

A coordinating mechanism for the recognition of prior learning in South Africa

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Abstract

This discussion paper provides the background to the developments leading up to the possibility of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) acting as an incubator for a national Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) coordinating mechanism for the period 2013-2018. The paper provides some reflections on how SAQA could take up this responsibility and includes a consideration of SAQA's role in terms of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act of 2008, current RPL projects which SAQA is involved in, suggestions for benchmarking with similar international RPL organisations, as well as initial thoughts on the necessary human and financial resources that will be required should SAQA take on this responsibility in the near future. The discussion paper has been developed as a proactive measure in response to a possible recommendation from the Ministerial Task Team on RPL that SAQA be tasked to set up the national coordinating mechanism for RPL. At the time that this paper is being prepared (October 2012) this matter has not yet been decided and the paper is therefore of an exploratory nature only, in order to prepare SAQA should this possibility be realised.

The paper will be presented to an international audience at a workshop during the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) conference that will take place from 21-23 October 2012 in Halifax. The main objectives of the workshop will be to:

- Reflect on the relationship between RPL and qualifications frameworks in general
- Share the South African RPL experience since 1995, and in particular, initiate debate on different ways in which RPL can be coordinated at a country level with the view of gaining new insights that may be applied to the current South African context

¹ This draft unedited discussion paper draws on discussions within the SAQA RPL Project Team comprising myself, Joe Samuels, Loffie Naudé, Shirley Lloyd, Themba Magasela, Khosi Molala, Jody Cedras and Tienie Maritz, as well from the revised SAQA RPL Policy which is available for public comment at www.saga.org.za until 15 November 2012. The overview of RPL activities that SAQA is involved in (Annexure 1) has been prepared by Loffie Naudé. The summary of key findings and associated policy implications from the research into RPL conducted by SAQA and the University of the Western Cape (Annexure 2) has been prepared by Heidi Bolton.

Introduction

The South African NQF is a first generation NQF that was formally introduced in 1995 following a number of years of deliberations and negotiations between key stakeholders, notably organised labour. The South African NQF drew on similar developments in Australia and New Zealand at the time, but was unique in many ways in order to address the key challenges in post-apartheid South Africa. Fundamental to the NQF and its transformative approach was the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) which was seen as a mechanism to recognise the skills of the black population which had been denied access to formal education and training:

South Africa's NQF was conceived as a comprehensive and unified ladder of learning with multiple pathways enabling learners to move from one field of education to another and to progress up the ladder. Those excluded from educational opportunities in the past would be given access onto a rung of the ladder through recognition of their prior learning and experience (RPL)... (Parker and Walters 2012:71)

SAQA initially developed policy for RPL in 2002, and Criteria and Guidelines for RPL in 2004. Both of these documents have been widely used and remain in use, but now need to be updated to align the policies with the NQF Act 67 of 2008, which replaced the SAQA Act 58 of 1995. The revised RPL policy takes cognisance of the considerable RPL-related knowledge and experience gained through practice and research across the education and training system since 2002. The updated policy follows a well-supported *National RPL Conference: Bridging and expanding existing islands of excellent practice* hosted by SAQA in February 2011, at which three themes identified by over 200 people at a preparatory workshop were addressed. This conference brought together findings from RPL-related research and practice to date, to address the three identified themes: 'Resourcing RPL', 'Effective delivery of RPL', and 'Quality assurance of RPL'. One of the conference outputs, the *Resolution and Working Document on RPL* (SAQA 2011), includes the agreed-upon actions needed for resourcing, delivery, and quality assurance of RPL based on the knowledge, experience and views discussed over the three days of the conference, by the more than 350 people present. This document forms one of the important bases for the revised RPL policy (SAQA 2012).

The revised RPL policy was developed with support from the SAQA RPL Reference Group which includes staff representatives from the Quality Councils². Broader consultation with all nominees for the SAQA RPL Reference Group and organised labour also took place in the form

²SAQA's RPL Reference Group comprises Mr Nigel Prinsloo (Further Education and Training Institute, FETI), Dr Bennie Anderson (Da Vinci Institute), Dr Elizabeth Smith (University of South Africa, UNISA), Mr Alan Ralphs (University of the Western Cape, UWC), Dr John van der Merwe (North West University, NWU), Mr David Dodge (Electricity Supply Commission, ESKOM), Mr Abie Dunn (Sandown Motor Holdings), Mr Varish Ganpath (Prodigy Business Services), Mr Isaac Masita (Congress of South African Trade Unions, COSATU), Dr Ronel Blom (Higher Education South Africa, HESA), Ms Malebo Mogopodi (National Union of Mineworkers, NUMSA), Ms Inger Marrian (Wholesale and Retail Sector Education and Training Authority, W&R SETA), Prof Nqabomzi Gawe (Durban University of Technology, DUT), Ms Deonita Damons (Knowledge Quest), Dr Rob Sieborger (University of Cape Town, UCT), Dr Luke Mlilo (Council on Higher Education, CHE), Dr Julia Motaung (Quality Council for Trades and Occupations, QCTO), Mr Vijayen Naidoo (Umalusi, Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training).

of a workshop on 6 July 2012. The revised policy is currently available for public comment until 15 November 2012 (available at www.saqqa.org.za).

The evolving understanding of RPL in South Africa

The NQF Act 67 of 2008 and the Acts associated with the three Quality Councils³ ushered in a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) strengthened by lessons learned from the first 15 years of implementation. The original NQF objectives of integration, access and redress, mobility and progression, and quality remain, and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is key for the achievement of these objectives and for realisation of the fullest developmental potential of Lifelong Learning. But what is RPL? RPL involves recognition – in various forms – of non-formal and informal learning that learners of all ages may have acquired in the course of their working lives or in participation in society and community activities outside formal places of learning. RPL has differing purposes; a few are given here.

RPL for access

One type of situation in which RPL is needed, is when learners seek access to college/university or to undergraduate or postgraduate study in Higher Education, when they do not meet all the formal entrance criteria set by the institution of learning they wish to enter. In many cases prospective learners may go through a process of mediation and preparation (sometimes referred to as ‘portfolio development’) towards assessment of their readiness to enter these courses of study.

RPL for credits

Another example: workers, including community workers and those currently unemployed, could for instance have acquired skills in the workplace or be self-taught and may have few or no formal qualifications and could consequently be barred from certain career pathways. Some of these individuals may go through the RPL process for the purpose of “just knowing what they are worth”. In some cases it is possible for individuals to undergo a process of preparation for testing and then assessment at the end of which this experience is recognised with an appropriate certificate or credit.

RPL for advancement

There are those already doing certain jobs and holding positions for which they have qualifications other than those currently recognised for that position. To comply with new national and internationally comparable laws and criteria, these individuals may be required legally to acquire new certification in order to continue to practice. There may be RPL preparation and assessment processes towards this certification.

³ For Umalusi: Council for Quality Assurance in General and Further Education and Training, the General and Further Education and Training Quality Assurance Amendment Act, Act No. 50 of 2008. For the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Higher Education Amendment Act, Act No. 39 of 2008. For the Quality Council on Trades and Occupations (QCTO), the Skills Development Amendment Act, Act No. 37 of 2008.

There are other examples. Importantly: RPL is not simply an assessment process – it involves mediation to ensure that candidates are able to make the transition from using knowledge and skills in one type of context, to using the same knowledge and skills in a different context. Mediation is also needed when knowledge and skills are recognised for particular qualifications, part-qualifications, or other specific types of credit. Effective RPL processes – whether for access, for credit, or for recognition in the workplace for white or blue-collar workers – usually involves making sure that RPL candidates have access to the mediation tools required for successful transition.

RPL has existed in South Africa for over 15 years now. All public and private institutions are required to have RPL policies in place. Implementation of these policies has not always been easy or straight-forward however. In a recent Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD 2009:68) report an apt comment is made:

South Africa has not yet gone beyond the initial stage represented by inspirational promoters of recognition, even though it has a network of excellent specialists and exhibits scattered signs of very good practice.

That there are islands of excellent practice is a positive and commendable achievement. It is imperative that these beginnings and developments are taken further. This new RPL policy draws on research and practice to date, to focus on the further development and resourcing of RPL, greater inclusivity regarding RPL; and the enhancement of the quality of RPL nationally.

Initial thoughts on the national coordination of RPL in South Africa

Following a background report on RPL in South Africa (Blom, Parker and Keevy 2007) and subsequent country visit to South Africa in 2008 by the OECD (SAQA & OECD 2009), SAQA responded by calling for an international conference in 2011 to share research information, but also to build RPL networks towards enhancing the implementation of RPL. Following from the conference the *Resolution and Working Document on RPL* (SAQA 2011) was agreed upon. In the Working Document a range of actions were identified in order to bridge and expand the islands of excellent practice.

Amongst the recommendations it was suggested that a Ministerial Task Team for RPL be appointed to give clear direction regarding a national RPL strategy, including a proposed National RPL Institute which would conduct, coordinate and disseminate a network of RPL-related research and information on effective practices. Following SAQA's advice, the Ministerial Task Team on RPL was established at the end of 2011 and will be concluding its work in August 2012 (see more discussion on the work of the Task Team later in this paper).

During this period, and in accordance with the requirements of the NQF Act of 2008, SAQA proceeded to develop national policy on RPL. This process involved an external Reference Group comprised of nominated experts in the field. The new policy draws on the existing SAQA policy developed in 2002 (SAQA 2002) as well as a set of RPL Implementation Guidelines (SAQA 2004), and is available for public consultations until 15 November 2012 after which it will be finalised.

An important component of the draft SAQA policy is the call for an independent Coordinating Mechanism for RPL to assist the Quality Councils, institutions and RPL practitioners to deal with barriers, accessing government funding, building capacity and expanding provision in respect of the information, advising, curriculum development, assessment, and administrative aspects of a comprehensive RPL system. The main functions of the proposed coordinating mechanism include (SAQA 2012:17):

- i. *Research*: Conduct, co-ordinate and disseminate RPL-related research and information;
- ii. *Professionalisation*: Initiate and encourage the training and continuing professional development of RPL practices and practitioners; and guide and support the professionalisation of RPL practices within the education and training system by supporting the *RPL Practitioner Association*;
- iii. *Co-ordination*: Identify and initiate strategic RPL projects that affect systemic shifts and address systemic barriers such as for artisan development and capacity-building projects;
- iv. *Support and advice*: Conduct formative, ongoing, and summative monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of RPL policy; oversee and ensure the dissemination of best local and international RPL practice, including successful models, toolkits and guidelines;
- v. *Advocacy*: Arrange a biennial conference on RPL inclusive of a full range of RPL practitioners and researchers, and learner representation.

It is proposed that the coordinating mechanism for RPL should include an Advisory Committee consisting of, amongst others, representatives from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHE), SAQA, the Quality Councils, the National Artisan Moderating Body (NAMB), RPL practitioners, public and private providers, professional bodies, organised labour and other stakeholders.

The Ministerial Task Team on RPL and related developments

In support of the Ministerial Task Team, SAQA initiated research by prominent experts in the field in the areas of RPL legislation (Werquin 2012, Lloyd 2012), funding (Pillay 2012), RPL activities in the SETA environment (Malgas 2012), and also in terms of international models⁴ of RPL (Michelson 2012, Harris 2012).

In comparing models from the Netherlands, United States and Canada, Michelson recommended that a centralised RPL Institute be established to “fund, direct, evaluate and recommend projects specific to RPL, but also to make sure that, through cooperative agreements, make sure that effective and viable RPL is part of the implementation of other related projects and initiatives” (2012:38). Michelson further proposes that the Institute be led by a small team of

⁴ The following international models of coordination of RPL were investigated: Norwegian *Institute for Adult Learning (Vox)*, Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL), Netherlands Knowledge Centre for RPL (*Kenniscentrum*), as well as United States sources.

RPL experts from the major stakeholder groups, including organised business, organised labour, the public sector, SAQA and the SETAs, and the Quality Councils. She makes the point that RPL must also be mandatory in a country like South Africa, and that the Institute should be empowered to carry out such a mandate. According to Michelson (2012) the tasks of the Institute should include:

- Directed and commissioned research;
- Programme development and management;
- Development and management of RPL processes within broader strategic initiatives;
- Capacity building;
- Articulation of, support for, and dissemination of best practice;
- Formative and summative evaluation of RPL and RPL-related projects.

Michelson also suggests a number of strategic projects that can be taken to scale, including a sector-specific RPL Centre along the lines of the Dutch model, a project within one or more Community Education and Training Centres, as well as a pilot on professional development in Further Education and Training (FET)/Higher Education and Training (HET).

In her review of RPL practices and approaches, Harris (2012) also reflects on the potential role of an RPL Institute. Harris argues that if RPL becomes mandatory, the Institute will be well-positioned to act on such a mandate. She suggests that the Institute will need to be formally connected to all stakeholder groups (2012:40):

...indeed [the Institute] will ideally be driven by [stakeholders] and their agendas through the strong advisory structure that is recommended.

Drawing on her own review of international examples, she finds that RPL centres have both operational and/or professional responsibilities. She proposes that the RPL Institute in South Africa should also have both these functions (2012:68):

...i.e. to be able to recommend, initiate, fund, direct, support and evaluate strategic RPL projects through cooperative arrangements with existing stakeholders and proposed networks such as Community Education Training Centres and the South African Institute for Vocational Education and Training.

Harris also stresses the important role for the Institute in terms of the professional development of RPL practitioners, suggesting that this should go far beyond assessor training unit standards.

The table below is a comparison of the tasks assigned to the coordinating mechanism through the SAQA RPL policy process (Michelson and Harris).

Overarching task assigned to the coordinating mechanism	SAQA RPL Policy (2012)	Michelson (2012)	Harris (2012)
Oversee research into RPL	Conduct, co-ordinate and disseminate RPL-related research and information.	Directed and commissioned research.	
Dissemination of best RPL practices	Oversee and ensure the dissemination of best local and international RPL practice, including successful models, toolkits and guidelines. Arrange a biennial conference on RPL inclusive of a full range of RPL practitioners and researchers, and learner representation.	Programme development and management.	
Support RPL processes within broader national and strategic initiatives, including strategic RPL projects	Identify and initiate strategic RPL projects that affect systemic shifts and address systemic barriers such as for artisan development and capacity-building projects.	Development and management of RPL processes within broader strategic initiatives. Articulation of, support for, and dissemination of best practice. Strategic projects that can be taken to scale.	Recommend, initiate, fund, direct, support and evaluate strategic RPL projects through cooperative arrangements with existing stakeholders and proposed networks.
Monitoring and evaluation of RPL	Conduct formative, ongoing, and summative monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of RPL policy.	Formative and summative evaluation of RPL and RPL-related projects.	
Professional development of RPL practitioners	Initiate and encourage the training and continuing professional development of RPL practices and practitioners; and guide and support the professionalisation of RPL practices within the education and training system by supporting the <i>RPL Practitioner Association</i> .	Professional development of RPL practitioners.	Professional development of RPL practitioners.

Table 1: Comparison of the tasks assigned to the RPL coordinating mechanism

Werquin (2012) in his review of VAE (Validation of Experiential Learning Outcomes) legislation in France also suggests the professional development of RPL staff, as he critically engages with the relationship between RPL and an NQF. He makes a strong case for the conceptual separation for the two concepts, while acknowledging that there are also strong links. Importantly, Werquin asks if an inter-ministerial agency would not be the best possible route to follow. Harris (2012) raises a similar concern when she suggests two issues that need to be considered:

- Should the Institute only focus on RPL or should it be part of something broader such as a national guidance system?
- How 'independent' should the Institute be? Indeed, how independent can it be if it is close to government?

SAQA, the NQF and RPL

The NQF Act of 2008 assigns very specific RPL-related responsibilities to SAQA, notably to develop policy and criteria for RPL, assessment and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT). As mentioned in the introduction above, SAQA has proceeded with the development of the RPL policy which is now in a public consultation stage. SAQA is also responsible for recognising professional bodies and registering professional designations on the NQF. This responsibility enables SAQA to work closely with professional bodies and creates possibilities for SAQA to be involved in the professional development of RPL practitioners in the absence of a professional body.

SAQA has over the past few years been able to successfully take up complex projects, such as the national Career Advice Service (CAS), which falls within its mandate (this has been pointed out in the draft 2012-13 Ministerial Guidelines for the NQF). The Ministry has acknowledged SAQA's ability to take up these projects and has provided the necessary support. When it comes to the establishment of an RPL coordinating mechanism there is no doubt that this function could fall under SAQA, notably as part of its responsibility to implement the NQF, and as part of its monitoring and evaluation role. The lessons learnt from the CAS project do, however, have to be borne in mind, including (also see Keevy, West and Steenekamp 2012):

- Impact on other parts of SAQA, specifically the support functions;
- Need for a strong project manager;
- Careful management of the relationship with DHET;
- Appointment of the right staff;
- Sustainable funding for at least a five year period;
- Strong links to other international agencies that perform a similar role.

The relationship between RPL and a qualifications framework requires careful interrogation. In South Africa, as was pointed out earlier, the two concepts were introduced simultaneously and have remained intertwined; RPL simply did not exist before the introduction of the NQF. The strong demarcation between formal, non-formal and informal learning associated with the NQF brought with it a strong emphasis (some would argue, over-emphasis) on the valuing of formal learning. The only way in which non-formal and informal learning could gain value was by becoming "formalised" through the process of RPL. Over time this has resulted in downscaling of such activities and limited funding being made available. As an example, the incorrect perception that companies could only claim back their skills levies against formal education and training courses persists to the present day. If SAQA takes up the role as the coordinating mechanism, RPL will inevitably remain firmly located within the NQF.

In order to reflect on this relationship between RPL and the NQF, the recent work by Werquin (2012) is useful. Werquin agrees that RPL and NQFs have much in common, but points out that these commonalities may not be enough to combine the two concepts in the same legislation (2012:115):

Recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes and national qualifications frameworks often have the concept of learning outcomes in common. They both bring transparency about qualifications and competences. Finally, they both promote equity and it is very likely that one will not happen without the other in many countries. These commonalities probably explain the attempt to address both of them in the same legislation. However, there are also many reasons to believe that they should not be addressed in the same legislation.

In arguing for a legal separation of RPL and an NQF, Werquin makes the point that is unlikely that four objectives described for validating and recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes – qualification, access, guidance and labour market – can be addressed in the same legislation. In this regard Werquin agrees that NQF legislation is mostly biased toward the formal education and training system. In his view these four objectives cannot be fully addressed in a legislative text dealing with a qualifications framework. He adds that the inclusion of aspects such as duration and content of programmes in NQF legislation are concepts that are not useful to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. He does however, note that this is becoming less frequent.

A second argument from Werquin for the separation of NQFs and RPL in legislation is based on the distinction between RPL as a process, and qualifications (i.e. the NQF) as a final outcome. He argues that the NQF is “only about the final outcomes: the qualification” (2012:116) and it is therefore not possible to adequately address the processes related to RPL (such as assessment, financing, objectives...) in NQF legislation.

Werquin notes that RPL currently falls under the NQF Act and SAQA, but asks if another division of labour should not be considered (2012:116):

In South Africa, it seems Recognition of Prior Learning falls under the legislative framework about national qualifications framework and the latter falls under the South African Qualifications Authority. Would it be possible to consider a different division of labour with, for example, an inter-ministerial agency?

Concluding comments

This discussion paper has provided a brief overview of the developments associated with RPL in South Africa since 1995. It has been shown that RPL and the South African NQF have been strongly interrelated with both positive and negative implications. On the positive side RPL has received strong policy support; on the negative side, RPL has been associated primarily with the “formalisation” of learning in order for such learning to be recognised within a system that has over-emphasised the value of formal learning. It has also been shown that islands of excellent RPL practice exist in South Africa and that RPL has not yet been taken to scale.

Drawing on the recent work of SAQA through its current review of the national RPL policy, and international models, notably from Harris, Michelson and Werquin, different views of how RPL

can be better coordinated in South Africa have been considered. In this regard, significant consensus about the roles of a potential coordinating mechanism for RPL was identified. However, consensus regarding the location of such a mechanism, notably within SAQA and the NQF, was not shared by all.

The Ministerial Task Team on RPL has concluded its work (the report has been submitted to the Minister) and there is a strong possibility that SAQA will be asked to perform the role of a coordinating mechanism, at least for an initial period. Within this context, SAQA has to be proactive. Based on the discussions summarised in this paper, the following options can be considered:

Option 1: SAQA

A national RPL system is part of lifelong learning as organising principle of the NQF. The architecture of the NQF incorporates a triad of components: RPL, Articulation and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), which need to be managed in a coherent manner. Adding Career Advice Services (CAS) as a fourth component, which is housed within SAQA, the argument is strengthened that SAQA should be the RPL coordinating mechanism. This option could save on infrastructure but maintains the link between the NQF and RPL.

Option 2: Department of Higher Education and Training

RPL is driven by Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) in cooperation with SAQA with offices located at DHET. This option could also save on infrastructure.

Option 3: Inter-Ministerial

An Inter-Ministerial agency is established, possibly under the auspices of the Department of Public Service and Administration. This will enable more focus on RPL (outside of the NQF).

Option 4: Outsourced

The RPL coordinating mechanism is outsourced to an external body established for this purpose. This is the most expensive option.

SAQA is undoubtedly in a strong position to take on the additional responsibility of incubating the proposed national RPL coordinating mechanism (Option 1). However considering the pressures on the organisation as a result of budget cuts and current expanded responsibilities, this task will have to be taken on with great care.

Key considerations include:

1. At present this discussion is only a proactive exercise – SAQA has not been formally approached as yet. A decision will have to be made as to how much SAQA should do in anticipation of the formal request.
2. Funding for 3-5 years will have to be sourced, if not through Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), then with external partners. To what extent can SAQA start to explore options?
3. A strong person will be needed to drive the project – can SAQA start exploring options?
4. In terms of the NQF Act, it is possible for SAQA to take on the responsibility of coordinating RPL, but the SAQA Board will have to be consulted and buy-in sought at the appropriate time.
5. SAQA's involvement with professional bodies also creates an opportunity for SAQA to support the professional development of RPL practitioners – how can SAQA take this forward?
6. How can SAQA build strong links to other similar RPL coordinating agencies? Study visits, such as the recent visit to the Netherlands, is an option but longer-term sustainable models must be investigated.

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⁵ At the time of the preparation of this paper the SAQA Bulletin 12(3) was being readied for layout and printing. Page numbers used in this paper refer to this version. It is anticipated that this edition will be finalised before the end of 2012. It will be placed on the SAQA website as soon as it is ready.

Annexure 1: Current RPL projects SAQA is involved in

SAQA has progressed well in conceptualising and implementing RPL:

1. Research into RPL is progressing apace. The partnership between SAQA and the University of the Western Cape (UWC) has proven fruitful, with four case study reports and interim findings delivered in the 2011/12 financial year. A cross-case study has commenced.
2. RPL publications are prepared within the Research Directorate for printing and wide workshopping and dissemination. Work includes (a) a book of full papers from the RPL conference held in 2011; (b) a series of RPL case study booklets covering 'achieving buy-in for RPL'; 'developing sectoral RPL policies'; 'examples of effective delivery models'; and 'RPL toolkits'; and (c) a booklet of RPL candidate experiences entitled *South African RPL experiences*.
3. Coordinating and monitoring RPL projects: SAQA has been approached to provide support for several organisational RPL cases, including those for (1) the Department of Public Services Administration (DPSA); (2) the Marine Industry Association (MIA) [Boat Builders]; (3) Medical Laboratory Scientists; (4) Community Development Practitioners; (5) South African Police Services (SAPS); (6) the Health Professions Council (HPCSA) [Psychology professionals]; (7) State Information Technology Agency (SITA); (8) Game Rangers; and several individuals. In the eight areas listed here initiatives are currently underway; in the case of Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) and Public Administration Leadership and Management Academy (PALAMA), assistance to develop an RPL policy for the public service is in the public comment phase. SAQA also assisted PALAMA in streamlining their RPL processes and procedures.

The above cases represent four sectors and serve as growing points towards full scale RPL implementation. The projects address important aspects of the NQF such as articulation and CAT, and systemic barriers experienced within each sector. These sectors are:

Sector	HET SECTOR	FET SECTOR	WORKPLACES	ARTISAN SECTOR
Projects	• Community Development • Medical Laboratory Scientists • Psychology • SITA	• Community Development • Game Rangers	• Community Development • SITA	• Boat building • Mechanical • Upholstery
Partnerships	• Universities • Department of Social Development, DPSA, SETAs, Local Government	FET Colleges, Department of Social Development, DPSA , SETAs, Local Government, WWF and Sanparks	SITA	National Artisan Moderating Body (NAMB)
Barriers	Admission requirements Articulation possibilities 50% residency clause CAT possibilities	Admission requirements Articulation possibilities CAT possibilities	• Workplace standards • Job descriptions	Section 13 and 28 trade tests

Annexure 2: SAQA-UWC Partnership Research: Summary of key findings and associated policy implications

Introductory note

This document summarises key interim findings from a five-year research project on alternative access in four widely differing contexts, namely RPL for access to undergraduate study; RPL for access to postgraduate study; in-curriculum RPL for workers; and RPL to meet legislative and other requirements in the workplace – for white-collar workers. In its original conception, this study did not include blue-collar workers; SAQA is, however, elsewhere engaged in extensive capturing of successful RPL initiatives involving blue-collar workers, and investigating the creation of associated RPL toolkits. The partnership project on which this brief report focuses is mid-way: the four case studies are complete, and have been written up in four detailed case study reports. The cross-case study designed to lead an inclusive RPL model, has commenced. This document has three sections: (1) Key perspectives; (2) Summary of key interim findings; and (3) Summary of policy implications from the interim findings.

1. Key perspectives

- 1.1 The purpose of this research is to explore RPL practices across a number of sites with reference to the perception that these practices have failed to enhance the inclusive potential of the education and training system, and specifically its capacity to provide opportunities for certification and access to new learning programmes for those who were unfairly denied these opportunities in the past.
- 1.2 The research is designed to draw on a number sources, including a literature review of RPL research in South Africa and internationally, four case studies of existing relatively well established practices at different sites in the system, and a number of biographical studies of people who are active participants or beneficiaries of RPL related programmes and services. One limitation of the research is that it does not include a case study of RPL practices for artisans or technicians at NQF Levels 1-4 for example, builders, mechanics, welders, or electricians. However, the study does include one site where the focus is on a Level 1 vocational qualification with specific orientation to workplace learning and relevant experience.
- 1.3 The case studies in this project are all based at institutions which have built up a set of RPL services and programmes over five years or more. They include two public Higher Education Institutions (HEI); one public workers' college; and one private provider. They include a scope of provision that ranges from NQF Level 1 vocational qualifications; NQF Levels 5 and 6 'licence to practice' occupational qualifications; to undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, certificates, and diplomas. Four lines of inquiry were established from the start of the research, for exploring nature of existing practices at the site for each case, namely: (1) the institutional contexts; (2) the epistemological requirements; (3) the pedagogical requirements; and (4) learner agency. Factors associated with each of these themes were identified and analysed for the ways in which they contribute to the affordances and constraints associated with the RPL practices at each site.

2. Summary of key interim findings

2.1 The literature review confirms that the discourse of globalisation and democratic transformation make competing claims on the nature and form of RPL as a key principle of the NQF: market related skills recognition for the former and the redress of apartheid-based imbalances in the case of the latter. Both approaches espouse the merits of an outcomes-led assessment practice through which experiential learning serves as a basis for certification or alternative access into a targeted learning programme.

2.2 Current RPL regulations and policy guidelines (SAQA 1995, 2002, 2003) are under review to address the inadequacies of a narrow focus on outcomes-led and assessment-oriented practice, and to take into account lessons from stronger RPL systems. The revised policy is premised on identification of a set of types of RPL; and language, learning and epistemological approaches that form part of RPL as a specialised pedagogy supported by extensive advice and learner information and support services.

2.3 Challenges relating to the outcomes-led/ assessment focused policy (SAQA 1995, 2002, 2003) have been accentuated in situations where learners are transitioning from one learning pathway to another example from a work-based practice to an undergraduate degree or professional programme at university, or from an out-of school out-of-work situation into a learnership or a vocational programme. In these cases, the articulation of RPL processes with the receiving or hosting qualification and associated curriculum is both complex and critical: complex in that the process involves mediation between different representations of knowledge and learning, and critical in that learners once admitted need time to acquire the tools and find their way into the new discourse and related practices. The specialised provision for RPL and adult learner friendly curricula, including flexibly designed programmes available after hours is crucial to the long term success of these innovations.

2.4 In each of the cases, the design and implementation of RPL involved and continues to involve a specialised curriculum and learning programme through which participants are equipped with the necessary procedural and conceptual tools to engage with the learning and assessment requirements of the RPL process. The pedagogical nature of these programmes is such that learners are provided with the social, cognitive, and linguistic tools needed to articulate their existing knowledge and skills for the purposes of acquiring a formal qualification. This finding highlights that successful practices in each case involve mediation between knowledges which is fundamentally distinct from RPL as an assessment-led practice where learners are classically RPL'led for compliance to pre-existing standards, as interpreted by the assessors in whom power and authority is vested.

2.5 RPL as an isolated assessment led practice is seldom effective in advancing the access, redress, success, articulation, and quality objectives of the NQF. On the contrary, RPL as an integral practice combines the processes of advising, mentoring, coaching, and teaching in preparing learners to engage successfully with different forms of learning and assessment in different contexts. The capacity to provide advising and pre-screening information in all languages is fundamental to these processes and it is clear (from the SAQA-UWC study) that

there are large numbers of people keen to exploit these alternative routes back into formal education and work-based learning programmes.

2.6 RPL as a specialised curriculum and pedagogy is seldom reducible to a one size fits all, and takes on different forms in different contexts and settings. RPL for access to postgraduate study at University will vary according to the purpose and design of the programme for which the learner is seeking access or credit such as. for a Certificate Level Business Management Programme with a strong focus on applied knowledge and skills as compared to a Disability Studies Masters Programme with a strong focus on concept development and research. Likewise, an RPL programme designed for office workers seeking a vocational qualification in Basic Business Practices will have to engage with a range of stakeholders (colleges, subject providers and employers) in attempting an integrated design based on standardised (procedural and conceptual) and experiential (workplace-based) requirements of the qualification. This is different in turn from a Labour Studies Programme that is designed to enhance the critical consciousness of trade union organisers and shop stewards whilst at the same time meeting the requirements of an articulation agreement for access to a social science degree at university. SAQA's broader research into RPL for trades is not yet complete, but first indications are that processes require particular preparation for candidates in differing contexts.

2.7 The institutional context is complex in each instance: policies and practices can vary across and within departments or faculties. Milieu vary from being supportive, to being sceptical and negative. RPL as a specialised practice within higher and further education and training is still relatively new in SA and globally, and increasingly requires specialised and dedicated personnel for all aspects of the practice: curriculum design and development, advising, teaching, mentoring, assessment, administration and research.

2.8 RPL is an unfunded mandate at all public HET and FET institutions and this reality contributes to the reluctance of many institutions to promote and implement specialised RPL services and programmes within their institutional contexts. It also elevates the costs for learners seeking to access these services at public institutions. In contrast, provision for RPL services in the private sector is assisted by SETA and NSF based funding with real benefits for employees in companies that have a proactive and equitable skills development profile.

3. Summary interim policy implications

3.1. The provision of quality advising and information programmes and services needs to be recognised and resourced as part of the total RPL offering at all public and private RPL provider institutions. An escalation of demand for these services may necessitate cost effective innovations such as regional advising and information centres, with referral to the participating public (and private) providers. Provision for these RPL services in the private sector assisted by SETA and National Skills Fund (NSF) based funding with real benefits for employees in companies that have a proactive and equitable skills development profile needs to be encouraged to continue.

- 3.2. The capacity and resources required to design and implement a comprehensive RPL curriculum at all levels in the education and training system must be carefully considered and properly resourced.
- 3.3. Full education and training of all RPL role players at the various stages of the RPL process needs to be mandatory, and the resources to make this possible need to be allocated.
- 3.4. The DHET needs to consider the provision of targeted funding for public institutions to make RPL provision a serious option and these funds must include the provision for personnel and administrative systems.
- 3.5. In brief, alternative access policy (policy for RPL, CAT, Assessment) and all related policies (such as those discussed in the Green Paper for Post-School Education and Training) needs to include the following:
- A strategic focus on making alternative access routes known and user friendly across the learning system, but most especially in the FET Colleges and Community Education and Training Centres;
 - Understanding of the specialised nature of RPL with its differing purposes and forms;
 - Funding for the pedagogical nature of alternative access practices, which include the elements of counselling, pedagogical mediating initiatives, assessment, certification, and others – all of which need to be indicated explicitly through Departmental budgets, the NSF, and where appropriate, the discretionary funds of the SETAs;
 - Explicit provision for the appointment and training of dedicated RPL personnel at all public and private institutions in the system, and in selected workplaces (with learnership and/or occupationally directed programmes);
 - Provision for the professionalisation of RPL assessors and moderators;
 - An outline of where the following will be located:
 - Coordination of RPL activities;
 - Dissemination of RPL-related information;
 - Development of RPL expertise;
 - Provision for centralised/regional RPL information and advising services, linked to all providers but not appropriating their autonomy or specialised RPL related policies and practices;
 - Facilities to develop e-learning portfolios for every learner who participates in the system;
 - A national data base of RPL participants and transactions (including monitoring the relationship between disbursement of funds and achievements).