.
- A RPL committee or board that oversees RPL activities on behalf of the institution.
- Co-ordination between the centre and the schools or faculties.
- Well-publicised communication channels for staff and students.
- Ensure that students understand their responsibilities within the RPL process.
- The administrative office should have appropriate forms, or their equivalent, available: (1) RPL application form that combines certificated

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and non-certificated learning; (2) RPL (Accreditation of Prior Credentialed Learning) form specifically for certificated learning and a form specifically for non-certificated learning.

- Administration office should also have a RPL evaluation form and a RPL monitoring log.
- An evaluative section on RPL experiences together with an appropriate plan for the future.

The micro or academic quality criteria include:

- Programmes or modules have clear learning outcomes both staff and students can base their RPL assessments on.
- Programme leaders and admission tutors are conversant with RPL principles and their application to assessment.
- Within the institution each school or faculty should have a RPL co-ordinator to enhance subject-specific debate and feedback.
- Subject teams should have a nucleus of people capable of either advising on or assessing RPL claims.
- Support and feedback to students.
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of the RPL provision through (a) self-evaluation (critical peer review); (b) institutional audit of artefacts (c) students' feedback; (d) external views and external examiner feedback. (External views may be requested from professional bodies, industry and commerce and funding bodies).
- Disseminate good practice in the recognition and accreditation of prior learning. (Nyatanga, Forman & Fox, 1998)

As in the case of the USA, England is making use of these quality criteria to ensure the credibility of their RPL processes. Also, these guiding principles again seem to point to the need for thorough evaluation, review, quality assurance and clear guidelines for the assessment of prior learning.

#### 3.2.3 Scotland

Running parallel to the changes that were taking place in education and training in England, Scotland was transforming its education and training in the nineties, into a criterion-referenced learning outcome format. Criterion-referenced learning makes it

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possible for learners to be assessed against learning outcomes as soon as they feel ready to do so – even without ever having to attend a single class. RPL in Scotland was born.

The criterion-referenced system encapsulates quality criteria in the standard against which an assessment is carried out. The assessment itself has to comply with the following technical quality requirements:

- Validity: how well the assessment matches what is being assessed.
- Reliability: refers to the consistency of the assessment outcome.
- Sufficiency: relates to the amount of evidence needed during the assessment.
- Authenticity: refers to the ‘ownership’ of the evidence.
- Currency: the recentness of the evidence’ (Simosko & Cook, 1996, p. 99).

Coupled with this, in Scotland, a system of quality assurance very similar to the one proposed for South Africa was put in place. Quality assurance is the shared responsibility of the awarding bodies, approved centres and assessors:

- The awarding bodies have a ‘Common Accord’ to promote consistency amongst them. The awarding bodies accredit, monitor and quality assure the assessment and support systems approved to deliver these services.
- External verifiers from the awarding bodies carry out the quality assurance function at the providers and must themselves be qualified in the external verification unit standard.
- Internal verifiers quality assure assessments by sampling the work of assessors at the approved centres and must themselves be qualified in the internal verifications unit standard (Simosko & Cook, 1996).

In Scotland, the use of quality criteria has become very specific and, furthermore, is closely linked with the Scottish quality assurance system. In addition, there seems to be a clearer understanding of what should be assessed; i.e. the clearly understood and agreed on descriptions for the successful achievement of a qualification. The ‘how’ is also becoming more specific – assessment itself must meet quality requirements.

The emerging South African system has adopted the approach to outcomes-based assessment, including the criteria for good assessment (given above) as well as

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internal and external quality assurance structures as a means to ensure an accountable system. In the Criteria and Guidelines for the Assessment of NQF registered qualifications and Unit Standards (SAQA, 2001), the principles of outcomes-based assessment and internal (i.e. provider/institutional quality assurance) and external moderation (awarding body quality assurance) are highlighted.

#### 3.2.4 Ireland

Even though a process dealing with experience gained in practical work situations was established in Ireland as early as 1975 there was little movement in the practice of RPL. The working group of the NCEA on 'Recurrent Education' highlighted the following areas as possible difficulties:

- The level or relevance of work experience to the course content (direct, indirect or general);
- The duration of the work experience; and
- The combined relevance and duration factors (NCEA, 1975).

It was only in 1984 in another report, Towards Facilitating Awards for Adult and Continuing Education, of the NCEA, that recommendations were made in relation to a credit system to be established to assess student effort and work experience. This culminated in a NCEA publication, which included a section on 'work experience and experiential learning'. It reads as follows:

The Council [NCEA] supports the concept of experiential learning and will give due allowance, in evaluating the quantity dimension of courses, to any prior or concurrent work experience required of students.

The allowance to be given in respect of work experience, whether prior or concurrent, will depend on the full circumstances of the case, with particular reference to the nature and quantity of the work experience, its relationship to the course objectives, and its role in the overall structure of the course.

The Council is prepared to approve arrangements under which students with substantial relevant work experience prior to the admission to a course may be afforded exemptions from specified parts of the course on the basis of such experience (NCEA, 1985, p.19).

The policy was officially launched in June 1993.

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However, many of the early activities in terms of RPL centred on ‘extra-university’ higher education (vocational education). It is only in the recent years that assessment of prior experiential learning has developed in Irish universities, notably the newer universities, such as Dublin City University and the University of Limerick.

In these universities admissions are granted to Master’s degree programmes where individuals do not hold a first degree and, to a lesser extent, exemptions are granted for subjects in degree programmes. This approach seems to be the preferred approach for university studies in South Africa. The University of the Witwatersrand, for example, conducts RPL almost primarily for access, particularly to post-graduate programmes.

The criteria for determining the quality of learning used by these institutions are similar to those developed by Urban Whitaker in his book: *Assessing Learning* (1989):

- There must be an appropriate balance between the theoretical background to a subject and its practical application;
- learning acquired through prior experience must be transferable to contexts other than that of the learning environment within which it was acquired; and
- when assessing learning gained from prior experience, care must be taken to ensure that the learning is at the appropriate academic level (McGrath, in Evans, 2000, p.142).

The most notable developments, however, have taken place in vocational education through the efforts of the Certification and Standards Department of FAS (Irish Training and Employment Authority). Between 1994 and 1998, FAS was also involved in projects for the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP), and in South Africa in conjunction with the then Building Industry Training Board.

Ireland now has a well-established RPL system, particularly in its vocational education and training sector (McGrath, in Evans, 2000).

### 3.2.5 *Canada*

Prior Learning and Assessment (PLAR) has been practised in Canada since the early eighties. Quebec was the first province to implement PLAR province-wide, but now six of Canada's ten provinces are implementing PLAR province-wide, particularly in their post-secondary college sector. The Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) has been established for the advancement of RPL (PLA) in Canada.

As in other countries, the need to ensure quality in the RPL (PLAR) process in Canada is an issue repeatedly raised by institutions as well as by candidates and employers.

Concerns about quality in RPL (PLAR) have been addressed in several ways in Canada:

- Agreed standards for assessment, policies and procedures have been developed at most practising institutions.
- Educators and trainers have prepared course descriptions using learning outcomes, which are clear statements about what an individual needs to know and be able to do to be successful in a course.
- Institutional faculty and staff have been trained in RPL (Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition - PLAR) so that adequate support services are provided.
- Institutions use a range of alternative methods and tools in their work.
- RPL (PLAR) candidates are provided with orientation to enable them to make informed decisions about undertaking an assessment.
- Community outreach activities to disseminate accurate information on RPL (PLAR) and to promote services to non-traditional markets have been provided.
- National organisations have funded the development of standards for RPL (PLAR) practices, quality audits and conferences promoting best practices (Van Kleef, 1998).

Many of these quality criteria have found their way into the SAQA RPL policy, including the need for flexibility in decision making regarding the forms and

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instruments for assessment and the need for focused training of staff dealing with RPL candidates.

In addition, the PLAR movement in Canada is increasingly attempting to bring into focus the need for recognition of alternative ‘knowledge-systems’ and the establishment of equivalence of such bodies of knowledge with formal academic education. Here too, the SAQA RPL policy (2002a) is explicit:

The curriculum [should] increasingly take into account the nature and form of knowledge produced in previously excluded constituencies and locations, e.g. indigenous knowledge, women’s knowledge, workers’ knowledge (p.29).

In addition, the Canadians make particular mention of the fact that traditional methods of assessment may not be suitable and, therefore, “[i]nstitutions have enabled faculty assessors to use a range of appropriate methods and tools in their work” (p. 7). This is important in terms of a more holistic and integrated approach to the assessment of learning.

#### 3.2.6 *Australia*

In Australia, RPL was formally instituted in 1992 with the signing of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) agreement between states and territories. This agreement was the result of work that has been done in terms of a competency-based approach to training (CBT). Competency-based training encapsulates the essence of RPL, i.e. (Metcalf, 1994):

CBT refers to an approach to vocational education and training, which focuses on the competencies gained, by an individual rather than on the training process itself (p. 1.1).

The National Framework (NFROT) ensures that recognition is given for accredited courses based on competency standards, credit transfer between providers, competencies and prior learning, where RPL is seen to be a key aspect in the implementation of their Australia’s competency-based training.

In December 1993, the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee (AVCC) accepted the guidelines on the recognition of prior learning for credit, making it possible for

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learners to access higher education through alternative routes (Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee [AVCC], 1993):

The guidelines include:

1. Universities should develop and publish policies (and, where possible, details of amounts of credit available) on the recognition for credit of prior 'informal' learning (RPL), that is knowledge, skills, attitudes and/or attributes which have been acquired through learning experiences other than in a course offered by an Australian university or technical and further education. RPL for credit may be of two broad kinds:
  - Learning acquired in a 'credentialed' context, other than a university or college, such as in a course offered by a professional body, workplace, private educational institution, or by any other provider recognised by a university.
  - Learning acquired in an 'un-credentialed' context, such as through work experiences or through life experience.
2. Published information on RPL should indicate that eligibility for credit based RPL assessment does not guarantee a place in the course in which such credit may be available.
3. Applicants for RPL should be advised of the forms and sources of prior learning, which a university is prepared to take into account in assessing prior learning for credit in a university course. As a guide, universities should indicate their willingness or otherwise to take account of
  - courses provided by professional bodies, workplaces, private educational institutions and/or other providers recognised by a university, and/or
  - learning from work or other forms of practical experience, and/or
  - learning from life experiences.
4. The procedures adopted to assess a particular course or range of experiences as the basis for credit in a university course should ensure that the prior learning assessed is comparable in content and standard with the university course for which credit is sought. The standards applied in assessing RPL should not be greater than those required to 'pass' the relevant component of the university course, i.e. it should not be more 'difficult' for RPL applicants to 'pass'.

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5. Procedures developed by a university for the recognition of RPL should ensure that
  - For recognition of courses provided by a body other than a university or college, the academic staff carrying out the assessment have a detailed knowledge of the university course(s) for which credit is sought.
  - For recognition of work and/or life experience, the academic staff carrying out the assessment have, in addition to detailed knowledge of the relevant university course(s), personal expertise in or access to advice on RPL assessment methods.
6. RPL assessment procedures should be completed, and the results recorded, before the beginning of the semester in which credit is sought.
7. Universities will give credit for learning from work and/or life experiences, and which carry out RPL assessment of this learning for individual applicants, should indicate whether, and in what form, the costs of RPL assessment will be recovered from applicants (AVCC, 1993).

No formal examination of RPL has been conducted, but states and territories in Australia are required to report annually on a wide range of statistical matters, including the extent of recognition granted through RPL. This data indicates that:

- Great diversity exists in the extent to which RPL services are made available from state to state.
- Slow development of RPL assessment in universities is associated with ‘the extra demands placed on staff to develop ‘customised’ assessments, a lack of RPL assessment expertise and training in universities; resistance by academic staff and professional bodies; delays caused by the need to develop special policies and procedures for RPL; and disincentives to grant credit inherent in the existing funding arrangements for universities’ (Flowers & Hawke, in Evans, 2000).

In South Africa, the danger also exists that RPL is interpreted in so many different ways that the ideal approach, i.e. that of a holistic and integrated approach to the assessment of prior learning, becomes diluted and that RPL becomes a purely technical application rather than a process whereby “it is possible to compare previous

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learning to a particular level of expertise common to a range of qualifications at a particular level of the NQF” (SAQA, 2002a, p.29).

Also, in Australia and in New Zealand (discussed below), the notion of granting ‘credit’, rather than only ‘access’, is explicit in the policy statements. The South African RPL policy is also in favour of awarding credits in relation to qualifications, as well as opening up access in a variety of ways.

#### 3.2.7 *New Zealand*

New Zealand has initially been very successful in integrating RPL into teaching and learning practice. This is partly as a result of its successful implementation of National Qualifications Framework; since 1995, with the introduction of the framework, the numbers of learners registered on the framework has grown from 40 000 to 626 000 in 2001. In addition, there are 770 National Certificates and National Diplomas and 15 800 unit standards against which recognition of prior learning may take place (National Qualifications Framework, 2001, p. v).

Quality assurance is based on the following principles:

- Framework credits are awarded when the achievements meet national standards, regardless of where those achievements were attained.
- Candidates who already have skills and knowledge can be assessed immediately by presenting evidence of prior performance and by completing assessment tasks.
- Workers can be assessed by completing regular on-the-job tasks
- Accredited providers and registered workplace assessors assess prior learning against the same standards and within the same moderation systems that are utilised for other education and training programmes.
- Assessment of prior learning provides qualifications credits where no previous credits exist. RPL is not normally used to describe exemptions from qualifications, credit transfers or translating whole qualifications to Framework qualifications (National Qualifications Framework, 2001).

Despite much activity and support in the early stages of development of the National Qualifications Framework, RPL was slow in developing. Surveys in 25 workplaces

making use of RPL assessment indicated that workplace trainers were struggling with how they might conduct RPL.

A 1996 survey found the following:

- 29 out of 39 respondents (mainly polytechnics and colleges of education and industrial training organisations) conducted some form of assessment of prior learning at their institutions.
- Activity levels were low, limited to only a few fields of learning and generally at the lower levels of the qualifications framework.
- The practice of RPL was frequently fragmented, taking place in isolation rather than concert with mainstream programmes.
- Great diversity of practice is evident.
- Great diversity in quality assurance practices is evident (Ker, Melrose & Reid in Evans, 2000).

This analysis of RPL in New Zealand seems to point to the need for guidelines in terms of how RPL should be conducted, including the establishment of clear criteria against which assessment will take place and the quality assurance measures to verify such assessments.

### 3.2.8 *The Netherlands*

In the Netherlands, APL (RPL) is a more recent development, where it has been implemented to accommodate the need for re-skilling and up-skilling of the workforce. Increasingly, the globalisation of society, technological and scientific advances necessitate the development of mechanisms to deal with these dynamics. In 1994, the Committee for Accreditation of Prior Learning concluded that a system of APL is desirable and feasible. It defines APL as (Klarus, 1998):

A process in which an individual's knowledge, skills and attitudes (competencies) are measured against standards, which are derived from the qualifications structure under development (p.7).

The Netherlands places its approach within the larger European knowledge-economy in which lifelong learning is a necessity. According to Ruud Duvekot (2001) “we need high-grade know-how and people who can develop, transfer, acquire and use

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that know-how” (p. 2). In the Netherlands there is strong support for the use of RPL as an important way to deal with the needs of the economy. Also, as mentioned above, competency standards are being developed that will help describe the skills, knowledge and values required for particular professions that will enable assessors to determine whether a candidate has met the requirements for a qualification. This approach, i.e. an approach where clear criteria for the assessment of prior learning are established against the requirements for a field of learning, is increasingly being used to clarify and define what it is that will tell an assessor that a candidate’s prior knowledge is on par. In South Africa, the outcomes-based approach to education and training mirrors this movement.

Quality assurance in the Netherlands, as in Scotland, is closely associated with the validity of the assessment process, as well as with the validity of qualification standards, the quality and accreditation of assessors and integrated quality management systems on a national level. (Klarus & Blokhuis, 1997).

#### 3.2.9 France

In France, a law was passed in 1934 whereby engineers who were older than 35 years, held no formal qualifications and who had worked in the engineering field for at least five years, could gain the official title of ‘engineer’ through the preparation and presentation of a dissertation based on their work experience. This was an early form of RPL.

However, it was only in 1984, with the increased movement towards the development of a European Union, that Validation des Acquis Professionnels (VAP) became a focus for the education and training sector. This was due to the need for worker mobility in the European Union. The principles for VAP were finally described in 1997. A summary of these principles is set out below (Feutrie, in Evans, 2000):

- It is possible to learn outside formal education institutions.
- The knowledge acquired outside formal institutions must be theoretical as well as practical.
- It should not be required of an applicant to relearn something he/she already knows.

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- Recognition of prior learning is every learners' right if he/she can prove what he/she has learnt.
- It is possible to assess this experiential learning with appropriate methods.

Current VAP (RPL) practice deals with two aspects: access to higher education programmes and the award of modules or credits within a diploma. Interestingly, because of a lack of clear standardised descriptions of learning and the diversity of practice in the universities, much work has been done in terms of determining equivalence of learning in relation to the complexity, level and scope of learning required for a particular qualification. This is also the approach taken by the SAQA RPL policy (2002a), which supports a more holistic, integrated form of assessment of prior learning.

In an attempt to facilitate implementation of VAP in higher education, a procedure for dealing with learners claiming credits (or access) towards qualifications was developed. This procedure includes four phases, which are (Feutrie, in Evans, 2000):

- An advisory phase, where learners are assisted in determining the validity of the claim and defining the steps to follow (i.e. for access to further learning or only for credit);
- The application phase, where the learner meets the faculty staff;
- The assessment phase where the Academic Committee (or Accreditation Jury) examines the application to make decisions; and
- The decision phase where access to further learning and/or credits are awarded.

Studies on VAP highlighted the following approaches taken by universities:

- Centralised approach – RPL (VAP) is applied across the institution;
- A decentralised approach – RPL (VAP) is applied by the departments according to their own rules, policies and arrangements; and
- Management by university administration – RPL (VAP) is dealt with by the Student Services of the institution.

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In the past few years, however, there has been a general movement towards centralisation, mainly because of the need for standardisation of approaches and methodologies.

Quality criteria were established by individual universities and, in many cases, individual departments. However, studies have been undertaken recently to determine and describe “certain markers” (Feutrie, in Evans, 2000, p. 113) for any professional skill that can be identified within a certain professional area. For this to happen, a standard form of equivalency must be agreed on. In addition, there is a call for independent, neutral organisations, which will conduct the assessments and for increased collaboration between educational institutions and the workplace. This, the French believe, will “construct bridges to allow for continuing development of individuals” (p. 114).

Also, as in the case of Canada, with their interest in indigenous knowledge and its inclusion in formal curricula, there seems to be a challenge to the traditional notion of knowledge and who the custodians of such knowledge may be. Feutrie (in Evans, 2000) points out that VAP

...proves to be an excellent analysing mechanism. It forces the institution to evaluate itself in its role as the centre of production of knowledge and in how it delivers it. In other words, the university becomes less of a ‘distribution centre’ for knowledge rather it becomes more a place of fine-tuning and formalising of already acquired knowledge as a basis for further learning (p. 114).

In France, as in South Africa, there is also the more explicit acknowledgement that RPL may have different purposes depending on the context in which it is applied; i.e. RPL for access and/or RPL for credit.

#### *3.2.10 South Africa*

RPL in South Africa is in its infancy. The South African Qualifications Authority adopted a national policy dealing with the formal recognition of prior learning in June 2002. However, on a systemic level, it is only in the Technikon sector in South

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Africa, that RPL has been actively encouraged, through the development of the CTP policy on RPL (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001) and standardised implementation plans.

Other initiatives are now increasingly found in the labour movement, most notably in the “New Tyre” project and the development of a policy manual for COSATU and its affiliates. In universities, many small projects have been undertaken, often in previously disadvantaged higher education institutions (PHEIs), where a drop in student numbers, due to the de-racialisation of higher education institutions, forced them to find alternative niche markets. Also, universities whose demographic profile is that of the non-traditional learner, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA), have developed and implemented RPL processes.

Yet, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), which has the responsibility of quality assurance of public and private providers of higher education, has not yet developed an approach or guidelines to RPL in that sector. Likewise, in the formal Further Education and Training (FET) band, very little has been done to conceptualise and implement RPL. This is of particular concern as large numbers of eligible candidates are found in this band (refer to the numbers provided by Statistics South Africa under 3.1 above).

In addition, individual Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) have developed and initiated RPL policy development and projects. However, as in other sectors, the development of policies and processes of the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies is not on an equal level of development.

The following section presents a brief description of these initiatives in South Africa.

*3.2.10.1 The (public) Technikon sector.* A survey undertaken by the Joint Education Services (JET) prior to the development of the Committee of Technikon Principals’ (CTP’s) RPL policy document (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001), found that in 2000, RPL implementation in public higher education and training institutions, was sketchy.

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The survey indicated that:

- Sixteen institutions [out of 38] did not have any policy or processes in place
- Twelve had initiated a process, ranging from investigating existing admissions policies to initiating the development of a RPL policy
- Six institutions had a documented final or draft policy
- Two were implementing RPL: one in the absence of a documented institutional policy; the other following an institutionally approved policy (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001, p.1)

The technikon sector took this as a clear indication of the need for the development of a policy “responsive to the dual demands of reconstruction and development, and the consolidation and expansion of the country’s capacity to participate in a global economy that improves the quality of life for all its citizens” (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001, p.2).

The policy was adopted in 2001. Subsequently, the CTP has taken the process further by encouraging its constituent providers to develop implementation plans. In July 2002, the state of implementation of RPL in the technikon sector was highlighted at a CTP workshop held in Durban. In a report to the SAQA ETQA Sub-Committee (SAQA, 2002b) the following emerged (overleaf):

**Table 3.2**

*The State of RPL Implementation in the Technikon Sector – 2002*

Name of institution	RPL policy	RPL implementation
Technikon Southern Africa (TSA)	Yes	Yes
Peninsula Technikon (Pentech)	Yes	Yes
Cape Technikon (CapeTech)	Yes	Yes, but ‘ad hoc’
Pretoria Technikon	Yes	No, development of procedures and access/bridging courses
Port Elizabeth Technikon	Yes	Yes
Free State Technikon	Yes	Yes, part of the Free State Higher education and Training Trust
Durban Institute of Technology	No	No
Technikon Witwatersrand	No	No
Eastern Cape Technikon	Yes	No
Border Technikon	No	No
Mangosuthu Technikon	No	Yes, in the Department of Nature Conservation since 1991
Technikon North-West	No, draft	No
Technikon Northern Gauteng	No, draft	No

Many of the difficulties experienced by the Technikons in implementing RPL, emanated from severe restrictions on staffing and resources.

In March 2003, the Technikons were requested to submit implementation plans at a CTP workshop held in Port Elizabeth. These plans had to include details regarding cost, staffing, proposed timelines, capacity building, proposed pilots in each institution and institution-wide implementation plans. The information was to be used to develop a Strategic Implementation Plan, including a funding strategy. In addition, the CTP has commissioned the development of training programmes for RPL assessors and a reference and resource tool (manual) for institutions and practitioners. Also, the CTP RPL policy is explicit on the principles of RPL within this sector. An important principle, which is in keeping with most of the international initiatives, is the need for national quality assurance and benchmarking: all RPL assessments must take place within a quality assurance framework.

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The following are some features of a proposed framework:

- Assessment rules, regulations and criteria should be published in full, in an accessible form and made freely available to candidates, staff and external examiners, moderators and assessors.
- Assessment practices should be fair, valid, reliable and appropriate to the level of credit being offered. Only appropriately trained staff should undertake assessment, and staff should be given regular opportunities to update and enhance their expertise as assessors.
- Boards of examiners and assessment panels have an important role in quality assuring assessment practices thereby maintaining standards, and institutions should develop policies and procedures governing the structure, operation and timing of their boards/panels.
- Policies and procedures to deal thoroughly, fairly and expeditiously with problems that arise in the course of assessment of candidates, should be in place. These should define the procedures in the event of academic misconduct, and the appeals processes against assessment outcomes or the assessment process.
- Staff should be trained and assessment expertise updated through quality assurance programmes as part of the Technikon's policy for the continuing professional development of all teaching staff (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001).

Many of these principles are highlighted in the international initiatives as being critical for the credibility of a RPL system.

*3.2.10.2 The (public) University sector.* In the university sector, the development of RPL implementation plans is much less structured. Generally, universities reflect neither a common understanding of, nor a common approach to RPL within and across institutions. However, Griessel (2001) highlights the elements in the RPL debate and practice, particularly in public universities, as follows:

- RPL as a mechanism to contribute to the achievement of the HE policy goals of equity and redress, broadened access and increased participation.
- The role of RPL in addressing the political imperative of enabling those previously denied access to formal education.
- The profile/s of target group/s that will benefit from RPL.

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- The development of guidelines and frameworks for the implementation of RPL.
- The complexities in determining equivalence between different kinds and sites of learning, and consequently different forms of knowledge and competencies.
- The development of appropriate, fit-for-purpose assessment instruments and curriculum responsiveness.
- The need for institutional policy decisions about the structural location of RPL initiatives within the institution (Griessel, 2001).

These debates are situated within the context of the need for increased participation and the broadening of access to higher education emanating from the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE)(DoE, 2001a). The NPHE describes access to higher education as being possible through a number of pathways, namely RPL, entrance testing and bridging, and foundation programmes (academic development). These policy imperatives are emphasised in the NPHE (DoE, 2001a) through proposed targets to be achieved.

While the technikon sector seems to be ahead of the university sector in terms of a systemic approach to RPL, the critical issues remain the same (and will increasingly need to be contextualised, particularly in the light of the mergers of higher education institutions). In a report to the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM), and the Free State Higher and Further Education and Training Trust (FSHFETT), Strydom (2002, p.17) suggests that the points of departure for access into higher education should be first and foremost a ‘client focus’, which is to work with learners in a way which is consultative, flexible and responsive to needs. ‘Clients’ refer to all learners from the diverse education backgrounds, which are characterised by disadvantage and poor preparation for the demands of higher education. Strydom (2002) suggests that a significant section of these learners will want to enter higher education as working adults with life experience. Furthermore, quality standards, which will provide clear direction in line with minimum thresholds and good practice guidelines stipulated by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Committee (HEQC), are essential. Linked to the quality standards is the notion of accountability, which means that institutions must work towards clear purposes (goals/objectives) and defined outcomes within the institutional and national access

parameters. Finally, the principle of equity, namely to apply justice, fairness and merit to all access procedures, must be maintained.

These principles seem to be in keeping with international trends, i.e. that of a learner-centred approach, quality criteria and standards for assessment, as well as accountability.

*3.2.10.3 Sector Education and Training and Labour initiatives.* All Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), in order to be accredited as Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs), had to develop and submit RPL policies to the SAQA Directorate: Quality Assurance and Development during their accreditation processes. However, fully-fledged implementation plans and projects have been developed in only a few sectors. The sectors considered for this study include:

- Banking Sector Education and Training Authority (BANKSETA)
- Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA)
- Chemical Industries Education and Training Authority (CHIETA)
- Education and Training Development Practices Training Authority (ETDP SETA)
- Insurance Education and Training Authority (INSETA)
- Mechanical and Engineering Manufacturing and related services Sector Education and Training Authority (MERSETA)
- Services Education and Training Authority (SSETA).

Common to all these developments is the acknowledgement of the responsibility of the ETQAs to ensure that RPL is implemented in a credible and accountable manner. Thus, the point of departure for all these initiatives is one of quality assurance, both in terms of the technical requirements for assessment of prior learning, but also in terms of assessment practices and methodologies. RPL policy development is closely aligned with the SAQA RPL policy and it is foreseen that the ETQAs will use the quality criteria established in the SAQA policy as a guideline for monitoring and auditing of RPL. Ultimately, the ETQAs will have the responsibility of awarding credits based on internal and external moderation processes undertaken to ensure the integrity of the processes.

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In most of the sectors mentioned above, procedures and guidelines have been developed and are being tested in a range of projects.

The SETAs' initiatives are closely linked to workforce development projects. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) as a key stakeholder in labour-related issues, including the opening up of access to education and training, spearheaded pilot projects in RPL in the nineties. Two pilot projects, one in the mining sector and one in the motor industries sector, highlighted the critical need for a common purpose and understanding of RPL between workers and management within a particular environment (Ballim, Omar & Ralphs, in Evans, 2000). Also, the impact that RPL may have on the development of 'fit-for-purpose' curricula became evident. Ballim (*et al*, in Evans, 2000) suggest that "[w]hat has become clear is that RPL cannot be separated from broader epistemological, political and ethical issues" (p. 189).

This notion is reflected in the SAQA RPL policy (2002 a) as the 'holistic' approach whereby "it also reflects the need to look for the intrinsic, rather than extrinsic value of someone's learning within a particular context and the ways in which some forms of knowledge are privileged" (p.11).

This is the real challenge for RPL in South Africa. The best international practices generally do not speak to these uniquely South African needs to redress past educational injustices, where an openness exists to the seeking and crediting of equivalence of learning in relation to qualifications, rather than an attempt to match learning exactly with current curricula on offer in institutions in South Africa.

A picture of what a valid and accountable system of RPL might look like, based on commonalities of approaches internationally, seem to be emerging.

### 3.3 The Emergence of the Characteristics of a Valid and Sustainable System for the Recognition of Prior Learning

From the literature review on international studies the following commonalities in terms of the approaches to RPL are emerging (where the names of countries are omitted, it does not suggest that these practices are not integral to their understanding of RPL, rather that they are not explicitly stated as such):

**Table 3.3**

*International Commonalities*

Commonalities	Country
1. The use of pre-agreed quality criteria as a benchmark against which the overall approach to RPL is evaluated	USA; England; Scotland; Canada
2. The imperative that credits are awarded appropriate to a particular field of learning and/or qualification	USA; England; Ireland; Australia; France
3. The need for institutions to establish policies and procedures	USA; England; Canada
4. The need for quality reviews, moderation and verification	USA; England; Scotland; Canada; New Zealand; Netherlands
5. The need for appropriately trained staff for conducting RPL	USA; England; Canada; Australia
6. A focus on workforce development	USA; England; Scotland; Ireland; Australia; New Zealand; Netherlands; France
7. The use of clear descriptions of learning required for a particular field of learning and/or qualification	Scotland; Ireland; Canada; Australia; New Zealand; Netherlands; France
8. The need for collaboration between learning institutions and workplaces	All

In addition, the following countries link their RPL processes clearly with the notion of improved access and greater participation of adults in education and training, as well as the mobility of workers between workplaces:

- England
- Scotland
- Ireland
- The Netherlands

- France

The following countries place their RPL processes within the lifelong learning debate:

- Scotland
- The Netherlands

In the literature, Canada and England and France make specific mention of the learner-centred nature of RPL processes.

Finally, central co-ordination as a quality measure seems to be a feature of the British, Canadian and the Netherlands' systems.

Overall, there seems to be agreement that RPL should not be an *ad hoc* process. RPL should be carefully planned, formalised in terms of policies, and operationalised through standardised, but flexible procedures. This requires skilled and confident practitioners. Where this is not the case, there seems to be great diversity of practice, both in terms of transferability of credits and in the quality of the process.

Also, it is clear that RPL is not only practised in one particular area. Whereas all the countries where RPL has been implemented have clear links with workforce development, these activities are not necessarily of a strictly vocational orientation (with a specific focus on 'skills' training). It is also interesting that in some countries RPL is mostly practised in 'extra-university' sectors, while in other countries, RPL emanates from the university sector.

### **3.4 Preliminary Analysis**

As this study intends to identify ways in which the credibility of a RPL process can be ensured, the commonalities highlighted in the previous section are particularly important. A preliminary comparison with the national South African RPL policy, seems to point to areas of agreement that have been set out in Table 3.4:

**Table 3.4**

*Comparison of International and National Approaches*

International studies	South African RPL policy
The use of pre-agreed quality criteria as a benchmark against which the overall approach to RPL is evaluated.	The SAQA RPL policy has developed a set of core quality criteria, including seven areas of practice: policy, support to candidates, training of assessors, assessment, quality management, curriculum development and fees charged for RPL services.
The imperative that credits is awarded appropriate to a particular field of learning and/or qualification.	The matching of a candidate’s skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and qualifications and therefore to the appropriate level and fields of learning.
The need for institutions to establish policies and procedures.	In the SAQA RPL policy, institutional policies dealing with the totality of the RPL process, is one of the core sets of quality criteria.
The need for quality reviews, moderation and verification.	In the SAQA RPL policy, quality management systems are integral to the continuous improvement of the system.
The need for appropriately trained staff for conducting RPL	The SAQA RPL policy includes advisors, assessors, internal moderators and external moderators/verifiers linked to awarding bodies as part of the cadre of trained personnel
A focus on workforce development	The SAQA RPL policy is not explicit on workforce development as being a key result, but implicitly points to such constituents, particularly with its focus on access for those candidates previously denied access, and the redress of past educational injustices
The use of clear descriptions of learning required for a particular field of learning and/or qualification	In the SAQA RPL policy, the ‘Design and moderation of appropriate assessment instruments and tools’, is seen to be a critical element of RPL implementation.  Also, the SAQA RPL policy is based on an outcomes-based approach to education and training and therefore assumes that such clear descriptions will be part of the process.
The need for collaboration between learning institutions and workplaces	In the quality criteria dealing with “Institutional policy and environment” such collaboration is encouraged.

It is encouraging to see the apparent high level of agreement between the principles upon which RPL is based internationally and those that have been developed for South Africa. The emerging education and training system in this country seems to be putting structures in place that will, in principle at least, facilitate the development of valid RPL systems.

However, while the literature is explicit about the need for a highly accountable system, it reveals little about the assessment approaches appropriate for the recognition of prior learning. This study will therefore look in particular, in addition to proposing resource-efficient quality assurance measures, at an approach to assessment that supports the notion of the assessment of ‘applied knowledge’<sup>2</sup> in relation to the overall requirements of qualifications, rather than a literal matching of learning against specific subject content only.

Also, it should be taken into account that RPL has been implemented in largely first-world countries, and it needs to be acknowledged that in a resource-strapped education and training system, the cost-effectiveness and practicability of RPL may be impacted on. No formal funding arrangements are yet in place for the implementation of RPL in South Africa. Where the implementation of RPL hinges on ‘institutional will’ only, the danger exists that the lack of funding may become a powerful disincentive to implement.

### 3.5 Conclusion

The NQF Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) responsible for the review of the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework, made four recommendations with regard to RPL:

- RPL implementation should be accorded high priority, provided with appropriate incentives and targets;
- RPL implementation should be speeded up through the simplification of standards setting and quality assurance arrangements;
- RPL implementation should be based on the recognition that the assessment process for RPL do not differ significantly from ‘normal’ assessment; and
- RPL implementation should be undertaken in a developmental context with the appropriate guidance infrastructure and training for assessors (p. 31).

This study therefore intends to extend the scope of existing studies on RPL, both in South Africa and internationally, particularly in terms of appropriate quality assurance

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<sup>2</sup> “Applied knowledge” is defined in the SAQA *Criteria and Guidelines for the Assessment of NQF registered Unit Standards and Qualifications*, as knowledge that reflects ‘foundational’, ‘practical’ and ‘reflexive’ knowledge (SAQA, 2001, p.21)

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measures and assessment approaches for the recognition of prior learning. In addition, the study hopes to contribute to an improved understanding of integrated assessment and the possible benefits of such an approach to ‘mainstream’ assessment methodologies.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

*The aim of this study is to describe current international and national practices in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and to identify mechanisms that will ensure that RPL is a credible and valid process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The conceptual model that informed the conceptual framework of this study is derived from the notion of the assessment and recognition of experiential learning whereby we acknowledge that learning can be achieved from the opposite end of education and training, i.e. by learning by doing first, and then formalising skills and knowledge into a qualification. Two operational research questions were used for this study, utilising a ‘mixed method’ approach: qualitative exploratory interviews were followed by a questionnaire and supported by semi-structured interviews, to develop a descriptive, exploratory report. In the first phase, the study seeks to describe the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system. In the second phase, the study investigates the processes whereby prior learning may be assessed in a valid and sustainable manner.*

In this chapter, the issues related specifically to the design of the study are described and discussed. Firstly, the conceptual framework is discussed (4.1), followed by the research questions (4.2). Thereafter the design issues related to the sample, data sources, and procedures followed are discussed (4.3). In 4.4 the research methods are discussed and 4.5 deals with the validity and reliability of the study. 4.6 details the data analysis plan.

#### 4.1 Conceptual Framework

In the review of the literature, particularly in literature on RPL initiatives in the United States of America, England, Scotland, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands and France (Simosko, 1996, Klarus, 1997, Van Kleef, 1999, Nyatanga, et al, 1998 and Evans, 2000), it became evident that internationally, the driving force

behind the implementation of RPL processes is ease of access to, and greater participation, in education and training for adults. This is the case in all the countries investigated. Some countries also link their understanding of RPL to the principle of lifelong learning and place much emphasis on the notion of experiential learning. This also holds true for South Africa – the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS) is explicit about the need for mechanisms whereby greater numbers of adult learners can be encouraged to improve their skills and become lifelong learners (DoE & DoL, 2000).

However, in addition to the human development needs for economic development of the country, RPL in South Africa is also linked to a ‘redress’ imperative; i.e. making it possible for people who have been prevented from entering education and training in the past to now access education through the mechanism of RPL and to be awarded credits for those parts of the qualification that they have already achieved. This socio-political directive complicates the implementation of RPL in South Africa – implementation is therefore not only about finding appropriate mechanisms for recognising and crediting experiential learning, but also about suspending our doubt about the preparedness and abilities of candidates, particularly in the light of the previous policies of ‘inferior’ education previously provided to an overwhelming section of the population.

It is therefore critical that a balance is struck between access and redress and the protection of the integrity of the system. This seems to point to the need for agreed processes whereby people’s prior learning can be recognised and quality assured and the integrity of the system can be protected. The SAQA RPL policy (2002a, chapter 2 of the policy) proposes a set of pre-agreed quality criteria through its core criteria for quality assurance of RPL and also suggests the broad steps for the successful conducting of RPL:

1. The identification of what a person knows and can do;
2. The matching of a person’s skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and qualifications;
3. Assessing the skills, knowledge and experience against standards and qualifications; and

4. Crediting the person for skills, knowledge and experience built up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past (p.3).

These steps are deceptively simple and straightforward, and seem to go a long way in the clarification of RPL procedures but, for practitioners, each step encapsulates a host of inhibitors to the implementation of RPL. As they stand, however, these steps are useful in clarifying the process and could provide an important starting point for the development of RPL mechanisms.

Each of these steps will be discussed briefly:

#### *4.1.1 Step 1: The Identification of what a Person Knows and Can Do*

In the past, in the countries investigated for this study and in South Africa, policies, regulations and procedures were developed to screen candidates for further learning, i.e. to ensure that the people who were most likely to succeed were the ones to be allowed into learning programmes. However, the screening was based on evidence of pre-acquired qualifications and not on possible alternative forms of evidence emanating from experiential learning, which may be equally valid evidence of the possible success of a candidate. At the time it was the only way in which learners could be allowed into formal further learning programmes, but such policies and regulations (for example the matriculation with endorsement policy – refer to chapter 2 of this report), are now in direct contradiction with the principle that people may gain access to further education on the basis of their ability to prove equivalent levels, depth and breadth of learning. This may mean that using matriculation with endorsement/exemption as an entry requirement into higher education programmes may become only a guideline and not the definitive reason for refusal or admittance to a programme (Kistan, 2002). RPL suggests, therefore, that pre-existing qualifications are not necessarily the only form of preparation for successful completion of further formal learning. Learning through experience is, in the discourse of RPL, considered to be as valuable and as suitable as learning acquired through formal processes. On the basis of such evidence, access and/or credits may be granted.

However, because experiential learning does not occur in neatly packaged modules or subjects, it requires in-depth reflection and descriptions of one's learning to identify

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what one knows and can do – this is in itself a hard-won skill. Also, there is the mistaken notion that ‘experience’ equals ‘learning’. In the example of French engineers (Chapter 3, 3.2.9 – Literature Review) who may claim the status of ‘engineer’ after having worked five years in the area, the danger of equating experience with learning is highlighted. It is the learning - therefore the ‘applied knowledge’ - that will be credited not the number of years spent in a particular field of work.

In terms of this step in the process of RPL, there seems to be two main inhibitors. The first inhibitor stems from the lack of congruence between old policies and procedures and the new Acts, regulations and the national SAQA RPL policy (2002a) (refer to Chapter 2 of this report). The second inhibitor relates to a lack of clear criteria and processes whereby ‘equivalent’ levels of learning can be determined, both by the assessor and the candidate. The inhibitors are described as follows:

- Inflexible regulations, policies and procedures currently in place, which prevent people from accessing education and training on the basis of their experiential learning. These regulations are still in place, despite the development and promulgation of a range of new education Acts, policies and guidelines (refer to Chapter 2, 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 – Acts, Regulations and Policies)
- The lack of the skill to reflect and describe one’s learning in a coherent and structured manner so as to provide evidence of the requisite preparatory knowledge for entry into a learning programme (SAQA, 2003a).

The second step deals with achieving a match between the knowledge and experience of the candidate and the requirements, at an appropriate level, of the qualification for which credits are claimed.

### *4.1.2 Step 2: The Matching of a Person’s Skills, Knowledge and Experience to Specific Standards and Qualifications*

In the literature a quality process requires that:

Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application; and

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Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted (Whitaker, 1989, p.9);

Programmes and modules [should] have clear learning outcomes or competencies both staff and students can base the APL (RPL) assessments on (Nyatanga, et al, 1998, p. 41);

Educators and trainers [must] prepare course descriptions using learning outcomes, which are clear statements about what an individual needs to know and be able to do to be successful in a course (Van Kleef, 1998, p.7); and

The procedures adopted to assess a particular course or ranges of experiences as the basis for credit in a university course should ensure that the prior learning assessed is comparable in content and standard with the university course in which credit is sought (AVCC, 1993, p. 3).

For this step of the RPL process to be implemented successfully, it seems to require a clear understanding on the part of the education and training practitioner of the skills, abilities and understanding that will indicate to the practitioner that a person has achieved the learning required to be awarded credits.

In an education and training system fully converted to an outcomes-based education and training approach, these descriptions of learning are captured in unit standards and their associated assessment criteria (for unit-standard based qualifications), or alternatively, in the purpose, exit-level outcomes and specific outcomes (for non-unit standard based qualifications). However, despite having adopted an outcomes-based approach to education and training, and despite enormous efforts to convert old qualifications to outcomes-based qualifications, the real meaning of an outcomes-based approach to assessment will only start playing itself out when recognition of prior learning is requested, where the ‘results of learning’ and not the course content, is assessed.

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In terms of the matching of a person's skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and qualifications, the main inhibitors to implementation of RPL again seem to be twofold:

- The lack of clear descriptions of learning which will guide the practitioner in verifying the evidence of the learner in terms of registered qualifications and/or the equivalences between the learning held by the learner and the requirements for the qualification (Van Kleef, 1998).
- The inability to describe and match experiential learning in terms of such descriptions, particularly when equivalence of learning, rather than literal matching of learning with neatly packaged modules or subjects, is required (for example where a person does not have matriculation with endorsement, but has undertaken extensive training beyond matriculation level, what level, depth and breadth of learning could be considered 'equivalent' to matriculation and could be credited as such?). (Peters, 2000)

The third step in the process deals with the actual assessment of candidates' learning.

### *4.1.3 Step 3: Assessing the Skills, Knowledge and Experience against Standards and Qualifications*

In the SAQA publication: *Criteria and Guidelines for the Assessment of NQF registered unit standards and qualifications* (SAQA, 2001, p. 88) assessment is defined as:

.... a structured process for the gathering of evidence and [for] making judgements about an individual's performance in relation to registered national standards and qualifications.

This is the third step in the RPL process as described in the SAQA RPL policy (2002a). This step will, to a large extent, determine whether end-users of qualifications will feel satisfied that credits awarded through RPL are equal to credits awarded through full-time programmes. The SAQA RPL policy also makes the point that credits will only be awarded by means of an assessment. The award of credits therefore takes place as follows: "To, through assessment, give credit to learning which has already been acquired in different ways" (SAQA, 2001, p. 10).

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It is therefore no surprise that in the literature, much importance is given to assessment:

Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated and revised as needed to reflect the changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts (Whitaker, 1989, p. 9);

...programme leaders and admission tutors [should be] conversant with APL principles and their application to assessment (Nyatanga, et al, 1998, p. 41);

Subject teams should have a nucleus of people capable of either advising on, or assessing APL claims (Nyatanga, et al, 1998, p. 41);

Assessment has to comply with the following technical quality requirements:

- Validity: how well the assessment matches what is being assessed.
- Reliability: refers to the consistency of the assessment outcome.
- Sufficiency: relates to the amount of evidence needed during the assessment.
- Authenticity: refers to the 'ownership' of the evidence.
- Currency: the recentness of the evidence. (Simosko & Cook, 1996, p. 188);

Institutions [should] enable(d) faculty assessors to use a range of appropriate methods and tools in their work (Van Kleef, 1998, p. 7); and

For recognition of work and/or life experience, the academic staff carrying out the assessment have, in addition to detailed knowledge of the relevant university course(s), personal expertise in or access to advice on RPL assessment methods (AVCC, 1993, p. 4).

A number of issues seem to emerge from these statements:

- Assessment should be subject to quality assurance, review and monitoring;
- Assessment staff should be appropriately trained;
- The assessment itself should be a valid and reliable process; and
- Different alternative assessment methodologies are encouraged.

In the case of assessment, the possible inhibitors to the implementation of RPL in South Africa are as follows:

- Lack of appropriately trained staff, particularly in assessing in an outcomes-based approach, i.e. where the results of learning, rather than the input or the extent to which the content of the learning programme can be memorised, is assessed (Nyatanga, et al, 1998).
- Lack of appropriate, alternative (to traditional pen and paper tests) and valid forms of assessment (and lack of trust in such methodologies) (Van Kleef, 1998).
- The perception of RPL assessment as highly individualised and customised and always takes place on a one-on-one basis, making it impractical and costly (SAQA, 2003a).
- Lack of understanding of integrated assessment that may occur across a number of modules and/or subjects (SAQA, 2003a).
- The tendency to ‘over-assess’ in an attempt to ensure rigour, with the result that it is required of a person to meet all the requirements of the qualification, whereas in a full-time programme, learners are required to meet a percentage of the outcomes (SAQA, 2002a, p. 24).

The last step in the process deals with the crediting and certification of learning.

#### *4.1.4 Step 4: Crediting the Person for Skills, Knowledge and Experience built up through Formal, Informal and Non-formal Learning that occurred in the past*

In the literature, it is only the French who make an explicit distinction between the award of credits and access to learning programmes. In South Africa, RPL may also be undertaken for a variety of purposes, including access, advanced standing/status and credit. This is an important distinction to make as it impacts on the certification of the learning. When RPL is undertaken for access or advanced standing/status, no formal certificates are issued – the candidate could at the most be given an academic record, which will serve as verification for admission to a learning programme and could be in the form of the ‘Senate’s discretionary exemption’ (refer to chapter 2 of this report). In the context of the SAQA Criteria and Guidelines for the

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Implementation of RPL (2003a) these terms, describing the purposes of RPL assessments, are used as follows:

- *Access* – as meaning to gain entry to a learning programme without the minimum formal requirement in terms of recognised, credentialed qualifications;
- *Advanced standing* – as meaning to gain entry to a learning programme one level higher than the logical next level [for example, gaining entry to a Master's programme, without having completed an Honours programme]; and
- *Credit* – as meaning the formal recognition and certification of learning in relation to a particular part of, or the full qualification.

It is particularly around the award of credits that the emerging RPL system in South Africa is experiencing difficulties. In terms of the SAQA RPL policy (2002a), credits should be awarded where a person meets the requirements of the (part/full) qualification.

However, the following aspects appear to inhibit the formal certification of learning:

- Most higher education institutions will only award fifty percent of credits or exemptions, regardless of whether all the requirements are met or not. This stems from the notion that an institution is not willing to certify learners unless they have had some input into their learning processes. This goes against the recognition that a person claiming credits or exemption may have already had all the 'input' necessary through work and life experiences to meet the requirements of the qualification (SAQA, 2003a).
- Despite giving lip service to outcomes-based qualifications, currently institutions cannot award credits for outcomes – the administrative systems of institutions are geared towards awarding credits for modules and subjects. Modules and subjects do not equal outcomes. A subject, for example, may cover a number of outcomes, and a module could possibly only cover a part of an outcome (SAQA, 2003a).

These four steps, and in particular the inhibitors, highlight some of the crucial considerations for developing a credible and sustainable RPL system in South Africa. In terms of the possible inhibitors, these steps suggest what the relevant authorities

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and practitioners could consider, to be valid processes for RPL. From the steps therefore, a conceptual framework has started to emerge.

The first step seems to point to the need for the establishment of an enabling policy environment within a quality assurance framework, including a description of the guidelines and decisions on a macro institutional or sectoral level, as to the breadth and depth of learning required that will evidence ‘what a person knows and can do’.

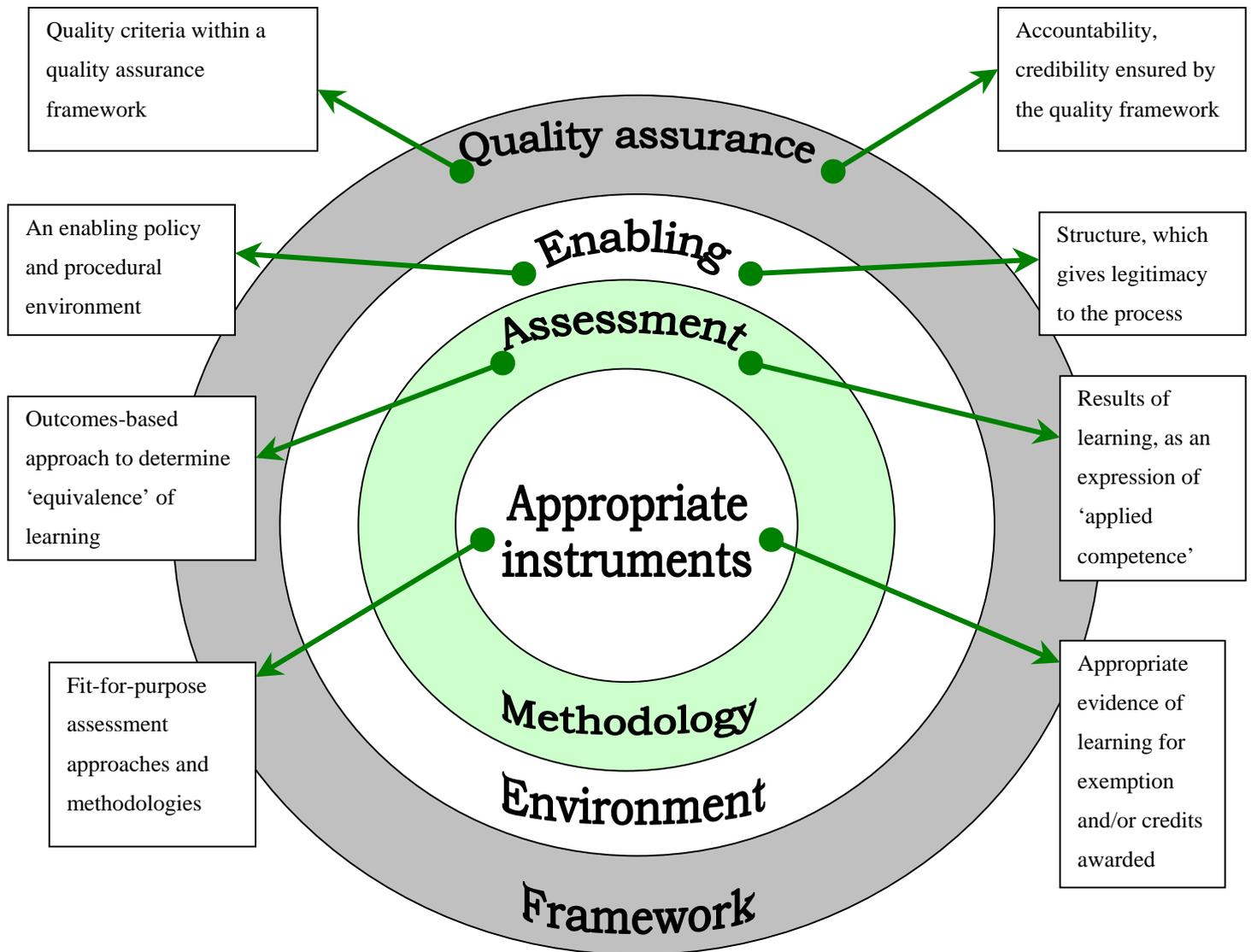
The second step refers to the need for practitioners to understand what is to be assessed; i.e. a means for matching a person’s skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and qualifications. This requires an understanding and guidelines in terms of the overall purpose and outcomes of the qualification/unit standard and the possible evidence that a learner may bring that could be considered ‘equivalent’ knowledge in relation to the requirements of the standards and qualifications.

The third step informed the conceptual framework by highlighting the need for appropriate assessment methodologies in an outcomes-based approach to education and training, and the fit-for-purpose assessment instruments and tools that could assess prior learning in alternative (to traditional pen and paper tests) ways. This step seems to deal with ‘what’ and ‘how’ prior learning should be assessed.

The fourth step points to possible purposes and outcomes of RPL assessment, including the extent to which learning credited or exempted through RPL may have academic currency in terms of formal qualifications and unit standards.

For RPL to be a credible process there seems to be a need for a great deal of sensitivity to particular contexts and also transparency and accountability to ensure that context-specific arrangements are defensible and valid. It seems that if RPL becomes a tool to enhance access to further learning and to redress past educational injustices it should not be viewed as a ‘back-door’ or second-best route to the achievement of qualifications. Users of qualifications and standards must be assured that credits awarded in this manner are of equal value to credits awarded to learners within a formal and structured teaching and learning environment. The conceptual framework therefore tries to capture the elements needed for the implementation of

RPL. Figure 4.1 indicates the relationship between the characteristics of a RPL system as it has emerged from the literature and the four steps highlighted above, and the elements needed to develop a sustainable system.



**Figure 4.1. Emerging characteristics of a RPL system**

Figure 4.2 (overleaf) provides a detailed description of the issues highlighted above.

A quality assurance framework in terms of the conceptual framework seems to be the point of departure for a valid and credible RPL system (the outer circle above, and the top and bottom descriptions in Figure 4.2 below). It encapsulates the quality criteria against which RPL practice will be measured. These quality criteria encompass every

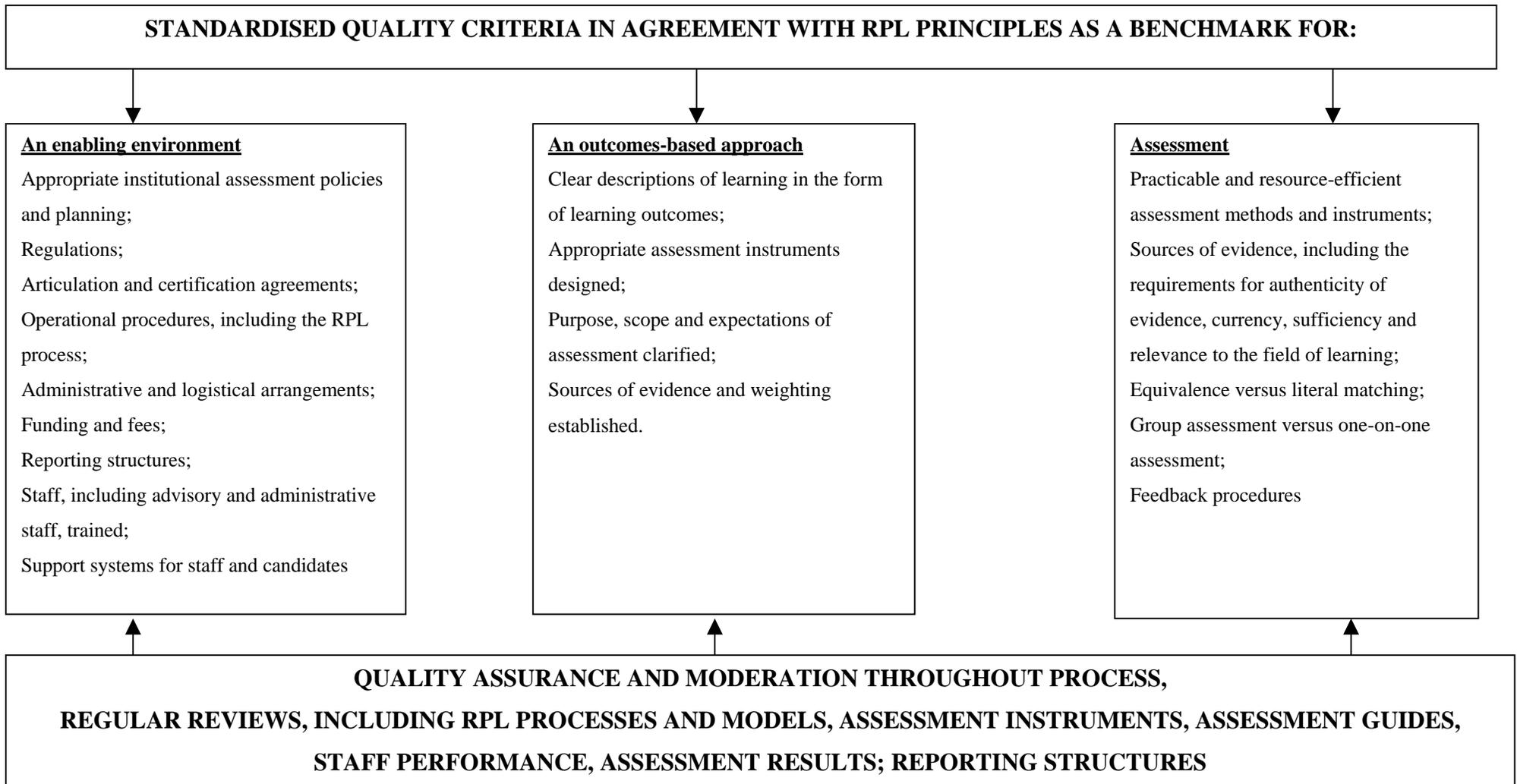
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aspect of RPL practice, i.e. the development and implementation of policies and procedures within the existing legislative framework, articulation agreements, assessment procedures and methodologies, administrative processes, staff training, reporting structures and the like.

By identifying the quality criteria, an enabling environment (the second circle above and **'an enabling environment'** in Figure 4.2 below), where the legitimacy and structure of RPL processes are ensured, is created.

The third circle (above) details the overall assessment methodology, i.e. the approach to assessment for the recognition of prior learning, namely an **'outcomes-based approach'** to assessment according to which the results of learning, rather than the input in terms of course content are assessed (refer Figure 4.2 below).

The inner circle (above) and **'assessment'** (Figure 4.2 below) deal with the appropriateness of assessment methods and instruments, including the appropriate sources of evidence in relation to registered qualifications and unit standards and the practicability of assessment.



*Figure 4.2. The characteristics of a valid, sustainable RPL system*

## 4.2 Research Questions

To formulate the research questions, a range of questions emerging from the conceptual framework was posed. If for example, a credible RPL system needs to be highly accountable, what does accountability entail? How is accountability achieved? What will a credible RPL system look like? What kind of environment will be conducive to the implementation of RPL? Further, how could one ensure that prior learning is assessed at the appropriate level and through appropriate assessment instruments? What would be considered appropriate assessment methodologies that are not only valid in terms of the rigour of the assessment process but are also practical and implementable? How can an outcomes-based approach to assessment facilitate an understanding of what should be assessed as evidence of the breadth and depth of learning required for the achievement of credits?

The main overarching research question was therefore formulated as follows:

*Which mechanisms are needed to ensure that recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a valid, practical, effective and sustainable process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)?*

The supporting questions attempt to capture what is meant by ‘mechanisms’, ‘validity’ and ‘sustainability’, as follows:

- *What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?*
- *What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?*

The first operational question coincides with the first phase of the research, i.e. the emerging elements of a RPL system and the environment within which RPL is most likely to be successful.

### 4.2.1 Question 1: *What are the Characteristics of a Valid, Practical and Effective RPL System?*

In the review of the literature (refer to chapter 3 of this report), as well as in the conceptual framework of this study, the characteristics of a valid, practical and

effective RPL system are emerging. Reflecting on recent and relevant literature on the topic, key elements of a valid system seem to be that of a highly accountable process, expressed in pre-defined quality criteria, as well as the establishment of an enabling environment in which RPL is likely to take place. The quality criteria specifically cover a range of aspects, including the quality assurance of every step of the process. This is in keeping with the international trend for more accountability in education and training – not only in terms of public money spent, but also in terms of whether the process matches the needs of the learner, the workplace and the needs of the economy and whether it addresses the assessment of prior learning appropriately.

The practicability of the emerging characteristics seem to deal with whether a system of RPL can be applied with ease in a cost-efficient and resource-efficient manner, once training has been undertaken; while effectiveness deals with measuring what it intends to measure, i.e. assessing prior learning at the appropriate level and for defined purposes.

In the second phase of the study, reflected in Question 2, proposals for a sustainable process for assessing prior learning are made.

#### *4.2.2 Question 2: What Elements are Required for Implementing a Valid and Sustainable RPL System?*

The second operational question explores the mechanisms whereby RPL assessment can be implemented in a sustainable manner. This question deals in particular with the process for assessing prior learning within and across institutions, making it possible to determine the extent of applied knowledge held by the learner without trying to match in an exact way the learning of the applicant with the content of a learning programme. The argument is that fit-for-purpose assessment approaches and methodologies could not only enhance the integrity of a RPL system and facilitate the transfer and award of credits, but could also support the practicability and efficiency of the process. Furthermore, such approaches could go a long way in ensuring that RPL is a sustainable process and that it becomes integral to mainstream assessment approaches.



- Whilst international literature abounds with policy approaches to RPL, and an explicit intent to facilitate access to further learning, not many large-scale studies on the effect and efficiency of RPL are available, making it difficult to propose practicable mechanisms sensitive to the South African situation. Also, the countries investigated for this study are not subject to such severe resource-constraints and also do not seem to have such a strong incentive to implement a system whereby people's prior learning can be recognised. Proposals in terms of possible mechanisms for South Africa therefore had to be extracted from particularly the semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with providers who have had experience in the development and implementation of RPL in their institutions. However, to ensure that not only the voice of project managers was heard, interviews were also conducted with officials of the Department of Labour and the Matriculation Board. The reason for interviewing the latter was that decisions to implement RPL systemically would be made by such authorities and it was important to hear their views.
- Lastly, the exploratory interviews undertaken with various providers and Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies, greatly facilitated the development of the two main research instruments: the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. The first phase of the study therefore 'lead to the questions and/or design of the second phase' (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p.16).

In keeping with the view that “mixed methods are being used extensively to solve practical research problems”, (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p.ix), this design was used to answer questions that neither a qualitative approach, nor a quantitative approach could have answered on their own. Using a mixed method design also allowed me to present the ‘diversity of divergent views’ so evident in RPL practice, particularly in terms of a highly atomistic view of RPL assessment, as opposed to a more holistic and integrated approach to the assessment, and to develop theories for application with both approaches as background.

#### 4.4 Research Methods

In this section the research design for the two operational or supporting research questions is elaborated on through a discussion of the sampling of the respondents and what should be included in the instruments to address the research questions.

##### *4.4.1 Operational Research Question 1: What are the Characteristics of a Valid, Practical and Effective RPL System?*

To answer the first operational question - *What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?* - extensive international literature reviews were undertaken, particularly of policy developments. This was done to determine how RPL has been implemented in other countries and to establish the characteristics of a large-scale RPL system. South Africa is on the brink of implementing a RPL system, which will hopefully address the needs of thousands of non-traditional learners, and it is therefore critical to understand what such a system should look like. The United States of America, where RPL was first conceptualised and implemented, has had and continues to have an enormous influence on the ways in which RPL has been implemented in other countries. Elements in all the literature on RPL systems, therefore, draw heavily on the experiences of the United States.

In addition, the most prominent models for the assessment of prior learning were explored. These models included a ‘credit-exchange’ approach, a ‘developmental’ approach, ‘radical RPL’ and a holistic and transformational approach that seeks to address not only how prior learning should be assessed, but also what should be assessed. Through the literature review it was therefore possible to start developing an understanding of what is considered, internationally, to be a valid, practical and effective model for RPL.

National studies on RPL are unfortunately still limited in scope and in number, as very few providers of education and training in South Africa have implemented RPL institution-wide. Also, prior to SAQA’s publication of a national RPL policy in 2002 (2002a), the directive to introduce RPL could not be enforced. However, a number of initiatives were undertaken – in most cases as pilot studies, and these reports were useful as starting points in contextualising RPL in the South African context.

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The literature review was supported by an analysis of recent South African education and training legislation, regulations and policies. The reason for undertaking such an analysis was to determine the extent to which the 'political will' to implement RPL is captured in formal legislation, regulation and policies. It was found that every piece of legislation since the promulgation of the SAQA Act in 1995 explicitly addresses the issues of redress of past educational injustices, increased access to learning, and participation in education and training through a variety of mechanisms and enabling structures, including RPL.

Literature reviews were undertaken at the same time as the exploratory interviews. These interviews served not only to probe more deeply into the characteristics of a valid, practical and efficient RPL system, but also facilitated the development of a clear research question and operational research questions.

The first set of exploratory interviews was undertaken with practitioners and learners, thereby focusing on the responses of the individuals to the process within which they found themselves (see Table 4.1 for the sample). These exploratory interviews were of a very general nature (refer to Appendix A) and included questions on:

- Biographical details, including the work history of the respondent. Both practitioners and learners were interviewed.
- Testing of understanding of what RPL is, and the purpose of RPL in a particular context.
- Gauging the impact of RPL on the personal lives of the respondents, particularly the learners.

The exploratory interviews of practitioners and learners were undertaken for two reasons: to sharpen the research questions and to engage with the different approaches proposed within differing contexts.

The second set of exploratory interviews was conducted with providers of education and training, as well as ETQAs, who have as a key responsibility the development and implementation of RPL systems within their institutions and sectors. At the time, very few institutions had implemented RPL formally (many institutions claimed that they had been doing RPL for a long time, but had done so without the official support

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and regulation needed for formal structures). Of the exploratory interviews conducted, only the Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) and the Construction Sector Education and Training Authority (CETA) had implemented RPL. In the case of TSA, implementation had taken place across the institution, but the CETA focused on two areas only: unit standards for building and carpentry. These two projects also represent the two most prominent ‘types’ of RPL: CETA uses the ‘credit-exchange’ approach, while TSA makes use of a ‘developmental’ approach (refer to Chapter 3: Literature Review).

The second set of exploratory interviews was based on a set of ‘self-audit tools’ proposed in the SAQA RPL policy document (SAQA, 2002a) (Appendix B). Unlike the first set of exploratory interviews where individuals (learners and practitioners) were interviewed to gauge the understanding and impact of RPL on the professional lives of the participants, the second set of exploratory interviews was held with representatives of providers/institutions and Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs), who have the responsibility to develop and implement RPL systems in their institutions and/or sectors respectively, i.e. looking at a systemic view of such a system.

The questions are therefore closely related to the self-audit tool for quality assurance of RPL (Appendix B), proposed in the SAQA RPL policy (2002a, p.17 - 30), i.e.:

- Institutional policies and procedures;
- Services and support to learners;
- Training and registration of assessors and key personnel;
- Methods and processes of assessment;
- Quality management systems;
- Fees for RPL services; and
- RPL and curriculum development.

The reason for using two sets of exploratory interviews was to understand RPL from the ‘bottom-up’ and from the ‘top-down’, thereby triangulating the findings.

The questionnaire was then developed on the basis of the emerging characteristics of a valid and practical RPL system as described in the literature and collected in the two

sets of exploratory interviews. The purpose of the questionnaire was to confirm the emerging elements mentioned above and to facilitate the development of the semi-structured interview. The questionnaire, while making use of a more quantitative approach, also required qualitative responses (Appendix C), which enabled me to determine possible areas of concern. The questionnaire was directed to providers of education and training, who are currently also at varying stages of RPL development and implementation.

The questionnaire dealt in particular with the following areas as highlighted in Figure 4.1 and 4.2:

- Institutional profile;
- Assessment;
- Quality assurance of RPL; and
- Administrative processes supporting RPL implementation.

The questionnaire was therefore developed taking into account the views that emerged from both these approaches. It sought to find commonalities and differences of approaches emerging from the practices of the providers who had subsequently initiated RPL, and also attempted to confirm the characteristics of a RPL system emerging from the literature. In addition, it also confirmed the two types of RPL in use as mentioned above. It was hoped that the responses to the open-ended questions of the questionnaire would help to refine the semi-structured interview schedule.

The results addressing Research Question 1 are discussed in Chapter 5 of this report.

Owing to the nature of the available cases and the extent to which RPL had been implemented in South Africa, the most appropriate sampling method for this phase of the study was the **non-probability** method. I chose particularly to conduct exploratory interviews where there was the highest probability of access to information.

The sampling units were therefore providers and organisations that were at various stages of implementation and that represented different education bands, i.e. HET, FET or GET, and functioned in different contexts; for example, public or private and

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single-purpose or multi-purpose<sup>3</sup> providers/institutions. This facilitated an understanding of the challenges faced by providers in the implementation of RPL within and across institutions, sectors and bands, as well as highlighted the different models adopted for RPL. The Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and single-purpose providers, for example, seem to prefer a criterion-based approach to RPL assessment, whereas the public, multi-purpose providers more often use a developmental norm-referenced approach (refer to Table 4.1 overleaf). A criterion-based approach to assessment is more in keeping with unit-standard based qualifications, usually associated with vocational (workplace) qualifications, while a norm-referenced approach is still the most prevalent in non-unit-standard based qualifications, usually associated with qualifications offered at the Higher Education level and schools.

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to 'List of Terms, Abbreviations and Acronyms'

**Table 4.1.**

*Sample for Exploratory Interviews*

Organisation/institution	Designation of person interviewed	Context of the provider/ Institution	Level of implementation
Technikon Southern Africa (TSA)	NQF specialist	HET, public, multi-purpose	Institution-wide
Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA)	Project leaders, practitioners and learners	GET, FET, public and private, single purpose	Particular unit standards
First National Bank (FNB)	Head: Training (FNB)	FET, private, single purpose	Workplace-based assessment as opposed to (and separate from) training and development
Learnsys	Director	GET, FET, private, single purpose	Domestic servants project for Services SETA Entry to Services SETA's learnerships
Education, Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP)	ETQA manager	HET, private and public, single purpose	Early Childhood Development project; NPDE project with the Department of Education
Local Government and Water Sector Education and Training Authority (LGW)	ETQA Manager	FET, private, single purpose	Policy development
UNISA	NPDE project manager	HET, public, multi-purpose, but here linked to a particular qualification	Up-skilling project linked to the Department of Education

**Convenience sampling** was used when an opportunity arose where a range of institutions/organisations at various stages of implementation came together for a SAQA hosted RPL implementation workshop on 12 Feb 2003, including some of the organisations mentioned above (exploratory interviews in Table 4.1). The questionnaire, developed on the basis of the literature review and the exploratory

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interviews, was distributed and 18 responses out of a possible 26 were returned, as follows (refer to Table 4.2 overleaf):

- Two of these responses could not be used for analysis. These organisations returned the questionnaires, but indicated that all their responses are ‘guesswork’ - they were not even at the stage of planning, but still very much trying to conceptualise what it is they need to do.
- Twelve of the respondents are offering almost exclusively higher education programmes
- Nine of these are public institutions, offering mainly non-unit-standard-based qualifications; three are private institutions, offering mainly short learning programmes based on unit standards and unit-standard based qualifications.
- Four organisations are associated with Further Education and Training and some General Education and Training.
- One of these fall within the public provider sector, and three are private providers
- The organisations that did not return their questionnaires included individuals who are not currently associated with an education and training provider/institution or with a RPL initiative, such as consultants (3), a provider umbrella body (1) and a representative of an ETQA (1).

**Table 4.2.**

*Sample for Questionnaires*

Organisation/institution	Designation of person who responded	Sector	Band
Technikon Southern Africa	RPL: Process manager/Assessor	Public, multi-purpose institution	HE <sup>4</sup>
Mentornet	Director	Private, single purpose (ETDP) <sup>5</sup>	HE
University of Cape Town	Lecturer: Adult Learning	Public, multi-purpose	HE
Mangusotho Technikon	Lecturer: Nature Conservation	Public, multi-purpose	HE
Peninsula Technikon	Manager: Educational Development and RPL	Public, multi-purpose	HE
Cape Technikon	Head: Curriculum Development	Public, multi-purpose	HE
UNISA	Director: RPL	Public, multi-purpose	HE
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Rector	Public, multi-purpose	HE
LearnSys	Director	Private, single purpose (SERVICES) <sup>6</sup>	GET/FET <sup>7</sup>
Rhodes University	Co-ordinator: Academic Development	Public, multi-purpose	HE
Assessment College	Director: Marketing	Private, single purpose (ETDP)	HE
Adaptable Learning Services	Director	Private, single purpose (MERSETA) <sup>8</sup>	GET/FET
University of the Witwatersrand	Director: Witsplus	Public, multi-purpose	HE
Learning Performance Link	Director	Private, single purpose (ETDP)	HE
M.R.R.T.	Lecturer	Public, multi-purpose	GET/FET
AFETISA	Director: Association of Further Education and Training Institutions of South Africa	Association of public, multi-purpose FET institutions	FET

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education

<sup>5</sup> Accredited by Education and Training Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA)

<sup>6</sup> Accredited by Services Sector Education and Training Authority (Services SETA)

<sup>7</sup> General Education and Training/Further Education and Training

<sup>8</sup> Accredited by Mechanical Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority (MERSETA)

The data from the questionnaires was captured in an MS Access database. However, due to the small number of responses, the data was analysed manually. With only 16 responses, it was not possible to apply statistical analyses.

*4.4.2 Operational Research Question 2: What Elements are Required for Implementing a Valid and Sustainable RPL System?*

Research Question 2 focused particularly on an emerging model for the assessment of prior learning, keeping in mind the need for a holistic and accountable approach. On the basis of the analyses from the literature review of the characteristics of a RPL system (Chapter 3), the exploratory interviews and the questionnaire, a semi-structured interview schedule was established (Appendix D). The responses to the questionnaire were used to structure the interview with two providers of education and training to deepen the understanding of the concerns and implementation problems emerging in practice. The two providers were chosen on the basis of their critical views on RPL – which is based on their experience with their respective initiatives.

Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with representatives of the Department of Labour and the Matriculation Board. The intention was to conduct the same interview with the Department of Education, in particular the FET directorate, but unfortunately this was not possible. The FET directorate did not feel ready to make explicit their views and hopes for the implementation of RPL. Subsequently to my approaching them, the Directorate initiated a task team to develop a RPL policy for Further Education and Training.

The results addressing Research Question 2 are discussed in Chapter 6 of this report.

A **purposive** (or **purposeful**) strategy was used to identify the sampling units for the second operational research question. The reason for choosing these sampling units, as expressed by Merriam (1998, p. 61), was that these initiatives were “information-rich”, particularly the two providers who were selected. Many of the conceptualisation issues and challenges concerning the implementation of RPL have had to be confronted by these implementers.

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In addition, two interviews (using the same semi-structured interview schedule – refer to Table 4.4 – Sample for Semi-structured Interviews) were conducted with organisations that are considered key to the implementation of RPL:

The Matriculation Board defines and enforces the entry (and subsidies) of learners going into Higher Education through the Joint Statutes, many of which are still based on old regulations repealed in September 1992, but which are still enforced until such time as the Minister of Education sets a date for their final demise (refer to Chapter 2 of this report). The Matriculation Board, as such, represents public Higher Education institutions through the South African Universities Vice-Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA) and is closely linked to the Department of Education which established the rules for entry through the Joint Statutes. Also, the Matriculation Board was interviewed because such a large number of people, possibly in need of RPL, are situated between the FET and HET bands. The recent release of census figures (Statistics South Africa, 2003) indicates that 30,8% of people over the age of 20 are, in terms of their levels of education, in the FET band. This group of people is most likely to apply for RPL in order to gain entry into higher education, or to be given the recognition that their experiential learning is at least equivalent to matriculation level learning. In addition, the matriculation examination (the school-leaving certificate) is still a 'high-stakes' assessment, either enabling or inhibiting access to Further Education and Training.

The Programme Management Unit at the head office of the Department of Labour was also interviewed. This is because the Department of Labour considers RPL one of the mechanisms that should be utilised at labour centres to facilitate career guidance and job placements in the future. Also, the labour movement, in the conceptualisation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), was one of the strongest proponents of the implementation of RPL processes to facilitate recognition of prior learning, particularly built up in work experience, at a time when formal education and training was denied to the largest proportion of the workforce. The semi-structured interview therefore tried to determine what the requirements would be for implementing such a system.

The intention was to interview representatives of the Department of Education as well. However, this was not possible. The Department of Education did not wish to

express and commit to principles and procedures for which they themselves had not yet made provision, including in terms of funding and subsidies.

In Table 4.3, the basis upon which these initiatives were chosen is reflected in the criteria for the selection of the population.

**Table 4.3.**

*Criteria for the Selection of the Population*

Criterion	Importance
Established RPL initiative	RPL is only now becoming an issue for providers of education and training and many do not know where or how to start. An initiative, which is either still underway, or has been completed, as part of a pilot study, will assist in understanding the issues.
Documented procedures	The extent to which an initiative has been successful (or not), and the documentation tracking the process, is critical for understanding in terms of the planning and quality assurance of RPL on a large scale.
Research conducted and documented	Many of the sites identified have linked their initiatives to research. The conclusions and recommendations of the studies will help identify the key issues relating to implementation.
Different education and training bands and contexts	RPL will be implemented in many different contexts, including workplaces and other areas outside of formal education and training institutions. It is equally important for these initiatives to maintain high levels of accountability, validity and sustainability.

(Merriam, 1998).

The first criterion, namely 'an established RPL initiative' directed the selection of the sampling unit. To gain an understanding of how RPL is being implemented, a study of current or recent initiatives must be made.

The second criterion used to select the sampling unit, i.e. 'documented procedures,' is an important one for this study. This aspect speaks to the level of accountability in terms of the methodology and the processes and the quality assurance of these. This

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was an important aspect covered by the questionnaire and explored through the semi-structured interview.

The third criterion - 'research conducted and documented' – supports the second criterion. For my study, it was important to know what lessons have been learnt in the implementation of a RPL initiative in order to describe a sustainable and valid process, particularly in terms of appropriate assessment methodologies for RPL.

A fourth criterion, namely 'sites that represent different bands and contexts', is also included. However, because RPL has not been implemented widely in South Africa, the sampling units for this study are mainly found in Higher Education contexts. The two semi-structured interviews were conducted with providers in the Higher Education band – one in the Technikon sector and the other in the University sector. Whilst both these providers are in public Higher Education and training, the learning programmes offered at these institutions are distinct from one another. Technikons, for example, usually offer qualifications of a professional or vocational nature. Also, the Technikon sector, in terms of Higher Education generally, has gone much further with the development of RPL systems than have the Universities.

Further Education and Training (FET) and General Education and Training (GET) providers were not interviewed for this phase of the study, but were included in the exploratory interviews and the questionnaire.

**Table 4.4.**

*Sample for Semi-structured Interviews*

Organisation/institution	Designation
University of the Witwatersrand	Director: Witsplus (A unit particularly put in place to facilitate entry of adult part-time learners to the institution through various mechanisms, including RPL)
Cape Technikon	Head: Curriculum Development
Dept of Labour	EU Training Advisers – Programme Management
Matriculation Board	Director

*4.4.3 Data Collection Plan*

Table 4.5 summarises how the data was collected. It also highlights what information was sought and the sources where information was most likely to be obtained (overleaf).

**Table 4.5.**

***Data Collection Plan***

Operational question 1: What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?		
Data collection	Sources	Purpose/Information required
Literature review and policy document analyses, including new South African education and training Acts, regulations and policies	International and national sources:	Investigate the characteristics of RPL systems implemented internationally and nationally
	USA	Investigate international elements of RPL systems which may be contextualised for South Africa
	Canada	Determine the extent of agreement and coherence in legislation, regulation and policy and the implementation thereof
	UK	Inform the structuring of the overall study, the main research question and the two operational research questions
	Australia	
	Scotland	
Exploratory interviews	Ireland	
	Netherlands	
	France	
	Local RPL initiatives	
	New (post 1994) South African education and training acts, regulations and policies	
	CETA	Help refine research question and operational questions
Administer questionnaires:	First National Bank	Develop an understanding of implementation issues
	Technikon Southern Africa	Inform the structuring of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview
	LearnSys	
	UNISA - (NPDE) project	
	ETDP SETA	
	LGW SETA	
	18 returned responses (of which 16 could be used) out of 26 questionnaires, refer to sample (Table 4.2).	Check for commonalities and differences in approaches to implementation Refinement of the semi-structured interviews
Operational question 2: What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?		
Data collection	Sources	Purpose/Information required
Semi-structured interviews	2 providers/institutions, Dept of Labour officials; Matriculation Board (refer to sample Table 4.4)	Deepen understanding of RPL initiatives and the aspects impacting on implementation
		Explore implications for large-scale implementation
		Explore assessment methodologies for RPL

4.4.4 Data collection procedures

The data collection plan (refer Figure 4.4 below), details the steps in data collection. However, these steps were not always chronological. Whilst the bulk of the literature review and document analysis, for example, was carried out at the beginning of the project, it continued while the exploratory interviews were being conducted and throughout the remainder of the study. Also, the two main research instruments detailed in step (iii) and (iv) were developed after the exploratory interviews and the literature review, but the semi-structured interview was only finalised when the responses to the questionnaire were analysed.

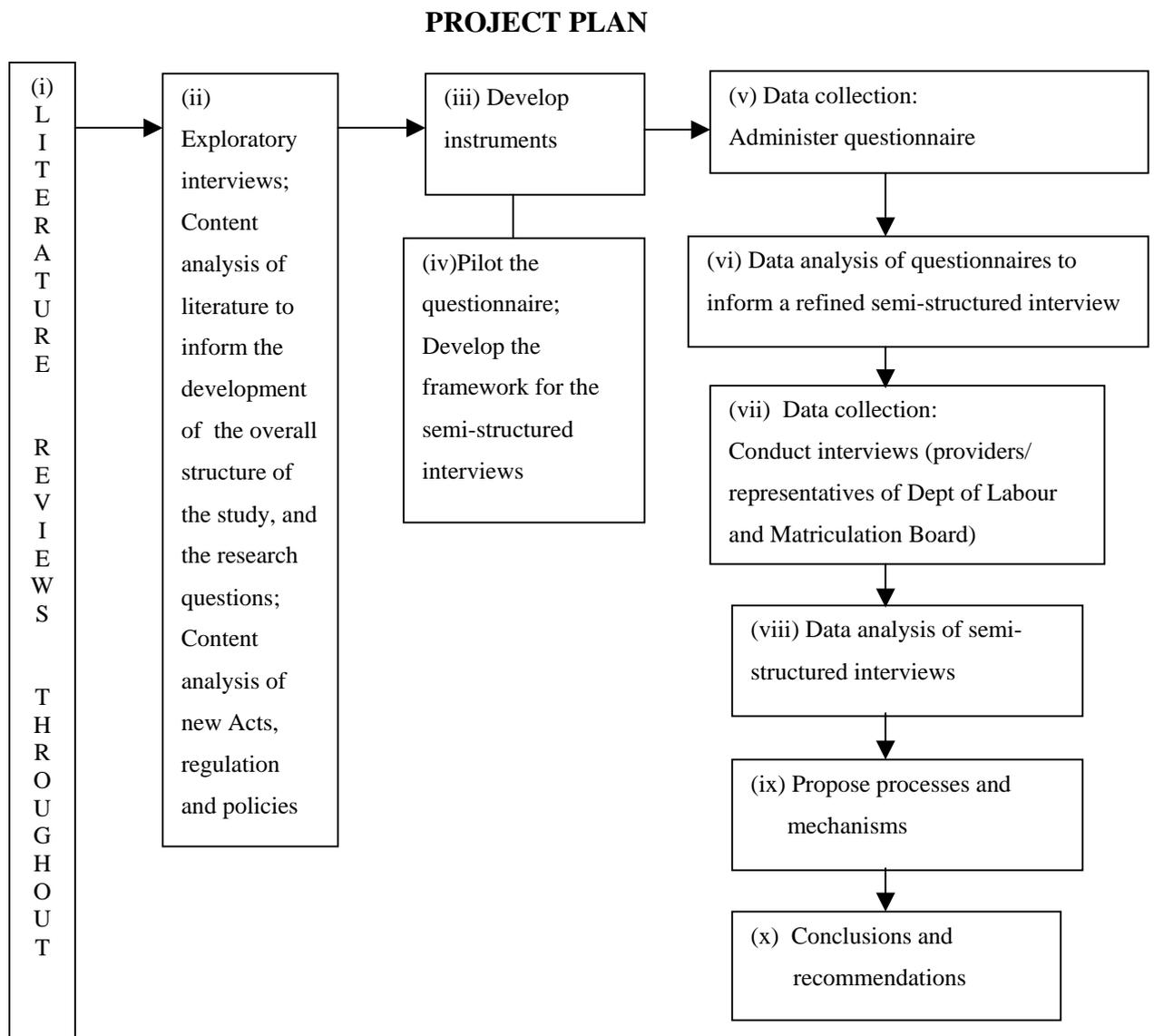


Figure 4.4. Project plan

**KEY – Project plan**

- (i) Literature reviews throughout the study, but particularly to address operational Research Question 1
- (ii) Exploratory interviews, content analysis of literature, legislation, regulations, policies.
- (iii) Develop research instruments
- (iv) Pilot questionnaire and improve semi-structured interview schedule (see ‘piloting of questionnaires’ below)
- (v) Data collection: administer questionnaires (providers, practitioners - refer to sample – Table 4.2)
- (vi) Data analysis to determine commonalities and differences in approaches and to inform the refinement of the semi-structured interview schedule
- (vii) Data collection: conduct semi-structured interviews (refer to sample – Table 4.4)
- (viii) Data analysis of the semi-structured interviews
- (ix) Proposed processes and mechanisms
- (x) Conclusions and recommendations

*Piloting of questionnaires.* The questionnaires were piloted with the following organisations:

- o Joint Education Services (JET)- Ms Aneesha Mayet
- o The University of the Witwatersrand – Teacher Education (WITS) – Prof Ruksana Osman
- o The Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) – Mr Ferdi Myburgh (Project Manager – CETA RPL project)

These three organisations were chosen for piloting because they have had extensive experience in RPL through a variety of initiatives:

- o JET is a non-governmental research institute that has undertaken projects and research in RPL for a range of institutions. They hosted international RPL conferences in 2000 and in 2003. Also, in 2001/2002, JET was contracted by SAQA to lead the research for the development of the SAQA RPL policy.

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- WITS – Teacher Education, undertook and completed two RPL projects with under-qualified teachers – the one in the newly incorporated Johannesburg College of Education and the other in the School of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. These projects in particular attempted a developmental approach to RPL assessment.
- The Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) was granted European Union funds for the establishment and implementation of a RPL system within the building sector. To date, over 3 000 candidates in this sector have been awarded credits for their prior learning in relation to specific unit standards. The Construction SETA was also visited during the exploratory interviews, including discussions with the project managers and practitioners at four sites where RPL had been implemented, and with learners who were, at that stage, busy with their RPL assessments.

#### 4.5 Validity and Reliability

In this study, validity and reliability of the research were dealt with in a number of ways. In qualitative research, the ‘standards’ for validity and reliability, unlike in quantitative studies where the rigour of the study is achieved by the researcher’s “careful design of contexts of production of phenomenon (experiments) and the processes of measurement, hypothesis testing, inference and interpretation” (Merriam, 1998, p.166), are the careful conceptualisation of the study, supported by the way in which the data is collected, analysed and interpreted. The first of these processes was described in detail in the previous parts of this chapter. Data analysis and interpretation will be described in the final part of this chapter.

Further, the validity and reliability of this study hinge on the ‘truth value’, the “transferability” and the “consistency” of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, in Merriam, 1998, p.166). The “truth value” (or internal validity) and the “transferability” (or external validity) are described by Merriam (1998) as the extent to which “one’s findings match reality” (p. 166). As seen from the discussions above, ‘reality’ in terms of RPL is multi-faceted and cannot be pinned down in a single, fixed discovery. Rather, ‘reality’ is a ‘multiple set of mental [and social, context-specific] constructions’ (Lincoln and Guba 1985, in Merriam, 1998). As the researcher I therefore tried to show that I had “represented those multiple constructions

adequately” (p. 168). This was achieved by making use of a number of strategies to ensure validity. These strategies include triangulation, member checking, peer examination and the like (discussed below):

Merriam (1998, p. 170), maintains that:

The applied nature of educational inquiry thus makes it imperative that researchers and others [are] able to trust the results of research – to feel confident that the study is valid and reliable.

‘Reliability’, according to Merriam (1998), refers to “the extent to which one’s findings can be replicated” (p. 170). However, this assumes that the research was conducted on a static, “single reality” (p. 170), whereas it has become very clear that RPL practice is a dynamic, evolving process. I therefore ensured reliability of the study through the internal validity of the process, by making use of multiple instruments and carefully documented procedures. I hoped by so doing that, given the contexts within which RPL will be implemented, the “results [would] make sense – [that] they are consistent and dependable” (Merriam, 1998, p.172).

Through understanding the characteristics of RPL systems, and the possible inhibitors and facilitators for the implementation of RPL, gauged through extensive literature reviews, exploratory and semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire, I tried to ensure that the results would also be generalisable to new contexts. The extent to which my results can be generalised was supported by the fact that my interviews were conducted and my questionnaire was administered to a range of implementers, representing all the constituencies in education and training: learners, practitioners, representatives of providers (both public and private, single and multi-purpose, in the general, further and higher education bands), representatives of Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies, the Department of Labour and the Matriculation Board. For this reason, the results of the research can be said to be based on the commonalities derived from multiple cross-site investigations.

A more detailed discussion of the techniques used to ensure validity and reliability is set out in the section that follows.

#### 4.5.1 *Triangulation*

Data collection was undertaken through four instruments: two sets of exploratory interviews with different sampling units, a questionnaire with overlapping and new sampling units, and a semi-structured interview, again overlapping with the sampling units of the questionnaire, but also adding two more.

By making use of multiple methods of data collection, I could increasingly “confirm the emerging findings” (Merriam, 1998, p.126). Firstly, the exploratory interviews tried to gain an understanding of RPL in general and to help direct the development of research questions while, as a second step, the questionnaire began to confirm the theoretical underpinnings of RPL practice and the quality assurance of these. Thirdly, the semi-structured interview assisted in a deepening of the understanding of the phenomenon. Further, by engaging with learners, practitioners, managers and officials, I ensured that different voices were heard.

In addition, multiple sources were accessed to study the recognition of prior learning. Extensive literature reviews, particularly of international and national policy directions were undertaken. New South African education and training Acts, regulations and policies were explored to confirm support for the notion of RPL from an ‘official’ point of view, and old and current debates and models for the assessment of prior learning were investigated. Thereby, triangulation strengthened reliability, as well as the internal validity of the study (Merriam, 1998).

#### 4.5.2 *Member checks*

For the semi-structured interviews specifically, I used the “member checks” technique to enhance the validity of the study (Merriam, 1998, p.173). After transcription of the interviews, the notes were sent to the interviewees so that they could check my understanding of what was discussed. This ‘check’ was particularly important because all four participants were reluctant to be audiotaped during the interviews.

#### 4.5.3 *Peer review*

I was in a fortunate position for undertaking this study in that my study and my work activities were closely linked. It afforded me with the opportunity to request and gain numerous peer reviews as the study progressed. The views, findings and the proposed

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model for the assessment of prior learning were scrutinised by a range of experts during workshops and SAQA stakeholder forums. These included engaging with a group of emerging RPL specialists, both as participants in workshops, but also as critical readers of the work undertaken to develop the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (SAQA, 2003a). In addition, the abovementioned draft document was made available for public comment before serving at the SAQA sub-committee meetings and at the SAQA meeting in August 2003, at which interested parties were requested to critique the proposals, as well as suggest additional measures to enhance the implementation of RPL.

### 4.5.4 *Cross-case analysis*

During all the stages of the study - i.e. exploratory, confirmatory and in deepening the understanding of the subject - initiatives that represented different points of view, were investigated. During the exploratory stage, for example, the two most prominent models for the assessment of prior learning emerged: a credit-exchange model and a developmental model. In addition, I looked at assessment of prior learning as it is used for unit-standard based and non-unit-standard-based qualifications. The CETA project, for example, makes use of unit-standard based qualifications, while the TSA makes use of non-unit-standard-based qualifications. Finally, I looked at RPL as it is practised in workplaces (the BANKSETA example) and formal institutions of learning, as well as a systemic conceptualisation of the process (ETDP SETA and LGW SETA, as well as the Department of Labour and the Matriculation Board). This technique, in particular, enhanced the generalisability of the study. Merriam (1998) maintains, “[T]he general can be found in the particular” (p. 175). The cross-case analysis therefore specifically tried to determine the ‘concrete universals’ that would run as a theme through all the different applications of RPL.

### 4.5.5 *Audit trail*

Merriam (1998) suggests that an important technique for ensuring reliability of a qualitative study is an “audit trail” (p. 173). This requires a detailed description of “how the data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the enquiry” (p. 173). Refer to 4.4: Research methods, and 4.6: Data analysis plan, deal with this requirement in detail.

4.5.6 *The investigator's position*

My interest in the recognition of prior learning emanated from the need identified by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for a policy dealing with the recognition and crediting of prior learning in keeping with the principles of 'access' and 'redress' of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). From the outset, therefore, the point of departure was not about whether RPL could be implemented as a valid, credible process, but rather about how RPL could be operationalised across a range of contexts. The principle, i.e. that prior learning could (and should) be recognised in terms of a policy position, was therefore never questioned.

I am still of the opinion that RPL is a credible and valid process whereby recognition for learning and access to further education could be enhanced – and this position is supported by the numerous Acts, regulations and policies that have emerged since 1994. However, I am conscious of SAQA's *authoritative voice* and constantly needed to guard against 'developing a policy' as opposed to 'conducting a critical inquiry' for this study. Initially, the do-ability of RPL, in an almost 'positivist' manner, guided the exploratory stage of the study. My 'positivism' was increasingly tempered by a growing sense of the contested nature of RPL, particularly where dearly held beliefs in terms of 'what' knowledge and 'whose', are considered valuable and credit-worthy in terms of formally registered unit standards and qualifications. This sense, specifically, directed the development of a particular approach to the assessment and recognition of prior learning (dealt with in Chapter 6).

However, I am also conscious of the work and research that must still be undertaken to identify and clarify 'equivalences' in terms of the level, breadth and depth of learning as benchmarked against 'high-stakes' assessments, such as the school-leaving certificate assessment (matriculation examination) and the skills needed by practitioners to undertake such an assessment. I am also increasingly becoming aware of the need to transform assessment, *per se*. Practitioners, myself included, are still very reliant on the form of assessment that we all feel most familiar with – the final written examination. Alternative, valid and credible assessment methodologies for the assessment of prior learning do not abound, not even in the international literature reviewed. RPL, as a mechanism whereby all prior knowledge is valued, must consciously seek to find ways through which the 'disempowered' can be empowered,

i.e. it should be a mechanism through which not only those people who are likely to have the academic abilities needed for further and higher learning are given recognition for their prior learning, but also those who lack those academic skills but who have nevertheless, valuable, recognisable skills and knowledge.

The philosophy of an outcomes-based approach to education and training also influenced this study. Again, from an official, policy point of view, through my association with the SAQA, an outcomes-based approach, according to which the results of learning are used to describe the desired outcomes of learning, has had an impact on my view of an appropriate model for the assessment of prior learning (discussed in Chapter 6). An outcomes-based approach to education and training is however, also contested, particularly because it is accused of being ‘reductionist’ and ‘market-driven’ and, thereby disallowing learning that does not ‘fit’ easily with the requirements for a qualification or the curricula supporting the attainment of the qualification. An outcomes-based approach to education and training is, as in the case of the new overall education and training system in this country, a new concept, not yet proven to be the most appropriate for South Africa. However, I believe that as the system matures, and as practitioners become more comfortable with the approach, an outcomes-based approach will increasingly facilitate an understanding of the bigger picture, which in turn will assist in the development of feasible systems whereby all knowledges, including ‘indigenous’ and other types of knowledge, are considered valuable and worthy of credit.

Finally, owing to the lack of extensive system-wide implementation of RPL in South Africa, my units of analysis emanated from initiatives where the possibility exists that there is a vested interest to present their initiatives in a non-critical light and therefore to report largely positively on their projects. It is for that reason that the Department of Labour and the Matriculation Board were interviewed. These two bodies do not have a vested interest; rather they are able to provide a sense of the possible obstacles to the implementation of RPL on a systemic and on a practical level. Also, the public comment received on two of SAQA’s publications: *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework* (2002a), and *The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* (2003a), often provided independent views from those of stakeholders

commenting on the proposed policy and guidelines. These views generally emanated from provider institutions that do not have a vested interest in reporting positively on their initiatives, with the result that their comments often balanced the ‘positive’ responses to the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews.

#### 4.6 Data Analysis Plan

In a mixed method mode of enquiry, the best characteristics of qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis can be utilised. Tashakkori & Teddlie (2003) points out that

A major advantage of mixed methods research is that it enables the researcher to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions, and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study (p. 15).

The choice of a mixed method design was discussed under 4.3 - Research Design, but in this study I also hoped that this design would facilitate better data analysis and inferences: with the qualitative methods providing greater depth of understanding and the quantitative methods providing greater breadth (albeit limited in this case as only 16 out of 26 responses to the questionnaire could be utilised).

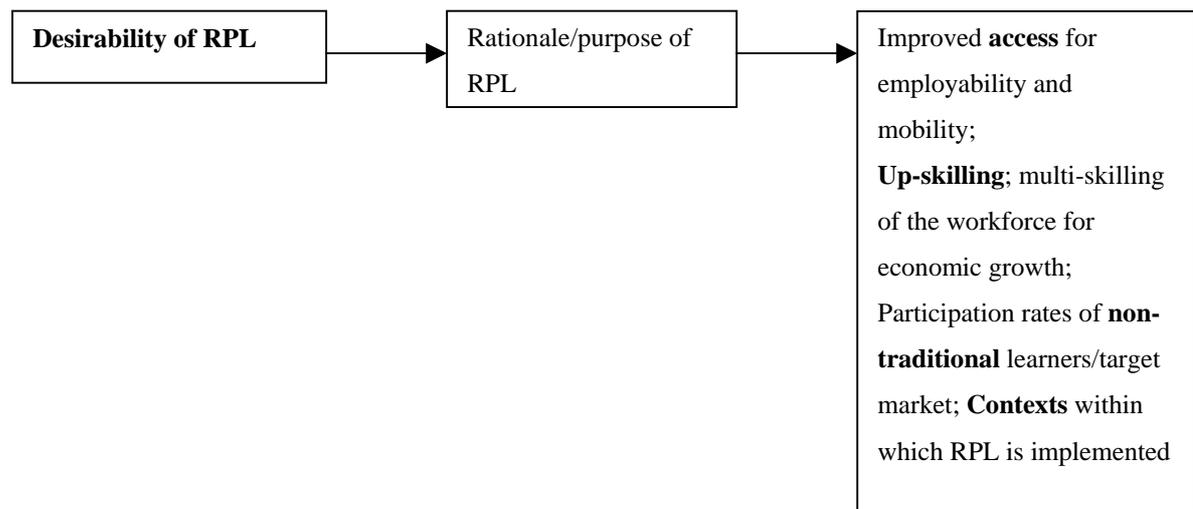
For operational Research Question 1, more data analysis techniques were used than for the second question. This was because the analyses of Question 1 informed the finalisation and refinement of the instrument, as well as the themes in Question 2. In addition, Question 1 was answered using qualitative and quantitative instruments, which required different forms of analysis, while Question 2 made use primarily of the semi-structured interview schedule.

##### *4.6.1 Operational Research Question 1: What are the Characteristics of a Valid, Practical and Effective RPL System?*

A variety of data analysis techniques were utilised. For the document analysis, for example, content analysis was used, looking at frequencies of similar phrases and ideas, whereby a number of themes emerged. These themes helped to develop a general start list of codes, namely:

- The desirability and need for RPL
- The elements of a RPL system

These quickly expanded to sub-codes and themes as follows:



*Figure 4.5. Desirability of RPL*

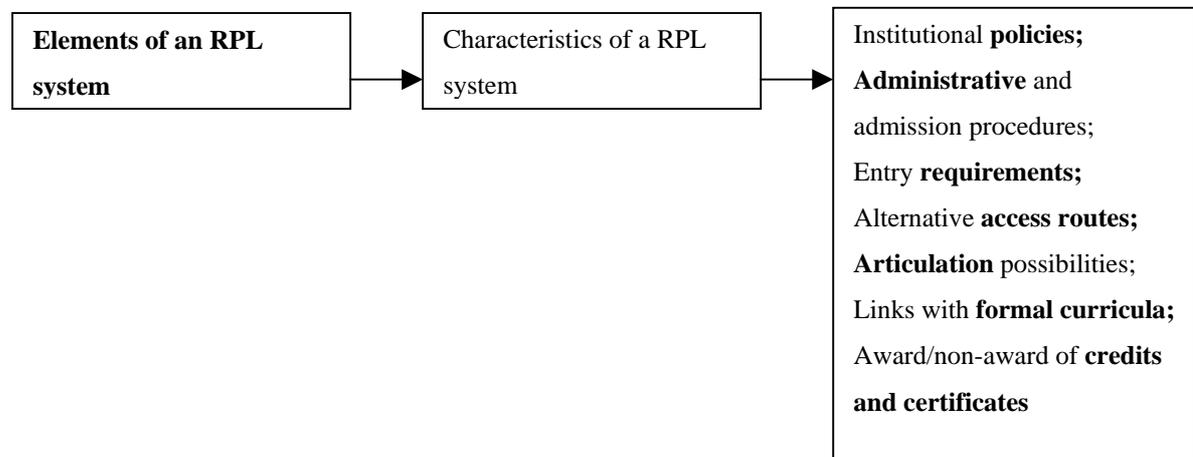
The themes that clearly emerged from the literature, purely in terms of frequency, in relation to the ‘desirability of RPL’ from the literature are:

- The need for **improved access** internationally, to further education and training opportunities with the purpose of encouraging lifelong learning for greater mobility of the workforce between workplaces.
- Globalisation and technological advances require constant **up-skilling** and multi-skilling for economic growth.
- The target markets for RPL. In most of the international initiatives, adult, under-qualified employees, i.e. **non-traditional learners** as opposed to the school-leaving population, make up the most important target market

In comparing the international literature and the South African literature in terms of the desirability/need for RPL, the following differences emerged:

- In most countries, RPL is closely associated with vocational/job specific requirements, whereas in South Africa, where the intention is to apply RPL in all **contexts**, bands and sectors.
- It should be noted that it is only in South Africa (and to some extent in Canada with their focus on their ‘First Nations’) that there is an explicit focus on ‘**redress**’ of past educational injustices and disparities.

As in the case of ‘desirability of RPL’, the next code – ‘elements of RPL systems’ expanded to more substantial sub-codes and themes:



*Figure 4.6. Elements of a RPL system*

- The themes emerging from this code, again initially only by frequency, started to address the operational issues impacting on a RPL system, for example:
- Institutional **policies**, which include an expression of commitment to quality for ensuring the credibility of the process, seem to be considered to be of central importance. This theme expanded substantially (refer to Table 4.6).
- **Administrative and admission** procedures, and the need for sensitisation of staff (including administrative staff) to deal with RPL applications, became a strong theme. By comparing the procedures of a number of international policies, it became evident that many commonalities between different systems exist, despite RPL being implemented in different contexts (see Chapter 3: Literature review).
- **Entry requirements** started to address the need for clear criteria against which prior learning could be assessed. This theme also expanded substantially (refer to Table 4.6).

In comparing international approaches to South African approaches emerging from engagement with the SAQA policy development process, the following specific foci in the South African context became evident:

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- In the South African literature, alternative **access routes**, **articulation** possibilities and links with **formal mainstream curricula** emerged as strong themes. In the United States and Canada, it became evident that whilst RPL has been implemented widely, there are not necessarily direct links with formal mainstream learning programmes.
- The award/non-award of **credits and certificates** for learning attained through informal and non-formal means also emerged as a strong theme in South African literature. As before, this theme expanded into sub-themes (see overleaf – Table 4.6).

**Table 4.6**

***Pattern Coding, Themes and Relationships: Literature Review***

	Sub-codes	Themes	Possible relationships
<b>E L E M E N T S</b>	Institutional policies	Legitimacy and structure to the process	Quality criteria established to ensure the integrity of the credits awarded
		Quality assurance mechanisms	The contested nature of RPL
	Administrative and admission procedures	Inadequate/inappropriate administrative and admissions procedures; transcription and recording of credits attained through RPL	Operationalisation of RPL processes Practitioner skills
<b>O F  A</b>	Entry/access requirements and arrangements	The need for clear criteria against which prior learning could be benchmarked The move towards criterion-referenced assessment	An outcomes-based approach to education and training, where descriptions of learning, as captured in the learning outcomes of the qualification, is used as benchmark
	Access routes, articulation and links with formal curricula	The portability of credits intra- as well as inter-institutionally and inter-sectorally	Links with an outcomes-based approach, where nationally agreed on descriptors of learning enable articulation with formal curricula
<b>S Y S T E M</b>	Credits and certificates	In South Africa, the reluctance to award credits and to certificate learning without inputting into the learning of the learner	Old regulations (such as the 50% residency clause) as an inhibitor to the implementation of RPL
		The 50% residency clause which governs credit transfer between institutions of particularly higher education institutions	Lack of coherence between new policy positions and old regulations

From these two codes, differences and commonalities were explored, and it became possible to start clustering the themes. Table 3.3 (Literature Review) for example,

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highlights the commonalities between different countries in terms of the following broad criteria:

- A well-defined explicit structure for RPL;
- Quality assurance processes, including the description of pre-agreed quality criteria;
- An outcomes-based approach to the assessment of prior learning; and
- A focus on workforce development, linked to the economic growth of the country where RPL is practised.

These commonalities in turn pointed to a number of differences in terms of the rationale for the implementation of RPL. For example, whereas in most of the countries investigated, the purpose of RPL is to enhance access of non-traditional learners, including immigrants, to further and higher education and to improve mobility of workers, a key reason for implementation in South Africa is the need to redress past educational injustices. The implementation of RPL in South Africa then has the purposes of redress, enhanced access to education and training, and transformation of education and training in the broader sense.

In the document analysis of the new Acts, regulations and policies, I specifically looked for coherence and agreements between different pieces of legislation, (or a lack of coherence). In this case, my start list of codes was again quite simple: key words were ‘redress’, ‘access’, ‘transformation’. It was found that all the Acts, regulation and policies are in agreement with the principles underpinning these concepts. However, it is in the old Acts and regulations that ‘incoherencies’ emerged. Evidence of these was ironically found in the new Acts, where the old regulations have not yet been repealed. For example, the Matriculation Board has been established as an interim body to regulate entry into higher education, yet the ‘Joint Matriculation Board’ has already been disbanded (refer to Chapter 2 of this report).

Throughout the literature review therefore, including the review of research literature, patterns or ‘leitmotifs’ emerged. These leitmotifs included:

- The contested nature of RPL, in terms of the credibility of such processes;

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- The need for accountability of education and training in terms of public money spent and the credibility of the process, particularly in relation to the institutional environment within which RPL is taking place;
- The balance between a market-driven approach to education and learning for the sake of learning;
- The models used for the assessment of prior learning and the conceptual framework upon which the models are based, i.e. a technicist (credit-exchange) or holistic (developmental) approach;
- The nature of knowledge and whose knowledge, i.e. academic knowledge or workplace knowledge, ‘counts’; and
- What should be assessed and how.

These leitmotifs and themes informed the research questions and were captured in the questionnaire (Appendix C). The questionnaire therefore attempted to ascertain the extent to which the leitmotif is operationalised. For example, the linkages between the leitmotifs and the questions can be represented as follows:

**Table 4.7**

#### *Links between Leitmotifs and Questionnaire Questions*

Assessment as a leitmotif	
Quality assurance (including moderation) of assessment and the process	Section 4 of the questionnaire
What should be assessed?	Questions 3.13 and 3.14
How should it be assessed?	Questions 3.7 – 3.9; 3.15
The model	Questions 3.17 – 3.20
The nature of knowledge	Question 3.14

The questionnaires were analysed by looking at frequencies of responses and the relationships between the frequencies in terms of the leitmotifs highlighted above, for example in the section in the questionnaire dealing with ‘Quality assurance (including moderation) of assessment and the process’:

In terms of structured, pre-agreed quality processes in the form of institutional policies (Question 3.1), most respondents indicated that their institutions have

formally documented assessment policies (12/16). Those that do not have such policies considered their processes as pilots. In relation to Question 4.1: *Does your organisation have a formally documented moderation process?*, which links with institutional policies and procedures, there was a high response rate. 14/16 respondents indicated that such a process does exist for the organisation. However, only 11 of those processes also include RPL assessment (Question 4.3). Again, this may suggest the ‘pilot’ status of RPL at that institution. One could therefore infer that institutional policies, including quality assurance mechanisms, are important for the legitimisation of RPL within the institution

Having determined that most organisations do have quality assurance in place, in keeping with the identified theme (Table 4.6 above) I then wanted to check what it is that is moderated. The responses to Question 4.2 - *What does the moderation process include?* - suggests that the ‘assessment results’ (14/16), the ‘instruments’ (14/16) and the ‘assessment processes’ (13/16) are moderated. However, in the response to Question 4.7 - *What form does the moderation take?* - four organisations, of which three are higher education institutions, did not respond at all, while the other responses related to ‘results’ (ten/12) and ‘instruments’ (eight/12). There was a high correlation between those organisations that have included RPL assessment in their quality assurance processes and those that moderated ‘results’ and ‘instruments’, suggesting that quality assurance is important for those practitioners to ensure the validity and credibility of the process.

#### 4.6.2 Operational Research Question 2: *What Elements are Required for Implementing a Valid and Sustainable RPL System?*

The questionnaire, as mentioned before, informed the refinement of the semi-structured interview (refer to data collection procedures – 4.4.3). The intention was to probe deeper into the possible facilitators of inhibitors to the implementation of RPL. For example, in terms of access and admissions, the questionnaire Question 3.5 - *Do the institutional policies and procedures currently make provision for alternative access into learning programmes?* - was probed further by Question 3.1 of the semi-structured interview:

- 3.1 What are the access and admissions arrangements for RPL candidates at your institution?

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- 3.1.1 How do these facilitate access to further learning?
- 3.1.2 How do these inhibit access to further learning?
- 3.1.3 How different are these arrangements from ‘mainstream’ procedures?

In addition, the semi-structured interview took into account the responses to the questionnaire. For example, in the questionnaire, Question 2.9 asked: *What is the purpose of RPL in your organisation?* The University of Witwatersrand indicated that RPL at that institution is undertaken for ‘access’ to under-graduate programmes and for ‘advanced standing’ for post-graduate programmes, but not for credit. Question 3.2 of the semi-structured interview therefore asked *Your organisation does not award credits. What is the basis for this decision?*

The semi-structured interviews were analysed looking at commonalities in responses, as well as differences between responses. I also looked at surprising and contradictory responses. This was done by placing the themes in matrices, for example in Tables 4.8 and Tables 4.9 (Appendix E, Table E1 and Table E2):

**Table 4.8**

***Matrix of Common Themes emerging from the Semi-structured Interviews***

Organisation	Theme: Institutional (political) will and quality assurance
Director: Witsplus of the University of Witwatersrand	Institutional will and policies; ‘Defensible in law’; Quality assurance and professional judgement of staff
The Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon Programme	Institutional leadership and structure; RPL must be quality assured against stringent requirements; Internal moderation and approval; Trust in professional judgement of academic staff
Management Unit of the Dept. of Labour	The relationship between process, content and reason for RPL; Mechanisms for quality assurance and improvement plans
Director: Matriculation Board	Regulatory requirements; Matriculation Board gives approval for Senate’s decisions, based on description and a peer review by another university

**Table 4.9**

*Matrix of Differences and Surprises emerging from the Semi-structured Interviews*

Organisation	Contentious issues
The Head: Witsplus of the University of the Witwatersrand	Those likely to succeed are not people with a ‘weak’ matric, but rather those who could not finish matric, “who have subsequently made something of themselves” after schooling, without a matriculation certificate; RPL is seen by the academics as part of a regulatory framework and increasing ‘managerialism’ of the authorities
The Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon	RPL will not be valid if all assessments take place in a language other than the learner’s mother tongue; RPL is linked to lifelong learning – we will always need it. It is therefore critical that systems are set up so that it will be sustainable; The most likely successes will be from people who have succeeded in their own personal and professional lives
Programme Management Unit of the Dept. of Labour	RPL could be negative, i.e. it exposes possible weaknesses of individuals in the workplace and could result in placement [on the learning programme] below their own staff; The realities of juggling the workplace contexts and RPL assessments need to be taken into account; The mismatch between expectations of learners and managers and the benefits derived from such a process; The mismatch between current requirements of qualifications and the future requirements of new unit standards and qualifications
The Director: Matriculation Board	Gateway subjects, such as mathematics, science and languages, should be the basis for access, via RPL for entry into higher education

In conclusion, whilst the two operational research questions are distinct, it should be noted that this distinction is artificial and is a means of facilitating the discussion of each question. The questions are interlinked and dependent on each other, requiring that not only the exploratory interviews and the questionnaire are discussed in Chapter 5, but that the results are also informed by the semi-structured interviews dealt with in Chapter 6, and vice versa. Nevertheless, Chapter 5 will deal mostly with the emerging characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system on a macro level, while Chapter 6 will deal with an approach to the assessment of prior learning that will ensure a sustainable process.

## CHAPTER 5

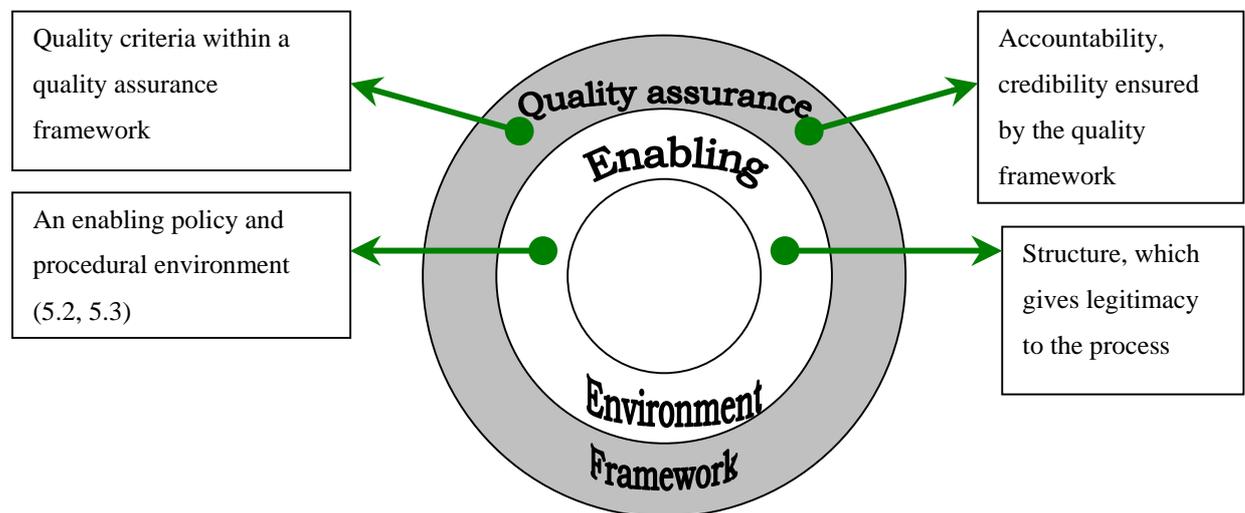
### THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A VALID, PRACTICAL AND EFFECTIVE RPL SYSTEM

*The results of the first operational question – ‘What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?’ - will be presented in this chapter. This chapter will deal with the characteristics of a RPL system that emerge from the literature reviews and the document analyses. These are supported by the analyses of the questionnaires and also by the responses to the semi-structured interviews. In addition, the public comment received on a South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) document, the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a), provided useful insights from provider institutions that do not have a vested interest in reporting positively on RPL at their institutions, and is also included in the analyses.*

*A key characteristic of RPL systems internationally seems to be that of a highly accountable system, whereby every aspect of RPL is quality assured, for the purpose of ensuring the validity of the process. This chapter will describe the quality assurance framework, which forms the basis for an enabling environment for the implementation of RPL. An enabling environment refers to the practicality and effectiveness of the system. A valid, practical and effective RPL system therefore seems to be made possible through an enabling environment, including an explicit quality assurance framework.*

In this chapter, the quality assurance framework that will ensure the protection of the integrity of credits awarded through a process of RPL will be discussed. This is in keeping with the need for a highly accountable system for education and training, including RPL, as indicated through national and international literature reviews. ‘Accountability’ - is often considered to be a highly regulatory mechanism, contrary to the need for autonomy of individual provider institutions – is, however, balanced with a sensitivity to the contexts within which RPL is implemented and the need for the development of an enabling environment. An enabling environment has as its intention to encourage and facilitate the implementation of RPL.

In 5.1, the quality assurance framework, often expressed in terms of system-validating quality criteria, is discussed. A quality assurance framework includes internal and external moderation and reviews of every aspect of the RPL process. In 5.2, the enabling environment made possible within the quality assurance framework is outlined. An enabling environment includes the identification of practical and effective processes of RPL within particular contexts. These include operational policies, administrative and assessment procedures, credit articulation agreements and funding and costing of RPL. In 5.3, the current regulations and policies that govern access, particularly as it relates to an enabling environment, are highlighted. Therefore, in terms of the conceptual framework, the following aspects will be discussed in this chapter:



**Figure 5.1. Emerging characteristics of a RPL system**

(Derived from Figure 4.1, in Chapter 4 of this report)

### 5.1 Quality Assurance Framework

Perhaps because RPL seems to be such a contested area, in South Africa, as well as internationally, stringent quality assurance measures in defense of the validity of the process are considered to be the norm, rather than the exception (refer to Chapter 3: Literature Review). A valid and credible RPL system, therefore, seems to hinge on the extent to which a quality assurance framework is established within which RPL processes could be located. In this regard Simosko, (1996) states:

In many contexts, flexible [RPL] assessment services will be a new idea. It will therefore be important for the providing centre to demonstrate on an on-

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going basis that it is not offering a ‘cheap’ or ‘easy’ route to credit or qualifications (p. 179).

Establishing a quality assurance framework seems to have become accepted practice in most of the institutions that responded to the questionnaire in this study. In response to Questions 4.1 – 4.4 and 4.12 of the questionnaire (refer to Appendix F: Extracts from the responses to questionnaire questions) which deal with a quality assurance framework for mainstream assessment and RPL assessment, for example, 14 (out of the 16) respondents indicated that their organisations or faculties have formally documented quality assurance procedures.

Questions 4.1 – 4.4 wanted to determine whether a formal quality assurance structure already exists and the extent to which such a system is utilised for RPL processes, and also whether current processes would constitute an appropriate process for RPL assessment. Question 4.12 elicited responses where a formal quality assurance process does not currently exist.

Quality assurance processes include a range of moderation interventions, from moderating the results and assessment instruments, to moderating the whole process of RPL: (refer to Table 5.1 overleaf).

(Please note: the following abbreviations were used to describe the respondents: -

Pu	Public
Pr	Private
Cnslt	Consultancy
HE	Higher Education
FET	Further Education and Training
GET	General Education and Training
H bl	Historically Black institution
H wh	Historically White institution
Dist	Distance Education institution
New	Newly established institution (post-1994)
AssFETInst	Association of FET institutions

For example: - Mangosuthu Technikon is a Public, Higher Education, Historically black institution, e.g. **Pu, HE, H bl.**)

**Table 5.1**

*Quality Assurance (Moderation) Procedures (n=16)*

Institution	Classific.	Combinations of quality assurance procedures				
		RPL included in moderation	Instr. <sup>9</sup> & results	Instr., results & process	Instr., results, process & pre and post assessment	None
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu,HE,H bl	X	-	X	-	-
Peninsula Technikon	Pu,HE,H bl	X	-	-	<u>X</u>	-
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu,HE,H wh	-	-	-	X	-
Cape Technikon	Pu,HE,H wh	X	-	X	-	-
Technikon SA	Pu,HE,dist	X	-	X	-	-
UNISA	Pu,HE,dist	X	-	-	X	-
University of Cape Town	Pu,HE,H wh	-	-	-	-	X
Rhodes University	Pu,HE,H wh	-	X	-	-	-
University of Witwatersrand	Pu,HE,H wh	-	-	-	-	X
Mentornet Assessment College	Pr,HE,new	X	-	-	X	-
Learning Performance Link	Pr,HE,new	X	-	-	X	-
Regional Training Trust	Pr,FE,new	X	-	-	X	-
LearnSys	Pr,GFE,new	X	-	X	-	-
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr,FE,cnslt	X	-	-	X	-
AFETISA	AssFET Inst	-	-	X	-	-
	Subtotals:	11	1	5	8	2

<sup>9</sup> Instr. - Instruments

Notes to Table 5.1:

Quality assurance is based on three combinations in the life-cycle of assessment: (1) quality assurance of the assessment instruments and assessment results; (2) quality assurance of assessment instruments, results, as well as the assessment process; (3) quality assurance of assessment instruments, results, the process of assessment, as well as the processes that take place before and after the actual assessment, such as pre-assessment support and guidance and post-assessment feedback and guidance.

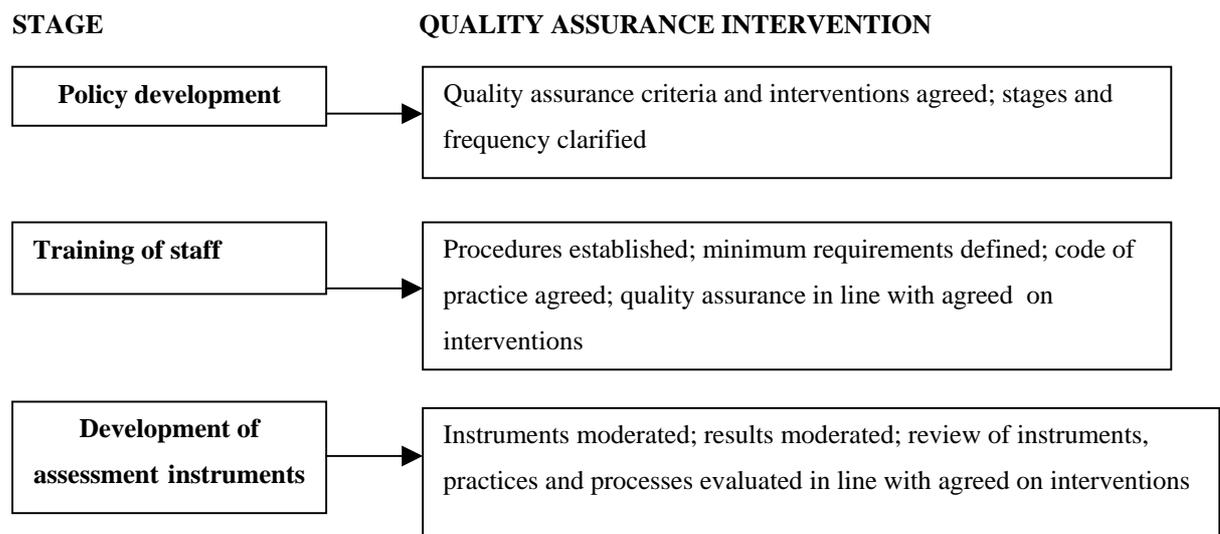
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Of the 14 respondent institutions that indicated that they do have formal quality assurance processes, 11 include RPL processes in their moderation. Eight out of the 14 indicated that their moderation covers every aspect of RPL (including the moderation of pre- and post-assessment processes, as well as the quality assurance of assessment instruments, results and the assessment process) and that they generally consider the process to be appropriate for RPL. The 11 respondents include five technikons and one university (UNISA) and all the private institutions (six out of 14). Of the three remaining universities, only one (Rhodes) indicated that it has a formal quality assurance system, but that this does not include RPL.

Therefore, it seems that in most of the institutions responding to the questionnaire in this study, as well as internationally (see Chapter 3: Literature Review), the ability to demonstrate that RPL processes are valid and credible was interpreted as meaning that structured and accountable quality assurance framework exists. Such a framework often consists of sets of quality standards, covering the whole range of RPL practices (refer to the standards established for the USA and England – Chapter 3). The national South African RPL policy has also taken this approach: sets of quality criteria were established for seven areas of practice. The criteria of the South African policy indicate a high level of agreement with international practices (refer to Table 3.4 - Literature Review). These include criteria on:

- Institutional policy and environment;
- Services and support to learners/candidates;
- Training and registration of assessors and key personnel;
- Methods and processes of assessment;
- Quality management systems;
- Fees for RPL services; and
- RPL and curriculum development. (SAQA, 2002a).

In addition, the recently adopted Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a) which was developed in support of the national RPL policy (SAQA, 2002a), indicate at least three quality assurance ‘moments’ in a cycle of development of a RPL system at institutional level: the quality assurance of the framework itself, described as the ‘policy development’; the quality assurance of ‘training of staff’, including the establishment of practicable procedures; and the quality assurance of ‘the development of assessment instruments’, as follows:



**Figure 5.2. Quality assurance interventions**

(From the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL, SAQA, 2003a)

This chapter deals in particular with the first stage and to a limited extent, with the second stage, while the third stage is dealt with in Chapter 6 of this report.

It seems that the intention of the explicit description of quality criteria in policies and guidelines is to assist implementers to justify their processes in order to demonstrate the validity of these. Explicit quality criteria therefore become the benchmarks against which implementation of providers’ RPL systems could be measured. Such quality criteria support the notion of ‘accountability’ towards its stakeholders, and particularly towards the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs). Despite its regulatory flavour, the notion of pre-agreed quality criteria seems to have become widely accepted in South Africa. This became evident through public

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comment on the newly adopted SAQA document: The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a, Chapter 5).

The University of Pretoria, for example, proposes as follows:

Sets of quality standards will have to be developed by institutions, which are properly benchmarked. Quality assurance processes for RPL will have to be assessed across institutions to ensure proper benchmarking and to create and maintain trust in the RPL system, as many students who enter institutions through RPL might migrate to other institutions who would want ‘guarantees’ that such students satisfy certain quality standards (My emphasis).

The University of Pretoria’s comment on the abovementioned SAQA document is supported by the Education White Paper (No 3 of 1997, p. 15). The Department of Education states:

The Ministry [of Education] strongly supports developmental work and pilot projects which will help institutions to develop criteria to assess applicants’ prior learning and experience, so that those with clear potential to succeed in higher education can be admitted (My emphasis).

Also, the draft New Academic Policy (CHE, 2001, p. 104) reiterates the notion of quality assured processes for RPL:

[Institutions] will need to develop appropriate, consistent and quality assured RPL policies, practices and assessment instruments based on the specification of entry requirements and learning outcomes.

These comments indicate a clear need for the establishment of common ground in terms of the quality assurance of RPL in South Africa, not only within particular institutions, but also between institutions and sectors. In the interview with the Director of the Matriculation Board for example, the need for guidelines for public higher education institutions in this regard, was highlighted (refer to Appendix E: Common themes emerging from the semi-structured interviews). Over the past few years, the Matriculation Board, as the body responsible for regulating access to public higher education institutions, has attempted to establish such common ground through a process whereby an institution must submit the rationale, structure and substance, as

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well as a peer review, of their decisions on the ‘Senate’s Discretionary Conditional Exemption’ which grants non-traditional learners access to a higher education institution (refer Chapter 2 of this report).

Also, in the international contexts investigated for this study, it emerged that in most cases, quality standards were developed as benchmarks for quality assurance. In these contexts, the quality standards most often used as a basis for the establishment of common ground are the standards developed by Whitaker (1989, p. 10 and 11). The Whitaker standards are quite detailed and encompass both professional and administrative practise, i.e.:

### *Academic standards*

- I. Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
- II. College credits should be awarded only for college-level learning.
- III. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject between theory and practical application.
- IV. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
- V. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

### *Administrative standards*

- VI. Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
- VII. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
- VIII. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
- IX. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
- X. Assessment programmes should regularly be monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts (p. 10 and 11).

The Whitaker standards seem to have pervaded the guidelines for most of the countries where RPL has been implemented, South Africa included. The Committee

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of Technikon Principals (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001), for example, also used these quality standards as the foundation for their quality assurance framework. However, the quality assurance framework developed by SAQA in the national RPL policy, seems to be broader than the Whitaker standards. Whitaker developed standards particularly for the provider institution's use, which indicates the high level of autonomy of individual institutions in the United States, while the emerging quality assurance requirements in South Africa try to deal with both the macro and micro level of implementation. The macro view includes an alignment of Education and Training Quality Assurance body (ETQA) requirements, with the actual implementation by provider institutions on the ground. This in turn is aligned with the national RPL policy. The micro view attempts to deal with particular contexts of provider institutions, allowing freedom and autonomy within a particular sectoral context, but with a clear understanding of the common benchmarks to be used (refer to the University of Pretoria's comment above). The importance of RPL in South Africa, in terms of a systemic opening up of access to previously excluded learners, seems to have necessitated a broader view, whereby RPL could become a commonly understood mechanism for entry – and hence the need for agreed benchmarks.

A quality assurance framework, including the establishment of institutional policies and moderation processes, seems to give structure to the process and is considered to be important for the legitimisation of RPL within the institution. A quality assurance framework encapsulates external (by the Education and Training Quality Assurance body (ETQA)) and internal (by the provider institution) moderation. According to The Criteria and Guidelines for Assessment of NQF registered Unit standards and Qualifications (SAQA, 2001), the main function of moderation systems (external and internal) is quality assurance. Moderation is undertaken:

- To verify that assessments are fair, valid, reliable and practicable
- To identify the need to redesign assessments if required
- To provide an appeals procedure for dissatisfied learners
- To evaluate the performance of assessors
- To provide procedures for the de-registration of unsatisfactory assessors
- To provide feedback to the National Standards Bodies on unit standards and qualifications (p. 60).

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The first two bullet points (above) are of particular importance for the establishment of RPL processes, while the fourth bullet, starts to deal with the operationalisation of processes.

Questions 4.1 – 4.4 and 4.12 (refer to Appendix F) wanted to test the extent to which a quality assurance framework already exists in the provider institutions that have responded to the questionnaire for this study. In addition, the extent to which there is agreement, as possible common benchmarks between provider institutions and sectors, was explored in Questions 4.7 and 4.8 by asking what such a quality assurance framework encapsulates. These questions were important, not only because quality assurance and moderation have become official requirements in terms of ‘accountability’ (SAQA, 2001) but also to gauge the possibility of developing common approaches to quality assurance that may allow inter-institutional and inter-sectoral transfer of credits.

The questions are:

Question 4.7: What form does the moderation take?

- Moderation by subject specialist of the assessment/paper/assignment
- Review of assessment tools and instruments
- Statistical moderation
- Other

And

Question 4.8: What is the basis for moderation?

- Subject content
- Subject/module objectives
- Unit standards
- Theoretical knowledge
- Applied knowledge
- Practical application
- Level of the qualification
- Exit-level/level outcomes
- Curriculum statements
- Purpose of the qualification
- Assessment instruments/tools

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- Assessment results
- All of the above
- Other

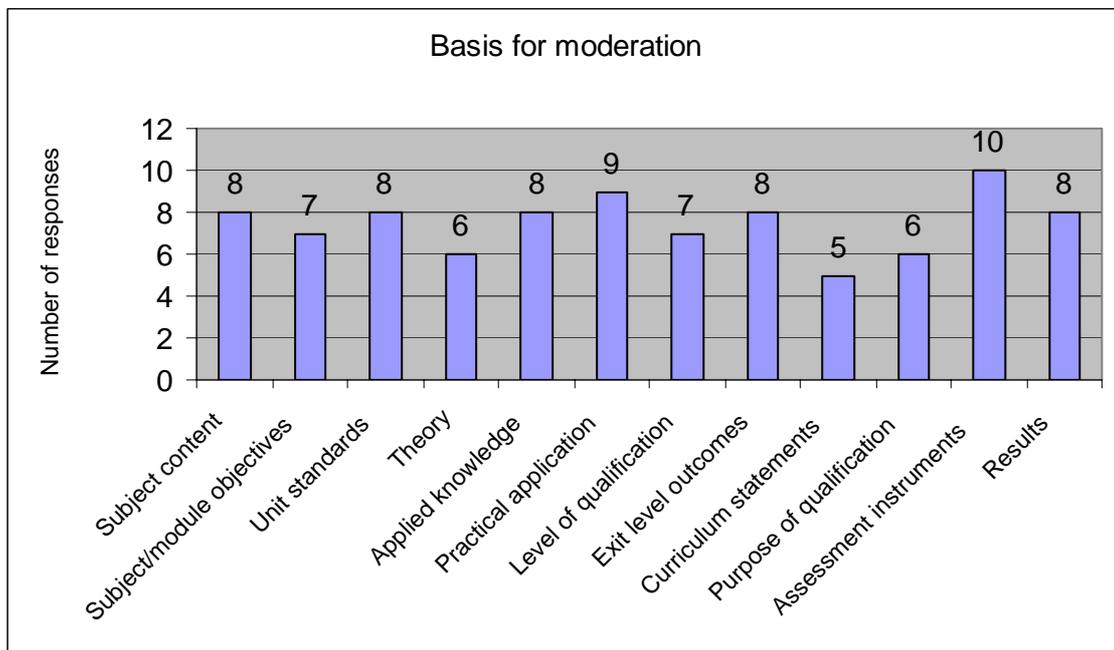
Twelve (out of the 16) respondents provided answers to these questions.

In response to Question 4.7 (refer to Appendix F), nine (out of the 12) respondents indicated that quality assurance is undertaken by a subject specialist who moderates in particular, the assessment instruments (papers/assignments, etc). Eight (out of 12) of these respondents also indicated that in addition to quality assuring the assessment instruments before they are used, they also review the instruments after use, while three respondents also make use of some form of statistical moderation. Two of the new emerging, private providers indicated that they do not necessarily make use of subject specialists, but rather of a registered moderator, or senior persons in the organisation. The private, further education provider, Regional Training Trust, makes use of pre-designed assessment instruments and therefore only reviews the assessment tools and instruments after they have been used.

Therefore, in terms of the form of moderation undertaken by the different providers, most of the respondents agree that quality assurance should, on the assessment instruments at least, both take place before and after their use. This may facilitate the establishment of common ground. Confidence in other institutions' quality assurance processes will facilitate the acceptance of credits awarded at such institutions and, therefore, the transfer of credits between institutions, sectors and bands.

As a further dimension of quality assurance, the basis upon which RPL is moderated is important. Quality assurance could be on different aspects of RPL and might therefore not be compatible with other provider institutions' processes. The extent to which there is agreement between institutions on what it is that should be moderated, will also facilitate the establishment of a common approach. It has already been established that the quality assurance of assessment instruments, both before and after their use, is important to most respondents. Question 4.8 of the questionnaire wanted to explore this further in terms of the substance and context of the moderation.

Respondents were asked to mark all the aspects (see above Questions 4.7 and 4.8), considered important for moderation. Figure 5.3 details these responses:



**Figure 5.3. The basis for moderation (n=12)**

The options provided in the questionnaire can be grouped into three broad categories: input-based, output-based and assessment-based moderation. Input-based moderation refers to moderation based on the content of the learning programme specific to the provider institution. Output-based moderation is based on the results of learning, or the outcomes of a qualification, not a specific but rather a generic description of the requirements of unit standards and qualifications. Assessment-based moderation is moderation of the assessment instruments and results. The respondents responded as follows:

**Table 5.2**
***Input, Output and Assessment-based Moderation***

Institution	Input-based				Output-based					Assessment-based		
	S/c	S/Mobj	Th	C/St	U/s	A/k	P/a	L/q	ELO	Pur	A/ins	Ass/res
Mangosuthu Technikon	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	X	X
Peninsula Technikon	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-
Vaal Triangle Technikon	X	X	-	-	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	-
Cape Technikon	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Technikon SA	X	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	X	X	-	-
UNISA	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Mentornet	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>10</sup>
Assessment College	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X	X
Learning Performance	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	X	X
Link Regional	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X	-
Training Trust LearnSys	-	-	-	-	X	-	X	-	X	-	X	X
Adaptable Learning Service	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>11</sup>
Subtotals:	8	7	6	5	8	8	9	7	8	6	10	8

**Key (Table 5.2):**
*Input-based*

S/c: Subject content

Th: Theory

S/Mobj: Subject/module objectives

C/St: Curriculum statements

*Output-based*

U/s: Unit standards

L/q: Level of qualification

A/k: Applied knowledge

ELO: Exit-level outcomes

P/a: Practical application

Pur: Purpose of qualification

*Assessment-based*

A/ins: Assessment instruments

A/res: Assessment results

<sup>10</sup> All of the above, but they are not equally important

<sup>11</sup> All of the above, but not all in one moderation

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Of the twelve respondents, most (ten out of 12) use as a minimum, the assessment instruments as the basis for moderation, i.e. assessment-based moderation (see Table 5.2).

A significant finding is that, of all the aspects considered to be important, the 'output', as captured in 'unit standards' (eight out of 12), 'applied knowledge' (eight out of 12), 'practical application' (nine out of 12), and 'exit-level outcomes' (eight out of 12), which represent the broad outcomes of a qualification, are used as a basis for moderation by all 12 respondents. This seems to suggest that it may be possible, on the basis of the broad outcomes of unit standards and qualifications, to establish common benchmarks across institutions, bands and sectors. This is because the generic statements and understanding about the outcomes and purpose of the qualifications are used as the point of departure, while still allowing for context- and institution-specific requirements in the form of 'inputs', i.e. the subject and module content and objectives. In addition, the assessment instruments and assessment results were cited as important in the quality assurance processes (ten and nine out of 12 respectively). Therefore, the extent to which there is agreement in terms of a particular field of learning and the requirements of a set of qualifications within that field (and the assessment thereof) facilitates a common understanding of and trust in the systems and processes of other institutions. This is what the University of Pretoria meant in their comment on the recently adopted SAQA publication, *The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL* (2003a):

Quality assurance processes for RPL will have to be assessed across institutions to ensure proper benchmarking and to create and maintain trust in the RPL system.

This seems to be in keeping with an outcomes-based approach, where the results of learning (or the output) and, to lesser extent, the content (or the input) are evaluated when moderation takes place. Both the Education White Paper (No 3 of 1997) and the draft New Academic Policy (CHE, 2001) make the point that through the establishment of common quality criteria based on the specification of entry requirements and learning outcomes, RPL may take place in a valid and credible manner. (This aspect will be discussed in Chapter 6 of this report.)

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Further, RPL in South Africa is seen to be a national strategy for opening up access and, as such, is captured in the NSB Regulations describing the format of qualifications (SAQA, 1998), as well as in the ETQA Regulations, describing the need for the establishment of assessment policies and quality assurance measures, which includes RPL (SAQA, 1998). This strongly suggests that this country is attempting to develop a systemic approach to the greater participation of non-traditional learners in education and training and, in terms of quality assurance, is trying to ensure that credits awarded through RPL at a particular institution could be recognised at other institutions and in other contexts. As indicated before, the external moderation process, undertaken by the relevant ETQA, is part of the overall quality assurance framework with the purpose to ensure consistency between their constituent provider institutions. In addition, it is envisaged that SAQA-appointed moderating bodies would be established to ensure consistency of approaches across sectors, and not only within a particular sector. For this reason, a 'macro' view of quality assurance, whereby common criteria aligned with ETQA requirements are used, is increasingly becoming important. Question 4.11 of the questionnaire asked - Are your organisation's RPL processes and services in line with the quality assurance requirements of the Education and Training Quality Assurance body? Twelve (out of 16) of the respondents provided answers to the question (refer to Appendix F).

All the new, emerging institutions (six out of 12) indicated that their quality assurance processes are in line with the relevant ETQA. This is significant because new private providers cannot become accredited provider institutions of learning unless they meet the quality assurance requirements of the ETQA.

The older, public institutions' answers varied: two technikons: Mangosothu and Peninsula indicated that their arrangements are in line with the ETQA, while only one public university, UNISA, felt that their processes are also in line with ETQA requirements.

Vaal Technikon and the Technikon Southern Africa was either still in the process of developing their system, or did not know whether their current system would meet the requirements. The Cape Technikon indicated that their processes are according to faculty and departmental requirements, and not ETQA requirements.

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Given that a formal quality assurance system for education and training in South Africa is just over three years old (with the first ETQA accredited by the South African Qualifications Authority at the end of 2000) and, is therefore, still in development, institutional alignment with ETQA requirements is encouraging and indicates that a systemic implementation of RPL systems will increasingly be made possible as a result of a macro approach to quality assurance and moderation.

In conclusion, the responses to questions in the questionnaire dealing with a quality assurance framework indicate the following:

- i. Most respondents (14 out of 16) currently have quality assurance processes in place for mainstream assessment, but not all include RPL in their current moderation processes.
- ii. The quality assurance processes cover a variety of aspects relevant to RPL, and eight (out of 14) respondents indicated that the assessment instruments, assessment results, as well as the overall process, including pre- and post assessment activities, are moderated.
- iii. All the new, emerging private institutions have formal quality assurance frameworks in place, and all consider these appropriate for RPL purposes. In addition, they consider their quality assurance arrangements to be in line with ETQA requirements – this may be an important facilitator for the establishment of common benchmarks, trusted by all the providers who fall within the area of responsibility of an ETQA.
- iv. Most respondents (ten out of 12 responses) agree on a minimum moderation, i.e. on the assessment instruments both before and after their use, as well as the assessment results (nine out of 12) as an indicator of the quality of the process.
- v. All the respondents (n=12) base their moderation on the output, i.e. on the generic descriptions of the results (or outcomes) of learning.

These responses seem to suggest that there is a common need for (and current usage of) quality assurance frameworks within which RPL is located. There is also a high level of agreement that not only the assessment instruments and results, as is usually the case in mainstream assessment, should be moderated, but also the overall process, including pre- and post assessment activities. However, if a minimum has to be

established, it would be on the assessment instruments, both before and after their use, suggesting that there is a need to review instruments for appropriateness and possibilities for the establishment of common approaches. Finally, all the respondents indicated that the outcomes of learning are an important basis for moderation, which may greatly facilitate the development of common benchmarks to ensure transferability of credits between institutions, bands and sectors.

## **5.2 An Enabling Environment**

As seen from 5.1 (above) a quality assurance framework could be an important starting point for the establishment of common ground between the different players in the implementation of RPL. The quality assurance framework therefore provides a common understanding of the principles and the purposes of RPL within a particular context. The disjuncture between similar and dissimilar institutions, sectors and bands in terms of the purpose and processes for RPL could be a major barrier to the implementation of RPL processes as a result of a lack of trust in the quality of other institution's processes. In a semi-structured interview with the Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon, the point was made that in order to implement RPL

...there needs to be clarity on what RPL is, and what it is not. What it intends to cover and what it doesn't cover. This information needs to be in one place so that one message goes out.

This suggests that ideally, there should be a common understanding, developed centrally – possibly by the ETQA as the body responsible for coherence and consistency across its constituent provider institutions. The Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon suggested that in the case of public higher education institutions, the South African University's Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA), where the Matriculation Board is located, could be the body that establishes common approaches for this sector.

In terms of establishing a shared understanding, the Programme Management Unit of the Department of Labour pointed out that to establish an enabling environment within which RPL processes could be developed and implemented “a RPL system

must be implementable and understood by all who are involved” (refer to Appendix E).

An enabling environment therefore seems to require clarification of the principles, purposes, policies and procedures for the development and implementation of RPL and it cannot be separated from the quality assurance framework. This means that would-be implementers seem to need to make a conscious decision about the desirability of the process within their environment and then deliberately work towards making this possible.

From the literature (refer to Chapter 3 of this report) it has become evident that a shared understanding and common approaches are essential for the development and delivery of RPL services. Guidelines and quality standards for provider institutions have been developed for all the countries investigated for this study. First and foremost in all the initiatives investigated is the expression of what RPL is intended to achieve – usually in the form of a definition and clarification for the reason for the establishment of RPL services, for example in the Guidelines for the Canadian PLAR Practitioner (CAPLA, 2000) RPL is defined as:

Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) is defined as a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning (p.3).

Likewise, in a CAEL publication: Best Practices in Adult Learning (2002), the purpose of RPL within the context of American higher education institutions is expressed as follows:

The institution defines and assesses the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by adult learners both from the curriculum and from life/work experience in order to assign credit and confer degrees with rigor (p. 49).

In South Africa, the purpose of RPL finds expression in the numerous newly promulgated education Acts and regulations (refer to Chapter 2 of this report).

Herein lies a significant difference between the South African context and international initiatives. Whereas all the international initiatives have as their purpose

to implement RPL to broaden access to non-traditional learners, in South Africa there is the added directive of transforming the education and training system and redressing educational injustices of the past (refer to Chapter 4 of this report). Therefore, whilst all the international initiatives have foregrounded their rationale for the development of RPL systems, these do not usually emanate from law. In South Africa, the principles and purposes of RPL are captured in law (refer to Chapter 2 of this report). For that reason, the expression of a will to implement RPL is seen to be one of the essential precursors to implementation. This was strongly supported by the interviewees for this study and will be discussed under 5.2.1.

In Chapter 3 of this report, Table 3.4 details the commonalities between international initiatives and the emerging South African system. The establishment of the principles, policies and procedures for the implementation of RPL is seen to be a key aspect for successful implementation (refer to Chapter 3). Linked to the establishment of policies is the definition and description of the target market. In all the international initiatives, adult learners (non-traditional learners) were the target markets. As before, the interviewees for this study supported the establishment of clear policies and procedures with the purpose of enhancing access to non-traditional learners. These aspects will be discussed under 5.2.2 and 5.2.3.

In the literature an enabling environment also seems to point to the extent to which the learning to be assessed can be articulated with formal learning programmes within and across institutions and the extent to which administrative systems facilitate the transcription of credits. In the quality standards established for the international initiatives, this requirement is expressed in various ways, for example in the USA, England, Ireland and Australia respectively:

- Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted (Whitaker, 1989);
- Focus on specific credits and programmes (Nyatanga, *et al*, 1998);
- Ensure proper co-ordination between the centre and the schools or faculties (Nyatanga, *et al*, 1998);
- The level or relevance of work experience to the course content (direct, indirect or general)(McGrath, in Evans, 2000);

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- The procedures adopted to assess a particular course or range of experiences as the basis for credit in a university course should ensure that the prior learning assessed is comparable in content and standard with the university course in which credit is sought (AVCC, 1993).

This aspect will be discussed in 5.2.4.

A further aspect that emerged as an important aspect of an enabling environment is that of clear policies and procedures structured within a quality assurance framework. In the literature, for example, the international and national initiatives highlighted clear policies and procedures as important. The USA, England, Canada, Australia and South Africa (refer to Chapter 3 of this report) respectively, all explicitly refer to policies and procedures as follows:

- Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available (Whitaker, 1989);
- The institution should have a clear APL policy, which is translated into operational structures (Nyatanga, *et al*, 1998);
- Standards for assessment, policies and procedures have been developed at most practising institutions (Van Kleef, 1998);
- Universities should develop and publish policies (and, where possible, details of amounts of credit available) on the recognition for credit of prior ‘informal’ learning (RPL), that is knowledge, skills, attitudes and/or attributes which have been acquired through learning experiences other than in a course offered by an Australian university or technical and further education (AVCC, 1993);
- Institutions should have in place policies and procedures to deal thoroughly, fairly and expeditiously with problems that arise in the course of assessment of candidates. These should define the actions to be taken in the event of academic misconduct, and the grounds for candidate appeals against assessment outcomes or the assessment process (Du Pre & Pretorius, 2001).

Section 3 of the questionnaire (refer to Appendix C: Research Instruments) dealt with current policies and procedures used by the respondents. These will be discussed in 5.2.5.

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The final aspect of an enabling environment is the funding and costing of RPL. In the English initiative, fees charged for services emerged as a possible ‘malpractice’; for example, malpractices to be avoided include “basing assessment fees (Portfolio etc.) on the number of credits awarded”(Nyatanga, *et al*, 1998, p.41).

The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) also highlighted fees as an issue. The policy states that:

RPL services and assessment should not cost more than a full-time face-to-face programme (p. 28)

Both the funding and fees for RPL will be discussed in 5.2.6.

### 5.2.1 *Political and Institutional ‘Will’*

From the analysis of the Acts and regulations newly promulgated for the transformation of education and training in SA (Chapter 2 of this report) it seems that the principle of ‘increased access’ and ‘redress’ is embedded in the vision for education and training in South Africa. The political ‘will’ at the level of the national policy-makers, therefore, already exists. However, it is at the level of the institution or provider where the political ‘will’ needs to become a reality. Such realities, however, do not always reflect the policy ‘idealism’.

The University of Port Elizabeth, for example, submitted comments to the recently adopted SAQA document: The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a). A tempering of the idealism as expressed in terms of ‘redress’ and ‘equity of access’ is called for:

... in practice, true RPL is primarily of symbolic value, applying to only a small proportion of marginalized learners. Thus, the report [Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL] is heavily rhetorical, ignoring important arguments that would temper its ardour and place it in a more realistic perspective.

This institution seems to voice a sense of impatience, with the focus on ‘redress’ at the (perceived) expense of education and training generally. This reflects the need for stringent quality assurance as discussed in 5.1, as a quality assurance framework is

seen to ensure the protection of the integrity of the system, and is not only of ‘symbolic’ nature.

However, RPL practise may indeed, in an attempt to operationalise the system, take on a more pragmatic and less idealistic view. What seems to be very important, though, is that the political ‘will’ be translated into an institutional ‘will’. In the interview with the Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon, the respondent raised this point (refer to Appendix E):

A RPL system, in order to be implemented, needs institutional leadership supportive of RPL in keeping with the national commitment. The message that RPL is important should therefore go out strongly to the institution from the leadership of the organisation.

The respondent also stated that in addition to institutional leadership, there is also a need for ‘intellectual’ leadership at the level of the practitioner. It seems that at the moment, practitioners do not see RPL as ‘intellectually’ challenging. It seems that the dominant feeling in higher education is that aspects of teaching and learning are common sense, and that practitioners do not need additional sensitisation in this regard. This feeling extends to the recognition of prior learning – practitioners are saying that they have been doing much of that for many years, and that it really isn’t all that difficult to do.

On the other hand, the alternative view, also emerging from practice at Cape Technikon, is that practitioners do not know how to tackle RPL processes – and therefore they avoid engaging with the conceptualisation and operationalisation of a RPL system for the institution.

In a study undertaken for the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in South Africa, Harris (2000, p.129), in her book *RPL: Power, Pedagogy and Possibility* points out that:

You may well need to lobby for a senior person in the institution to take responsibility for speaking for RPL at high-level meetings.

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She maintains that RPL as a process is likely to remain a highly contested issue and traditionalists may well cling to their notion of how learning could take place, until sufficient research and critical examination of the credibility of processes in South Africa convinces them otherwise. This seems important to acknowledge: institutions are therefore not only resisting the implementation of RPL due to the perceived resource-intensiveness of such a system, but are also questioning the principles upon which such a system is based. An organisational ‘will’ to consider alternative ways of opening up access to education and training for non-traditional learners, as well as to develop credible ways in which learning, not attained through formal programmes, could be credited, seems important. According to Harris, (2000) a formally established steering committee, also serving as the “champions” (p. 93) for RPL in an organisation, could facilitate this process.

The interview with the Head: Witsplus of the University of the Witwatersrand also highlighted this point yet again:

RPL will only be implemented if there is an ‘institutional will’, combined with clear institutional policies to implement, including making resources, such as trained staff available (Appendix E).

In the institutions in South Africa, where RPL has been implemented across all fields of learning, it is clear that high-level support for such initiatives was very strong. In the exploratory interview<sup>12</sup> with the respondent from the Technikon Southern Africa (TSA) (refer to Table 4.1 in Chapter 4 of this report), for example, it became evident that the institution feels confident enough about its RPL processes so that RPL as a service is offered across all the faculties of the institution, to the extent that this institution is willing to exempt learners from particular parts of the learning programmes (a common approach in higher education institutions) but is also looking at ways in which credits can be awarded without the learner necessarily wanting to enter further education. This emerged as one of the ‘purposes’ of RPL, namely for a candidate to be acknowledged for his/her current skills, without “progression into a learning programme” (p. 13) of further education and training (SAQA, 2002a) (more about ‘purposes’ in 5.2.2).

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<sup>12</sup> Interviews undertaken with provider institutions and learners to facilitate the development of the two main research instruments: the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews

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In summary, the translation of the political intent to broaden the participation of non-traditional and previously disadvantaged learners in education and training to an institutional will and commitment to implement seems to be the an important aspect of the quality assurance framework discussed in 5.1. In the Australian example (refer to Chapter 3), the lack of institutional will inhibited the development of RPL processes. Slow development of RPL assessment in universities is associated with (Flowers, et al, in Evans, 2000):

The extra demands placed on staff to develop ‘customised’ assessments, a lack of RPL assessment expertise and training in universities; resistance by academic staff and professional bodies; delays caused by the need to develop special policies and procedures for RPL; and disincentives to grant credit inherent in the existing funding arrangements for universities (p.158).

The institutional ‘will’ is often reflected in the expression of the principles and purposes upon which RPL implementation could be based.

### 5.2.2 *Principles and Purpose*

In the literature (Chapter 3 of this report), it became evident that many countries view RPL as a process whereby adult learners in particular can be given an opportunity to return to and further their learning. This stems from the need to become more competitive globally or regionally, and RPL is therefore seen as a mechanism whereby adults could be encouraged to up-skill and/or multi-skill for a changed working environment. It is also an acknowledgement that “people learn from experience throughout their lives and that they develop abilities which are equivalent, or at least comparable, to those achieved by learners in formal education systems” (CHE, 2001, p. 104). A number of key principles therefore seem to govern decisions regarding RPL throughout the world:

- The need for increased and broadened participation of non-traditional learners in education and training;
- The need to facilitate ‘returning to learning’, particularly of adults; and
- The encouragement of lifelong learning to cope with the constantly changing world of work.

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In addition, as mentioned before, in South Africa, there are the socio-political directives relating to ‘redress’ and ‘equity of access’ for those previously denied access to education and training as a result of past unjust educational policies and practices.

In terms of the newly promulgated Acts and regulations, the principles of ‘access’ and ‘redress’ seem to be the basis upon which the emerging RPL system in South Africa is to be built. However, these two principles are not without tension (refer to the University of Port Elizabeth’s comment above). ‘Redress’ learners in particular are viewed with doubt regarding the extent to which they will be able to cope with formal further learning (refer to Chapter 4 of this report). The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) describes ‘redress’ candidates as

...candidates [who] may be on the shop floor, in workplaces, or may be semi-skilled and unemployed. They may have worked for many years and have gained experience in specific areas, but were prevented from developing and growing because of the education and training policies of the past. Possibly such candidates will have low levels of education (p. 14).

For these candidates, the focus may be on ‘certification’ for skills gained in workplaces, as a form of redress and an acknowledgement of their contribution to the economy of the country, rather than on seeking access to further education.

In the exploratory interview (refer to Chapter 4 of this report) with the Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA), redress emerged as a key principle of its project. In this initiative, assessment of prior learning was undertaken to recognise and certificate learning in terms of the practical parts of a unit-standard based qualification.

The two principles of access and redress are closely linked to the purposes for RPL within a particular context and the manner in which systems are operationalised. Formal descriptions of such purposes were proposed in a recently adopted SAQA document: The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a) as follows:

**Table 5.3**

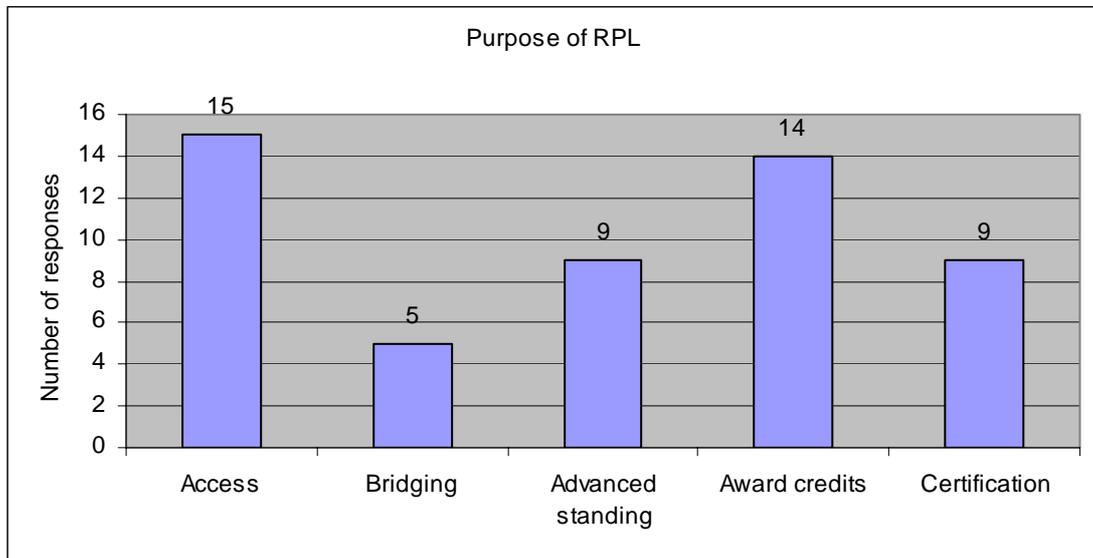
*Purposes of RPL*

Term	Description
Access	To provide ease of entry to appropriate levels of education and training for all prospective learners in a manner which facilitates progression
Placement	To, through a diagnostic assessment, determine the appropriate level for learners wanting to enter education and training
Advanced status	To grant access to a level of a qualification higher than the logical next level following on the preceding qualification
Advanced standing	To award credits towards a qualification for which a candidate has registered
Credit	To award formal, transferable credits for the learning that meets the requirements of the part of full qualification
Certification	To, for purposes of a qualification, certify credits attained

Whilst most provider institutions are open to the principle of ‘access’, it is specifically the awarding of credits and the subsequent formal certification in terms of those credits that seem to be problematic for some higher education institutions. In terms of the table above, ‘credit’ and ‘certification’ would be associated with ‘redress’, i.e. a learner is given recognition for his/her learning without the purpose of continuing his/her learning, but with the purpose to formally acknowledge the learning in the form of a certificate. The Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys (PU vir CHO), for example, in its comment on the SAQA document *The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a)*, indicated its preference:

Regarding the award of credits at undergraduate level, the university is not in favour of doing so, rather we are in favour of a system whereby exemption without credit is awarded. We are willing to give exemption to a student for a particular course, or part of the course, but are opposed to the award of credits that may be used for promotion purposes in a workplace, for example. The exemption therefore gives access to further study with the aim to complete graduate studies. We are also opposed to the award of certificates for a part of the course for which exemption has been granted (Translated from Afrikaans from the University’s public comment on the abovementioned SAQA document).

In this regard, Question 2.9 of the questionnaire tried to determine the purpose of RPL within the different respondent institutions. Refer to Figure 5.4 below:



**Figure 5.4. Purpose of RPL (n=16)**

All the respondents, except the Assessment College, that did not differentiate between ‘access’ and the ‘award of credits’ indicated that they undertake RPL for ‘access’ and for a range of other purposes. Table 5.4 (overleaf) details these responses:

**Table 5.4**

***Purposes of RPL as indicated by Respondents across Institutions***

Institution	Classification	Purposes of RPL				
		ACC	BRD	A/S	CRT	CERT
Mangosutho Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	-	X	X	-
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	-	X	X	-
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	X	-
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	X	X <sup>13</sup>
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	X	X	X
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X <sup>14</sup>	-	X	X	-
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	-	-
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	-	X	-
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	X
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	X	X
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	X	-	-	X	X
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	X	-	-	X	X
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	X	X	-	X	X
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, conslt	X	-	-	X	X
AFETISA	Ass FET Inst	X	X	-	X	X
	Subtotals:	15	5	9	14	9

**Key (Table 5.4)**

ACC:	Access	CRT:	Awarding of credits
BRD:	Bridging	CERT:	Certification
A/S:	Advanced standing		

Notes to Table 5.4:

(Refer to Table 5.3 for full definitions)

Access – Entry to a learning programme without the requisite prior qualification

Bridging – A bridging programme must be completed before entry to a programme is granted

Advanced standing – To award credits towards a qualification, usually a level higher than the next logical level, for which a candidate has registered

Credits – Formal credits attained in relation to the qualification

Certification - Award of a formal certificate, for example a Bachelor in Commerce

<sup>13</sup> Certification and career development

<sup>14</sup> Currently being developed

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Fourteen (out of the 16 respondents) indicated that they award formal credits. The University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand do not award credits, which seems to be in keeping with the comment made by the Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys, referred to above.

Of the 14 respondent institutions that do award credits, nine respondents also award formal certificates. These include all the private new emerging institutions (six out of 14) and two public technikons (the TSA and Cape Technikon), as well as the public FET association (in the case of the FET association members awarding credits is intended rather than actual, as RPL is not yet practised in the institutions).

Therefore, while nine out of 14 respondents may agree to not only award credits, but also to formally certificate those credits, the public comment on the previously mentioned SAQA document (see the Potchefstroomse Universiteit's comment above) seems to indicate that there is a widespread unwillingness to certificate prior learning, particularly in public higher education institutions.

The University of the Witwatersrand, for example, clarifies its purpose for RPL as a means to facilitate entry of non-traditional learners into their institution, (i.e. 'access'). In the interview with the Head: Witsplus of the University of the Witwatersrand, it became evident that the institution tries to accommodate RPL candidates within mainstream programmes as soon as possible. Access, in the form of 'advanced standing' is seen as a means to achieve this, but the University will not formally certificate the learning until the learner has undertaken at least 50% of the learning programme leading to a qualification offered by this institution, regardless of whether he/she meets all the requirements for the qualification, or not (refer to Chapter 2 of this report). The Director: Witsplus indicated, however, that the 'award of credits' and subsequent 'certification' may become feasible in the future – when a proven record of initial successes is available. The University therefore is willing to grant 'advanced standing', rather than award credits per se. This seems to be the dominant trend in higher education – seven out of the 16 respondents that are not willing to certificate prior learning are from public higher education institutions. This also speaks to the translation of the 'political' will into an 'institutional' will to not only recognise prior learning, but also credit and certificate such learning. The national

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RPL policy, as well as the newly promulgated education and training Acts, all support the notion of awarding credits, which are certificated (refer to Chapter 2 of this report).

Also, despite the draft New Academic Policy's (CHE, 2001) declaration that "RPL is used extensively by those seeking: admission to a course; advanced standing for a course; or credits towards a qualification. It can also be used by those seeking entry to a particular field of employment; promotion or self-development" (p. 103), the public higher education institutions that responded to the questionnaire for this study, are unwilling to certificate credits. This may be because 'redress' learners are generally considered to be the 'shop floor' workers who, according to the SAQA RPL policy (2002a, p. 14), may be 'semi-skilled' and therefore not eligible for entry into higher education institutions.

The private providers, on the other hand, are often offering RPL services against particular unit standards (and not necessarily against full qualifications), and would tend to offer unit standards and qualifications of a more occupational and vocational nature, and would therefore be willing to certificate against those distinct parts of the qualification that are relevant to workplace practice. Two of these provider institutions also awarded credits towards learnerships<sup>15</sup>, thereby allowing access into the learnership.

In workplace contexts, for example, RPL therefore could be used for 'placement' (refer Table 5.4). This is often associated with access to learnerships. In the interview with the representatives from the Department of Labour, it became evident that in an initiative undertaken at their national office, RPL was undertaken with two purposes in mind: entrance to a learnership for Business Communication at a beginners, intermediate or advanced level (i.e. 'placement'); and staff development, in line with staff members' performance management contracts. This approach may have a major impact on possible promotion and/or career changes of the individual.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Learnership': a combination of structured workplace learning and theoretical learning which will lead to a qualification registered by the South African Qualifications Authority on the NQF (Skills Development Act, 97 of 1998, p. 12).

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The purpose of RPL within a particular sector, education and training band or institution, therefore, seems to define how such a system is operationalised. In the broadest sense, according to the SAQA RPL policy, (2002a), the purposes of RPL include:

- Personal development and/or certification of current skills without progression into a learning programme, if the candidate so chooses;
- Progression into a learning programme, using RPL to fast-track progression through the learning programme;
- Promotion; and
- Career or job change (p. 13).

To summarise, there seems to be a shared commitment among the respondents to the questionnaire for this study to the opening up of access to non-traditional learners. In addition, the award of credits for prior learning mostly seems to be the accepted approach. However, the formal certification of prior learning, so that the learning also has currency outside of formal education and training institutions, seems to be problematic for most public higher education institutions. As mentioned before, this may be because public higher education institutions do not see candidates who simply want acknowledgement for their current learning as their target market and are therefore focusing their activities on facilitating entry into higher education institutions.

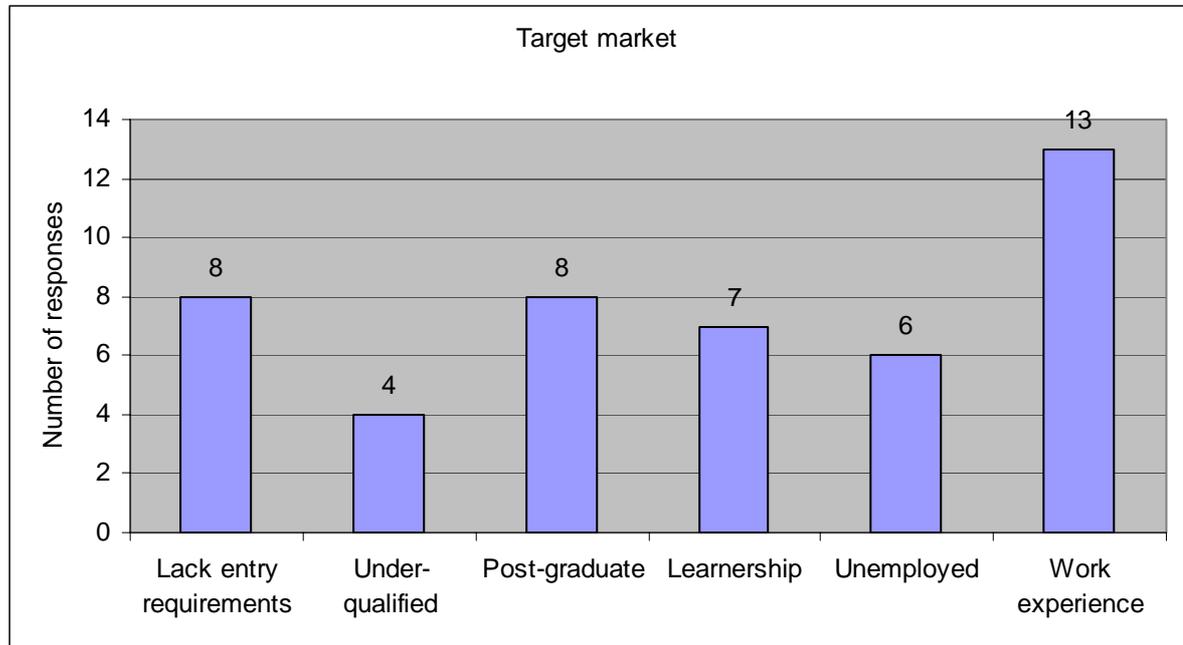
#### 5.2.3 *Target Market*

Closely linked to the purposes of RPL within a particular context is the identification of a 'target market'. In other words, the organisation needs to ask itself who it is that they want to open access to. Question 2.4 of the questionnaire (refer to Appendix F) sought to determine who the target markets for the different institutions are. This may range from:

- Students lacking the minimum requirements for entry into a learning programme;
- Under-qualified graduates;
- Post-graduate students;
- Learnership candidates;
- The unemployed; and

- People with work experience but lacking formal qualifications.

Figure 5.5 details the responses to the questionnaire:



**Figure 5.5. Target market (n=16)**

The highest number of responses (13 out of 16) was for ‘people with work experience but lacking formal qualifications’. The three respondents who do not have this group in mind as a target market included three public universities; namely the University of Cape Town, the University of South Africa and the University of the Witwatersrand, possibly because ‘work experience’ is considered to be implicit in ‘under-qualified graduates’ and ‘post-graduate students’.

The following table (Table 5.5) identifies the target groups per provider institution:

**Table 5.5**

***Target Groups for RPL***

Institution	Classification	Target groups for RPL					
		MR	UQG	PGS	L	U	WE
Mangosutho Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	X	X	X	X
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	-	X	-	-	X
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	-	X	-	-	-	X
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X	X
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	X	-	X	X
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	-	X	-	-	<sup>16</sup>
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	-	-	-
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	-	-	X
University of Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	-	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	-	-	X <sup>17</sup>
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	-	-	X
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	X	X	X
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	-	-	X	-	X
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	-	X	X	X
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, conslt	-	-	-	X	-	X
AFETISA	Ass FET Inst	X	-	-	X	X	X <sup>18</sup>
	Subtotals:	8	4	8	7	6	13

**Key (Table 5.5)**

- MR: Students lacking minimum requirements for entry to a learning programme
- UQG: Under-qualified graduates
- PGS: Post-graduate students
- WE: People with work experience but lacking formal qualifications
- L: Learnership candidates
- U: The unemployed

<sup>16</sup> Undergraduate students

<sup>17</sup> Work experience and knowledge

<sup>18</sup> Especially ‘students lacking minimum requirements’ and ‘people with work experience’, but also ‘Learnerships’ and the ‘Unemployed’

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Eight (out of the 16) respondents indicated that an important target market for RPL at their institutions would be candidates who 'lack the minimum requirements for entry into a learning programme'. Seven (of the eight) are public higher education institutions, and one is a public further education association.

'Under-qualified graduates' and 'post-graduate students' had four (out of 16) and eight (out of 16) responses respectively. Clearly 'under-qualified graduates' and 'post-graduate students' would only be relevant to higher education institutions, but the remaining options could be found across all sectors and bands. This is in keeping with the view of public higher education institutions that RPL is 'easier' to undertake for learners in post-graduate studies. While the respondents do not make their reasons explicit in the responses to the questionnaire, this view may stem from the restrictions placed on public institutions in terms of the admission of learners to higher education institutions without 'matriculation with exemption' (refer to Chapter 2 of this report). It seems that public higher education institutions are not willing to challenge the notion of 'matriculation with exemption' as the minimum requirement for entry into higher education; rather, students who have already successfully completed a degree (and therefore already meet the minimum requirements) are targeted as RPL candidates. As expected, all these responses emanated from public higher education institutions.

Seven respondents indicated that their target market is also people who want to access learnerships. Two private further education and training organisations, one public further education and training association and one private general education and training institution have a specific focus on learnership candidates. Given that learnerships are mostly associated with a workplace route to the attainment of a formal qualification, it is expected that the general and further education and training institutions would have these candidates as a target market. The fact that the two public higher education institutions (Mangosuthu Technikon and Cape Technikon) also identified learnership candidates as their target market is surprising because public higher education generally is not associated with workplace routes to qualifications.

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Further, the decision to implement RPL is also influenced by the infrastructure that needs to be put in place for the process. Therefore, where provider institutions are confident that their systems are in place, RPL is offered across all the learning programmes, while other provider institutions have opted to pilot and implement RPL in particular fields of learning. This suggests a more tentative and cautious approach.

The target fields of learning were specified by the respondents per (part) qualification as shown in Table 5.6.

**Table 5.6**

*Target Qualifications for RPL Services*

Institution	Classification	Target markets - (part) qualifications	Implementation at the time of the study
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu,HE, H bl	Nature Conservation, Medical Technology; Agriculture	Pilot
Peninsula Technikon	Pu,HE, H bl	Diplomas, B., M. & D.Tech	Implemented
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu,HE,H wh	Diplomas, B., M. & D.Tech	Pre-pilot planning
Cape Technikon	Pu,HE, H wh	Diplomas, B., M. & D.Tech	Implemented
Technikon SA	Pu,HE, dist	Diplomas, B., M. & D.Tech	Implemented
UNISA	Pu,HE, dist	Across the institution	Implemented
University of Cape Town	Pu,HE, H wh	Advanced Certificate in Adult Education, M. in Disability Studies, Adv. Diploma. in Nursing	Pilot
Rhodes University	Pu,HE, H wh	Education, Manufacturing management	Pilot
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu,HE, H wh	Post-graduate: Business School/ Humanities, Teacher Education	Pilot
Mentornet	Pr,HE, new	Education and Training Development Practices	Implemented, no completed candidates
Assessment College	Pr,HE, new	Generic Assessor unit standards, Occupation-directed ETD qualifications	Implemented
Learning Performance Link	Pr,HE, new	Education, Training and Development Practices	Implemented

Table 5.6 (continued)

Institution	Classification	Target markets - (part) qualifications	Implementation at the time of the study
Regional Training Trust	Pr,FE, new	Carpentry, Bricklaying, Plastering, Tiling and Painting (Unit-standard based qualifications)	Implemented - some fields of learning associated with Construction SETA
LearnSys	Pr,GFE, new	Learnerships, in the Services sector	Implemented
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr,FE, cnslt	Learnerships, in the Mechanical, Engineering and related services sector	Pilot
AFETISA	AssFET Inst	Not yet in place, will be in the public further education and training sector	Pre-pilot planning stage

#### 5.2.4 Articulation

The articulation of experiential learning with the formal requirements of unit standards and qualification seems to have been a vexing question since RPL was first conceptualised in the United States of America. In the introduction to section 5.2, a number of examples from the international initiatives were referred to (also refer to Chapter 3). Articulation of prior learning with formal learning outcomes is a challenge because prior learning does not come in neatly packaged units of learning, which can simply be matched against the outcomes of a qualification. The interviewees seemed to agree that it is difficult to match experiential learning exactly with the requirements of a formal qualification. In the interview with the Director: Witsplus of the University of the Witwatersrand, it was made clear that articulation of RPL processes with mainstream programmes is critical:

It is in everyone's interest if students can enter 'mainstream' education as soon as possible. We are not in favour of locking people into 'boxes' whereby articulation with other degrees [inter- and intra-institutionally] is not made possible. Implementation at Wits will require that we bring students admitted in this way into the mainstream – if not, the notion of RPL for access is questioned as if access is only to special programmes, [then] we are not meeting the requirements for improving access (refer to Appendix E).

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She added that all their degrees carry equal weight and that such practices (as above) are not acceptable to Wits.

It therefore seems clear that when planning for the introduction of RPL takes place, it should be linked with the requirements of particular unit standards and qualifications (or sets of related unit standards and qualifications) – as these are expressed in the entry requirements and learning outcomes for the qualification (refer to Chapter 3).

In order to help identify articulation possibilities, Harris (2000) proposes that provider institutions analyse:

- How knowledge and/or competence is understood [in relation to a target qualification or set of qualifications]
- Who defines what counts as knowledge/competence
- How the knowledge is organised
- How the learning is understood
- How experience and learning from experience are understood
- How the pedagogy [to support the attainment of learning] is understood (p. 95 and 96).

This could form the basis for articulation. In addition, it could facilitate an understanding of what should be assessed and the number of credits that could be awarded in relation to the formal programme. (This aspect will be addressed in detail in chapter 6.) Articulation arrangements and agreements emanating from Harris' questions above seem to be important for the establishment of an enabling environment within which RPL can be implemented.

Consider the following example (from the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL, SAQA, 2003a):

For recognition of prior learning of a Bachelor of Commerce in Management qualification, it seems important to first identify the overall purpose of the qualification, for example:

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*Qualifying learners awarded with this degree will have the requisite competence to manage a business in a particular sphere of expertise.*

Using the questions proposed by Harris (2000), an analysis of the qualification's requirements could be:

- How is knowledge understood in terms of the *management* of a business?
- Who decides how *management* is defined?
- How is the knowledge of *management* organised in this learning programme?
- What kind of learning in terms of *management* will tell me that the learner has mastered the knowledge?
- What kinds of experience and learning in *management*, outside of the context of this institution, will tell me that the learner has mastered the knowledge?
- How do we teach *management*?

Analysing a qualification (or a range of related qualifications) in this way may assist with the development of intra- and inter-institutional articulation agreements. This will accommodate the possible 'migration' of students between qualifications at the same institution, as well as between different institutions (refer to the University of Pretoria's comment to the SAQA Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL for example).

*5.2.4.1 Administrative Articulation.* Linked to articulation arrangements that have been decided on in principle are the administrative processes needed to support RPL processes. Questions 5.1 to 5.6 of the questionnaire for this study tried to address this issue. The question asked whether the organisation currently has a dedicated administrative process for RPL. Ten (out of the 16) respondents indicated that they do not have dedicated administration processes but that they believe that there should be a dedicated process. Of these ten respondents, eight are public higher education institutions, one is a public further education association, and one a private further education institution. The reasons given for a dedicated process include:

- Candidates require different implementation process and support. The attitude of staff towards RPL candidates should also be different;
- To separate the roles of advisor and assessor so that the assessor is not overloaded;

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- To prevent malpractice and to direct the process in a fair way;
- Current admission practices are focused on students entering at fixed points. RPL students enter at varying levels and require varied administrative pathways;
- The RPL admin process is different – requires advising and counselling specific to RPL;
- Candidates need individual attention – depending on needs;
- Enough care is required to guard against false claims;
- RPL cannot be processed in ‘bulk’; and
- Resource-efficiency (refer to Appendix F).

These comments reflect the fact that current administrative systems may not be able to accommodate the needs of RPL processes. Not only do current administrative processes not provide sufficient support (both for the candidate and the practitioner) and flexibility, but they are also perceived to bring the integrity of the system into question.

The other respondents who indicated that dedicated processes are not needed, included all the remaining private new emerging institutions, except for the Regional Training Trust. The only public higher education institution that agreed that separate processes are not desirable was the Technikon Southern Africa, whose representative also indicated that they currently have a dedicated process, but feels that their process should be aligned with mainstream processes. Reasons from the private institutions include:

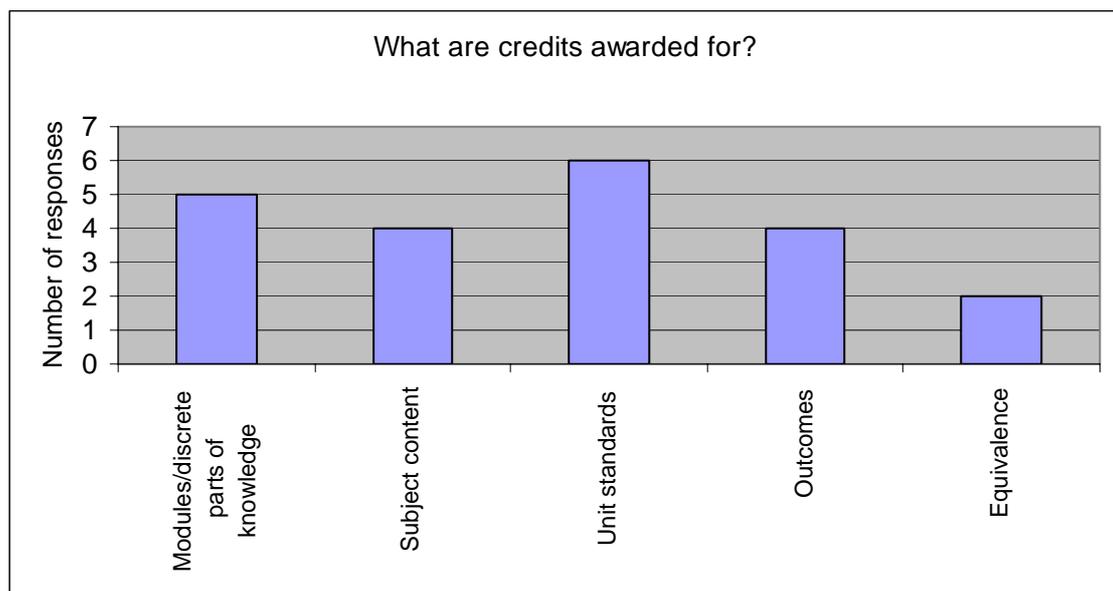
- The results are the same – access’;
- There should be no discrimination between formal learning and RPL; and
- RPL should not be seen as an add-on – this will give equal value to RPL process (refer to Appendix F).

The difference in approaches between the public and private institutions may be as a result of deeply entrenched processes and a need to carefully control who is allowed into the system (in the case of the older public institutions), and new processes which may have been developed to accommodate more flexible approaches to RPL, but also in general, for the new institutions.

In addition, the ‘processing’ of RPL requests, is not the only difficulty in terms of administrative articulation with formal programmes. The administrative systems of formal institutions are generally not geared to awarding credits towards the outcomes of learning. Traditionally, credit transfers were granted in the form of subject/module exemptions for learning completed at other formal institutions, not for prior experiential learning. Question 5.9 tried to determine, in terms of the administrative process, what credits are awarded for:

Question 5.9: Are credits awarded for ...

- Modules/discrete parts of learning?
- Subject content
- Unit standards
- Outcomes (specific outcomes and/or Exit-level outcomes)
- Equivalence to an NQF level?



**Figure 5.6. The award of credits in terms of administrative systems (n=11)**

The responses to this question can be categorised as follows (refer to Table 5.7 overleaf):

**Table 5.7**

***The Basis for Credits Awarded (n = 11)***

Institution	Classification	Traditional forms of transfer		Generic descriptions		Equivalent requirements
		Mod/Dis	S/c	U/s	Outc	Equiv
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	-	-	-
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	-	X	X	X
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	X	X
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	-	X	-
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	-	-	X	X <sup>19</sup>
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X <sup>20</sup>	-	-
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	-
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	-
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	-	X	-	-
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	X	-	-
	Subtotals:	5	4	6	4	3

**Key (Table 5.7)**

Mod/Dis: Modules/discrete parts of knowledge

Outc: Outcomes (specific or Exit-level)

S/c: Subject content

Equiv.: Forms of learning equivalent to the level

U/s: Unit standards

Notes to Table 5.7:

Traditional forms of credit award include credits for modules and subject content

Generic descriptions of the qualification's level and breadth of learning is used as the basis for credits awarded

Equivalent requirements to the generic description of the qualification's level and depth of learning is used as the basis for credits awarded

<sup>19</sup> Degree status

<sup>20</sup> Unit standards for the Nat Certificate/Diploma in Occupationally directed Education and Training Development Practices

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All the public higher education institutions that responded to this question, except Peninsula Technikon, grant exemptions for discrete parts of knowledge and/or subject content (five out of 11 respondents). However, only two of these respondents (Mangosuthu and Rhodes) award credits for traditional forms of credit transfer. The other public higher institutions also award credits for ‘outcomes’ and ‘unit standards’ and three of these award credits for ‘equivalence’. The new emerging private institutions all award credits against ‘unit standards’ but not for ‘equivalence’.

An important implication in terms of articulation is that current administrative systems do not generally make provision for exemptions against learning outcomes, and even less often for the award of credits for ‘equivalencies’ in learning. An outcome for a qualification does not translate directly into subjects or modules. The transcription of credits towards outcomes of a specified qualification is therefore problematic because administrative systems were developed for and are geared to award exemptions towards subjects/modules. The administrative system, rather than a principle decision, may therefore add to the inability of public higher education institutions to formally certificate learning – it may simply be that the administrative system cannot capture and transcribe learning outcomes because it was developed to transcribe subjects and modules. This suggests that articulation of such credits (or exemptions) within and outside of the institution may only be appropriate within that institution, and not between institutions and sectors.

In addition, ‘administrative sequencing’, according to Harris (2000) may also cause problems:

It appears that administrative constraints often make it easier to undertake a RPL preparatory course *after* registration – that is, after candidates have been accepted and enrolled in a course of programme. Yet the logic of RPL would be to undertake preparatory work *prior* to registration (p. 129).

It is for this reason that institutions/providers often establish ‘special’ courses, which enable them to register candidates and, on completion of these courses, allow them access into their chosen fields of learning. This is the model that the University of South Africa has implemented.

UNISA commented as follows:

UNISA has accepted a RPL policy for the *Assessment of mature learners: entry to NQF level 5*, which allows for the assessment of non grade-12 learners – those without a National Senior Certificate. The assessment focuses on *equivalence* to the learning outcomes for entry to NQF level 5. These learners will complete the three access modules to prepare them for university level studies before enrolling for an undergraduate degree (my emphasis) (Taken from the public comment submitted by this institution on the SAQA discussion document: The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL, 2003a).

This approach assumes that RPL candidates will not have the requisite preparatory knowledge for entry to undergraduate degrees and, in fact, are not even allowed to undertake an assessment prior to registration at all – this only takes place on completion of the three access modules.

The approach also pre-supposes that learners with a school-leaving certificate do have the requisite preparatory knowledge for successful higher education studies. In an article in the South African Journal for Higher Education, Kistan (2002) makes this point:

Global and regional evidence suggests that in using a school-leaving certificate as the sole/most important indicator of success/access to higher education is *inadequate* and *outdated* (p.171).

Further, in the public comment on the newly adopted SAQA document: The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a), current arrangements in terms of how learners could be registered at institutions was highlighted by comment from the Technikon Free State, as follows:

Until Report 151, (the list of qualifications currently on offer at Technikons) has been repealed, Technikons are unable to register students for properly developed modules in Outcomes-based format, because the titles of the modules do not (and are not supposed to) fit the prescribed subjects listed under each CESM category in the Report. And if we do not register our students under the subject listed, we will not receive any state subsidy.

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5.2.4.2 *Two Types of Qualifications.* A further complication in terms of articulation is the existence of two types of qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework, i.e. unit standard-based and non-unit standard-based qualifications. A unit standard-based qualification consists of sets of unit standards, which are nationally agreed on descriptions of the results of learning as captured in a unit of coherent learning. Credit transfer between closely related qualifications constructed in this manner, and between different institutions, is facilitated because learners have to meet the same requirements to prove applied knowledge, regardless of which provider offered the programme and regardless of the content of the learning programme. This is possible because the Education and Training Quality Assurance body (ETQA) uses the outcomes captured in the unit standards as the benchmark for parity, not the learning programme and the content of the programme.

For example, where an outcome therefore states that (Paraphrased from the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL, SAQA, 2003a):

*The qualifying learner must demonstrate the use and implementation of a quality management system,* the actual learning content could be a ‘Total Quality Management’ approach, or a ‘Conformance to Specifications’ approach as the preferred learning content, both of which will ensure that the requirements of the outcome is achieved. Institutions have interpreted ‘quality management’ to mean two different models or approaches, but the ‘use of’ a quality management system, could be demonstrated and therefore facilitates articulation of credits between institutions.

Non-unit standard-based qualifications however, have been structured into modules and subjects, rather than unit standards. This is typical of most public higher education institutions and schooling qualifications and presents limitations to RPL assessment, specifically when inter-institutional articulation is a priority. This is because subjects and modules are generally input-based rather than output-based. Institutions interpret the learning content to meet the requirements for Exit-level outcomes differently. If credit transfer and articulation is based on subjects and modules, rather than on the specified outcomes of the qualification, the process of credit transfer (or exemption) is inhibited. As a result, the articulation between different types of institutions, i.e. institutions that offer unit standard-based

qualifications and non-unit standard-based qualifications may also be complicated (SAQA, 2003a).

In the interview with the Director: Witsplus of the University of the Witwatersrand, the interviewee stated that:

At this stage, the course content is very important. Wits prides itself in the good programmes that they offer and therefore their content and Exit-level outcomes are inextricably linked (Appendix E).

Most of the University of the Witwatersrand's current RPL, therefore, deals with 'exemptions' in terms of formal, credentialled courses completed at other institutions, which are easier to match against the subject content of their learning programmes. In fact, before 'exemptions' are awarded, the institution requires syllabi and proof of successful completion of syllabi through formal assessment. It then requires that the 'tests' and 'examinations' make up part of the request for 'exemption'.

In their responses to the questionnaire, the provider institutions were clearly split between institutions offering unit-standard based and non-unit-standard-based qualifications. Twelve respondent institutions (out of 16) indicated that they award credits, but only the private institutions also issue formal certificates that are endorsed by the Education and Training Quality Assurance body (ETQA). Table 5.8 below indicates which provider institutions offer unit-standard based and non-unit-standard-based qualifications:

**Table 5.8**

*Unit-standard based and Non-unit-standard-based Qualifications*

Provider/institution(s)	Qualification
Public, higher education technikons and universities (n=6)	Non-unit-standard-based qualifications
Private, higher education provider institutions (n=3)	Unit-standard based qualifications
Private, general and further education provider institutions (n=3)	Unit-standard based qualifications

Of the 12 respondents which indicated that their institutions do award credits, the Technikon SA and Peninsula Technikon award credits which are located within a

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non-unit-standard-based programme for which the candidate is registered, or status is granted for equivalence to an under-graduate programme for entry to a post-graduate degree in the form of an academic record. The remaining public higher education institutions all issue an academic record. An academic record is issued for subject and modules, i.e. for the 'input'. This suggests that in order for credits to be awarded for non-unit-standard-based qualifications, public provider institutions try to match the learning with the input of the learning programme. This may stem from the need to work within the constraints of their current systems whereby credit transfer takes place according to subject content and modules.

Articulation of the learning of RPL candidates is, therefore, not only about the extent to which such learning agree with the content of a learning programme, but also about the extent to which a provider/institution has the administrative processes in place to accommodate the transcription of credits and/or exemptions. Institutions are not free to award credits/exemptions in relation to outcomes of a qualification, but can only do so in relation to recognised subjects and modules. The two systems - i.e. an inputs-based system and an outcomes-based system - do not seem easily reconcilable and, in fact, despite the fact that particularly higher education qualifications were reformatted into an outcomes-based format, where the results of learning are expressed in exit-level outcomes, providers/institutions (and their administrative and funding processes) still consider the input to the learning rather than the results of learning as the benchmark against which prior learning is to be measured.

Question 2.7 of the questionnaire tried to determine whether the respondents believed that RPL was appropriate for any type of qualification. Nine (out of the 16) respondents indicated that they believe that it could. However, six of the remaining seven provider institutions seemed to consider this possible only if the qualifications are unit-standard based qualifications – even academic and professional qualifications, which are usually non-unit-standard-based qualifications. Also, it is surprising that two of the provider institutions (out of the seven), that indicated that RPL cannot be undertaken for non-unit-standard-based qualifications, are public higher education institutions, particularly because unit standard-based qualifications are not generally offered at these institutions. UNISA, specifically, claims to have implemented RPL already, suggesting that RPL was undertaken against non-unit-

standard-based qualifications. The respondents indicated that the following qualifications offered by their institutions are appropriate for RPL (Table 5.9):

**Table 5.9**

***Types of Qualification against which RPL can be undertaken***

Institution	Classification	Types of qualification				
		VOC	ACA	PROF	U/s	Non-U/s
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	X	X	X
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	X	X	X
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu,HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	-
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	X	X	X
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	X <sup>21</sup>	X	-
University of Cape Town	Pu,HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	-
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu,HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	- <sup>22</sup>
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	X <sup>23</sup>
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	-
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	-
Regional Training Trust	Pr. FE, new	X	X	X	X	X
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	X	-	-	X	-
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr,FE, cnslt	X	X	X	X	X
AFETISA	AssFET Inst	X	X	X	X	X
	Subtotals:	16	15	15	16	9

**Key (Table 5.9)**

VOC: Vocational qualifications U/s: Unit-standard based qualifications  
 ACA: Academic qualifications Non-U/s: Non-unit-standard-based qualifications  
 PROF: Professional qualifications

<sup>21</sup> Limited 'PROF', e.g. nursing

<sup>22</sup> Depends on definition of RPL and nature of experience

<sup>23</sup> Outcomes-based education and training is supposed to neutralise differences between qualifications

The distribution above seems to suggest *intent*, rather than actual practice, particularly where public higher education institutions indicate that Unit-standard based qualifications could be utilised for RPL. Once these institutions start offering unit-standard based qualifications extensively, they may find the current administrative processes, which allow for credits against modules and subjects only, more inhibitive than they imagine them to be.

#### 5.2.5 *Policies and Procedures*

Once the principles upon which RPL will be based within a particular context have been agreed on, the next step - to create an enabling environment, according to international practice - is the establishment of policies and procedures. The SAQA RPL policy (2002a), for example, warns that if appropriate policies and procedures are not established, problems in the implementation of RPL may arise:

.. unless proper policies, structures and resources are allocated to a credible assessment process, [RPL] can easily become an area of contestation and conflict (p.18).

In the literature, much importance is given to the establishment, and transparency of policies. Whitaker (1989) states that even at the level of the learner

Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available (p. 9).

As in the case of the purposes and target markets for RPL, the policies will be context-specific, but they could facilitate the establishment of common ground between institutions in terms of the extent to which such policies and procedures agree on the process and integrity of the system. The national SAQA policy (2002a) attempted to facilitate a common understanding by identifying common quality criteria to be used by all the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs).

The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) proposes for example, a set of self-audit tools whereby the ETQAs could measure their constituent providers' progress against pre-agreed quality criteria. The establishment of self-audit tools seems to be in agreement

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with international practice in this regard. In England, for example, the following is proposed with regard to RPL policies:

The institution should have a clear APL [RPL] policy, which is translated into operational structures (Nyatanga, *et al*, 1998, p. 41).

The approach taken in England also supports the notion of the establishment of indicators (or criteria) against which this area of practice could be evaluated. This seems to be a prominent feature in all the international practices. The use of pre-agreed quality criteria becomes a benchmark against which the overall approach to RPL is evaluated (refer to Chapter 3 of this report). Policies and procedures are therefore often the first step in the establishment of a quality assurance framework and are considered key to the establishment of an enabling environment for the implementation of RPL.

Consider for example, the following extracts from the SAQA self-audit tool relating to ‘Institutional Policy and Environment’ (2002a, p. 19):

**Table 5.10**

***SAQA Self-audit Tool - Institutional Policy and Environment***

INSTITUTIONAL POLICY AND ENVIRONMENT	
There is a shared commitment on the part of ETQAs, accredited constituent providers and workplaces to provide enabling environments for learning and assessment (inclusive of close cooperation between administration, learning facilitators, evidence facilitators, advisors, assessors, moderators, professional organizations, employers, trade unions and communities, where appropriate)	
The assessment policy expresses an explicit commitment to the principles of equity, redress and inclusion	
The assessment policy reflects planning and management in accordance with relevant legislation and policy	
Information about assessment opportunities and services are widely available and actively promoted	
Admission procedures and systems are accessible and inclusive of learners with diverse needs and backgrounds	
Equal access to opportunities to advice, support, time and resources for all candidates seeking assessment	
Organisational structures ensure that evidence facilitators, assessors and moderators and other key personnel, such as advisors, are given sufficient support, resources and recognition for their services	

Y	N

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The extent to which the respondent institutions to the questionnaire for this study already have institutional policies and procedures in place for RPL was tested through Questions 3.1 and 3.2 of the questionnaire.

Question 3.1 asked: Does your organisation/institution/faculty/department have a formally documented assessment policy?, while Question 3.2 sought to determine whether assessment policies were supported by procedures to implement them, i.e. - Is the policy supported by formal procedures?

Most respondents to the questionnaire indicated that their institutions have, at the very least, formally documented assessment policies: eleven (out of the 16) responses indicated that they have both assessment policies and supporting assessment procedures. Mangosuthu Technikon, a historically black, public higher education technikon and Cape Technikon, a historically white, public higher education technikon indicated, however, that neither they, nor two of the historically white, public higher education universities, University of Cape Town and Rhodes University, have formal assessment policies and procedures. The other organisation, which does not have formal policies, is 'Adaptable Learning Services' – it is not a provider, but a consultancy assisting ETQAs in establishing appropriate processes for their constituent providers.

A range of procedures and formal documentation supports the 11 respondents' assessment policies. The questionnaire gave the following options:

- Application for RPL
- Selection/screening
- Pre-assessment advice
- Pre-assessment support
- Assessment
- Post-assessment advice
- Post-assessment support
- Other

All respondents indicated that they have procedures in place for assessment (n=11), while ten (out of 11) respondents indicated that they also offer post-assessment

advice. The selection procedure also seemed to be important – nine (out of 11) respondents indicated that they have formal selection procedures. In addition, a number of respondents indicated other procedures important in their contexts, i.e. ‘training of assessors’ (Technikon SA), ‘career counselling’ (LearnSys), and ‘exemplars’ (Assessment College). Table 5.11 summarises the procedures and formal documentation established by the 11 respondents, as follows:

**Table 5.11**

*Assessment Procedures and Formal Documentation (n = 11)*

Institution	Formal procedures							Formal documentation					
	Ap	Se	Pa	Ps	A	Aa	As	Af	Sf	Ff	Sh	Pf	Rf
Peninsula Technikon	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	-	X
Vaal Triangle Technikon	X	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>24</sup>	X	X	X	X	X	X
Technikon SA	X	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>25</sup>	X	X	X	X	X	X
UNISA	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	X
University of the Witwatersrand	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	No response					
Mentornet	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	-	X
Assessment College	X	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>26</sup>	X	-	X	X	X	X
Learning Performance Link	-	X	-	X	X	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	X
Regional Training Trust	X	X	X	-	X	X	X <sup>27</sup>	X	X	X	X	-	-
LearnSys	X	X	X	X	X	X	- <sup>28</sup>	X	X	X	X	-	-
AFETISA	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	Old policy document (NATED 190/191)					
Subtotals:	8	9	8	8	1	10	7	8	8	6	8	4	7

**Key (Table 5.11)**

Formal procedures:

- Ap: Application procedure
- Se: Selection procedure
- Pa: Pre-assessment advice
- Ps: Pre-assessment support

Formal documentation:

- Af: Application form
- Sf: Selection form
- Ff: Feedback form
- Sh: Assessment sheet

<sup>24</sup> Intended rather than actual

<sup>25</sup> Also procedures for the training of assessors and portfolio development course

<sup>26</sup> Including exemplars

<sup>27</sup> Also procedures for awards, credits and portability of credits

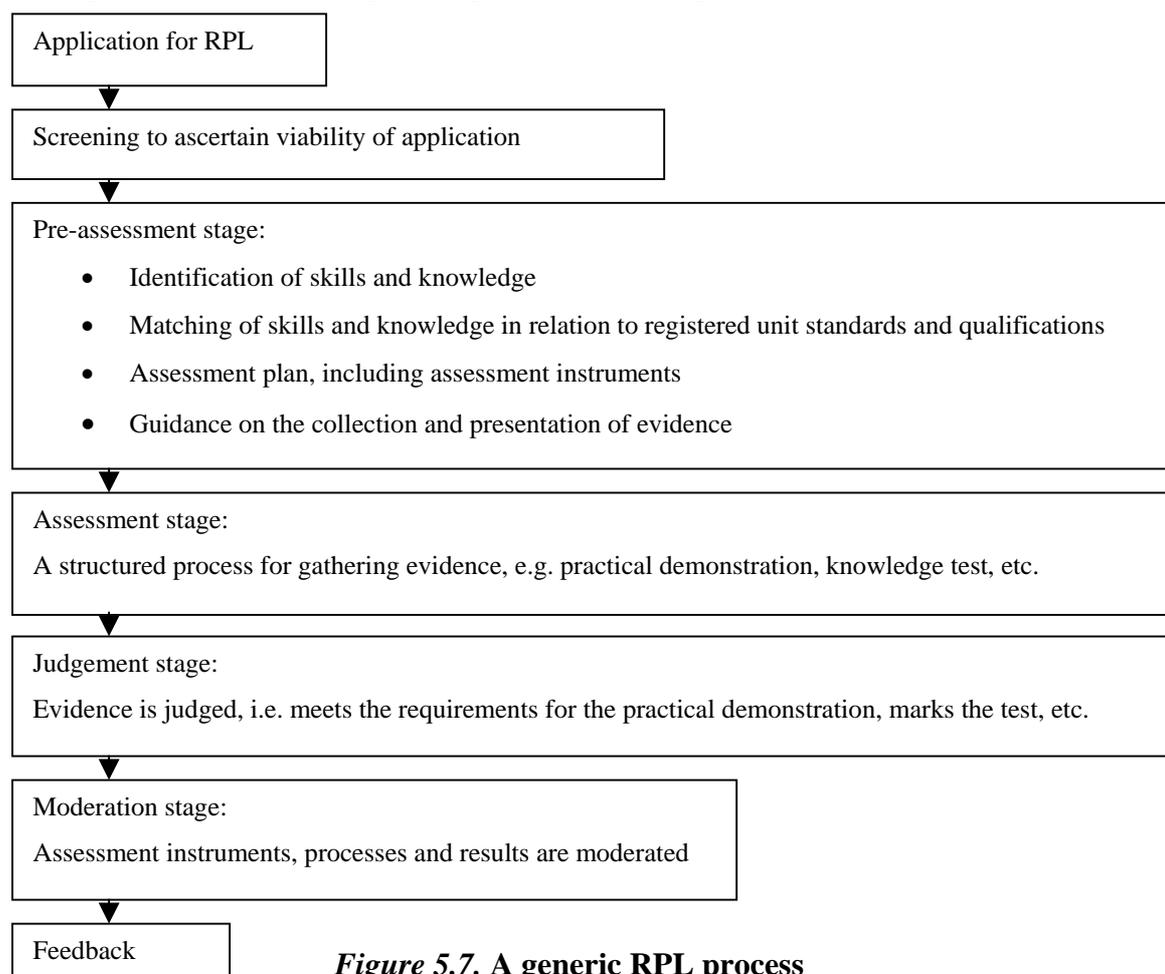
<sup>28</sup> Also procedures for self-selection questionnaire and career counselling

**Key Table 5.11 (continued)**

<u>Formal procedures</u>	<u>Formal documentation</u>
A: Assessment	Pf: Post-assessment feedback form
Aa: Post-assessment advice	Rf: Recording form
As: Post-assessment support	

Policies are usually followed by sets of procedures for implementation. In the SAQA RPL policy (2002a), a generic process is proposed, which could form the basis for the procedures. In most cases (refer to Table 5.11 above), the respondents have developed formal procedures to deal with RPL. The procedures follow the generic process as proposed by the SAQA RPL policy closely, suggesting that there may be a high level of agreement possible between the provider institutions.

A simplified version of the generic process for RPL (p. 33) is included here:



**Figure 5.7. A generic RPL process**

One of the main criticisms levelled at the implementation of RPL is the resource-intensiveness of such a process. While it should be acknowledged that RPL will

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require resources, the point should also be made that there are efficient ways in which RPL may be conducted, using the basic stages as outlined above.

In the interview with the Head: Curriculum Development of Cape Technikon, he responded (on being asked what would constitute a valid, practical and effective RPL system), as follows:

It is important to balance quality and efficiency. For example, if a curriculum vitae or an interview is sufficient evidence of a candidate's prior learning, then no additional assessment should be required. Professional judgement, based on a solid understanding of the risks involved, should be made possible (Appendix E).

In an attempt to ensure that the integrity of the system is upheld, the SAQA RPL policy has tried to capture and quality assure every aspect of the process, making the whole process seem very onerous and highly resource-intensive. In practice, however, the procedures are often much more simplified. The University of Port Elizabeth's comments on the SAQA Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a) is highly critical of this 'over-regulation' of the process:

UPE is currently implementing RPL with great success in nursing and social sciences, but our systems are practical and effective, not bogged down with long lists of idealistic documentation, checks and counter-checks that such a formal policy is forced to include on the off-chance that someone might be cheated or a mistake made.

Formal, long procedures may therefore become less onerous, as the confidence in the integrity of the process grows. However, it should be noted that internationally, there is a movement towards more explicit processes and procedures. In Canada, for example, the Guidelines for the Canadian PLAR [RPL] Practitioner (CAPLA, 2000), were established. The main aim of the publication is to establish benchmarks for RPL practice. The nature of RPL and the possible stigmas that may be attached to attaining credits through these means, seem to require an explicit statement of the quality criteria against which RPL practice will be measured.

Policies and procedures are often seen as the framework that legitimises and gives structure to the RPL process. The respondents to the questionnaire to a large extent agree with the need for policies and procedures and have already established these (refer above, Table 5.11). Therefore, such structures seem to be an important part of an ‘enabling environment’.

#### 5.2.6 *Funding of RPL*

An ‘enabling environment’ requires sustained funding. In the Education White Paper (No 3, 1997), in principle, decisions have been taken that institutions will be granted targeted funding for pilot projects dealing with RPL. In addition, funding will also be made available for programmes of redress. The draft New Academic Policy also makes mention of funding, particularly for academic development programmes and Foundation Certificates (CHE, 2001). Yet, despite these plans, no clear funding structure and/or subsidy for RPL has been forthcoming. Currently, public institutions are carrying the cost, at least until the candidate has completed modules or subjects for which subsidies could be granted. The lack of a funding and costing structure became evident from the responses to Question 5.13 - How does your organisation/institution determine the cost of RPL? - Eight (out of the 16) respondents for example, did not have a formal costing structure, nor did representatives know what the term ‘formal costing structure’ referred to. These respondents included six public higher education institutions and the private FET consultancy (Adaptable Learning Services), as well as the Association for FET providers (AFETISA), which will not be responsible for the establishment of a funding and costing structure in their sectors. The remaining eight respondents consist of three public higher education institutions, all indicating that the ‘number of services required’ is used to determine the cost of RPL. Peninsula Technikon, however, indicated that all the options (refer to Question 5.13, Appendix F) are considered when cost is determined. The private higher and further education institutions (which will not receive subsidies from the state) either indicated that fees are determined by “the amount of work required” or “the number of services required” (Appendix F), while LearnSys, a private general and further education provider, was funded for the Domestic Servants project by the Services Sector Education and Training Authority (Services SETA).

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The lack of structured funding is of concern. In Australia, slow development of RPL assessment in universities was associated with inadequate incentives to implement in terms of public funding of RPL (Flowers, et al, in Evans, 2000):

[T]he extra demands placed on staff to develop ‘customised’ assessments, a lack of RPL assessment expertise and training in universities; resistance by academic staff and professional bodies; delays caused by the need to develop special policies and procedures for RPL; and disincentives to grant credit inherent in the existing funding arrangements for universities (p.158) (my emphasis).

SAQA has published a national RPL policy, as well as made available for public comment (and has now adopted) criteria and guidelines for the implementation of RPL. This has generated a huge interest in RPL. If funding is not made available for the start-up and implementation of RPL processes, the momentum and an opportunity to make a difference may be lost.

### 5.2.7 *Costing and Fees*

In addition to funding and subsidy arrangements, the fees (or costing) for RPL is highlighted in the literature as an issue for consideration:

Harris (2000) indicates that three options exist internationally for the determination of fees for RPL services:

- i. Fees based on the time spent to complete the RPL process;
- ii. A common fee irrespective of time spent or the number of credits awarded;
- iii. A fee based on the number of credits applied for and awarded (p. 131).

The last option in particular seems to be problematic as this could easily associate RPL with the ‘sale’ of qualifications. For this reason, the Whitaker quality standards (1989) make explicit mention of fees for RPL:

Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded (p. 9).

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Also in England, it is considered a malpractice if assessment fees are based on the number of credits awarded, and not on the services provided (Nyatanga, et al, 1998)

In the SAQA RPL policy (2002a), would-be implementers are warned that

Fees for the delivery and administration of assessment and RPL services, [should] not create barriers for candidates (p. 28).

In the South African context in particular, with high unemployment rates, it seems that it should not be assumed that because RPL addresses mature learners, that such learners will have the financial resources to access education and training via this route. In the light of the Education White Paper's (#3, 1997) statement that 'free' education is not a feasible option for South Africa at this stage, this becomes even more important. Ideally, according to the SAQA RPL policy (2002a):

RPL services and assessment should not cost more than a full-time face-to-face programme (p.28).

In the interview with the Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon, he suggested that there is a need for a financial aid system for adult learners. In their experience, many of their candidates have been retrenched – and they are seeking to return to learning to attain more marketable skills and qualifications. High costs of RPL, owing to its perceived resource-intensiveness, will inhibit the access of these learners.

Harris (2000) suggests that the calculation of cost for RPL services should always be off-set by the "social cost of *not* valuing prior learning" (p. 132). With this in mind, she suggests in her book, *RPL: Power, Pedagogy and Possibility*, the following cost-benefits to institutions:

- New and experienced learners are attracted to the institution – standards actually increase rather than decrease.
- Student recruitment and retention rates tend to increase.
- Staff can learn from the candidates, for example about developments in the workplace – this is useful for curriculum and pedagogy.

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- Staff can gain valuable insights into different and non-dominant cultures of knowledge – which can and should form a useful adjunct to traditionally academic ways of thinking about knowledge.
- Engaging with RPL means that curricula can build meaningful links with the communities they seek to serve.
- The process of implementing RPL forces staff to understand what their curriculum actually requires of learners and to clarify issues such as the meaning of particular levels, notions of academic coherence and equivalence (p. 132).

The cost associated with the development and provision of RPL services is, therefore, a critical factor in the establishment of an enabling environment. It seems that providers/institutions will have to balance the transformation imperatives of the new education and training system in South Africa with the cost of developing a sustainable system. If RPL is seen to be a legislative directive, rather than a social responsibility and an opportunity to add value to educational practices, RPL could easily become the ‘victim’ instead of the ‘agent’ of transformation where, once the real (or perceived) socio-political imperatives have been met, is no longer practised.

In conclusion, for the establishment of a valid, practical and effective system for RPL in particular, appropriate funding and costing seems to be critical. The slow uptake of RPL at public institutions seems to be directly related to the lack of funding and costing structures, which may if properly structured, serve as an incentive for implementation.

### **5.3 Policies and Regulations that Govern Access**

Despite the promulgation of many new Acts and regulations in support of the transformation of education and training in South Africa (refer to chapter 2 of this report), there are a number of ‘policy incoherencies’. These irregularities result from the fact that many old Acts (prior to 1994) and their regulations have not yet been repealed. In the public comment on the SAQA document, The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a), the fact that institutions cannot yet implement an outcomes-based approach to education and training was highlighted by the Technikon Free State. Also, in addition to their response to the questionnaire

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for this study, the Cape Technikon, in their comments on the abovementioned SAQA discussion document, suggested that:

After reading the foregoing section [dealing with ‘regulations on the entry into higher education’], it is not clear to me how the old regulations relate to the new SAQA/NSB regulations, nor why the latter have not superseded the former.

Access to public higher education institutions, particularly universities, is governed by statutory regulations, with the Matriculation Board and the Committee of University Principals (known as SAUVCA – the South African University Vice-Chancellors Association) as the implementing agents. Its predecessor, the Joint Matriculation Board, was dissolved on 4 September 1992, when the Matriculation Board was put in place as an interim body that would govern entry to higher education institutions. In the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997), it is stated that:

(1) The Committee of University Principals, the Matriculation Board and the Committee of Technikon Principals continue to exist and to perform their functions until the date or dates contemplated in subsection (2), as if the Universities Act, 1955 (61 of 1955), and the Technikons Act, 1993 (125 of 1993), had not been repealed.

Therefore:

(6) The joint statutes and joint regulations and rules made in terms of the Universities Act (61 of 1955), and the Technikons Act, (125 of 1993), continue to exist until the date or dates contemplated in subsection (2) (p. 46).

These policies, which are still being enforced, inhibit the implementation of RPL in a practical and efficient (and legal) manner. However, in the interview with the Director of the Matriculation Board, it became clear that provision is being made for alternative access. The ‘Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption’, in particular, seems to allow for candidates wanting to access higher education through the recognition of their prior learning (refer to Chapter 2 of this report). Currently, however, this seems to be an onerous process, as each application has to be submitted and justified by the Senate of the University and then forwarded to the Matriculation Board for verification (SAUVCA, 2002). In addition, the subsidy arrangements for

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public institutions also seem to serve as a strong disincentive to admitting non-traditional students. The Director of the Matriculation Board indicated that:

The SAPSE [subsidy] prescriptions define a student, as a person who is matriculated. Universities, therefore, may not include in the subsidy returns any enrolment, or degree credits, obtained by persons who are not matriculated.

This is confirmed by a study undertaken by Peters (2000) at the University of Cape Town into current regulations that may inhibit RPL implementation:

- Students over the age of 23 years may apply for *mature age exemption* if they have completed their final year of schooling without passing with ‘exemption’, or ‘endorsement’. The exemption/endorsement refers to a minimum number of points awarded to the certificate, based on the grades achieved in the matriculation examination (school-leaving certificate);
- Students without the option of mature age exemption, (i.e. students who have completed only grade 11, or lower), currently have no means for admission to suitable programmes by means of proof of equivalent learning; and
- Should a student be admitted to a particular programme without the minimum requirements, such a student is not eligible for access to any bachelor’s degree unless he/she has passed at least four subjects at the Senior Certificate level (matriculation without endorsement – known as a ‘Standard Grade matric’ as opposed to a ‘Higher Grade matric’);
- Also, under the present national legislation, a student is not eligible for being awarded a degree even when he/she has completed the programme of study successfully. This could mean that an adult learner, with an incomplete school-leaving certificate, who may have met all the requirements for a post-matriculation qualification (possibly obtained in part through RPL), cannot be awarded this qualification until he/she has completed the matriculation certificate (p. 14 and 15).

In the SAUVCA guidelines (SAUVCA, 2001), however, public higher institutions are encouraged to establish minimum requirements for entry and, therefore, for determining what the ‘equivalencies’ would be in terms of the learning required for entry into higher education institutions; i.e. minimum requirements should be related

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to the minimum requirements for matriculation with endorsement, in terms of the breadth and depth of achievement expected; and these minimum admission requirements should in the opinion of the senate concerned, to be at least equivalent to Grade 12 or the senior certificate.

A candidate for the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption therefore does not have to have completed a senior certificate or even twelve years of schooling. However, despite the guidelines and direction offered by SAUVCA, this is not yet practised widely. Only one such RPL process has been recorded with the Matriculation Board – by the University of the Free State. (The UNISA model was being proposed at the time of the interview.) The University of the Free State's process for candidates who hold at least a Grade 10 certificate involves the following:

- (1) An extended interview by an educational or industrial psychologist where factors such as motivation and aptitude are considered. Many persons do not pass this stage.
- (2) Intensive formative assessments on study related topics. Students are guided by tutors, but successive failure to perform may lead to disqualification or additional value addition<sup>29</sup> before they are allowed to proceed to the next phase.
- (3) A final summative assessment in terms of which it is determined whether the applicant is able to apply the prior learning and the principles promoted by additional value that was added when doing the formative assessment programmes.

The 'formative assessment programmes' offered by the University of the Free State, however, do not carry any credit towards formal qualifications and, in addition, the subsidy arrangements for such candidates have not changed. SAUVCA makes it clear that while individual universities have the power to determine their own admission requirements in terms of the provision of the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997), subsidies are based on the matriculation regulations stated in the Joint Statute (SAUVCA, 2001).

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<sup>29</sup> 'Access' and/or 'upgrading'/'bridging' programmes

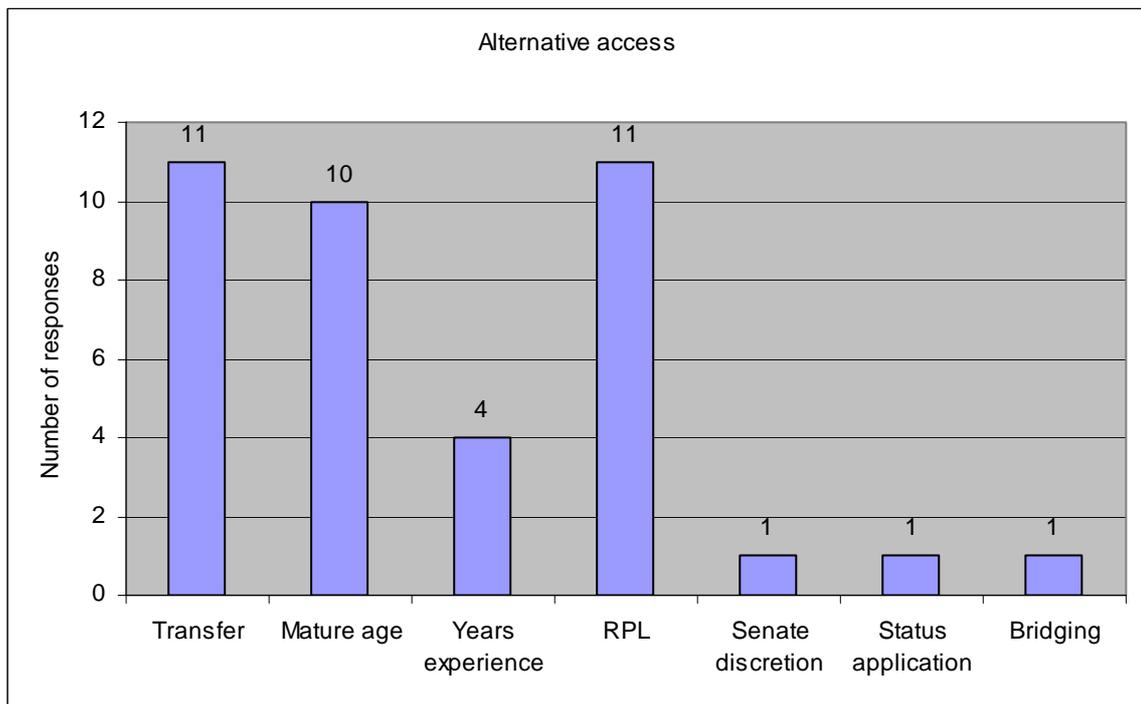
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On completion of the ‘bridging courses’, such candidates are allowed into first-degree courses. It is important to note that these candidates are not allowed entry before they have completed the full bridging programme and also that the learning attained through these programmes do not bear any credits.

It seems, therefore, in terms of this model that RPL candidates not only have to ‘jump through a number of hoops’ before they are allowed access, but also the institution that is trying to open up access does not receive any recognition (in the form of subsidies) for its efforts. It is also worth noting that ‘mainstream’ learners are not required to go through such extensive screening as seems to be the approach to RPL candidates. Kistan, (2002) pointed out that increasingly it is becoming clear that “matriculation with exemption/endorsement” (p. 171) is a poor determinant of success in higher education. The question that could be asked is that if ‘mainstream’ learners were required to meet so many requirements, would so many of them be successful in their application to enter higher education institutions?

However, despite the regulatory problems posed by policy inconsistencies, the respondents to the questionnaire for this study increasingly seem to use alternative access routes. Question 3.5 of the questionnaire asked whether institutional policies currently make use of alternative forms of access to institutions. Fifteen (out of 16) providers indicated that they make use of a range of alternative forms of access. (AFETISA, the association of public further education institutions, indicated that it does not have alternative arrangements at present.) All the public higher education institutions (n=9) indicated that they make use of the traditional ‘transfer of credits’ and ‘mature age’ exemption, but three of these (Mangosutho Technikon, Cape Technikon, and Rhodes University) also consider ‘years’ experience’. Two private higher education institutions, also consider ‘transfer of credits’ as a basis for entry, and Mentornet (private higher) will also consider ‘years’ experience’ for entry. Five (out of 9) public institutions use RPL as an alternative mechanism for entry – four technikons and one university (UNISA) and two (out of nine) also make use of the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption (University of Cape Town) and ‘status applications’ (Cape Technikon respectively). All the private institutions (n=6) indicate that they grant access based on RPL.

Consider Figure 5.8:



**Figure 5.8. Alternative access to institutions (n = 15)**

These responses can be grouped into two categories: traditional forms of access, and non-traditional forms of access. The Senate’s Discretionary Conditional Exemption, while formally accepted as a means of granting access, is an attempt by the Matriculation Board to regulate non-traditional access, and would therefore fall within the category of ‘non-traditional’. However, despite the attempted regulation, only one public higher education institution in this sample makes use of this form of access, suggesting that it may be a very onerous process, particularly because university senates usually have limited meetings per year. ‘RPL’ and ‘years experience’ seem to have been conflated by some provider institutions. ‘Status application’ and ‘bridging’ have not been formalised and are currently being used to a limited extent. Refer to the Table 5.12 overleaf:

**Table 5.12***Distribution of Alternative Access Routes across Institutions*

Institution	Classification	Traditional access		Non-traditional access		
		Transfer of credits	Mature age exemption	Years of experience	RPL	Other <sup>30</sup>
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	X	X	-
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	-	X	-
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	-	-
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	-	X	-
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	-	X	-
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	-	X
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	-	-
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	-
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	X	-	-	X	-
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	X	-
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	-	-	X	X
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	-	X	-
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, cnslt	-	-	-	X	-
	Subtotals:	11	10	4	11	3

From this table it would seem that despite current macro-policy dissonance, public and private providers are currently granting access in traditional and alternative ways of access. However, in the case of the public institutions, policy inconsistencies do not generally facilitate access via RPL despite the political ‘will’ as is expressed in the new Acts mentioned before (Chapter 2) even if institutional policies intend to broaden access through alternative means. When institutional/provider policies and procedures for RPL are developed, the extent to which dominant macro policies may

<sup>30</sup> ‘Senate discretionary conditional exemption’; ‘status application’ and ‘bridging’ (one each)

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inhibit the implementation of these must be explored. Harris (2000) for example points out that "[y]ou may well find that there are regulatory knots in your institution that have to be untangled" (p. 93).

Further, the definition of RPL that appears in the National Standards Bodies Regulations (No 18787 of 28 March 1998) (SAQA, 2003a) clearly indicates that a dissonance between official RPL policy and current practice exists. The definition is as follows:

Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements (p.7).

In the context of access and admissions policies and procedures, this may mean (as mentioned before) that using matriculation with endorsement/exemption may become only a guideline and not the definitive reason for refusal or admittance to a programme. Therefore, where a candidate can provide evidence of sufficient and current learning as associated with matriculation level learning, an institution/provider could grant access and award credits to such a learner on the basis of the evidence. However, this requires clear criteria and processes whereby the 'equivalence' of learning, in terms of the depth, breadth and scope of learning attained through non-formal means, can be benchmarked against the requirements for the qualification. In this regard, the Education White Paper (No 3, 1997) supports the development of criteria and mechanisms to recognise prior learning with a view to admitting non-traditional students to higher education institutions.

In addition to policy incoherencies, a clause developed as a result of the need for credit transfer between institutions, known as the '50% residency clause', is now being used to avoid giving formal credit for the learning attained in non-formal situations. In essence, it means that a learner, having been granted exemption for parts of the learning programme at an institution through a RPL process, must still complete at least 50% of the programme at that institution, regardless of whether the exemption granted exceeds 50% of the requirements for the qualification (or even fulfils *all* the requirements). The implications are that, as in the case of the Senate's

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Discretionary Conditional Exemption, exemptions granted for part of the qualifications are informal and non-transferable between institutions, and formal credits are only awarded once the candidate has completed the remaining 50% of the qualification. Where candidates therefore simply want to determine the 'status' of their learning, for promotion and/or access in other contexts in the workplace, without wanting to continue further studies, such credits mean nothing. Yet, the proposed New Academic Policy (CHE, 2001) is silent about the 50% residency clause. In fact, it states:

[I]f a candidate can demonstrate that s/he has attained the learning outcomes prescribed for a particular module (through formal, non-formal or informal learning), s/he can be awarded credit for it and exempted from having to take the module formally (my emphasis) (p. 103).

In the past, in the countries investigated for this study, and in South Africa, policies, regulations and procedures were developed to screen candidates for further learning, i.e. to ensure that the people who were most likely to succeed be allowed into learning programmes. However, the screening was based on evidence of pre-acquired qualifications and not on possible alternative forms of evidence emanating from experiential or other non-formal learning, which may be equally valid evidence of the possible success of a candidate. At the time it was the only way in which learners could be allowed into formal further learning programmes, but such policies and regulations are now in direct contradiction with the principle that people may gain access to further education on the basis of their ability to prove equivalent levels, depth and scope of learning.

RPL as a concept seems to suggest that preceding qualifications are not necessarily the only form of preparation for successful completion of further formal learning. Learning through alternative means is considered to be as valuable and as suitable as learning acquired through formal processes. On the basis of such evidence, credits may be granted.

## 5.4 Conclusion

In terms of the conceptual framework for this study, this chapter deals with the first research question: *‘What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?’* A key characteristic of a valid system is the level of accountability, both in terms of the format and the process of recognising prior learning. A quality assurance framework for RPL supports validity by providing the structure within which RPL is located whereby the integrity of the process is upheld and whereby common benchmarks for inter-institutional and inter-sectoral quality criteria could be established. A quality assurance framework is also the first step in ensuring an enabling environment within which RPL will be implemented.

An enabling environment deals with both the principles and the practical issues to be considered when RPL is implemented. To implement RPL effectively, clear procedures and arrangements must be decided on and described beforehand, not only for internal purposes, but also to enable a systemic approach to RPL inter-institutionally and inter-sectorally.

In 5.4.1 and 5.4.2 the conclusions regarding the first two parts of the conceptual framework, i.e. that of a quality assurance framework and an enabling environment, are summarised.

### *5.4.1 Conclusions about a Quality Assurance Framework*

The extent was explored to which a quality assurance framework within which RPL practice could be located was considered important and was already in place. Also, the extent to which such a framework could be used as a common benchmark between differing institutions to facilitate inter-institutional arrangements was highlighted.

It was found that all the respondents felt that a quality assurance framework, as expressed in moderation and review processes, was important. A high level of agreement existed in relation to the minimum quality assurance in terms of assessment instruments, both before and after use. Whilst none of the respondents indicated that their quality assurance was put in place to facilitate inter-institutional arrangements, the fact that all the respondents stressed the outcomes of learning as an important basis for moderation and review will facilitate inter-institutional and inter-

sectoral transfer of credits because a common benchmark is possible. A common benchmark could be expressed in the form of quality criteria agreed on between different partners. In addition, a common benchmark facilitates accountability whereby the integrity of the RPL process is enhanced.

#### 5.4.2 *Conclusions about an Enabling Environment*

An enabling environment was explored and was found to be made possible by a clear quality assurance framework. The enabling environment includes the expression of the will to implement RPL; the principles and purpose of RPL within a particular regulatory context; the target market and target area; articulation arrangements, including administrative arrangements; policies and procedures that will deal with assessment, reviews and a generic process for the assessment of prior learning; and funding and fees. It also includes the exploration of current regulation and statutes that govern access to and credit for learning achieved through non-formal and informal means.

A key factor in the successful implementation of RPL is the institutional commitment to translate the political ‘will’ expressed in macro policies and legislation into an institutional will to broaden participation of non-traditional and previously disadvantaged learners in education and training.

The principles upon which RPL will be implemented and the purpose of RPL; i.e. to enable access, award advanced standing or award credit, will impact on the target market and target area for RPL. In addition, the principles and purpose will influence the articulation arrangements, including administrative articulation, within and outside of the institution.

Policies and procedures were often seen to be synonymous with the quality assurance framework, which legitimises and gives structure to the RPL process. It was found that there was a high level of agreement relating to the need for policies and procedures and most of the participants in this study have already established these. A generic process, which can be used as a common benchmark, emerged from the responses to the questionnaire and the interviews. Therefore, a policy and procedural structure seems to be an important part of an ‘enabling environment’.

While very few of the respondents had a clear fee structure for RPL services, a standardised approach will protect the candidate and ultimately the system. A funding structure, particularly for public institutions, has not yet been made clear by the authorities. The lack of funding may become a powerful disincentive to implement RPL across institutions and sectors.

Likewise, the presence of outdated, unrepealed regulatory requirements still contained in new legislation and macro policy, may inhibit the implementation of RPL unnecessarily.

#### *5.4.3 Concluding Remarks*

Unlike other initiatives internationally, where RPL is often institutionally based, in South Africa there is a drive towards systemic implementation across education and training. This is a much more complex requirement and necessitates the establishment of common criteria upon which a systemic process can be based. The SAQA RPL policy and Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL attempted to establish such criteria and agreed processes.

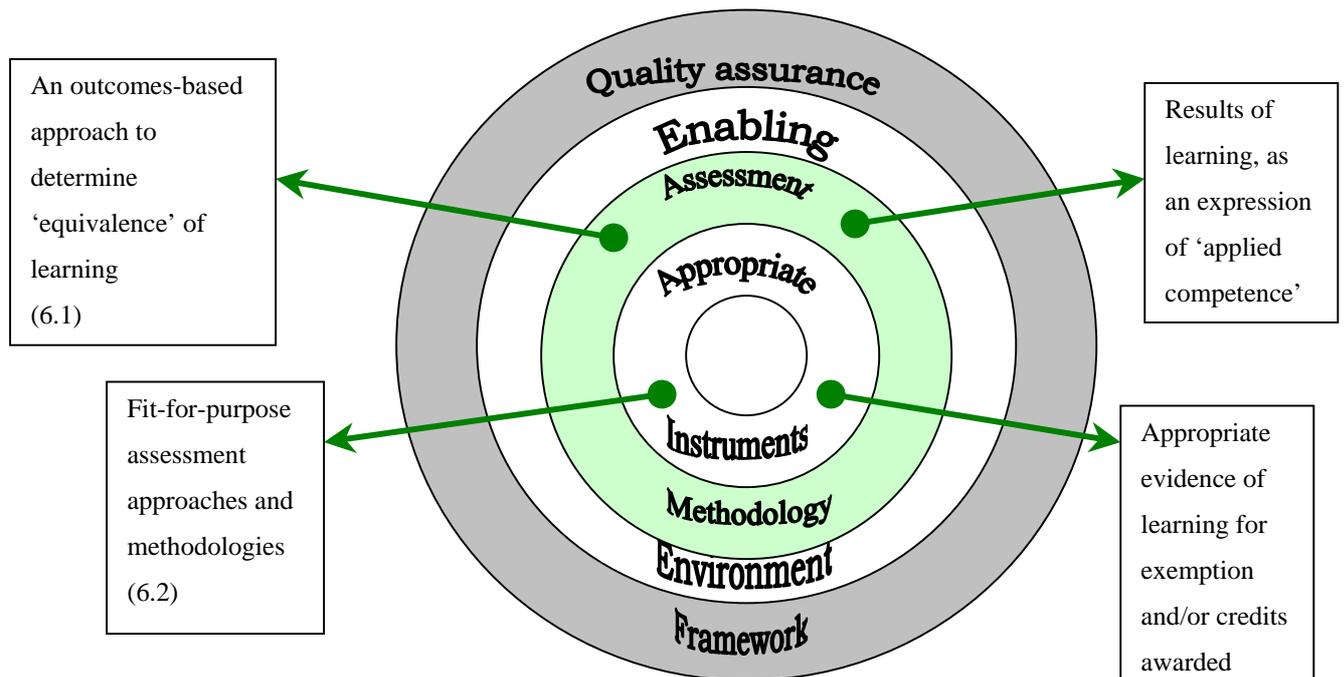
The results of the first research question indicate that a high level of agreement already exists between different institutions, sectors and bands. These now need to be formalised and supported by the authorities, both in principle and by means of appropriate targeted funding.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE ELEMENTS REQUIRED TO IMPLEMENT A SUSTAINABLE SYSTEM

*The second operational question – What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system? - will be addressed in this chapter. A sustainable system seems to be made possible by a quality assurance framework within which an enabling environment is established. The quality assurance framework and enabling environment, as characteristics of a valid, practical and effective system, were discussed in Chapter 5 of this report. Chapter 6 will deal with the ways in which a RPL system could become sustainable through the manner in which implementation takes place, in particular in the way in which prior learning is assessed and recognised. As before, the discussion will be based on the analyses of the questionnaires and the semi-structured interviews conducted for this study. In addition, the comments received on the newly adopted SAQA document, the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a), also informs the discussion.*

In this chapter, sustainability seems to suggest that a common understanding and approach to the assessment and recognition of prior learning is needed. A common understanding of RPL assessment, facilitated by an outcomes-based approach to education and training, entails the establishment of clear benchmarks against which learning could be assessed and defining what should be assessed, and how. The ‘what’ that will be assessed against pre-defined benchmarks will be discussed in 6.1. In 6.2, fit-for-purpose assessment instruments and appropriate evidence of learning will be discussed, dealing in particular with how prior learning could be assessed. In 6.3 RPL as a national strategy, particularly in terms of the sustainability of the system, is discussed. Therefore, in terms of the conceptual framework, the following aspects will be dealt with in this chapter:



*Figure 6.1. Emerging characteristics of a RPL system*

### 6.1 A Common Understanding

In the literature, it became evident that a common understanding, both of the purposes of RPL, and the criteria against which prior learning will be measured, are important for the sustainable implementation of RPL. Table 3.3, in Chapter 3 of this report, details the extent of agreement between international initiatives in this regard (Table 3.3 - International commonalities). One of the aspects that stand out is the use of clear descriptions of learning as benchmarks for the assessment of learning in a particular field and/or qualification. In the interview with the Head: Curriculum Development, of the Cape Technikon, the need for a common understanding was highlighted on a number of levels: he commented that “clarity is needed on what RPL is, and what it is not”, (refer to Appendix E), to the extent that the purposes and processes are described and maintained in one central place, such as the South African Universities’ Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA). He went further to say that

a shared understanding of the epistemological framework within which RPL will be undertaken and the philosophical underpinnings about what RPL is, are critical (Appendix E).

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The other interviewees agreed. The Director: Witsplus of the University of the Witwatersrand, for example stressed that lecturers will only have confidence in the learning of RPL candidates if they understand what it is that should be assessed. She mentioned that “if the requirements are explicit, then RPL will be easier” (Appendix E).

The Director of the Matriculation Board, in his interview, supported the notion of clear benchmarks for entry into higher education:

Benchmarks must identify where the person’s [learning] is at. He/she should be able to produce evidence of such learning through tests and validation. Also, the ‘shelf-life’ or currency, of learning is important. Higher education needs guidelines about what such competencies may be (Appendix E).

On a more practical level, the Programme Management Unit of the Department of Labour commented that assessors would need “real detail – forms, examples and checklists” (Appendix E). They mentioned that RPL is perceived to be “too sophisticated a process and the criteria against which we will assess are not clear” (Appendix E).

Given that the intention is that RPL should be implemented in South Africa on a larger scale than any of the initiatives investigated in other countries, the need for common benchmarks seems to be even more important. Common, agreed descriptions of learning, in addition to a common process for quality assurance as discussed in Chapter 5 of this report, could ensure that learning recognised in different contexts will have currency in other environments and not only in the institution where the assessment was conducted. Geysers (2001) in her study on international RPL systems noted that:

Even the very successful [international] RPL programmes do not have the influence they should have on mainstream development. Thus, while American universities have pioneered many innovative programmes, the absence of a national qualifications framework has possibly made it harder to move these into mainstream education (p. 32).

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In the United States of America, education is highly decentralised, making it more difficult to establish common benchmarks across institutions and contexts. It may be for this reason that one of the criteria for the establishment of a RPL system in countries such as England and Canada respectively, include the requirement that:

...programmes or modules [must] have clear learning outcomes or competencies both staff and students can base their APL [RPL] assessments on (England) (refer to Chapter 3 of this report).

South Africa has established a National Qualifications Framework and has adopted an outcomes-based approach to education and training, which may greatly facilitate the establishment of common benchmarks because the qualifications against which learning programmes are to be developed, contain generic descriptions of the requirements for the qualification common to any context and institution who will be offering the qualification. The generic descriptions are captured in outcomes, with the purpose of making clear the knowledge, skills and values expected of a learner on successful completion of a programme, regardless of where this learning was acquired. Using the same descriptions of learning could assist in the establishment of a common understanding of the qualification, even if the learning programme and content differ from institution to institution and context to context.

Spady (1994, in SAQA, 2000) describes outcomes-based education as follows:

Outcomes-based education means clearly focussing and organising everything in an educational system around what is essential for students to be able to do successfully at the end of their learning experiences. This means starting with a clear picture of what is important for students to be able to do, then organising curriculum, instruction, and assessment to make sure this learning ultimately happens (p. 10).

In the South African context this has found expression in the fact that all qualifications and unit standards registered on the NQF explicitly state the purpose of the qualification or the unit standard, as well as the outcomes expected to be achieved by the end of the learning process. The results of learning, as agreed on through national stakeholder forums, are therefore already available, unlike many of the international initiatives investigated for this study. As mentioned above, a system in

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which the results of learning are clear and in the public domain would seem to facilitate the implementation of RPL. In countries where national qualifications frameworks are not used and, in particular, where an outcomes-based approach is not explicit, their RPL systems are increasingly seeking to establish clearly defined outcomes against which the learning of candidates could be benchmarked. In the Guidelines for the Canadian PLAR Practitioner (2000), for example, it is made clear that the learning to be recognised should be matched to “the requirements of education and training programs; occupational and/or professional certification; labour market entry; and/or organisational and human capacity building [criteria]” (p. 3). The need to establish clear descriptions of learning resulted from recommendations regarding concerns about PLAR (RPL) practices in Canada. Van Kleef (1998) stated that:

Educators and trainers have begun to prepare course descriptions using learning outcomes, which are clear statements about what an individual needs to know and be able to do to be successful in a course (p. 7).

In the US Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) handbook dealing with adult learning (Flint, Zakos & Frey, 2002) the need for clear learning outcomes is strongly supported, particularly as it relates to quality assurance:

Clarity about learning outcomes is a pre-requisite for quality assurance in programs recognizing prior learning assessment (PLA), which are vitally important to adult learners. Recognition of prior learning refers to any knowledge building or skills attainment that occurs prior to enrolment or outside of enrolment at a postsecondary institution, assessed for the purpose of awarding college credit (p. 51).

Taking all these comments into account, ‘clarity’ about learning outcomes seems to suggest that implementers should have a clear understanding of the end-points of learning as expressed in the purpose and the exit-level outcomes of qualifications – a ‘macro’ view of what the results of learning should be. In practise, however, education and training practitioners seldom have (or seek) this macro overview – they tend to be concerned with their own areas of expertise and would have the tendency to assess prior learning only within their own domains, as they would for full-time, mainstream learners, without necessarily taking into account the ‘applied

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knowledge/competence' which is the ultimate overall aim of the qualification. Therefore, a 'credit exchange' approach, whereby exact matches with the content of the learning programme is required, is used (see Chapter 3: Literature Review). This is the approach taken by the University of the Witwatersrand. Recognition of prior learning is given for credentialed learning where such learning match with the learning inputs to the programmes of the institution:

RPL at Wits for undergraduate studies is primarily in the form of recognition of other forms of learning – not experience, and in particular – other forms of credentialed learning. We request syllabi, transcripts and the actual examination papers, if possible, before credit exemptions are awarded (Appendix E).

The 'inputs' to a learning programme, and the extent to which these match with the content of the university's programmes are in this institution the most important determinant for credit exemption. However, RPL seems to suggest that learning should be assessed from the opposite end of education because the inputs required to attain the qualification have already taken place. It therefore requires more than literal matching; it requires that practitioners have a common understanding of why they assess, what it is that should be assessed, and how this should take place in a manner that will determine an equivalent level, breadth and depth of learning required for the attainment of a qualification or unit standard, rather than actual content.

The questionnaire for this study tried to determine the extent to which a common understanding of the learning outcomes, rather than the inputs, has been established. A common understanding is facilitated, according to Harris (2000) by an analysis of the qualification and the applied knowledge/competence that will indicate that a learner has attained the necessary learning, in particular by asking the questions:

- How [is] knowledge and/or competence understood [in relation to a target qualification]?
- Who defines what counts as knowledge/competence?
- How [is] the knowledge organised?
- How [is] the learning understood?
- How [are] experience and learning from experience understood?

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- How [is] the pedagogy [to support the attainment of learning] understood? (p. 95 and 96).

A careful analysis of the knowledge, skills and values that will indicate applied competence/knowledge in a particular area of learning is therefore important to establish a common understanding of what and how we should assess.

Whitaker (1989) suggests that: "To assess is to identify the level of knowledge or skill that has been acquired" (p. 2).

In the SAQA document, Criteria and Guidelines for the Assessment of NQF registered Unit standards and Qualifications (2001) the purposes of assessment are clearly defined - essentially, assessment is to determine 'applied competence'/knowledge. In terms of the SAQA description of 'applied competence', this means a combination of:

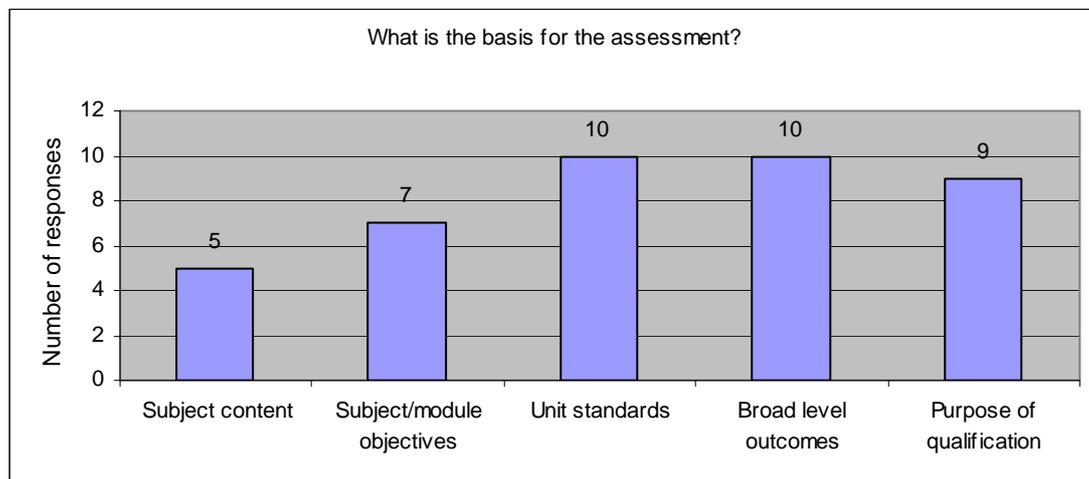
- The practical competence, i.e. the demonstrated ability to perform a set of tasks in an authentic context;
- The foundational competence, i.e. the demonstrated understanding of what the learner is doing and why; and
- The reflexive competence, i.e. the demonstrated ability to integrate performance with understanding, so as to show that the learner is able to adapt to changed circumstances appropriately, are assessed (p. 21).

Therefore, in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework, RPL assessment is to determine applied competence/knowledge. Perhaps because RPL is to a great extent still an untried, untested approach in South Africa, assessment of prior learning has largely taken on a technicist approach; i.e. whereby discrete parts of learning are assessed for the sake of assessing in terms of subject inputs and modules, and not to determine the achievement of the overall outcome and purpose of a qualification. This is the 'credit exchange' approach discussed in Chapter 3 of this report. However, this approach seems to be unsatisfactory as it disregards other forms of learning, which do not neatly fit into the parameters of subjects and modules.

Also, as Whitaker (1989) observed:

Two different teachers might choose different content, assignments, tests, etc for the same set of outcomes, and the assessment is warped accordingly. Effective assessment is enhanced by clarity of learning outcomes (p. 2 – 4).

The responses to Question 3.13 of the questionnaire: What is the basis for the RPL assessment?, however seem to indicate that where RPL has been implemented, there is increasing agreement on the assessment of the ‘purpose’ and ‘broad level outcomes’ of a qualification and unit standards rather than on the assessment of small discrete parts of a qualification as captured in subjects and modules. Refer to Figure 6.2 (below):



**Figure 6.2. The basis for assessment (n = 16)**

The options above could, as before, be categorised into ‘input’ to the learning programme as the basis for assessment or the ‘output’, (or the results of learning) as the basis for assessment, as shown in Table 6.1 overleaf:

**Table 6.1**

*Input versus Output as the Basis for Assessment of Prior Learning*

Input to the learning programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Subject content</li> <li>○ Subject/module objectives</li> </ul>
Output of the learning programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Unit standards</li> <li>○ Broad level outcomes</li> <li>○ Purpose of the qualification</li> </ul>

The responses in Figure 6.2 suggest that 37% of assessments is based on the ‘input’ to the programme (five out of 16 on ‘subject content’, and seven out of 16 responses on ‘subject/module objectives’ respectively – refer to Table 6.1).

However, 60,4% of assessments (ten out of 16 for ‘unit standards’ and ‘broad level outcomes’ each, and nine out of 16 for ‘purpose of the qualification’) are based on a broader understanding of the applied knowledge required for the attainment of the qualification, suggesting that the ‘output’, or the results of learning, are used to establish common benchmarks for the assessment of prior learning. In addition, three respondents indicated that critical cross-field outcomes<sup>31</sup>, including the ability to communicate orally and in writing also inform the assessment, suggesting that ‘applied knowledge’ is important to assess.

The distribution of assessment approaches across the respondents is detailed in Table 6.2 (overleaf):

<sup>31</sup> Generic outcomes which inform all teaching and learning, including outcomes dealing with problem-solving skills, effective communication, understanding the world as a set of related systems, etc. (SAQA, 2001, p.88).

**Table 6.2**
*The Basis for Assessment (n = 16)*

Institution	Classification	The basis for assessment				
		CONT	OBJ	U/s	OUTC	PUR
Mangosutho Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	-	-	X
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	-	X	X	X
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	-	X	X	X	X
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	-	-	-	X	X
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	-	X	-
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	-	X	X	X	<sup>32</sup>
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	-	-	-	X	X
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	X	-
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	-
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	-
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	-
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	-	X	-	X
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	X	X	X
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, conslt	-	-	X	X	X
AFETISA	Ass FET Inst	X	X	X	X	X
	Subtotals:	5	7	10	10	9

**Key to Table 6.2:**

CONT: Subject content

OBJ: Subject/module objectives

U/s: Unit standards

OUTC: Broad level outcomes

PUR: The purpose and focus of the qualification

All the private provider institutions (six out of 16), as well as three public higher education institutions (three out of 16) and the public FET association, AFETISA, indicate that in addition to the broad descriptions of the qualifications as captured in 'outcomes' and the 'purpose' of the qualification, they make use of unit standards as the basis for assessment. The fact that the private institutions and AFETISA indicate the use of unit standards as the basis for assessment is in keeping with the fact that

<sup>32</sup> Unisa also adds 'module match for under-graduate and post-graduate' and 'broad outcomes for degree studies'.

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such providers often offer (or would be offering in future) unit-standard based qualifications. The three public higher education institutions, however, do not generally offer unit standard-based qualifications, but seem to use the unit standards as clear descriptions of learning to facilitate their processes. This may also enable such providers to transfer credits between them since the same benchmark, i.e. the unit standard, is used.

When the responses to Question 3.13 are compared to the responses to Question 3.14: Based on the assessment, what is it that is given credit for? - it seems that while the combination of 'applied knowledge, practical application, competence, skills and unit standards', (twelve, ten, nine, seven and six out of 16 responses respectively) which encompass the 'results of learning' are increasingly used as a basis for assessment, when credits are awarded it leans back towards the traditional forms of assessment, i.e. 'subject knowledge' and 'theoretical knowledge'. Approximately 56% of credits are awarded for subject and theoretical knowledge. Refer to the responses shown in Table 6.3 overleaf:

**Table 6.3**
*On the basis of the Assessment, what is it that is given Credit? (n = 16)*

Institution	Classification	Credit is given for:							
		Y/e	S/k	T	A	P/a	C	S	U/s
Mangosutho Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	X	X	X	X	-	-	-
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	-	-	X	X	-	-	X
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	X	X	X	X	-
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	-
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	- <sup>33</sup>
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	-	X	-	-	-	-
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	-	-	-	X	X <sup>34</sup>	-
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	-	X	X	X	X	-	-	-
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	-	X	X	X	-	X	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	X	-	X	X
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	X
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	X
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	-	-	-	-	X	-	X
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	-	X	X	X	X	X
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, conslt	-	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
AFETISA	Ass FET Inst	-	X	X	X	-	X	-	-
	Subtotals:	5	10	8	12	10	9	7	6

**Key to Table 6.3:**

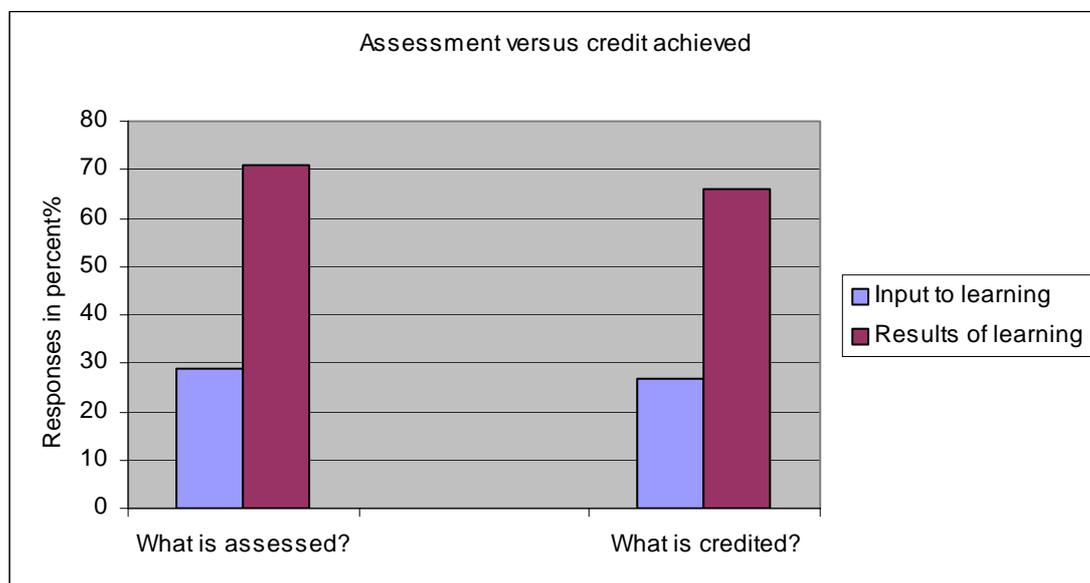
Y/e:	Years experience	P/a:	Practical application
S/k:	Subject knowledge	C:	Competence
T:	Theoretical knowledge	S:	Skills
A:	Applied knowledge	U/s:	Unit standards

<sup>33</sup> The Technikon Southern Africa also includes critical cross-field outcomes, reading and writing at the appropriate level

<sup>34</sup> The University of Cape Town also includes 'academic' and 'critical' skills

The responses seem to indicate that many provider institutions (ten out of 16) still rely on ‘subject knowledge’ as the basis for assessment, but are increasingly making use of the understanding of ‘applied knowledge’, in addition to subject content, as the basis for assessment (twelve out of 16). Applied knowledge encompasses practical competence and skills, and is usually expressed in nationally registered unit standards or learning outcomes. This is encouraging because it seems that common benchmarks are increasingly being used to assess prior learning, which will facilitate the portability of credits between institutions and sectors.

When the results of these two questions are compared, there seems to be increasing agreement between what is assessed, and what is credited in relation to the learning programme: the 15 respondents that indicated that they assess the results of learning (unit standards, outcomes, purpose of the qualification) also indicated that their institutions give credit for the broad outcomes for the qualification, i.e. for applied knowledge, which includes practical application, competence, skills and unit standards. Refer to Figure 6.3:



**Figure 6.3. Assessing and crediting results of learning in relation to the learning programme**

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However, when the responses to Questions 3.13 and 3.14 were compared to those for Question 5.9: [What] are credits awarded for? - a different picture emerged. Of the 11 (out of 16) provider institutions that award formal credits, 40% of credits are awarded for subject content (five out of 11 responses) and modules/discrete parts (four out of 11) of the learning programmes, which represents the ‘inputs’ to programmes, suggesting that when credits are transcribed (and therefore formally certificated), it is still done against the content of the learning programme. This may point to the current administrative processes, where credits/exemptions can only be awarded for modules and subjects (see Chapter 5, 5.2.4). However, 39% of the credits are awarded for broad outcomes, consisting of ‘unit standards’ (six/11), ‘outcomes’ (four/11), and ‘equivalent’ learning to the requirements of the qualification (three/11), rather than for inputs or content of the programme (see Table 6.4 below). The ‘new’ provider institutions, which generally offer unit-standard based qualifications, award credits against unit standards (five out of 11), while the public provider institutions that offer qualifications based on exit-level outcomes and not on unit standards award credits against ‘outcomes’ and ‘equivalence’, as well as subject content (six out of 11). Nevertheless, ‘unit standards’, ‘outcomes’ and ‘equivalence’ all represent the results of learning, rather than the inputs to the learning.

The eleven (out of 16) provider institutions that award formal credits for prior learning responded as follows (Table 6.4 overleaf):

**Table 6.4**

*Awarding Formal Credits for Prior Learning in relation to Qualifications (n = 11)*

Institution	Classification	Traditional forms of transfer		Generic descriptions		Equivalent requirements
		Mod/Dis	S/c	U/s	Outc	Equiv
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	-	-	-
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	-	X	X	X
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	X	X
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	-	X	-
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	-	-	X	X <sup>35</sup>
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X <sup>36</sup>	-	-
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	-
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	-
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	-	X	-	-
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	X	-	-
	Subtotals:	5	4	6	4	3

**Key (Table 6.4)**

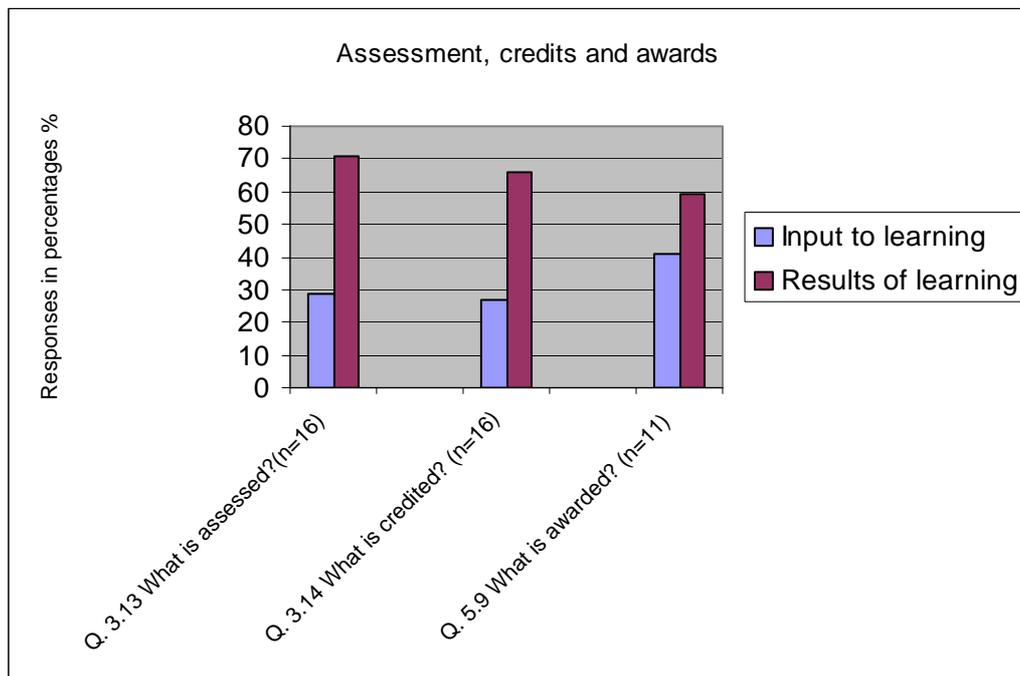
Mod/Dis:	Modules/discrete parts of knowledge
S/c:	Subject content
U/s:	Unit standards
Outc:	Outcomes (specific outcomes or Exit-level outcomes)
Equiv:	Forms of learning equivalent to an NQF level, rather than exact matches

<sup>35</sup> Degree status

<sup>36</sup> Unit standards for the Nat Certificate/Diploma in Occupationally directed Education and Training Development Practices

When looking at the results of all three questions, it seems that intra-institutional processes in these provider institutions takes place, to a large degree against the ‘results of learning’, but that inter-institutional and inter-sectoral processes are still inhibited by the presence of old regulations and administrative systems, particularly in public higher and further education institutions (refer to Chapter 5 of this report). Nevertheless, the following figure (Figure 6.4) indicate that there is increasing agreement between what is assessed to determine prior learning, what is given credit for in terms of the learning, and what is finally formally certificated:

The fact that assessment, credit and certification is increasingly becoming aligned is important because it suggests that the generic skills, knowledge and abilities that will, according to SAQA (2003b, p.3), give coherence to different qualifications on the same level of the NQF and will facilitate transferability of learning between different contexts, are increasingly used as common benchmarks.



**Figure 6.4. Assessment, and awarding credits**

At least three of the respondents in this sample made explicit mention of such a broader, generic understanding of applied learning within their contexts. The Technikon Southern Africa for example indicated that it also assesses ‘critical cross-field outcomes, reading and writing [skills] at the appropriate level’, the University of

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Cape Town highlights the need to assess ‘academic and critical skills’ and UNISA points out that it also assesses the ‘broad outcomes for degree studies’, suggesting that a macro view of the qualification is taken to determine what should be assessed, and how. To illustrate this notion, a brief analysis of the broad level outcomes within the context of a particular qualification is given, as follows:

The broadest understanding of the required breadth and depth of learning as the applied competence/knowledge for a qualification, at a particular level of the NQF, is captured in draft Level Descriptors (CHE, 2001). In this example, NQF level 6: the level where a first degree is placed on the framework, the required learning is described as:

- A solid knowledge base in the main areas of at least one discipline/field;
- An informed understanding of one or more discipline’s/fields key terms, rules, concepts, established principles and theories; some awareness of how the discipline/field relates to cognate areas;
- Selection and application of a discipline/field’s central procedures, operations and techniques;
- An ability to solve well-defined but unfamiliar problems using correct procedures and appropriate evidence;
- A critical analysis and synthesis of information; presentation of information using information technology skills effectively; and
- An ability to present and communicate information coherently and reliably, using academic/professional discourse conventions and formats appropriately (paraphrased from CHE, 2001, p. 60).

A qualification at NQF level 6 should therefore be informed by and ensure that the generic abilities described above are attained. These abilities are translated in the purpose and the exit-level outcomes of a qualification: for example, for the Bachelors of Commerce Degree: Tourism Management, the purpose of the qualification is as follows:

***Purpose:***

*The overall purpose of this qualification is to develop future managers and entrepreneurs in the tourism sphere.*

The outcomes for the qualification read as follows:

***Exit-level outcome(s):***

*After completion of the B.Com (Tourism Management) programme the graduate will have the competence to operate and/or manage any of the key functional areas of a tourism business and be in the position to become an entrepreneur in the tourism sphere.*

(SAQA, 2003a, p. 56)

In answer to ‘what should be assessed’, the purpose and Exit-level outcomes could be used to determine the criteria to measure the learning as described in the level descriptors. An example of this usage is shown in Table 6.5.

**Table 6.5**

***Level Descriptors and Purpose and Exit-level Outcomes of a Qualification***

Generic level descriptor	Purpose and Exit-level outcomes of the target qualification
A solid knowledge base in the main areas of at least one discipline/field	A solid knowledge base of the discipline/field of management and entrepreneurship
An informed understanding of one or more discipline’s/fields key terms, rules, concepts, established principles and theories; some awareness of how the discipline/field relates to cognate areas	An informed understanding of the terms, rules, concepts, established principles of management theory, economic principles and theory, as it relates to the tourism industry
Selection and application of a discipline/field’s central procedures, operations and techniques	The application of management procedures and techniques and of entrepreneurial skills to start a business in the tourism sphere
An ability to solve well-defined but unfamiliar problems using correct procedures and appropriate evidence	As above
A critical analysis and synthesis of information; presentation of information using information technology skills effectively	Analyses and syntheses of the aspects of the tourism industry, e.g. by making use of feasibility studies and business plans and appropriate technology.
An ability to present and communicate information coherently and reliably, using academic/professional discourse conventions and formats appropriately	An ability to present and communicate the trends, feasibility studies and the business plan, orally and in writing

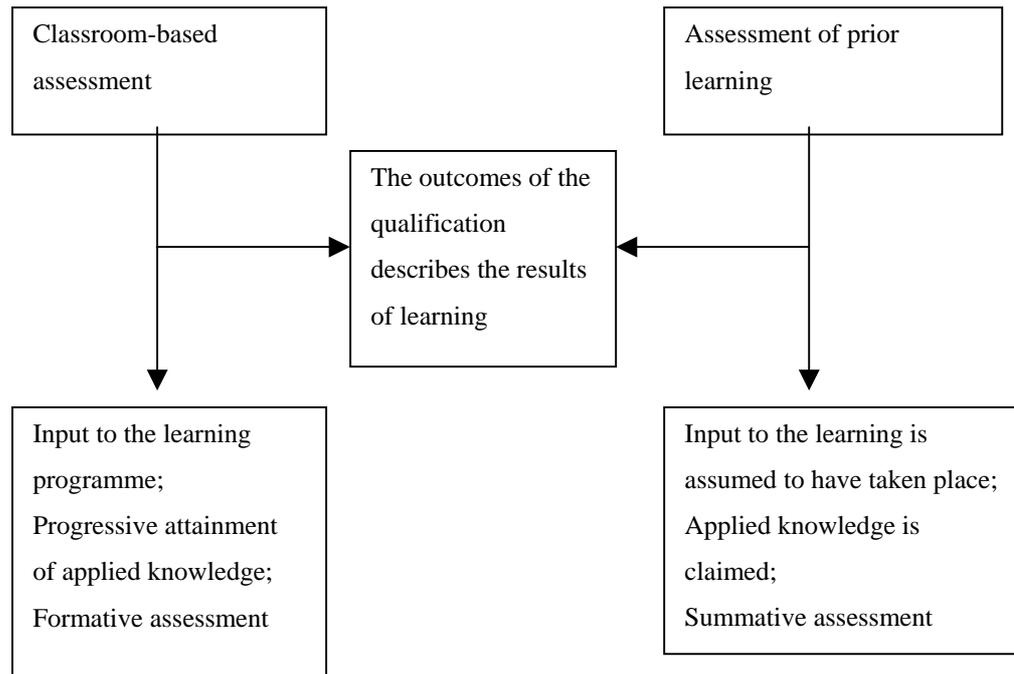
Notes to Table 6.5:

Generic level descriptors are intended to describe the depth and breadth of learning, rather than the specifics. The purpose and Exit-level outcomes are placed within these broad requirements, but contextualise the requirements to the particular qualification

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The purpose and outcome(s) highlight the core of the qualification, i.e. the ability to manage and the extent to which the qualification enables entrepreneurship. Assessment should therefore focus in keeping with the level, breadth and depth of learning required for this level of qualification - on the ability to manage, and the entrepreneurial skills of the candidate. The assessment of these aspects will carry the most weight in terms of the overall assessment.

To conclude: the aforementioned suggests that prior learning should be assessed from the opposite end of education, making use of the outcomes or results of learning to determine the criteria for the measurement of learning, rather than the input to the learning programme, which has as its purpose to enable the progressive mastery of skills and knowledge in terms of full-time, traditional learners. This is because, when RPL candidates claim credits against particular qualifications and unit standards, they believe that they already have had all the input required for the achievement of a (part) qualification. RPL assessment should therefore measure the extent to which such claims could be made. Figure 6.5 (overleaf) explains this notion:



**Figure 6.5. Assessment of prior learning assesses the results of learning** (Heyns, 2003. From a paper entitled ‘Developing models for the assessment and recognition of prior learning’, delivered at the Q-Africa conference, Nov. 2003).

In terms of sustainability of RPL, the approach discussed in this section could facilitate a common understanding of what is required, based on the outcomes described for each level of the NQF and the location of each qualification within a particular level. This could greatly enhance the transferability of credits and learning inter- and intra-institutionally, and inter-sectorally.

However, establishing the criteria against which prior learning will be measured, suggests only the first step in the assessment of learning. Appropriate alternative assessment instruments, other than formal written tests, are needed for the assessment of prior learning. Section 6.2 will deal with fit-for-purpose assessment instruments and the appropriate evidence to support the candidate’s claims.

## 6.2 Instruments and Evidence

This section will deal with the possible assessment instruments that could be used to assess prior learning (6.2.1) and with the form, quality and sources of evidence that may be considered for recognition and credit (6.2.2).

6.2.1 *Fit-for-purpose Assessment Instruments*

The sustainability of a RPL system hinges to no small degree on the extent to which the system is easy to implement. This means that assessment instruments that are easy to use and are resource-efficient in terms of cost and time are needed. Assessment instruments hitherto developed with RPL in mind are often perceived to be highly resource-intensive, requiring a one-on-one approach to assessment. This is confirmed by the responses to the questionnaire for this study. In most of the cases (eleven out of 16), assessment is conducted on a one-on-one basis. This seems to confirm the view of critics that “assessment procedures (especially portfolios of learning and experience) are unwieldy and time-consuming, for both candidates and assessors” (Cretchley & Castle, 2001, p. 489). This may have a major impact on the sustainability of RPL within institutions.

Questions 3.7 and 3.9 of the questionnaire, therefore, tried to determine what forms of assessment are used by the respondents, first for general mainstream programmes and whether these are also used specifically for the assessment of prior learning. Table 6.6 (overleaf) details the responses to Question 3.7 for ‘mainstream assessment’:

**Table 6.6**
***Mainstream Assessment Instruments (n = 16)***

Institution	Classification	Assessment instruments							
		Ex	CEx	A	Pr	Po	I	V	Ad
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	-	X	X	X	-	-	-
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	-
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	-
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	X	-	-	-	-
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	X	X	-	X	-
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	X	X	-	X	-	-
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	X	X	X	X
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	X	-	X	-	-	-
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	X	-	X	X	X	-	X
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	-	-	X	X	X	-	-
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	X
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, conslt	-	-	-	-	X	X	X	-
AFETISA	Ass FET Inst	X	X	X	X	X	X	-	-
	Subtotals:	11	5	12	12	14	10	7	5

**Key to table 6.6:**

Ex:	End of term/year written exams	I:	Interviews
CEx:	Challenge examinations	V:	Validation of certificates
A:	Assignments	Ad:	Assessment on demand
Pr:	Projects		
Po:	Portfolios		

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As expected, the ‘conventional’ forms of assessment for mainstream programmes included high responses for ‘end of year exams’ (eleven out of 16), ‘assignments’ (twelve out of 16), and ‘projects’ (twelve out of 16). Surprisingly, high responses were also given in terms of ‘portfolios’ (14 out of 16) and ‘interviews’ (ten out of 16), which are often associated with RPL assessment.

Table 6.7 details assessment instruments used for RPL.

**Table 6.7**

*Assessment Instruments for RPL Purposes (n = 16)*

Institution	Classification	Assessment instruments							
		Ex	CEx	A	Pr	Po	I	V	Ad
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	-	-	-	X	X	X	-
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	-	X	-	-	X	X	X	-
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	Not yet finalised							
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	-	-	-	-	X	X	X	<sup>37</sup>
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	-	X	-	X	X	X	-	-
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	-	X	X <sup>38</sup>	-	X	-	-	-
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	-	X	X	X	X	X <sup>39</sup>	X	-
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	-	-	X	X	X	X	-	-
University of the Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	-	X	-	-	-	-	-	<sup>40</sup>
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	-
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	-	-	-	X	-	-	<sup>41</sup>
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	-	X	-	X	X	X	-	-
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	-	X	-	X	-	-	-	-
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	<sup>42</sup>
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, conslt	-	-	-	-	X	X	X	-
AFETISA	Ass FET Inst	-	-	-	-	X	X	-	X
Subtotals:		0	7	3	5	13	10	5	1

**Key to Table 6.7:**

Ex: End of term/year written exams      I: Interviews  
 CEx: Challenge examinations              V: Validation of certificates

<sup>37</sup> The Cape Technikon also includes ‘observation of work in context’ and ‘evaluation for job upgrading’.

<sup>38</sup> Unisa indicated that assignments would make up part of the portfolio.

<sup>39</sup> At the University of Cape Town, ‘interviews’ include ‘oral presentation’.

<sup>40</sup> The University of the Witwatersrand also use ‘access tests’ and ‘counselling interviews’.

<sup>41</sup> Assessment College also use ‘workplace assessment’.

<sup>42</sup> LearnSys learners are also assessed through ‘activity-based games’ and ‘simulations’.



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maintains that portfolio development, of which ‘reflective essays’ is an important component, is in itself a hard-won skill and may not always be the most appropriate form of assessment, particularly if it requires of candidates to write extensively (and academically):

Assessment forms such as reflective essays – which rely on high-level language and literacy skills – are inappropriate for a broad range of adults and may entrench existing forms of discrimination (p. 489).

This may have an impact on the effectiveness of these instruments to assess prior learning, particularly at the lower levels of the NQF. Some respondents agreed that the current assessment instruments used for RPL might not always be appropriate. They cited ‘observation within a particular context’, ‘oral presentations’, ‘workplace assessment’ and ‘simulations’ as additional and/or alternative forms of assessment that may be more appropriate. Also, many respondents (seven out of 16) to the questionnaire indicated that they have (or intend to develop) a RPL ‘module’ as a means to facilitate the collection and compilation of evidence and to provide bridging skills to enable candidates to write at the appropriate level, including ‘reflective essays’. This is more in keeping with the ‘developmental’ approach to RPL (Chapter 3: Literature Review). The forms that such a RPL module could take include:

- Bridging programme
- Academic development programme
- Upgrading programme

It also became evident that such an additional module attempts to assist candidates to structure evidence and to prepare them for further learning, particularly in higher education institutions. The University of South Africa, for example, in its comment on the newly adopted SAQA document, Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a) indicated that:

UNISA has accepted a RPL policy for the *Assessment of mature learners: entry to NQF level 5*, which allows for the assessment of non-grade 12 learners – those without a National Senior Certificate [school-leaving certificate]. The assessment focuses on *equivalence* to the learning outcomes for entry to NQF level 5. The learners will complete the three access modules to prepare them for university level studies before enrolling for an undergraduate degree.

Current assessment instruments, however, as indicated by the respondents to the questionnaire, while agreement seems to exist between some mainstream and RPL assessment instruments, RPL assessments are still considered to be highly customised. The reason for this may be found in the form and sources of evidence, which differ substantially from what is assessed in mainstream processes as proof of prior learning.

### 6.2.2 *The Form, Quality and Sources of Evidence*

The form, quality and sources of evidence of competence are very closely related to the fitness-of-purpose of assessment instruments.

The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) refers to ‘evidence’ as follows:

Quality of evidence relates to reliability, validity, authenticity, sufficiency and currency. Particularly in RPL assessment, the latter two issues of quality are important. In the case of sufficiency, it is not only a question of whether enough evidence has been gathered. Sometimes, in an attempt to ensure rigour, assessors require too much evidence (e.g. extensive triangulation) and thus make the assessment process very onerous for candidates and for assessors. The essential reference point for ‘marking’ RPL is the lowest mark which enables a classroom taught candidate to ‘pass’. Rarely does this mean a complete coverage of the syllabus. It would be unfair to RPL candidates to expect more than the minimum requirements for learners in full-time study (p. 24).

In the interview with the Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon, the tendency to ‘over-triangulate’ to ensure the credibility of the assessment became evident. The interviewee indicated that:

It is important to balance quality and efficiency. For example, if a CV or an interview is sufficient evidence of a candidate’s prior learning, then no additional assessment should be required. Professional judgement, based on a solid understanding of the risks involved, should be made possible (Appendix E).

The understanding of the ‘risks involved’ would be based on a good understanding of the requirements of the qualification, as well as pre-determined criteria for the curriculum vitae or the interview, to use the Cape Technikon example, suggesting that

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in the analysis of the results of learning, a common understanding of what is required for the achievement of the qualification, is used as benchmarks. To take the earlier example of the Bachelors of Commerce: Tourism Management, a little further, this could mean that if an interview is to be used as an assessment tool, the assessor would have decided beforehand that during the interview he/she will look for particular answers, underpinned by the theory and practice for the discipline. For example, the assessor could ask –

*‘How do you manage a project?’*

The criteria to be used for the assessment of the answer could include:

- *Clarify the brief of the project*
- *Determine the resources required*
- *Draw up a budget*
- *Manage the resources, including people, etc.*

When establishing criteria for the assessment of evidence, however, Whitaker (1989) warns that there should be a balance of theory and practice as required for the qualification. One of the key quality criteria established by Whitaker in his discussion of possible ‘malpractices’ addresses this issue:

The theory expert who has no practical learning is the classic failure of much traditional education. On the other hand, the practical expert with insufficient theoretical understanding is often a handicapped learner when it comes to applying the experiential learning in new settings or to explaining to somebody else how something works (p. 99).

Whitaker (1989) maintains that if either of these aspects are lacking, then this should be addressed in the learning plan, or could be addressed in other, additional forms of assessment.

With that in mind, according to Mays (in SAQA, 2003a) evidence of skills, knowledge and values may be in the form of:

- Certificates from previous education and training courses, including short learning programmes and skills programmes

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- Licences to practice
- Professional registration
- Products of any nature relevant to the courses offered at the institution: art portfolios; publications, etc.
- Samples of completed work
- Employment related documents such as resumes, performance appraisals, etc.
- Statutory declaration outlining previous types of work and experience
- References from current and past employers, supervisors and colleagues
- Testimonials from persons holding relevant qualifications in the area being assessed
- Photographs of completed work certified by a referee or accompanied by a statutory declaration
- If self-employed in the past, evidence of running a business using the skills and knowledge being claimed.

The respondents to the questionnaire for this study are in agreement with the abovementioned sources of evidence. In answer to Question 3.15 - What forms and sources of evidence are accepted for recognition of prior learning? - the respondents indicated that previous 'certificates' (14/16) and 'short courses' (12/16) make up 81% of the evidence accepted for RPL (refer to Table 6.8 below). This suggests that previous credentialled learning is recognised. For un-credentialled learning, the most common types of evidence accepted are 'testimonials', 'curricula vitae' and 'job descriptions' (13 responses out of 16 for 'testimonials', 14 for 'curricula vitae' and 13 for 'job descriptions'), with 'project plans' used to a lesser extent, (ten out of 16 responses) – these would also be considered non-credentialled learning. Table 6.8 details the responses to the questionnaire (overleaf):

**Table 6.8**
*Sources of Evidence for the Recognition of Prior Learning (n = 16)*

Institution	Classification	Sources of evidence of prior learning					
		CERT	TEST	S/C	P/P	CV	J/D
Mangosuthu Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	X	-	-	X <sup>43</sup>
Peninsula Technikon	Pu, HE, H bl	X	X	X	X	X	X
Vaal Triangle Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X	X
Cape Technikon	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X	X
Technikon SA	Pu, HE, dist	X	-	X	X	X	X <sup>44</sup>
UNISA	Pu, HE, dist	X	X	X	X	X	X
University of Cape Town	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	X	X	X	X
Rhodes University	Pu, HE, H wh	X	X	-	-	-	-
University of Witwatersrand	Pu, HE, H wh	X	-	-	-	X	X
Mentornet	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	X	X
Assessment College	Pr, HE, new	-	X	X	-	X	X <sup>45</sup>
Learning Performance Link	Pr, HE, new	X	X	X	X	X	X <sup>46</sup>
Regional Training Trust	Pr, FE, new	X	X	-	-	X	- <sup>47</sup>
LearnSys	Pr, GFE, new	-	-	-	-	X	-
Adaptable Learning Services	Pr, FE, conslt	X	X	X	X	X	X
AFETISA	Ass FET Inst	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Subtotals:	14	13	12	10	14	13

**Key to table 6.8:**

CERT:	Certificates	CV:	Curriculum Vitae
TEST:	Testimonials	J/D:	Job descriptions
S/C:	Short courses		
P/P:	Project plans		

Of significance is that nine (out of the 16) respondent institutions are willing to consider all these sources of evidence (but not all of them necessarily at the same time) as proof of prior learning.

<sup>43</sup> Mangosuthu Technikon also requires validation of duties from the employer

<sup>44</sup> Technikon Southern Africa also requires artefacts/products and affidavits where evidence is not available

<sup>45</sup> Assessment College also requires specific evidence related to a unit standard

<sup>46</sup> Learning Performance Links always follows these up by supplementary assessments

<sup>47</sup> The Regional Training Trust also requires confirmable proof of evidence

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However, there seems to be very little agreement between possible assessment instruments (refer Table 6.7) and the sources of evidence. The assessment instruments, therefore, seem to assess aspects of learning not evident through the documentary evidence provided. It seems that assessment instruments are therefore only developed where the documentary (static) forms of evidence do not provide sufficient evidence in terms of the requirements of the learning programme. This may explain why RPL is usually undertaken on a one-on-one basis: the validation of these forms of evidence would be specific to each individual learner. In terms of sustainability, the acceptance of learning attained at other institutions, including learning achieved at providers offering short courses and skills programmes, seems a cost-efficient and resource-efficient manner in which to recognise prior learning. The fact that a substantial percentage of non-credentialed learning is also accepted where documentary proof can be provided further reduces the need for additional assessment. These typically would be placed in 'portfolios of evidence' and would be supported by an interview. Peninsula Technikon, a public higher education institution, and Learning Performance Link, a private higher education provider, for example, made specific mention of the fact that the pieces of evidence would be 'part of the portfolio' (Appendix E). Conventional assessment instruments therefore seem to be needed, in the context of these institutions, only for a small percentage of the learning not evident through documentary proof.

Whilst this is encouraging for the recognition of prior learning, and enhances the cost-effectiveness (and therefore sustainability) of RPL processes, it does pose a possible difficulty in terms of the integration of RPL into mainstream education and training.

RPL is granted on the basis of different sources of evidence from those required from full-time classroom-based learners. This allows for non-traditional learning to be recognised and validated, but may create difficulties in terms of the comparability between learning attained through full-time formal education and non- and informal learning.

The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) makes the point that:

[T]here is no fundamental difference in the assessment of previously acquired skills and knowledge and the assessment of skills and knowledge acquired

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through a current learning programme. The candidate seeking credits for previously acquired skills and knowledge must still comply with all the requirements as stated in the unit standards or qualifications. The difference lies in the route to the assessment. RPL is a form of assessment, which ideally, should be fully integrated into all learning programmes (my emphasis) (p. 8).

While there should be no ‘fundamental difference’ in the principles and integrity of the assessment, RPL suggests that education and training practitioners must have the knowledge and skills to recognise alternative forms of evidence and use alternative forms of assessment than those used in mainstream contexts. There seems to be a real need for defining and describing the learning outcomes and for the translation of these into assessment tools that will measure the attainment of the learning outcomes. Possibly, there may also be the need to develop more ‘conventional’ forms of assessment, such as projects and/or assignments, which will support the documentary evidence supplied by the candidate. In the analysis of Questions 3.7 and 3.9 of the questionnaire (refer Appendix F), it is evident that some provider institutions are already using additional (to those identified above) sources of evidence to support the recognition of prior learning, including challenge examinations (seven respondents), open-book examinations (two), access tests (one), workplace assessments (two), simulations (one) and oral presentations (one). In addition, assignments and projects are also used (three and five respectively out of 16). The Learning Performance Link, a private higher education provider, seems to capture what the other providers do not state explicitly but are practising; i.e. that the sources of evidence highlighted here are used, but are also supported by ‘supplementary assessment’ (Appendix F). The need for a ‘supplementary assessment’ may afford the opportunity to develop a more conventional, but integrated (mainstream) assessment tool, which will enable practitioners to make a judgement about the learning in a more clearly defined manner and to compare the prior learning with the learning attained through full-time programmes. This does not mean however, that such an assessment should be an exam-based assessment.

In this regard, the CHE (2001) notes that

Clearly, conventional ways of assessing students, such as the unseen three-hour exam, are no longer adequate to meet these demands. The testing again

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and again of the same restricted range of skills and abilities can no longer be justified; instead of simply writing about performance, students should be required to perform in authentic or simulated real-world contexts. This demands innovative assessment approaches and methods, which ensure that all learning outcomes are in fact assessed, and that assessments add value to student learning (p. 112).

The respondent institutions to the questionnaire seemed to have already taken on this challenge and are developing and using ‘innovative assessment approaches and methods’ to assess prior learning.

To illustrate this notion, another of the formally registered NQF qualifications was analysed, using the ‘model’ for analysis discussed in section 6.1, i.e. the Certificate: Tourism Management NQF Level 5 (Refer to Appendix G for a full description of the qualification).

The purposes of this qualification are as follows:

<p><b><i>Certificate: Tourism Management NQF level 5</i></b></p> <p><i>SAQA Qualification ID: 36030</i></p> <p><i>Regular-Provider- ELOAC qualification</i></p>
<p><i>Purpose of the qualification:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>○ <i>To promote an understanding of the interrelated nature of the sectors in the tourism industry</i></li><li>○ <i>To enhance learners’ knowledge of legal and ethical principles applicable to the tourism industry, e.g. the impact of tourism</i></li><li>○ <i>To develop management supervisory skills</i></li><li>○ <i>To ensure improvement of management and customer service standards in the tourism industry</i></li><li>○ <i>To develop innovative thinking, leading to entrepreneurial skills, particularly to develop economic growth in developing regions in order to alleviate poverty through tourism SMMEs</i></li></ul>

In terms of ‘what’ should be assessed to determine applied competence/knowledge in relation to the requirements of the qualification, the qualification descriptor and the level descriptors as the broad generic descriptions of learning expected of a learner at this level, three key aspects have been identified for this qualification:

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- (i) Knowledge and understanding of the tourism industry;
- (ii) Management skills; and
- (iii) The development of entrepreneurial skills.

In a portfolio of evidence, much of these requirements may be covered by credentialed learning, for example: for the knowledge and understanding of the tourism industry, a learner may have undertaken a number of credentialed industry-specific short courses; management skills could be covered by a job description, curriculum vitae or testimonial, while entrepreneurial skills may be evident from the fact that the learner has started and is running a business. If these aspects are not clearly articulated in a portfolio of evidence, there may be a need for additional assessment. From the analysis of this qualification, the following assessment instrument could be appropriate to assess the applied competence/knowledge not evident through documentation in the portfolio:

Conduct **research** into the **feasibility** of a **tourism activity** in a particular context. Your research must culminate in a **report** and an **oral presentation** giving the details of your findings.

The report must reflect:

- The proposed tourism activity, based on an analysis of regional, national and international **trends** in the tourism industry as appropriate.
- The economic, ethical, social and environmental **impact** of the proposed tourism activity
- A business plan detailing the **resources, risk management and financial management** needed to initiate and sustain the activity
- The other **role players/partners** that will be needed to initiate and sustain the activity

A research project of this nature could cover most of the exit-level outcomes and their associated assessment criteria for the Certificate: Tourism Management (refer to Appendix G). The keywords (in bold above) represent details of the qualification as described in the assessment criteria for the outcome. The coverage of the Exit-level outcomes through this assessment is detailed in Table 6.9 overleaf:

**Table 6.9**

*Matrix of Areas covered in the Assessment and Exit-level Outcomes for the Qualification*

Keyword	Exit-level outcomes
Research	Use technology efficiently
Feasibility	Apply basic entrepreneurial skills
Tourism activity	Demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of the interrelated sectors of the tourism industry, the legal and ethical issues and possible impact
Report	Demonstrate verbal and non-verbal communication skills
Oral presentation	Demonstrate verbal and non-verbal communication skills
Trends	Demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of the interrelated sectors of the tourism industry
Impact	Demonstrate basic knowledge of legal and ethical principles pertaining to the tourism industry  Demonstrate an understanding of the potential positive and negative physical/environmental, economical and social/community consequences of tourism
Resources	Apply basic knowledge and skills to effectively manage a business  Manage time and resources efficiently
Risk management	Apply basic knowledge and skills to effectively manage a business  Manage time and resources efficiently
Financial management	Apply basic knowledge and skills to effectively manage a business  Manage time and resources efficiently  Implement and produce proper financial management accounts
Role players/partners	Demonstrate an understanding of the dynamics of the interrelated sectors of the tourism industry

Notes to Table 6.9:

The full description of the Exit-level outcomes of the qualification is attached as Appendix G.

The 'keywords' (see above) represent the Exit-level outcomes of the qualification

(Heyns, R., 2003, from a paper entitled: Developing models for the assessment and recognition of prior learning', delivered at the Q-Africa conference, November 2003).

In conclusion:

The credible, valid and reliable assessment of prior learning seems to hinge to a great extent on the fitness of purpose of the assessment instruments, which will enable education and training practitioners to make informed judgements about the evidence presented as proof of equivalent learning in terms of the requirements of qualifications and unit standards. This rarely means that formal examinations will be required. It does seem to mean, however, that the practitioner responsible for the assessment be skilled in recognising and identifying alternative sources of evidence. Also, in support of static documentary evidence of prior learning, more conventional forms of assessment could be equally useful in determining applied competence, particularly if such instruments are developed to assess in an integrated and holistic manner. This seems to be facilitated by clear descriptions of learning and a thorough understanding and description of the criteria to be used for assessment in relation to the purposes and outcomes expected to be achieved on completion of the qualification.

### **6.3 RPL – A National Strategy**

In the semi-structured interviews with the Cape Technikon, the University of the Witwatersrand, the Department of Labour and the Matriculation Board, in answer to the question *What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?*, all agreed that for systemic implementation, at the scale on which RPL is envisaged for South Africa, a national strategy is needed (Appendix E). In Chapter 3 of this report, in the discussion of the new education and training policies, the ‘political will’ to implement RPL has become evident. In Chapter 5, the need for the political will to be translated into an ‘institutional will’ was dealt with (refer to 6.3.1). In addition, the interviewees indicated that apart from the national commitment to RPL, an orientation to adult learners as the main target market for RPL to facilitate entry to further education is key (refer to 6.3.2). Also, RPL, as Geysers (2001) suggests:

[RPL] introduced a new perspective on learning – a perspective that challenges the traditional approaches to teaching and learning. These learners represent new challenges that could add to the heavy load of overworked academics (p. 30).

RPL also challenges, in the words of Harris (2000) not only the infrastructure and work load of academics, but also “how knowledge is understood” and “who defines what counts as knowledge” (p. 95, 96). A sustainable system will therefore need to find mechanisms whereby a bridge is provided between candidates’ knowledge and the academic ways of knowing, and between candidates’ language and discursive academic forms. These mechanisms are discussed in 6.3.3.

For RPL to be implemented across the system in a coherent manner that also protects and enhances the integrity of the system, it seems that an explicit commitment to RPL, an orientation to adult learners, and an acknowledgement that other forms of learning may be equally valid forms of knowledge in relation to qualifications are important. Each of these issues will be discussed briefly in the remainder of this section:

#### *6.3.1 A National Strategy and Commitment*

In the Study Team (ministerial) review of the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (DoE & DoL, 2002) the Team made four recommendations with regard to RPL:

- i) RPL implementation should be accorded high priority, provided with appropriate incentives and targets
- ii) RPL implementation should be speeded up through the simplification of standards setting and quality assurance arrangements
- iii) RPL implementation should be based on the recognition that the assessment process for RPL do not differ substantially from ‘normal’ assessment
- iv) RPL implementation should be undertaken in a developmental context with the appropriate guidance infrastructure and training for assessors (p. 133).

These four recommendations are confirmed by the responses of the interviewees in this study. In addition, the recently released response to the report on the review of the NQF, An interdependent National Qualifications Framework system: Consultative Document (DoE & DoL, 2003) the ‘political will’ of policy makers is yet again confirmed:

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The Study Team regarded the Recognition of Prior Learning (or the recognition of current competence) as a strategic goal of the NQF for which appropriate incentive and assessment procedures must be available. The departments [of Education and Labour] agree with the Study Team's proposals (p. 34).

As noted before, the political will already exists, but a systemic implementation plan has not yet been developed.

The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) has the following to say about sustainability of RPL:

[T]he key challenge for the implementation of a RPL policy in South Africa is the sustainability of such a system. It would be shortsighted to suggest that RPL has a redress function only and therefore may have a relatively limited lifespan. As the South African education and training system matures, increasingly RPL will support the principle of lifelong learning. This will ensure that a nation's people are encouraged to develop and improve their skills continuously to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (p. 9).

In the interview with the Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon, the interviewee added that:

If [RPL] is associated with lifelong learning – then we will always need it. It is therefore critical that RPL systems are set up in such a way that it will be sustainable (Appendix E).

#### 6.3.2 *Orientation to Adult Learners*

In a rather scathing comment on the (then draft) SAQA RPL policy in April 2002, the Rand Afrikaans University made clear its position (and possibly the position of many higher education institutions not under pressure to increase their student numbers by opening up access to non-traditional learners) regarding RPL candidates:

A whole infrastructure will have to be created, put in place and maintained to firstly, find and recruit candidates for RPL, secondly, process them once they are on campus and, thirdly, spoon-feed and make them cosmetically acceptable until they are ostensibly capable of being presented as candidates with genuine prior skills. The university must thus not only make good the

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qualitative and quantitative scholastic deficiencies of the applicant, but must do so in significantly less time.

Yet, in the interview with the Head: Curriculum Development of Cape Technikon, the interviewee pointed out that in many of their cases, RPL candidates lack the minimum requirement for entry into higher education, because they left school before completing schooling particularly because they were the ‘brighter’ ones in the family and more likely to find work – particularly in the tumultuous seventies and eighties in South Africa. He pointed out that these candidates all ‘made something of themselves’ and that they deserve a second chance at qualifications and that being successful in their own personal lives seems to be a good determinant of success in higher education (Appendix E).

The Director: Witsplus of the University of the Witwatersrand agreed. The university’s experience is that

..the people who are most likely to succeed are not those with a ‘weak’ matric, but rather those who could not, for whatever reason, finish matric, but who have subsequently ‘made something of themselves’ after leaving formal schooling. Success often hinges on life experiences, curiosity, motivation and innate (often hidden) ability (refer to Appendix E).

However, this does not suggest that such candidates will not require support – as all adult learners do. The SAQA RPL (2002a) policy suggests that:

...the danger of underestimating the levels of disempowerment and dislocation that decades of discriminatory education and training policies and practices had on ordinary citizens, and the unfamiliarity with formal academic study, (particularly in higher education) cannot be ignored (p. 20).

#### 6.3.3 *New Ways of Knowing*

As mentioned before it is suggested that a sustainable system will need to acknowledge that academic and formalised discipline-based knowledge are not the only forms of knowledge worth recognising. A sustainable system will deliberately develop mechanisms whereby alternative, non-traditional forms of learning are identified as being of equal value to the learning attained through formal full-time

programmes and will assist learners in describing and collating such evidence of learning in relation to the broadest understanding of the purpose of a particular field of learning. The broadest understanding include those objectives of education and training that are captured in the level and qualification descriptors; i.e. descriptions of the level, breadth and depth of learning on a generic level rather than on the specific inputs to a learning programme. From the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire, this approach increasingly seems to be taken. However, it also suggests that an attitude of open-mindedness is needed regarding other forms of learning.

In the interview with the Programme Management Unit of the Department of Labour, the ‘new ways of knowing’ was underscored. The interviewee pointed out that there still is an ‘intolerance’ for other knowledge forms:

The nature of knowledge in different institutions and the intolerance for other types of knowledge narrows the discourse around RPL. The point is that this is not a ‘growing’ discourse, but a new discourse all together (Appendix E).

Harris (2000), in her book RPL: Power, Pedagogy and Possibility, discusses the new discourse in relation to RPL as follows:

Knowledge, as defined by the discipline, is organised hierarchically into collection code curricula. Knowledge is often seen as universal, objective, neutral and normative (and therefore relatively fixed). In traditional academia, learning from experience is seen largely as an individual phenomenon that is irrelevant for academic learning (p. 31).

This view is increasingly being challenged. Geysers (2001) noted that

RPL has deleted the borders between working, learning and leisure. Institutions of higher education have to acknowledge that learning can take place in a number of settings and that such learning is equivalent to, and worthy of academic credit (p. 30).

The Director of the Matriculation Board supported this view. In the interview with him, he indicated “the universities need guidelines as to what competencies [in adults] could be considered equivalent to the learning required for a learner at NQF level 4

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[school-leaving certificate]” (Appendix E) whereby access to higher education can be granted.

In order for RPL systems to become sustainable, therefore, it seems necessary for the custodians of knowledge in particular higher education institutions to recognise that “the university becomes less of a distribution centre for knowledge; rather, it becomes a place of fine-tuning and formalising of already acquired knowledge as a basis for further learning” (Feutrie, in Evans, 2000, p. 114).

However, in their comment on the recently adopted SAQA document: The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a) the University of Port Elizabeth, questions the ability of people to develop cognitive skills outside formal education:

RPL at institutions of higher education differs for RPL at other levels because of the central importance for HE of structured theory, abstract conceptualisation, definition and procedures, critical reasoning, metacognitive skills and specialised academic discourses at advanced levels. These are not easily developed outside of formal education. For example, although experiential learning might develop skills such as practical problem-solving to a greater degree than a graduate might have, a graduate’s theoretical knowledge develops the ability to articulate more possibilities for solving the problem.

A study undertaken at the Charter Oak State College and the University of Connecticut on the meta-cognitive abilities built up outside of formal institutions however, challenges this perception. LeGrow (2002) states that:

Critics who question the APL [RPL] process argue that these metacognitive skills cannot be acquired through experiences in extra-collegiate settings. The results of this study counter this critique. They also support the assertions underlying APL: (a) the development of cognitive skills can and does take place outside the academic environment and (b) these cognitive skills have parity with those typically acquired through college-level instruction. More than confirming these assertions, the results suggest that the APL students in

this sample, compared to their classroom counterparts, demonstrated a greater ability to develop intricate solutions to a problem situation (p. 6).

In the interview with the Programme Management Unit of the Department of Labour, the interviewee suggested that perhaps it is not so much the abilities of learners that are questioned, but the lack of “communities of trust” (Appendix E). She indicated that building “communities of trust” is essential for the implementation and sustainability of a RPL system. This will entail an agreement on what would be considered ‘quality processes’, including assessment processes for RPL, so that providers, between themselves and workplaces, could trust and validate each other’s decisions with regard to the recognition and awarding of credits.

#### 6.4 Conclusion

This chapter addresses the second operational question - *What elements are required to implement a sustainable RPL system?*- and builds on the first operational question, particularly in terms of the establishment of common benchmarks for the sustainable implementation and maintenance of a system of RPL.

Sustainability of a system hinges, to no small degree on the ease of implementation and the clarity of focus of the principles underpinning the assessment of prior learning. The elements required to implement a sustainable system therefore include, in terms of this study: a common approach and understanding of *what* should be assessed to determine applied knowledge and the types of learning that may be regarded as equivalent learning; and *how* the assessment could be approached to establish and verify prior learning.

In 6.4.1 and 6.4.2 the conclusions regarding the third and fourth aspects in the conceptual framework, i.e. an assessment methodology and appropriate approaches and instruments, are summarised.

##### 6.4.1 Conclusion about an Assessment Methodology

The extent to which a common understanding and use of broad descriptions of the results of learning are used to determine applied knowledge was explored. From the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire it became evident that provider

institutions are increasingly making use of learning outcomes to determine equivalent levels of learning. In addition, the notion of applied knowledge as being a combination of practical, foundational and reflexive competence, also inform decisions on what should be assessed to evaluate the learning.

However, it also became evident that, while provider institutions are transforming their assessment approaches intra-institutionally, the existence of old administrative systems and the continued presence of old regulations, inhibit inter-institutional and inter-sectoral transfer of credits, particularly in public higher and further education institutions. This also became evident when the approaches of public and private institutions, which are not subject to the funding and subsidy arrangements governing administrative and regulatory frameworks, are compared: none of the (new) private institutions base their assessments and award of credits on the content (i.e. input) to the learning programme.

Nevertheless, where RPL has been implemented there is increasing agreement on a common understanding of what should be assessed in order to make informed judgements about the candidates' learning. For example, the respondents agreed that the results of learning, as captured in the broadest understanding of the breadth, depth and level of learning in qualifications and unit standards, should be used to determine what should be assessed to determine prior applied knowledge. This became evident through the many references to the use of 'unit standards', 'outcomes', the 'purpose' and 'equivalent learning' as the basis for assessment, the awarding of credit and the certification of these evidences of learning. A common understanding of the applied knowledge articulated in formally registered unit standards and qualifications may greatly facilitate inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaboration, and bodes well for the sustainability of a RPL system.

#### *6.4.2 Conclusions about Appropriate Approaches and Instruments*

Assessment of RPL is perceived to be highly resource and time-intensive. The respondents confirmed that most of the RPL assessments take place on a one-on-one basis. However, on investigating the sources of evidence presented as proof of prior learning, it emerged that much of such evidence could be provided through more static forms of evidence such as previous certificates, testimonials, job descriptions,

etc., which necessitate one-on-one validation (rather than an actual assessment), but also reduce the need for extensive formal, ‘conventional’ forms of assessment. Formal conventional assessment instruments seem to be used where documentary evidence is not sufficient or does not clearly demonstrate applied learning. In terms of comparability with the evidence required from full-time classroom-based learners and RPL candidates, the fact that portfolios of evidence and interviews are increasingly used in ‘mainstream’ assessment is good news for the integration (and therefore the sustainability) of RPL into the mainstream activities of the provider institution. However, portfolios of evidence, in particular, are not always considered to be an appropriate tool, specifically where candidates are required to write extensively. Many respondents have identified alternative and/or supplementary approaches that may be more suitable for particular contexts, such as observation in the workplace, simulations, etc. These approaches seem to be used with a solid understanding of the ‘risks involved’; i.e. they are based on a thorough knowledge of the field of learning and the requirements, as expressed in the purpose and outcomes of the unit standards and qualifications.

#### *6.4.3 Concluding Remarks*

The sustainability of a RPL system depends greatly on the validity and quality of processes and the extent to which approaches and instruments can withstand intellectual scrutiny. It also seems to depend on new perspectives of learning and teaching, particularly in relation to the needs and knowledge bases of adult learners. A sustainable system, therefore, suggests that mechanisms should be put in place that will provide a bridge between the candidates’ knowledge and academic ways of knowing. This seems to require the acknowledgement that alternative, non-traditional forms of learning may be equal in value to more formalised, discipline-based knowledge. It also seems to require the development and establishment of ‘communities of trust’, i.e. the trust that is developed between provider institutions within the same sector, as well as inter-sectorally through the use of common benchmarks and clear common quality criteria. This will enable provider institutions and sectors to believe in and validate each other’s decisions with regards to the integrity of their assessment processes and results and the credits awarded as result of the assessment.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

*In the concluding paragraphs of the SAQA RPL policy (2002a, p.32), an important point is made: 'Recognition of Prior Learning is not a precise science, rather it builds on international best practice, takes from the lessons that which is valuable and establishes a system that is responsive to the needs of the learners, but also balances this with the need for the integrity of the system'.*

Recognition of prior learning is a key principle of the South African National Qualifications Framework and is - unlike initiatives in other countries where RPL is often associated with the facilitation of access to education and training to a minority of the learning population - considered to be an important national mechanism to redress past educational injustices to large numbers of people who were deliberately kept out of education and training pathways in the past. In the conceptualisation of the NQF, both just prior to and after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, RPL was seen to be a major transformation tool for education and training in this country.

Moreover, the right of every person to basic education and to further education, 'which the State, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible, as well as equal access to educational institutions' is enshrined in the Constitution and the Bill of Rights of South Africa (DoE, 2002, p. 8).

However, for RPL to become the transformative tool it was meant to be, the discourse should now, 10 years after the defining elections in 1994, move away from being a political instrument to an operational level. Both in the Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (DoE, DoL, 2002) and in the recently released An Interdependent National Qualifications Framework System: Consultative document (Doe & DoL, 2003), the importance of RPL to the system is re-iterated:

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RPL implementation should be:

- accorded high priority, provided with appropriate incentives and targets;
- speeded up through the simplification of standards setting and quality assurance arrangements; based on the recognition that the assessment processes of RPL do not differ significantly from ‘normal’ assessment; and
- undertaken in a developmental context with the appropriate guidance infrastructure and training for assessors’ (DoE & DoL, 2002, p. 89)

However, these statements are tempered by the realisation that “on its own [RPL] is not a solution to either inequalities or unemployment” (DoE & DoL, 2002, p. 86) nor is it a simple mechanism for redressing past injustices, that it first was considered to be in the ‘hype’ after the 1994-elections. In addition, while RPL has been implemented in various sectors, these initiatives were at the level of pilot projects and, to date, the Departments (of Education and Labour), have not yet made provision for large-scale, systemic implementation, despite their (political) support of the principle.

The South African Qualifications Authority has put in place a national policy and guidelines for the implementation of RPL. Therefore, the macro policy environment, to support the statutory environment discussed in Chapter 3, is in place. The challenge for the South African education and training system, is now to create an enabling environment to implement RPL, including making available funds and resources.

It is against this backdrop that this study attempted to build on the common understanding of RPL best practice internationally, and tried to contextualise operationally the processes that will have national use, as well as establish accountable practices that will enhance the implementation of RPL whilst ensuring that the integrity of the system is protected.

In this chapter, therefore, the research questions and approaches are briefly summarised (7.1). In 7.2 some methodological reflections are discussed, and 7.3 captures the recommendations for would-be implementers and policy-makers and the

conclusions are presented. In 7.4 the study is concluded with possible areas for further research.

### 7.1 Summary of Research Questions and Results

The aim of this study was to describe current international and national practices in the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and to identify mechanisms that will ensure that RPL is a credible and valid process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

The main research question - *Which mechanisms are needed to ensure that Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a valid and sustainable process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)?* - was supported by two operational questions. The supporting questions attempted to elaborate on and clarify what is understood by ‘mechanisms’, ‘validity’ and ‘sustainability’. The first supporting question - *What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?* - sought to identify the key elements of the emerging RPL system in South Africa, which will in particular, support the validity of such a system. Through the responses to this question, it became evident that a valid system seems to be a highly accountable one, which finds its expression in clear quality criteria common to all contexts. The quality criteria seemed to support the development of an enabling environment within which policies, procedures and processes provide structure for and legitimacy of the system. Within such an enabling environment, issues that could impact on the practicability and effectiveness of a system, such as administrative and admissions procedures, entry/access requirements and the articulation of learning credited through the recognition of prior learning, emerged.

In the second operational question - *What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?* - the focus was on the extent to which innovative assessment methodologies situated within the paradigm of an outcomes-based approach to education and training could become integral to mainstream education and, therefore, become sustainable. Fit-for-purpose assessment approaches and

methodologies, as well as the form, quality and sources of evidence that enable practitioners to make judgements about learning, emerged through this question.

The results according to the two research questions are as follows:

*7.1.1 Research Question 1: What are the Characteristics of a Valid, Practical and Effective RPL System?*

The evidence emerging through this study indicates that a valid, practical and effective RPL system seems to require, first and foremost, *a quality assurance framework* which supports *an enabling environment*, within which the development work needed to establish such a system can take place (refer to Chapter 5 of this report).

*7.1.1.1 Quality assurance measures.* Defining the *quality assurance* measures against which all aspects of RPL will be evaluated, including the overall results, assessment and practitioner practices, the moderation of assessment methodologies, approaches and instruments, emerged strongly as a means to validate RPL processes. The Director: Witsplus from the University of the Witwatersrand, stated that RPL must be “defendable by law” (Appendix E) – not only to satisfy critics, but also to ensure that the integrity of standards of attainment are above reproach. This need for defensibility is in keeping with the increasing call for a highly accountable system of education and training.

Most respondents to the questionnaire (14 out of 16) indicated that they currently have quality assurance processes in place for mainstream assessment, but not all include RPL assessment in their current moderation processes.

The respondents who felt most confident about the alignment of their quality assurance processes with the legislative requirements of the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies (ETQAs) included all the ‘new, emerging private’ provider institutions; the alignment to common criteria established by the ETQA seems to be an important factor in the establishment of common benchmarks, which could be trusted by all the provider institutions that operate within the same field of learning

and it also facilitates the establishment of ‘communities of trust’ between such institutions.

These communities of trust could be established on the basis of an agreement on minimum moderation - ten (out of the 12) respondents who answered this question indicated that minimum moderation is on their assessment instruments, both before and after its use, as well as the assessment results (nine out of 12 respondents) as an indicator of the quality of the process.

Very important was the fact that all respondents (n=12) seemed to base their minimum moderation on the output, i.e. on the generic descriptions of the results (or outcomes) of learning. This means that where common benchmarks are used, regardless of where the learning takes place, it is possible to recognise and transfer credits intra- and inter-institutionally, as well as inter-sectorally, because the outcomes of the qualification as captured in unit standards and exit-level outcomes are used as benchmarks.

*7.1.1.2 Policy environment.* The establishment of a *policy environment* at the level of the Education and Training Quality Assurance body (ETQA), as well as its constituent education and training providers/institutions, which addresses the principles, purposes and procedures needed to implement RPL, seems to be the first step within the quality assurance framework to create *an enabling environment*. Policies seem to give legitimacy to the process, as well as provide the structure within which implementation could take place (refer to Chapters 2 and 5 of this report). Institutional policies are seen to be successful where *institutional commitment* and intellectual engagement with the processes have taken place. In the in-depth interviews with four respondents to the questionnaire for this study, they agreed that ‘*institutional commitment*’ as an expression of the ‘*institutional will*’ that translates the legislative ‘*political will*’ into operational action is key to the establishment of an enabling environment (refer to Chapter 5).

*7.1.1.3 Clear criteria.* According to the Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002, p.86) “it is mistaken to believe that any and all informal learning is readily assessable in an entirely different context”, particularly in the absence of *clear criteria* and

appropriate assessment instruments. The interviewees agreed: the Head: Curriculum Development suggested that “there needs to be clarity on what RPL is, and what it is not. What it intends to cover and what it doesn’t cover”(Appendix E).

The representative from the Programme Management Unit of the Department of Labour pointed out that to establish an enabling environment within which RPL processes could be developed and implemented “a RPL system must be implementable and understood by all who are involved” (Appendix E; Chapter 5).

An enabling environment therefore seems to require the clarification of principles and processes, particularly in the form of clear criteria to facilitate a common understanding and comparable approaches between institutions and sectors.

*7.1.1.4 Purpose.* In all cases in the responses to the questionnaire, it emerged that where RPL has been implemented, the principles seem to be supported by a *clear purpose*. The respondents all share the commitment to the opening up of access to non-traditional learners and, in most cases (15 out of 16), will award credits for the learning attained in contexts outside of formal education and training institutions as a means to facilitate access. However, the public higher education institutions in particular are not willing to certificate such credits, but will allow learner entry (often in the form of advanced status or standing – refer to Chapter 3) to learning programmes based on their prior learning. On the other hand, the new, emerging, private institutions (six out of 16) are willing to certificate the learning, particularly for those distinct parts of a qualification that are captured in occupational and vocational unit standards. In addition, these providers often use RPL for the correct ‘placement’ of a learner who wishes to enter a learnership (Chapter 5).

*7.1.1.5 Articulation.* The articulation of prior learning with the formal requirements of unit standards and qualifications seems to have been a vexing question since RPL was first conceptualised in the United States of America. For this reason, a number of the criteria established by Whitaker (1989) specifically address the articulation of prior learning as follows:

- Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
- College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.

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- Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
- The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
- Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted (p. 9 & 10).

These criteria seem to acknowledge that prior learning does not come in neatly packaged units of learning, which can simply be matched against the outcomes of a qualification, and that it may need more than literal matching to determine and evaluate the learning. However, RPL will always remain on the periphery of education and training if credits awarded through such means are considered less than equal to the credits attained through formal full-time learning programmes. In this regard, the Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) responsible for the review of the implementation of the NQF stated that:

...establishing opportunities for RPL is integral to the expansion of education and training opportunities..... and is integral to programmes of teaching and assessment.... It must not be regarded or offered as a separate activity, still less as an optional concession (p. 87).

In addition, an important finding in terms of articulation relates to the administrative infrastructure of provider institutions, which seems to inhibit, rather than facilitate the implementation of RPL. This is because current administrative systems do not award credits in relation to the outcomes of learning, but will grant exemptions on the basis of the input, i.e. the subject content, of a learning programme. For this reason, ten (out of 16) respondent institutions, of which eight are public higher education institutions, indicated that a dedicated RPL administrative process is preferable. The comments from some of these respondents highlight the difficulties experienced by practitioners to ensure that credits are awarded for prior learning, namely:

Candidates require different implementation processes and support; and  
Current admission practices are focused on students entering at fixed points.  
RPL students enter at varying levels and require varied administrative pathways (Appendix F, also Chapter 5).

It also became evident that the public institutions have greater difficulties with this aspect than the new, private institutions. This is because entry to public institutions of learning is still subject to old regulations not yet repealed by new legislation (refer to Chapter 2) whereas the private institutions do not experience such restrictions.

*7.1.1.6 Funding.* According to Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) RPL implementation “may need to be stimulated by a combination of targeted *incentives*, information, guidance programmes and joint planning” (p. 86). This is particularly true in making available appropriate *funding* for RPL in a systemic manner. In the Education White Paper (No 3, 1997), in principle decisions have been taken that institutions will be granted ‘targeted funding’ for ‘pilot projects’ dealing with RPL. In addition, funding will also be made available for programmes of ‘redress’ (see Chapter 2). Yet, despite these plans, no clear funding structure and/or subsidy arrangements for public institutions have been forthcoming. Currently, public institutions are carrying the cost, at least until the candidate has completed modules or subjects for which subsidies could be granted. The lack of a funding and a costing structure for determining fees is of concern. In Australia, slow development of RPL assessment in universities was associated with inadequate incentives to implement in terms of public funding of RPL (Chapter 5).

The respondents to the questionnaire gave various responses to Question 5.1.3 of the questionnaire - How does your organisation/institution determine the cost of RPL? - which highlights the lack of a clear funding and costing structure. Some respondents of public institutions, for example, did not have any formal costing structure, or did not know what the costing structure is, while others indicated that ‘the number of services required’ defines the cost, while still others indicated that it depends on ‘the amount of work required’ (Chapter 5). Costing structures are a worrying matter, particularly because many applicants may not be in a position to pay for such services if services are not subsidised. The Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon, in this regard, suggested that simply because RPL candidates are adult learners, it cannot be assumed that they will have the funds necessary for further learning – which would be contrary to the principle of opening up access (Chapter 6). In addition, the cost of RPL services is seen, by both the United States and English practitioners, as a possible area where ‘malpractice’ may occur. The United States’,

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as well as the English criteria for the implementation of RPL, make specific mention of the fees charged for services (refer to Chapter 3 of this report):

Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded (Whitaker, 1989, p. 9 & 10); and

Basing assessment fees (Portfolio etc) on the number of credits awarded' [is a malpractice] (Nyatanga, et al, 1998, p. 9).

It seems that the slow uptake of RPL in, particularly, public institutions is directly related to the lack of funding and cost or fee structures, which may, if properly structured, serve an important incentive for the development and implementation of RPL services.

*7.1.1.7 Policies and regulations that govern access.* Chapter 2 of this report discussed the new Acts, regulations and policies that have been put in place since the 1994 democratic election. These were developed with the explicit purpose of transforming education and training in South Africa, in particular to open up access to larger numbers of learners (including non-traditional, adult learners) and to create a more equitable system with enhanced participation. However, despite the political intent, many of these pieces of legislation have not yet repealed old, outdated regulations. Nowhere else is this more evident than through the inhibiting regulations, that prevent learners to enter education and training programmes. One of the interviewees, the Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon, expressed his surprise that these regulations still play such an important role in determining who may or may not enter higher education institutions, i.e.:

... it is not clear to me how the old regulations relate to the new SAQA/NSB regulations, nor why the latter have not superseded the former (chapter 5).

The Director of the Matriculation Board, which is an interim body put in place to ensure continuity in the transition period between 'old' and 'new' structures that govern access into higher education, confirmed the difficulties experienced by provider institutions that are trying to implement RPL:

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Individual universities have power to determine admission requirements in terms of the provision of the Higher Education Act (101 of 1997), but because of the SAPSE [subsidy] rules and the Joint Statute must do so subject to the matriculation regulations (chapter 5).

Nevertheless, most of the respondents to the questionnaire (15 out of 16) indicated that they already make use of alternative forms of access, despite the fact that the old regulations have not yet been repealed. These arrangements range from previously acceptable forms of access, such as ‘transfer of credits’ and ‘mature age exemption’, to the use of new forms, such as considering the ‘years experience’, ‘status applications’ and RPL. The Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption, which is the approach proposed by the Matriculation Board to broaden opportunities for access, is used to a limited extent. The reason may be that it is a highly regulated process (contrary to the notion of institutional autonomy as mentioned in the quote above), and is quite onerous, as the Senate of an institution may sit only once or twice a year to deliberate on such decisions (refer to chapter 2).

#### 7.1.2 Concluding comments: Question 1

In answer to the first operational Research Question - *What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?* - it became clear that a key characteristic of a *valid* system is the level of accountability of the system. This seems to be facilitated by a clear quality assurance framework within which the criteria and generic processes become common benchmarks against which different institutions and sectors can measure their services and whereby these institutions can develop a sense of trust in each other’s processes. A quality assurance framework, therefore, seems to provide an enabling environment where the principles, the purposes, as well as the *practicalities* of a RPL system can be explored, developed and implemented. Implementation seems to hinge on the extent to which procedures, including such procedures dealing with the articulation and recognition of prior learning, are clarified. Not only will solid procedures enhance *effectiveness* of implementation, but they also serve as mechanisms for quality assurance. Taken together, these aspects, where a common understanding and common criteria have been agreed, may enable a more systemic approach to the implementation of RPL.

7.1.3 *Research Question 2: What Elements are Required for Implementing a Valid and Sustainable RPL System?*

In the SAQA RPL policy (2002a) the point is made that

...the key challenge for the implementation ....is the sustainability of such a system. It would be shortsighted to suggest that RPL has a redress function only and therefore may have a relatively limited lifespan. As the South African education and training system matures, increasingly RPL will support the principle of lifelong learning (p. 8).

Commitment to RPL as a principle of the new education and training system in South Africa is well documented. But commitment to a principle is not enough. This study therefore attempted to propose mechanisms that will enable would-be implementers to operationalise RPL in a meaningful and accountable manner at the level of the provider/institution. The Study Team commented “RPL must not become a mere slogan. Redress is primarily about creating new opportunities for learning and enhancing existing skills” (DoE&DoL, 2002, p. 86).

However, RPL will remain at the level of rhetoric, unless practicable and sustainable mechanisms are developed that will enable would-be implementers to structure and maintain their systems. The first of these ‘mechanisms’ that emerged through the study is the establishment of clear, common descriptions of learning against which prior learning could be evaluated (refer to Chapter 6 of this report):

7.1.3.1 *An outcomes-based approach to education and training.* In the literature, it became evident that *clear common descriptions of learning* in the form of learning outcomes, greatly facilitate recognition of prior learning (and the quality assurance thereof). These descriptions then become the benchmarks against which learning is measured (refer to Chapter 3 of this report).

The interviewees agreed with this approach. The Director: Witsplus, of the University of the Witwatersrand, for example, indicated “if the requirements are explicit, then RPL will be easier” (Appendix E; Chapter 6).

The fact that South Africa has established a National Qualifications Framework and has adopted an outcomes-based approach could assist in the establishment of a common understanding of what should be assessed to determine the level of prior learning, because the ‘clear descriptions of learning’ are already available and present in the public domain through the registration of qualifications and unit standards on the NQF.

The questionnaire for this study tried to determine the extent to which provider institutions make use of such common understandings of the learning, where the results of learning, rather than the inputs to the learning, are used as the basis for assessment. Where RPL has been implemented, it became evident that internally, at the level of the provider institution, the move away from input-based assessment to output-based assessment, i.e. where applied knowledge is assessed, is quite advanced. However, inter-institutional and inter-sectoral credit transfer arrangements seem to be as in the case of articulation (discussed in Chapter 5) still inhibited by old regulations and inappropriate administrative systems. Nevertheless, it became clear that the respondents to the questionnaire are increasingly making use of the generic descriptions of skills, knowledge and abilities as captured in the purposes and outcomes of qualifications and unit standards as the basis for their assessment of prior learning (refer to Chapter 6 of this report). In terms of the sustainability of RPL, this approach greatly enhances the transferability of credits intra-institutionally and, later, once the old regulations have been repealed, possibly also inter-institutionally and inter-sectorally.

*7.1.3.2 Fit-for-purpose assessment instruments.* The sustainability of a RPL system seems to hinge to no small degree on the extent to which the system is easy to implement. At the level of the provider institution this means that their processes, in particular their *assessment instruments*, should be easy to use, resource-efficient, reliable and practicable. However, one of the main criticisms levelled at RPL is the perceived resource-intensiveness of RPL assessment, where a one-on-one approach is necessitated. On the other hand, RPL practitioners claim that candidates are often ‘over-assessed’ to ensure that there is no ‘sale of qualifications’ or that RPL is not seen as an ‘easy way’ to obtain credits. The Head: Curriculum Development of the Cape Technikon for example maintained that

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It is important to balance quality and efficiency. For example, if a CV or an interview is sufficient evidence of a candidate's prior learning, then no additional assessment should be required. Professional judgement, based on a solid understanding of the risks involved, should be made possible (refer to Appendix E and Chapter 6).

For this reason, the assessment approaches of the respondents to the questionnaire were explored to determine the extent to which these criticisms are true.

Through the responses to the questionnaire it became evident that when prior learning is assessed the most preferred assessment instruments are 'portfolios of evidence' and 'interviews', but that more conventional approaches, such as (challenge) examinations, projects and assignments are also used, but only where the documentary evidence in the portfolio and the interview do not provide sufficient proof of learning. Two implications emerged from these findings:

The first implication is that portfolios of evidence and interviews are increasingly being used for both RPL assessment and for 'mainstream' assessment. This is good news for the sustainability of RPL in that it suggests that integrating RPL into the mainstream activities of the organisation is more feasible. This is what the Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) refers to in their discussion of RPL:

The assessment process [of candidates requesting the recognition of prior learning] would be the same as for trainee workers. In both cases the assessment would provide the basis for the learner to progress in a career path or further education and training. Similarly, learners entering a technical college, technikon or university who believed they could already meet some of the required standards ...could be offered the same assessments as would be undertaken by learners who had completed the relevant module or course (my emphasis) (p.87).

However, it also became clear that the respondents did not believe that portfolios of evidence and interviews are the always the most appropriate forms of assessment to assess prior learning. Other assessment approaches cited included 'observation within a particular context', 'oral presentations', 'workplace assessment' and 'simulations'.

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These comments exemplify the notion that prior learning cannot always be matched exactly against the requirements of a qualification or unit standard, and that determining *equivalence of learning*, rather than literal matching as proposed in the quote above, requires alternative and innovative assessment approaches (refer to chapter 6, number 6.2.1).

The second implication emerges from this need to develop alternative, innovative assessment approaches. It relates to *the form, quality and sources of evidence* accepted as proof of learning.

*7.1.3.3 The form, quality and sources of evidence.* When the possible assessment instruments were compared with the possible sources of evidence of learning, it became evident that formal assessment instruments are used only where documentary evidence (i.e. the portfolio) and the interview are not sufficient and a need for ‘supplementary assessment’ is identified. Whilst this is encouraging because the cost-effectiveness and resource-effectiveness if RPL assessment are enhanced, as practitioners do not have to develop ‘special’ assessment instruments for a limited number of learners, it does pose possible difficulties in terms of the integration of RPL into mainstream activities of the provider institution. Herein lies the second implication: while this approach allows for non-traditional learning to be recognised and validated, it creates difficulties in terms of the comparability between learning attained through full-time formal education and non- and informal learning (Chapter 6, number 6.2.2). This is what is meant by SAQA in its RPL policy (2002a):

The candidate seeking credits for previously acquired skills and knowledge must still comply with all the requirements as stated in the unit standards and qualifications. The difference lies in the route to the assessment. RPL is a form of assessment, which ideally, should be fully integrated into all learning programmes (my emphasis) (p.8).

It seems, therefore, that there is an urgent need to identify and validate *alternative forms of assessment which are fit-for-purpose* but which, ultimately, will assist practitioners to make a judgement about the *equivalence of the learning* in a more clearly defined manner. The assessment instruments need not be the same, but both should be based on the broader understanding of the requirements, i.e. the applied

knowledge, as expressed in the learning outcomes of qualifications and unit standards. In this way the evidence of prior learning can be more readily compared with the evidence required in full-time, mainstream programmes (refer to Chapter 6, number 6.2.2 of this report).

*7.1.3.4 Orientation to adult learners.* The target groups for RPL of the different providers ranged from applicants who are at least 20 years old (three out of 13 responses), with at least two years work experience, to 50 year olds with as many as 20 or more years' work experience (five out of 13 responses). Most respondents (n=13) displayed sensitivity to the fact that their candidates are adult learners. This became particularly evident out of comments made with regard to dedicated administrative processes, for example:

Candidates require different implementation processes and support;

The RPL admin process is different – requires advising and counselling specific to RPL; and

Candidates need individual attention – depending on needs (refer to Appendix F and Chapter 5, number 5.2.4.1).

These comments seem to acknowledge that there needs to be a specific orientation to adult learners. The SAQA RPL policy (2002a) supports this view:

...the danger of underestimating the levels of disempowerment and dislocation that decades of discriminatory education and training policies and practices had on ordinary citizens, and the unfamiliarity with formal academic study, (particularly in higher education), cannot be ignored (p. 20)(Chapter 6, number 6.3.2).

*7.1.3.5 New ways of knowing.* This study did not focus on knowledge systems, (including indigenous knowledge, women's knowledge and workers' knowledge), which are considered to be knowledge systems previously excluded from curricula, but two of the interviewees in the in-depth interviews specifically made mention of 'new ways of knowing' and it is worth mentioning. Geysler (2001) agrees that new forms of knowledge need to be recognised as being valuable and suggests

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“institutions of higher education have to acknowledge that learning can take place in a number of settings and that such learning is equivalent to, and worthy of academic credit” (p. 20). In particular, the Programme Management Unit of the Department of Labour underscored the notion that RPL is subject to an ‘intolerance’ to ‘new ways of knowing’:

The nature of knowledge in different institutions and the intolerance for other types of knowledge narrows the discourse around RPL. The point is that this is not a ‘growing’ discourse, but a new discourse altogether (Appendix E and Chapter 6, number 6.3.3).

The Director of the Matriculation Board supported this view. He indicated that “universities need guidelines as to what competencies [in adults] could be considered equivalent to the learning required for a learner at NQF level 4 [school-leaving certificate]” (my emphasis), (Appendix E and Chapter 6, number 6.3.3).

In terms of sustainability of RPL, the notion of ‘new ways of knowing’ seems to require an open-mindedness – “based on a solid understanding of the risks involved” (Appendix E) to accept and recognise alternative forms of learning. A sustainable system therefore seems to need mechanisms by means of which alternative, non-traditional forms of learning are identified and compared to the learning attained through formal, full-time programmes. These seem to include the need for assistance of applicants to describe and collate evidence of learning in relation to the broadest understanding of the purpose of learning within a particular field. This is in keeping with international (and increasingly, national) approaches to the identification of ‘applied knowledge’ as the key determinant of potential to enter and succeed in formal education and training (Chapter 6, numbers 6.1 and 6.2). The Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) captures this well:

A new attitude is required, admitting the possibility that current competence can be formally recognised even in the absence of evidence of formal learning (p. 86).

### 7.1.4 Concluding Comments: Question 2

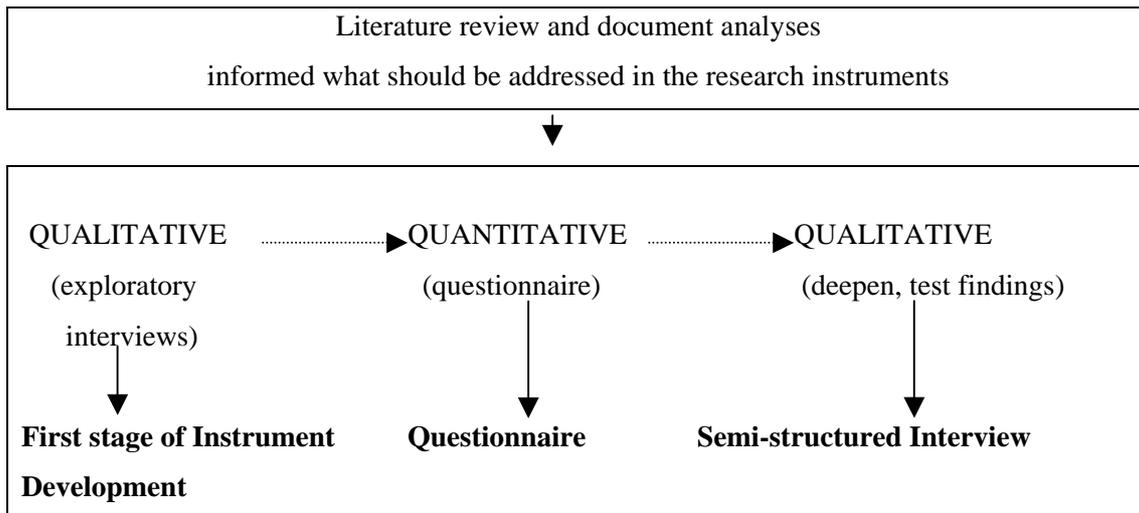
In answer to the second operational question - *What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?*- it became clear that an *outcomes-*

*based approach* to assessment facilitates a common understanding of the results (or outcomes) of learning to determine applied knowledge in the broadest sense. The identification and description of applied knowledge, as being a combination of practical, foundational and reflexive competence, make it possible to determine *equivalence* in learning, which enhances the ability to compare prior learning to the outputs of a programme, rather than literally matching learning with the inputs to the programme. This approach requires *fit-for-purpose assessment approaches* and instruments, which seldom means that the same assessment instrument would be used for prior learning and for learning attained through formal, full-time programmes. Rather, the assessment approaches and instruments will be based on alternative (to conventional methods) approaches appropriate to the *form, quality and sources of evidence* provided as proof of equivalent learning, but based on a common understanding of the purpose and outcomes of the qualification and/or unit standard.

Further, it also became evident that provider institutions that have implemented RPL have a particular *orientation to adult learners* and to the *new ways of knowing* these learners bring to the process. The elements to enhance sustainability within this context therefore relate particularly to the ease with which the system can be implemented. This requires a ‘shared understanding of the epistemological framework within which RPL will be undertaken and the philosophical underpinnings about what RPL is, and what it is not’ (Chapter 6, number 6.1).

## 7.2 Methodological Reflections

The research approach for this study was a mixed method design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Qualitative and quantitative techniques were utilised in a manner represented by Figure 7.1 (overleaf) (from Figure 3.1: Illustrative designs linking qualitative and quantitative data, Miles & Huberman, 2000):



*Figure 7.1. Linking qualitative and quantitative data*

This design was used to answer questions that neither a purely qualitative, nor a purely quantitative approach could have answered on their own. This approach proved to be appropriate for a research problem dealing with an issue that is considered untried and untested in the emerging education and training system of South Africa. Precisely because RPL is a recent introduction to South Africa, many divergent views and practices exist. This became evident through the exploratory interviews and led to the realisation that if a quantitative research tool (as in a questionnaire) is to be used, this will have to be followed by qualitative approaches (semi-structured interviews) to extract and interpret the meaning of the responses to the questionnaire.

The exploratory interviews (see above) were undertaken with five role players who either have implemented or, at that stage, were planning to implement RPL within their contexts (refer to Table 4.1 in Chapter 4). These included one public higher education institution, two private institutions – one focusing more on general education and training and the other focusing on further and higher education and training, and two Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies. Two of these providers, namely Technikon Southern Africa and LearnSys, also completed the questionnaire for this study. The exploratory interviews not only assisted in the development of the main research instruments, but also assisted in the demarcation and conceptualisation of the study (see Appendix A and B).

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The questionnaire was administered to 26 possible respondents and 16 of the responses given could be used. RPL in South Africa has not been implemented widely, and even the responses that were used were used with the knowledge that full implementation of RPL has taken place in only a small number of provider institutions (refer to Table 4.2 - Sample for questionnaires). The limited number of respondents makes any generalisations derived from the study only tentative. Also, it was evident that the respondents have different understandings of some of the concepts and meanings and, because they completed the questionnaire on their own, differences in interpretations could not be corrected. For this reason, follow-up semi-structured interviews were held with two of the respondents to the questionnaire: the University of the Witwatersrand and the Cape Technikon. An additional two interviews with the organisations responsible for the planning and implementation of RPL on a systemic level were conducted. These included an interview with the Director of the Matriculation Board, which is the body responsible for regulating access into public higher education institutions, and interviews with the Programme Management Unit of the Department of Labour, at the head office in Pretoria (refer to Chapter 4 of this report).

### *7.2.1 The Research Instruments*

The research instruments were discussed in chapter 4 and are included as Appendix C and D. The final qualitative instrument, the semi-structured interview schedule however, needs additional mention. This instrument was surprisingly effective in stimulating discussion, to the extent that it was largely unnecessary to use the detailed probing questions in the plan. The two questions, which mirrored the operational research questions for this study, generated rich discussion far beyond the questions planned, with the result that there was limited need for the probing questions.

### *7.2.2 Limitations*

The most important limitation to this study is the fact that RPL has not been implemented widely in South Africa. RPL is seen to be an innovative, but largely untried concept in education and training in this country. This made it difficult to determine trends and to gauge success rates, simply because not enough data has been produced to conduct longitudinal studies. The focus of this study therefore has been on those aspects that will facilitate implementation, rather than on throughputs and

tracking of successful candidates. However, in that regard, the purposive sample (refer to Chapter 4), proved to be very effective. The provider institutions that completed and returned the questionnaire are in the midst of coming to an understanding of what the recognition of prior learning is and how it should be practised. While generalisations are, therefore, quite tentative, there seems to be sufficient agreement between the different provider institutions on various aspects investigated by the study for most findings to be presented with some degree of confidence.

Other limitations to the study are set out in the paragraphs below:

- Providers of education and training who have implemented RPL in South Africa, or who are piloting projects have a *vested interest* to report positively in terms of their RPL initiatives. In an attempt to triangulate, so that not only the project leader(s)' views were heard, I deliberately interviewed providers and other stakeholders who are known to be sceptical of RPL. When it became evident that even these stakeholders were really only cautious and concerned about resource constraints, rather than sceptical, the public comment submissions to two of SAQA's publications dealing with RPL - The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework, (2002a) and the Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL (2003a) - were utilised to get a more balanced view of how RPL implementation is perceived. Such comments emanated from provider institutions and other stakeholders that clearly did not have a 'vested interest' to report positively on their projects.
- Despite an attempt to achieve *representivity* of providers/institutions at all levels; i.e. in the General Education and Training band, Further and Higher Education and Training bands, the representation of respondents was skewed towards higher education.
- Further, while RPL is seen to be an important mechanism for opening up access to adult learners internationally, nowhere else in the world is the *expectation of what RPL can do* for the transformation of education and training and the redress of past educational injustices so great as in South Africa. In a country where resources are limited, these expectations will require some hard decisions to be made by policy-makers.

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- The *lack of funding structures and incentives* to implement RPL, which ought to be established by the bodies that are supposed to take the lead in the implementation plans for RPL (for example, the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies, including the Higher Education Quality Committee and the General and Further Education Quality Council), emerged as a serious obstacle to the implementation and sustainability of RPL.
- In addition, the Department of Education, as a major provider of education in this country, did not feel ready to discuss its plans for RPL in its sector, despite numerous attempts to interview representatives. The Department of Labour, where it is foreseen that a large amount of RPL will be undertaken (at labour centres for example), were interviewed, but no formal RPL policies, and, more importantly, no *implementation plans* have been established in either of the departments.

### 7.3 Conclusions and Recommendations

Education and training in South Africa is currently experiencing unprecedented pressures to transform. On the one hand, the directives from legislation are to be more inclusive of a larger range of possible learners, including non-traditional learners, while on the other hand there is a drive for improved quality of provisioning at all levels and contexts, as well as public accountability in terms of the responsiveness to the needs of the country and public money spent. All of these are taking place against the background of restructuring, mergers of institutions and redeployment of staff and resources.

At the same time, the National Qualifications Framework is being implemented, which requires a whole new way of “doing” education and training. To support the implementation of the NQF, new structures, such as the Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies, are being established and institutions are having to re-direct substantial resources to meet the requirements of accreditation with ETQAs and registration with the Department of Education.

The NQF itself, as a framework established to bring coherence and parity of esteem of education and training into being, is being reviewed. This is evident from the two processes initiated to determine ways in which implementation of the NQF could be

streamlined: two publications detail these reviews – the Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (DoE & DoL, 2002) and An Interdependent National Qualifications Framework System: Consultative document (DoE & DoL, 2003). Education and training in South Africa is currently subject to intense transformation and is experienced as a very unsettling environment.

Within this environment, recognition of prior learning is seen as a key mechanism for transformation and for redress. While everybody agrees that RPL is important, it is constantly being pushed to one side while institutions/providers are trying to deal with other priorities. It is therefore not surprising that RPL has not been implemented widely. In international examples of RPL implementation, such countries have the luxury to explore the possibilities of RPL for workforce development, multi-skilling and up-skilling, and opening up of access, without the pressures and expectations placed on the process to the extent that this is evident in South Africa. Such pressures and expectations, however, create opportunities to move the South African RPL agenda, forward and to move beyond policy commitments towards practice. This study attempted, in particular, to identify those aspects that will facilitate implementation within the current environment. The key findings were discussed in Chapters 5 and 6 and summarised in 7.1. These findings can now be distilled into recommendations, which could be used by would-be implementers of RPL, including the departments and organisations responsible for macro planning, resource allocation and, ultimately, quality assurance of the process. These recommendations are set out below.

### *7.3.1 Macro Policy Environment*

It is critical for policy-makers to investigate education and training policies that may inhibit the implementation of RPL and thereby reduce coherence of the system. New policies should supersede old restrictive policies not yet repealed, to enable provider institutions to develop feasible plans for implementation without the need to establish ‘special’ arrangements and agreements. The existence of old regulations, rooted in an old paradigm, disincentives provider institutions from developing RPL implementation plans. The Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) cites the “absence of incentives for providers, employers, learners and ETQAs to attach value to RPL” (p.86), as one of the most important reasons for the slow development of RPL

implementation. Such incentives should include appropriate funding and fee structures.

### *7.3.2 Administrative Procedures*

Linked to the policies and funding made available for the implementation of RPL, appropriate administrative procedures should be developed. These include the processes whereby credits attained could be granted against the outcomes of qualifications and the reporting and recording processes whereby the throughput of RPL candidates can be tracked.

### *7.3.3 A Developmental Approach*

In the SAQA RPL policy (2002a), it is acknowledged that

...as in the case of all the approaches, processes and procedures in the new education and training system, it is acknowledged that the development of such a system takes time. It is also acknowledged that lessons will be learnt on the road to full implementation and that we **should learn these lessons** (p.32).

Therefore, policy-makers cannot assume that because the principle has been agreed on, that the system is now in place. The Study Team (DoE & DoL, 2002) strongly supports the developmental approach to the implementation of RPL at all levels, including at the level of the assessor and the potential learner:

...there is a need to develop a guidance and information infrastructure to support the opportunities for RPL, especially where those involved have no previous experience of assessment. Employers, learning institutions, workers and learners alike will need guidance in preparing for and undertaking RPL (p.87).

In addition, development of staff and resources should be supported by the development of assessment methodologies and assessment instruments. The ‘proof of the pudding’ will ultimately be in the credibility of the assessment of prior learning in a manner that is meaningful and also protects (and enhances) the integrity of the qualifications achieved via this route.

In conclusion, it has been my observation that in addition to the potential of opening up access to large numbers of people that were prevented from furthering their learning in the past, RPL could perform other invaluable functions. Firstly, RPL may well become a critical instrument whereby an outcomes-based approach to education and training takes on real meaning, particularly if the approach to the assessment of ‘outcomes’ rather than ‘inputs’ which became evident through this study, could have wider application; i.e. in the assessment of applied knowledge and competence in full-time learning situations. Secondly, once the start-up costs for the development of RPL systems have been covered, a system whereby learners can fast-track their learning, could become a highly cost-efficient process – not only in terms of financial commitments, but also in terms of time and resources.

Finally, as a result of the highly contested nature of RPL, the quality assurance mechanisms put in place to protect the integrity of the RPL system may have a positive effect on quality assurance measures of a provider institution in the broader sense.

#### **7.4 Further Research**

The recognition of prior learning is a ‘hot’ topic in education and training worldwide, regardless of the reasons for the interest in developing systems to widen access for non-traditional learners to education and training. Macro-policy intention is well documented, nationally as well as internationally (refer to Chapter 3 of this report), but implementation issues and tools are necessarily highly context-specific and are not so clearly articulated. Yet, in South Africa, unlike other countries investigated for this study (refer to Chapter 3), the intention is to implement RPL across the education and training system, which goal necessitates a systemic, comparable approach, which will accommodate the disparate sectors’ and provider institutions’ processes. Further research must, therefore, move beyond rhetoric and start focusing on practical implementation. Some of the possible key focus areas are set out below.

##### *7.4.1 Assessment of Prior Learning*

Research into assessment methodologies, approaches and fit-for-purpose assessment instruments, particularly in the context of the assessment of applied competence as it is understood in the outcomes-based assessment paradigm, is critical. It is at the

moment of assessment where the quality and integrity of the process are upheld or, alternatively, destroyed. The findings of this study highlighted the fact that there is not an easy match between conventional assessment approaches and RPL assessment. Valid, reliable, alternative approaches should be investigated and tested. The outcome of such a study could facilitate the integration of RPL into mainstream processes where RPL is seen to be fully equal to full-time, classroom-based learning and it could assist in the development of new assessment approaches for mainstream environments, which are more in keeping with an outcomes-based, criterion-referenced approach.

#### *7.4.2 An Integrated, Holistic Approach to the Assessment of Prior Learning*

Through this study, it became evident that the learning presented by RPL applicants does not necessarily match exactly with the inputs to learning programmes. This does not mean that such learning has less value than disciplinary knowledge - rather it means that an integrated, inter-disciplinary approach to assessment should be developed to determine applied competence as it is expressed in the purpose and learning outcomes of qualifications and unit standards. In formal, full-time programmes, this is seldom the approach, with practitioners focusing on their own particular domains. This means that not only are other knowledges (for example indigenous knowledge) disregarded, but also that awarding credits requires a range of domain-specific assessment instruments, which may add to the perception that RPL is highly resource-intensive. Also, domain-specific assessment tends to focus on the extent to which the 'input' to a learning programme has been mastered, while RPL assessment intends to measure the extent to which the output (outcomes) have been achieved because it is assumed that the applicant has already had all the input required to attain the qualification.

### **7.5 Reflections**

The weight that is given to the recognition of prior learning in South Africa is not equalled anywhere in the world. In none of the countries investigated for this study is there evidence that there is such a strong socio-political incentive to implement a process whereby the learning of thousands of people, who were deliberately kept out of learning pathways, are to be recognised and credited. Furthermore, it is not only about crediting informal and non-formal learning, but it is also about acknowledging

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that these thousands of people have contributed in numerous ways to the society which South Africans are trying to build. The expectations of what RPL can achieve are therefore perhaps overly idealistic. Nevertheless, there seems to be increasing support for the implementation of such a system and it is therefore crucial that 'political will' is translated into practicable, valid and sustainable mechanisms. This study hopes to contribute to an improved understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of RPL, but in particular it hopes to encourage debate on what such a system could look like and on how to get down to the business of RPL and on how to proceed with this important task.

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