



# **The EWSETA and the Recognition of Prior Learning**



**Perspectives and challenges  
including a roadmap for 2014 - 2015**

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# Preface

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*The Energy and Water Services Sector Education and Training Authority (EWSETA)* is a skills development authority serving the energy and water sectors in South Africa.

EWSETA is one of 21 Sector Education and Training Authorities SETAs established in South Africa in terms of the Skills Development Act of 1998 - amended. It plays a crucial function in ensuring that the National Skills and Development Strategy is executed within the energy and water sectors. The main areas of focus of the EWSETA is energy, renewable energy, gas and water services sector, as determined by the Honourable Minister of Higher Education and Training in terms of section 9(2) of the SDA, read in conjunction with Government Gazette No 33756, RG 9417, No. R1055 of 11 November 2010.

Part of the EWSETA's mandate is to see to the successful implementation of the systematics of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the sector. In 2012 the board of the EWSETA decided to realize a pilot on RPL in the water sector.

*PiCompany South Africa* has been contracted by the EWSETA to execute the capacitation of the SETA and its stakeholders to implement RPL policies and procedures.

This research report seeks to paint a picture of the current state of RPL in South Africa with an ultimate focus on EWSETA. This document will, to some extent, bring to light the needs that have been identified with regards to the implementation of RPL. These identified needs will then be used as input for further discussion with relevant stakeholders in the Water Sector and also for the further development of the training content to be used for the up-skilling of selected candidates from the sector to execute RPL.



# Introduction

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Throughout history, people have always prepared thoroughly for strengthening and practising their skills in a profession. The prevailing systems of professional training and education do require adjustment and even innovation, because they are part of the changing socio-economic and socio-cultural landscape. Where once upon a time, simply completing a qualification was enough to gain and hold onto your place in society and on the labour market, in ever more cases this no longer holds. Nowadays, in the ongoing transition to ‘the learning society’ flexible, continuous and more adaptive learning is required to keep the citizen viable on today’s labour market. Staying on top of this development is vital for all actors; authorities, citizens, labour organizations, employers, trade unions, schools/universities and legislative and regulatory bodies are all tied together closely in the social and economic structure. These ties have always been present, but never before in history the individual – or the citizen – got the chance to gain so much control in steering one’s career through learning as is the case in ‘the learning society’. It is the systematic of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) that offers this window of opportunities with its focus on opening up learning opportunities for all people. This is also the perspective for the EWSETA’s objective of enhancing RPL in the sector.

This report provides the building-blocks for enhancing such a sector-based approach towards RPL-steered learning strategies in terms of an analysis of:

1. (inter)national policy developments. Since the 1970s the development and gradual implementation of RPL-systematics can be observed in the international context. This chapter aims at clarifying *‘the why’* of RPL:
  - why has it been developed and only gradually been implemented so far?
  - why is it that the time’s ripe for full implementation on national and sector-levels?Positioning South African policy-developments in this global picture is part of this chapter.
2. When implementing RPL on a national and sector level it is of great importance to be aware of the complex nature of the RPL-systematics, the critical success factors and its reaching out to a variety of perspectives. This chapter presents *‘the how’* of RPL by analysing best practices of RPL-systematics in different countries, especially the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, Finland and Switzerland. This analysis is finalized with the formulation of the four main models for RPL-steered learning-strategies.
3. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter the South African context is described. Both national and sector a policy is analysed. The outcomes of this analysis contribute to the formulation of the potential for sector-implementation of RPL in the final two chapters.

4. This chapter presents '*the what*' of RPL. Main purpose of this chapter is to answer the question 'What to do when implementing RPL in the EWSETA-context, on a sector level with linkages to the national level?'.  
First the stage is set for both conclusions as well as critical success factors regarding the implementation of RPL-systematics in the sector context. Next the potential linkages are described between the 2013 Guidelines of the National Policy for implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning and the 2008 ESETA policy paper on RPL.

5. The final chapter presents the roadmap for the further implementation of RPL in the EWSETA.



The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process oriented approach for recognizing and validating what people have learned so far in their lives. The RPL-process aims at linking these personal learning experiences to further development steps or – in other words - to personalized lifelong learning-strategies. RPL is not designed to highlight the lack of competences but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing competences and embrace the vision that ‘someone’s glass is already half filled’.

This chapter provides an overview of the (inter)national policy journey towards the acknowledgement of the social and economic value of RPL within the global development of lifelong learning strategies<sup>1</sup>.

## 1.1 The learning society

The development of RPL-enhanced lifelong learning strategies needs to be understood as an essential part of the concept of ‘the learning society’. This concept originated in the 1970s, a period that saw a growth in employment and better life conditions for all people. The UNESCO formulated this concept as follows:

*“If learning involves all of one’s life, in the sense of both time-span and diversity, and all of society, including its social and economic as well as its educational resources, then we must go even further than the necessary overhaul of ‘educational systems’ until we reach the stage of a learning society. For these are the true proportions of the challenge education will be facing in the future.”*  
(Faure et al., 1972, xxxiii).

The concept was built on the notion that learning was important and valuable for all and that people needed to be encouraged to invest in their potential throughout their lives, taking into account their prior learning. Both the UNESCO and the Council of Europe pushed the concept further by initiating the idea of ‘permanent education’ as a cultural-political structuring principle for the educational field to serve as a universal, coherent and integral system with the sole purpose of meeting lifelong the educational and cultural needs of everyone, in line with his/her abilities. Permanent education refers in this way to enabling man to integrate freely and independently in the changing society and to participate actively in the evolution of society (Ommen, 1969, pp. 20-21). This idealism was influenced by the ideas of Ivan Illich concerning the need for ‘deschooling society’ with its plea for self-directed education, supported by intentional social relations in fluid informal arrangements (Illich, 1971) and of Paolo Freire on learning as a developmental and dialogical process of action-reflection-praxis of and by people – teachers and learners (Freire, 1970).

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<sup>1</sup> This policy analysis is based on: Duvekot, R.C., Lifelong Learning Policy in The Learning Society: the promise of Faure? In: Harris, J., Wihak, C. and Kleef, J. van (eds.) (2014) *Handbook of the Recognition of Prior Learning. Research into Practice*. Leicester, NIACE, pp. 63-84.

Together, these concepts, principles and ideals evoked a growing need for social participation of all in society and for skilled labour. Research and literature underlined the attention in national government's policies for the pre-conditional role of education in maintaining and enlarging this rise in 'social and economic wealth'. Education was equated with lifelong learning and a significant and relevant means of transforming social and political life for this purpose (Gelpi, 1985; Hobsbawm, 1994).

Education, therefore, could no longer be considered as a period preceding - and distinct from - active life. Every kind of experience should be used to acquire further knowledge; education should no longer be restricted to formal schooling, nor limited in time. School, while remaining the essential mode of delivery for transmitting organized knowledge, would be supplemented by all components of social life, institutions, working environment and leisure, as well as by the media. In addition to no longer being based on teaching and on the precedence of the teacher over the learner, education would in fact replace the 'teaching' approach by the 'learning' approach, the learner - particularly during his adult life - directly assimilating the knowledge provided by society. A social configuration that accorded such a place to education and conferred such a status on it deserved a name of its own: 'the learning society'.

The assumptions of the UNESCO and the Council of Europe resulted in an on-going debate on the challenges that such a learning society poses to us all (Schon, 1973; Husén, 1974; Delors, 1996; Edwards, 1997; Jarvis, 2008). These contributions focus on various principles for creating 'the learning society':

1. there's more to learning than just education,
2. lifelong learning is a necessity since initial qualifications aren't a structural guarantee for careers,
3. acquiring competences isn't restricted to formal learning but also entails informal learning and non-formal learning; all these forms of learning have to be considered as valuable learning,
4. society can be seen as a social and economic structure in which learners have a learning attitude, implicitly and/or explicitly, and in which learners have to take up their responsibility in this too, lifelong,
5. access to learning needs to be lifelong, open and democratic, regardless of status, gender, age, philosophy, special needs, heritage or any other personal feature.

In such a learning society almost all contributors to the debate suggested RPL as an important cornerstone of lifelong learning-strategies by operationalizing these strategies in bottom-up steered learning-processes. In this sense RPL serves individual perspectives and challenges the education and training system. This is the social context in which the empowerment of the individual can come to full bloom. Empowerment refers to the expansion of freedom of choice and action to shape one's life. It implies a sense of ownership and control over resources, decisions and focuses on the expansion of assets and capabilities of people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives (Narayan, 2005).

Empowerment changes the nature of learning and challenges the learning system to design learning-strategies in different settings and for different purposes. It entails learning that Giddens and Beck perceived as *reflexivity*, which is an expression of the transition to the modernity of *The Learning Society* (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). In their view modernity is characterized by the requirement placed upon individuals and institutions to reflect upon what they know in order to make their choices about who they are and how they behave. Giddens accentuated this theme with his notion of 'reflexive modernity' - the argument

that, over time, society becomes increasingly more self-aware, reflective, and hence reflexive. In this perception, lifelong learning is a key characteristic of modernity in which meaning and identity are grounded in the self (individual) as the primary agent of change in the learning society. RPL therefore supports positioning 'the self' as a co-designer of the lifelong learning process.

This co-making of learning fits well into social development as one of the so-called instrumental freedoms that contribute, directly or indirectly, to the overall freedom that people have to be able to live the way they would like to live. Therefore, it is vital for people to have access to all forms and phases of learning in order to shape their own destiny (Sen, 1999). Sen acknowledges in this way the relevance of the permanent education principle. Between individuals and their access to learning stand a variety of organisations, institutes and relationships, all acting as 'partners in learning' in their own image of society. Democratisation of learning is clearly seen by all theorists as a vital strategy for realizing the concept of 'the learning society', even when they are having different images of what this democratization in reality entails. The bottom-line is that "without democratisation of all actors, the learning society will continue to generate ever greater inequity and exclusion, and become ever more unstable" (Field, 2006, p. 171). It's precisely with this broad perspective in mind why the evolving importance of RPL in lifelong learning policy as a potential bridge to learning opportunities for all – and as a promising precondition for personalisation of learning – is worth analysing.

## 1.2 Definitions

Defining lifelong learning remains an issue to be solved. In the literature a common definition much used, is the one by the European Commission: *"all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective"* (EC, 2001, p. 9). In this definition lifelong learning is perceived as a conscious act or behaviour of individuals. However, there must be more to lifelong learning, since learning also gives meaning to the society as a holistic feature of a society in which people live, work and learn together, self-conscious and autonomous or not, and agreeing on and settling themselves in its institutions. Therefore we are more inclined to support the definition of Jarvis. He addresses the holistic character of lifelong learning as an individual and social process:

*"Every opportunity made available by any social institution for, and every process by which, an individual can acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and sense with global society"* (Jarvis, 2007, p.99).

Defining RPL is also problematic because of the different abbreviations and meanings attributed to it. For this chapter Recognition of Prior Learning can best be defined as the instrumentation of

*"the process of promoting participation in and outcomes of (formal or non-formal) learning, in order to raise awareness of its intrinsic worth and to reward learning"* (Cedefop, 2008).

This kind of recognition shows the real human potential (of the person) on the basis of the analysis and recognition of personal competences; it even adds lifelong learning as a personalised learning strategy to existing, institutionalised learning roads. It is not designed

to highlight the lack of skills and competences but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing skills and competences; in other words, rather than being half empty, the idea is that the glass is half full! (Werkgroep EVC, 2000). In this sense RPL is focused on empowerment and opening up individual perspective(s) by means of designing personalised learning strategies. It can make the (public and private) system more customer-driven with this focus on personal development objectives. Organisations benefit from this since individuals can always be developed within their organisational context, which makes the circle round again and turns personal development into a collective effort with collective gains.

In this global perspective it is worthwhile to show the focus of EWSETA's definition on RPL which clearly is in line with the worldwide signification of RPL:

*“RPL is a process to help people get formal recognition for what they have learned through their experiences and for what they can do, know and understand. The RPL process enables a person to gain qualifications and credits.”* (EWSETA Policy, 2008).

### **1.3 Breaking ground for RPL**

France was the first country to introduce legislation with respect to RPL. It already had a law since 1934 for individuals to obtain an engineering diploma on the basis of professional experience. In the 1980s the rationale for recognizing skills and competences for all professions was based on the high unemployment rates, particularly among young people and those lacking qualifications. Since 1985 it became possible for people to get access to all education-levels on the basis of their *Bilan de Compétence*. This ‘bilan’ or ‘balance’ is a personal dossier with all the proofs of someone's professional and personal learning experiences so far. These experiences might have been obtained in- and outside the learning system. With a portfolio-assessment someone can get formal accreditation of these experiences for obtaining a specific certificate or even a diploma (Charraud, 2007). The importance of the Recognition of experience and skills has since then been confirmed through a number of subsequent policy initiatives and laws. Supporting systems such as the *Répertoire National de la Certification Professionnelle* (National Repertory of Vocational Certificates) were to be set in place on a national level, with collaboration from all stakeholders and support for implementation at regional level.

In the United States the implementation of RPL (or Prior Learning Assessment-PLA) had been exemplary and peculiar since the 1970s. There was no national PLA-policy but many practices of such PLA existed. The processes were (and are) used to establish credit against college courses. This practice came to the fore with the establishment in 1974 of the Council for Adult & Experiential Learning (CAEL), linking learning and work by means of PLA. It was defined as *“a method whereby learning gained through an individual's life experience is considered as credit toward a college degree program. As this learning can come from a variety of sources, including work, hobbies, military service and family responsibilities, this credit may be given depending on the criteria established by the PLA-offering institution. Prior Learning Assessment can be administered through exams, portfolios or curriculum evaluation”* (ILO, 2005, p. 51).

PLA has been used since the 1980s mainly as a process by which colleges evaluate for academic credit the college-level knowledge and skills an individual has gained outside of the classroom (or from non-college instructional programs), including employment, military training/service, travel, hobbies, civic activities and volunteer service. A study of

graduation rates in 1994 of PLA students and non-PLA students, found that those who completed PLA went on to finish a bachelor's degree or higher at a higher rate than those who had not completed their portfolio for PLA (Freers, 1994).

In England the development of RPL was influenced by David Kolb's approach of experiential learning (1984). He stated that for learning to take place, people should progress from experience, via reflection, to theorisation, thence understanding and application of their new knowledge in another sphere. Reflection is crucial in being able to extricate the learning gained from experience. This learning cycle, based on a concrete experience, reflection on this experience, turning this reflection into a generalisation and applying this generalisation back into new situations where new experiences could in turn be enhanced and accumulated, contributed in England to the development of methodology for the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). In this way people could provide themselves the basic material for further learning. Later RPL came to the front with its focus more on prior certificated or vocational learning and less on experiential or informal learning (Fraser, 1995).

Canada saw the introduction of RPL (using the term Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition or PLAR) later, in the 1980s. It was applied as a means to grant educational credit to learning acquired in non-school settings. It was first used in Winnipeg, Manitoba, within the areas of nursing, dental assisting and early childhood education. At the time, there was a substantial number of mature-aged students seeking college credentials in vocational areas where there was a need for qualified practitioners (ILO, 2005).

The foundation for RPL in South Africa is legislative. The National Education Policy Act of 1996 aimed at achieving equitable educational opportunities and redress past inequalities of learning provision. RPL was - and still is - closely associated with broad education, training and industrial strategies in the post-apartheid era (OECD, 2007a).

Two types of RPL emerged in South Africa: RPL for credit, usually associated with general and further education and training, and RPL for access, usually associated with higher education. *"RPL in South Africa has, unlike similar initiatives in other countries, a very specific agenda. RPL is meant to support transformation of the education and training system of the country. This calls for an approach to the development of RPL policy and practices that explicitly addresses the visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment"* (SAQA, 2003, p. 11).

The key challenge for the implementation of RPL in South Africa is the sustainability of the lifelong learning strategy for all, within social and economic dimensions of fighting inequalities and unemployment.

These national initiatives demonstrated the pendulum for lifelong learning policy swinging between social and economic perspectives. It needed an open mind for incorporating learning outcomes acquired formally, informally and non-formally both in learning systems as well as in social and labour systems. Above all, RPL was practiced in different countries, with various drivers and outcomes. The question of ownership of learning by the individual was however not raised yet in practice, unlike the question of access to qualification systems or frameworks.

#### **1.4 The rise of RPL in Europe, 1995-2005**

The current broad approach to lifelong learning originated in the 1990s. It was paramount to the need to adapt to the (again) changing social conditions in the late 1990s. In

particular, the trends of globalization, the development of the information society and the rapid scientific and technological progress led to this need (CEC, 1995; Janssens, 2002). It simultaneously led to the recognition of the added value of international education policy, in addition to and equivalent to national education policies and can be understood as a harbinger of the activating role that international organisations could play in the learning arena.

The Bologna Declaration of 1999 is a good example of this role (Harris, 2011). It meant the creation of a European Higher Education Area in which national authorities would raise awareness on the need for a knowledge society, promote mobility in Europe by creating similar diplomas in the Bachelor-Master levels and organize the transfer of credits through the European Credit transfer System (ECTS), the exchange of students and lecturers and, lastly, independent quality control (Bologna Declaration, 1999). Although mainly engineered for economic purposes, the declaration would help open up the learning world to RPL as a method for recognizing prior learning outcomes. The economic approach was associated with the socio-integrative character of education because it focused on providing learning opportunities to every citizen as an integral part of independent and lifelong education. The introduction of the notion of learning outcomes is crucial for getting a grip on the impact RPL can have on learning processes. Learning outcomes can be defined as *“the set of knowledge, skills and/or competences an individual has acquired and/or is able to demonstrate after completion of a learning process, either formal, non-formal or informal”* (Cedefop, 2008).

The coupling of lifelong learning with higher education was broadened in 2000 to the entire education sector when the EU Member States agreed on the 'Lisbon Strategy' (CEC, 2000). This strategy aimed at creating the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world by 2010, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion and respect for the environment. RPL was strongly embedded in this agenda with the focus on recognizing learning and improving the ways in which learning participation and outcomes are understood and appreciated, particularly non-formal and informal learning.

The quantitative targets, however, soon turned out to be too difficult to achieve due to economic hardship from 2001 onwards. The initial optimism gave way to pragmatic realism and the Lisbon Strategy was revised in 2005 (CEU, 2005). The emphasis again was placed on economic growth with lifelong learning focused on strengthening a flexible labour market by stimulating personal development in the spirit of employability and less on the development of the individual for social and/or cultural purposes. Within this pendulum between social and economic objectives, however, much attention was paid to creating support for recognition or Recognition of non-formal and informal learning experiences (Bjørnåvold, 2000). Policy aimed at initiating a strategy for RPL at national level, with a set of general principles for RPL, formulated by an expert group (EC, 2004):

1. The overall aim of Recognition is to make visible and value the full range of qualifications and competences held by an individual, irrespective of where these have been acquired. The purpose of this Recognition may be formative (supporting an on-going learning process) as well as summative (aiming at certification).
2. Recognition of non-formal and informal learning must first and foremost serve the needs of individual citizens. This means that individual entitlements have to be clearly stated, in particular in relation to issues like privacy, ownership of Recognition results and right to appeal.
3. Institutions and stakeholders face certain responsibilities when they initiate Recognition, for example in terms of providing proper guidance and support.

4. Confidence is a necessary pre-requisite for successful development and implementation of Recognition of non-formal and informal learning. This requires well-defined standards, clear information on the assessment-process and the purpose of Recognition and how the results will be used and information on conditions for Recognition such as time and cost involved as well as support/guidance provided.
5. Impartiality is a crucial feature of Recognition and relates to the roles and responsibilities of the assessors involved in the Recognition process. It is important to avoid undue mixing of roles as this will negatively affect overall confidence and credibility to Recognition results. Impartiality can be strengthened through training and systematic networking, something that needs to be promoted by Recognition providers.

These principles were to be finalized in 2009 as basic principles for the European Guidelines for Validating Non-formal and Informal Learning (Cedefop, 2009).

### **1.5 Swinging all over again, 2004-2010**

The OECD committed itself to Europe's renewed Lisbon 2005-strategy with a re-orientation on the personalized nature of learning. RPL was considered to be inseparable from personal and societal application of lifelong learning when looking at the new strategic features of lifelong learning (OECD, 2004):

1. Lifelong learning approaches the supply and demand of learning opportunities as part of an integrated system that incorporates the whole personal life cycle and all forms of learning.
2. The learner takes a central place here. Demand-driven learning, focused on meeting the learning needs of individuals is the key.
3. Self-motivation is absolutely crucial, in other words learning to learn.
4. The learning process in itself can serve various purposes: from personal development and knowledge acquisition to economic, social or cultural benefits.

The importance of recognizing skills, including prior learning and previous experiences was also highlighted by the International Labour Organization in its Recommendation on Human Resources Development (ILO, 2005). The value of RPL not only laid in getting access to learning opportunities in education and training systems but also in the workplace where the nature of learning was more focused on personally updating and upgrading for the sake of employability. The focus on personal development was in all contexts for the bigger part tuned in to the context in which learning was or should be taking place, for purposes of qualification and certification or personal development.

This focus was taken further in studies of the OECD on personalizing education (OECD, 2006) and on bridging national qualifications systems and lifelong learning (OECD, 2007). Both studies expressed that the social and economic role of lifelong learning had been elaborated thoroughly in an approach based on learning outcomes, competence-steered learning, opportunities for recognition and transfer of competences and credits. A strong focus on the personal nature of learning, both in terms of prior learning as well as future learning was to be chosen. RPL was to be embedded in policy, aiming at providing individuals with an opportunity to validate skills and competences that hadn't been formally recognized before.

OECD's swing towards to RPL and the individual entitlement of learning was completed in a worldwide review of twenty-two countries (Werquin, 2010). The advantages of recognizing non-formal and informal learning outcomes, taking stock of existing policies

and practices were explored. The benefits for all stakeholders in RPL were clearly pointed out: for individuals, employers, trade unions, learning providers and governments. The outcomes were reflected in recommendations for strengthening, improving and promoting RPL, therewith allowing it to realise its full potential for making visible the human capital people already have. The challenge for lifelong learning policies was to find the right balance by developing recognition processes that can generate net benefits to both individuals and to society – and its organizations – at large.

Meanwhile in Brussels, the European targets for lifelong learning were once again evaluated with the EU 2020 strategy as the outcome (EC, 2010). It is the new long-term strategy of the European Union for a strong and sustainable economy with high employment, labour mobility and competitiveness as targets. The strategy holds the view that continuous learning opportunities should be offered to all European citizens. In practice this means that everyone should have an individual learning pathway that is adapted to the personal needs and interest in all stages of life. The content of learning, the way of learning and where learning takes place may vary according to the learner and his/her learning needs. Lifelong learning should support in this view both learning for employability as well as for purely personal development and/or second-chance education. This means that learning is still considerably dominated by economic reasoning but the upper hand is slowly shifting to the individual level, which opens up opportunities for individual ownership of learning goals and offers for tailor-made learning. The EU 2020 strategy is therewith embarking on a mission in which learning systems in education and training, and other constraints (fiscal, legal, customer-orientation, etc. ) more effectively than ever are positioned for actual use by the learners.

## **1.6 Moving on in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

Overlooking the period, the objectives of pursuing lifelong learning for all were not so much the issue; it was rather an ideological battle fought over the strategy for learning in society aiming at social change and participation or at economic growth and competitiveness. In times of prosperity the social objectives were given more attention and in economic dismay the focus changed to employability and the mobility of labour.

What since the 1970s has been achieved is a strong focus on learning instead of solely education and training, together with a focus on all citizens instead of only the young ones and on linking learning within and outside of the prevailing learning systems. The need for giving lifelong learning broader commitment by expanding the participation of more stakeholders than just ‘the teacher’ or employer with the citizen/worker as object instead of subject has been changed. Partnerships of learning have widened due to the acknowledgement of learning taking place anywhere, anytime and anyhow. This also brought about a growing importance of the professional roles of (independent) guidance, assessment and counselling in lifelong learning strategies. These roles are focusing more and more on not just qualifications and certificates but also on learning for personal development, upgrading, updating or just for enjoyability.

There is also progress in the fields individual ownership of learning by making learning more accessible to all, although this still mainly is a top-down steered process within national qualification systems. The next step, moving towards the perspective of sector, corporate and/or regional frameworks for learning outcomes opening up to individuals is yet to be made. Recent policy initiatives especially focus on opening up these domains. It however also entails that in the sense of ownership of learning, the citizen still needs to



cover a lot of ground for making use of his/her individual entitlement on learning opportunities. Knowing what your prior learning outcomes are and for what purpose you want to further develop yourself is a relevant question to be tackled by the citizens themselves – supported by guiders and counselors in the lifelong learning arena.

Only if individual ownership of learning – meaning learning perceived as a bottom-up steered process - can come to full bloom in an open learning environment, the approach of Faure's commission might be realized fully. The world of the 1970s isn't of course comparable with the present age but RPL as a supportive instrument for the citizen as well as for realizing an open learning society has the power to bring Faure's approach closer to a practical reality. A lot of effort still has to be made for this approach to be fulfilled. Least of all worries is convincing governments and policy makers on national and international levels on the potential benefits of RPL-steered lifelong learning policies. The biggest challenge is to convince the other stakeholders embedded in the practicalities of learning within sectors, organisations, institutes, etc. to fill in their responsibility in the RPL-process; this goes for employers, trade unions, learning providers and – above all – for the citizens themselves. The agenda for this is already set in various policy programmes of international and national organisations:

- the Europe 2020 Strategy with its focus on building a smart, sustainable and inclusive economy, delivering high levels of employment, productivity and social cohesion. RPL is embedded in the 'flagships initiatives'. This importance of making the skills and competences gained through life and work experience visible was confirmed in 2012 in a broad public consultation (EC, 2012).
- The OECD Skills Strategy (OECD 2012) in which 'Recognition-principles' are crucial for achieving the goals of the programme of filling in the need for skills and competences on the labour market.
- ILO's G20 Training Strategy with a Recognition-focus in the holistic approach to skills development of wage work or self-employment (ILO 2010).
- UNESCO Guidelines for Recognition, Recognition and Accreditation (RVA) of Non-Formal and Informal Learning (UIL 2012).
- *The Council Recommendation on The Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning* (CEU, 2012) recommending all Member States to have in place, no later than in 2018, arrangements for the Recognition of non-formal and informal learning which enable individuals to obtain a full or part qualification on the basis of validated non-formal and informal learning experiences.
- The *Education for All Initiative* aiming at bringing the benefits of education to "every citizen in every society" (EFA). In order to realize this aim, a broad coalition of national governments, civil society groups, UNESCO and the World Bank committed themselves to achieving specific education goals.
- The many national and regional initiatives that are apprent across the world in practices of education, training, social and citizenship activities, employability, human resources development and learning as personal development and enjoyability (Singh and Duvekot, 2013; EU Inventory, 2010).

This growing reality can be directly and indirectly supported by (1) implementing the RPL-process and (2) the open mind that RPL brings about by focusing on learning outcomes acquired in formal, informal and non-formal settings. RPL therewith offers a broad 'window of opportunities' by opening up (lifelong) learning opportunities for all, both summative as well as formative. Since learning is ever more connected to social

success in this time of economic difficulties, the focus on RPL as a feature of the changing learning culture in Europe focuses on facilitating self-efficacy and competence-based & outcome-steered learning.

South Africa's implementation strategy fits in well into this 21<sup>st</sup> century reality of pushing forward the implementation of RPL within sector-approaches. SAQA's national policy on implementing RPL states in this respect:

- “29. *The idea of RPL is aligned to main elements of South African national policy discourse since 1994: transformation; accreditation; lifelong learning; and the NQF.*
30. *The RPL process is a multi-dimensional one. It is a process through which non-formal learning and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or workplace. RPL processes can include guidance and counselling, and extended preparation for assessment.*”  
(SAQA, 2013, p. 5)

The Sector Skills plan of EWSETA (EWSETA 2011) fits in well in this national policy and provides a sector based structure, including sector objectives, for creating RPL-enhanced learning strategies on sector level with a strong linkage with the NQF.

But, regardless of all these favourable circumstances for lifelong learning, it's of little or no importance when people themselves are not encouraged or encourage themselves to focus on their lifelong learning-process. It is as Peter Jarvis stated: “... *many societies have introduced policies and legislation for lifelong learning. But it is not possible to legislate for people's learning, only for their education*” (Jarvis, 2008, 28). The next step in developing and implementing lifelong learning therefore has to focus on activating the learning individual. It is the people themselves who learn and not policy or learning facilities. This perspective of stimulating and facilitating lifelong learning by people themselves – in true bottom-up steered learning processes – should be opened up by RPL. Let's examine therefore the diverse ways of RPL for creating self steered lifelong learning as an added value to the already existing ways to activate lifelong learning. It's especially with this focus on the learning individual that we might understand that the ‘promise of RPL’ is here to stay. Active participation of individuals in decisions about form and content of lifelong learning and the implementation of lifelong learning strategies thus becomes a clearer perspective and paves the way for supporting personalized (lifelong) learning.

Taking all policy initiatives and the growing implementation in practices into consideration, the final step seems to be aiming at the biggest treat of Faure's approach in 1972: realizing individual ownership of learning, embedded in the collective function of learning within the learning society. After all, Delors himself stated when recently reflecting on ‘The Treasure Within’: “*Lifelong learning is about work and life, success in work that benefits the community, and the future of our young people [-]. But on a deeper level, it is about knowing oneself better [-] gaining a kind of self-esteem to help us deal with the risks and constraints of life, and acquiring the ability to take control of our own lives.*” (Delors, 2013, p. 329).

Lifelong learning above all means ‘Recognizing Learning’, i.e. recognizing *the Learning* that is constantly taking place and learning *the Recognizing* in order to start up stimulating and developing lifelong learning in an effective and efficient way. Recognition of Prior Learning in this respect is not only a process underpinning lifelong learning strategies but also the organising principle for designing these strategies and creating real impact.

## 2.1 The broad interpretation of RPL

Evidence for the broad interpretation of RPL as process and a procedure comes from research projects like “Managing European Diversity in lifelong learning 2005-2007” (Duvekot et al, 2007), the European Inventory on Informal and Non-formal Learning Experiences (<http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/about-cedefop/projects/validation-of-non-formal-and-informal-learning/european-inventory.aspx>), “Quality in Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition for internationally Educated Nurses (Kleef, 2012), “Linking Recognition Practices and NQFs” (Singh & Duvekot, 2013) and “Access to Lifelong Learning in Higher Education” (Duvekot et al, 2014a & 2014c), etc.

These projects all aim(ed) at showing the outline of the learning society by analysing case studies in the profit, non-profit and voluntary sectors in Europe and Canada. The analysis supported the vision that ‘Recognition of Prior Learning’ is as much a principle as a process, giving true evidence of the transition from the present knowledge society towards the learning society. Society changes to a learning society where the need for a good balance of power between the main stakeholders in lifelong learning - individuals, organisations and the learning system - will be reshaped and the learner will get a real say in designing lifelong learning strategies.

The main changes of this transition can be reflected on five levels:

- a. Economically, aiming at getting and/or keeping a job (employability).
- b. Socially, aiming at motivation, reintegration, self-management of competences and personal development (empowerment).
- c. Educationally, aiming at qualification, updating, upgrading or portfolio-enrichment by means of creating output-oriented standards focusing on learning outcomes and learning made to measure.
- d. A fourth level on which the change is having its impact, can also be distinguished, the civil society, aiming at social activation, voluntary activities, societal awareness & reintegration and citizenship (activating citizenship).
- e. On the macro-level finally, authorities and social partners are responsible for organising the match between these levels by means of legislation, regulations, labour agreements, fiscal policy, training funds, etc.

‘Recognition of Prior Learning’ as an organising principle of lifelong learning reflects the change towards a learning society in which the individual learner has and takes more

responsibilities for his/her own, personal learning process. It also means that the individual learner changes the existing ‘balance of power’ in learning processes because he/she will be steering lifelong learning too with a portfolio. In this portfolio, the learning outcomes that he/she has achieved are documented together with the relevant evidence. In many cases the portfolio even encompasses an action plan for personal development. Such portfolios create a new balance within learning as a process and contribute to the individual’s social identity; above all, they show the road map for personal development in the context of the organisation and the society.

The emphasis on learning outcomes is in line with the development of common structures of education and training across Europe and is associated with the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and the European Qualification Framework (EQF). Thus Recognition of Prior Learning as such contributes to the removal of barriers to the mobility of labour between countries and between sectors. At national levels, learning outcomes are made a central part of the modernisation of qualification systems and frameworks in order to innovate Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE), to stimulate economic development and to promote social cohesion and citizenship. These goals of ‘Recognition of Prior Learning’ are shown in Figure 1.

<b>Figure 1: Goals of ‘Recognition of Prior Learning’</b>	
<i>Individual</i>	Stimulating self-investment in learning; showing learning outcomes; building up a learning biography or portfolio
<i>Organisation</i>	Building up competence management and facilitating employees’ self-investment and articulation of competences; designing lifelong learning strategies in Human Resource Management
<i>VET/HE</i>	Matching learning to real learning needs; offering learning-made-to-measure; focus on learning outcomes; facilitating lifelong learning strategies
<i>Civil Society</i>	Activating citizenship; transparency of learning outcomes in the civil society; linkages with other perspectives (qualification, careers)
<i>Macro-level</i>	Concerns policies of governments and social partners and their responsibilities for creating favourable conditions for lifelong learning through laws and regulations
Source: Duvekot et al, 2007	

Important preconditions for creating a learning society in which these benefits come to full bloom, are:

1. A transparent, output-oriented knowledge infrastructure.
2. Creating trust by (a) focusing on the already available quality-system based on the judgement of the existing assessment processes used by schools, colleges and universities and (b) prospective quality-management by introducing external peer-reviews on quality-issues for the future.
3. A transparently structured education sector, that allows a flexible flow of participants from one layer of a sector to another, both intra- as well as inter-sectorial<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Intra-sectorial’ refers to transfers of people within a sector, from one branch to another branch, whereas ‘inter-sectorial’ means a transfer from one sector to another sector.

4. Universal, transparent and interchangeable procedures and reports on the competences that have been valued.
5. Close relations between educational institutions and their associates/partners (enterprises, government institutions, institutions in the field of (re)integration of unemployed into the labour market).
6. Creating possibilities for developing and executing individual tailor made learning paths.
7. Facilities for financing flexible tailor made individual learning routes, such as an individual learning account.
8. Clear communication to citizens about the technical and financial arrangements for education and 'Recognition of Prior Learning'.
9. Development of an individual right for portfolio-assessment and career-advice.

## **2.2. Learning modes and the concept of competence**

The development of the systematics of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) can best be understood as a confirmation of this shift towards empowerment as facilitated by personalised learning strategies. The understanding grows that the role of the learning system changes from an institutionalised learning system with uniform learning paths and little room for personal input, into a learning system characterized by flexible and more personal steered learning (Duvekot et al, 2007). In England this is referred to as 'personalized learning' or the tailoring of pedagogy, curriculum and learning support to meet the needs and aspirations of individual learners (Hargreaves, 2004-2006). The same goes for the labour system in which the general norms on the functioning of workers are focused more and more on facilitating their further development instead of controlling labour top-down. One could even say that RPL is about democratising learning and working and, to stay in the terminology of Giddens, enhancing the reflexive character of learning itself.

The starting point of RPL is that initial training for a career no longer suffices. It is important to acknowledge that competences (knowledge, skills, attitude, aspirations) are constantly developing. This means recognizing that someone always and everywhere - consciously and unconsciously - learns through:

- *formal learning*, which occurs in an organised and structured context (in a school/training centre or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to qualification or certification.
- *non-formal learning*, which is learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support) but with an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically does not lead to certification.
- *informal learning*, which results from daily work-related, family or leisure activities. It is not organised or structured (in terms of objectives, time or learning support). Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective. It typically does not lead to certification.  
(Cedefop, 2009)

Competence is a central concept in RPL. Without a good understanding of this concept little can be achieved with RPL. 'Competence' means having adequate knowledge of how to act in a particular situation. Whether or not someone is competent becomes apparent based on how he/she acts (Lyotard, 1988).

In other words, a competence is the sum of knowledge and skill: knowledge is ‘the knowing’ and skill is ‘the acting’. A competence, then, encompasses knowledge and skill as well as the personal methods used in applying that skill. It is essentially based on personal attitudes and ambitions. For this reason, a competence value is only partially fixed, as this value is mainly personal. The way in which a competence reaches a particular, personal value is also a part of that competence. For that reason, Cedefop’s definition, which states that a competence is an ability that extends beyond the possession of knowledge and skills, is best suited for ESWETA’s context. It includes: 1) cognitive competence; 2) functional competence; 3) personal competence; and 4) ethical competence ([www.cedefop.gr](http://www.cedefop.gr)).

The ‘personal competence’ is particularly relevant, because it is this competence that ‘colours’ the generic description of a competence. It is only within this personal context that a competence can be identified, assessed, valued and developed (further).

Based on this concept of competence, RPL is particularly useful as an evaluation, not connected to the learning path, of the personal development of competences. This perspective, however, reduces RPL to a kind of intake assessment. It also turns the individual into a passive learner. RPL’s potential as a vision on personal development, however, as well as an instrument, is much larger than that. RPL needs to be used on a much larger scale, especially in approaches geared more towards the individual. After all, RPL can motivate the individual to take more initiatives in personal development. Educational institutions, companies and other organizations can then fine tune their educational and personnel policies in line with this.

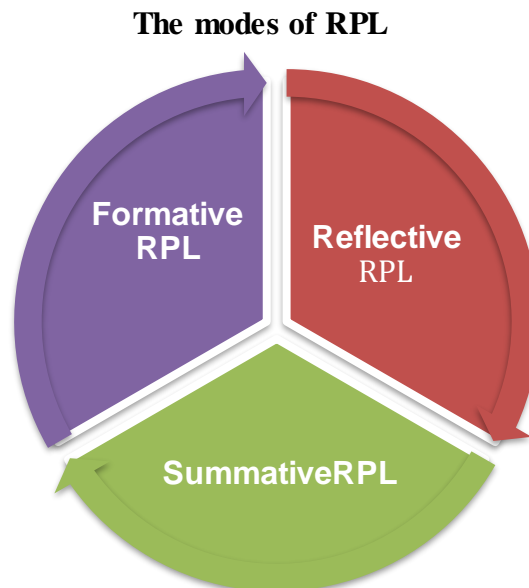
### 2.3 Three approaches

In particular, RPL makes it possible for a person to make an inventory of his/her competences, allowing those competences to receive a value and to be recognized; it is not a direct requirement that development steps are taken instantly, as this is up to the individual to decide. Recognizing and placing value on competences is also known as the *passive* or *summative* RPL approach. When RPL also stimulates further learning – that is, places a value on competences – this is called *activating* or *formative* RPL. These are the three main streams within RPL. A third form is focused on the person him- or herself and can be considered as a reflective form of RPL in which the individual is undergoing a process of self-recognition.

The methodology for Recognition of Prior Learning takes many shapes and destinations. These can all be captured in three main modes:

1. **Reflective RPL**, takes the whole learning biography of an individual as the focus for building up a portfolio and action plan. Only after this is done, the individual makes a choice on taking action: which standard to link to, which stakeholders to address, which learning goal, etc. A high level of (social) reflexivity can be defined by an individual shaping his/her own norms, desires and objectives. It refers to the notion of autonomy of the individual.
2. **Summative RPL**: building up a portfolio against a pre-set standard, with a one-dimensional goal; looking for access and exemptions.
3. **Formative RPL**: meeting up with a portfolio to a standard for deciding on what/where/how to learn further, or formulating a career-step with the portfolio as a starting point.

The difference between these approaches is that in a summative and formative RPL process the focus is on recognizing someone's development against a pre-set standard. Evidence for such recognition is collected in the form of 'a snapshot of someone's present status quo' through his/her diplomas, certificates, professional products, etc. The outcome of the RPL-process is official recognition for learning accomplishments within a qualification or certificate. The award is captured in exemptions or (sometimes) in full qualifications/certificates.



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The formative process goes a step further than summative RPL. The objective is further developing one's competence on the basis of learning evidence and recognized against a pre-set standard in learning (qualifications, certificates) and/or working (function profiles in human resources management). In this sense, summative RPL can be seen as part of formative RPL.

The reflective process is quite different from the other forms. It is geared at enabling individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competences. Education and vocational training should respond to this, becoming more flexible and demand-driven. Formal systems such as qualification structures and vocational education will then have less of a prescriptive function in terms of personal development, and serve more as a reference framework and repertoire within which there is individual choice. These formal systems retain a function as pegs for defining the direction and level of personal development and the relevant external communication with employers, mediators, referrers, schools, etc.

## **2.4 From portfolio to portfolio-loop**

The portfolio is the most important prerequisite for implementing RPL. Portfolios are used to plan, organize and document education, work samples, informal activities and skills. People can use portfolios to apply to school or training programmes, get a job, get a higher salary, show transferable skills, track personal development or more holistically, answer the question who they are and what their ambitions can/may be.

In general there are three types of portfolio:

1. A *dossier portfolio* is used to document proof for getting exemptions in a specific degree or qualification programme. The proof consists of professional products and

behaviour results. This portfolio acts as a showcase for a summative APL-procedure. It is only filled with the necessary proof and is hardly steered by the candidate. Its nature is reflective, for the learning results that are of importance.

2. The *development-portfolio* focuses on broad, personal reflection. Its nature is reflective as well as prospective. It is filled with all relevant, lifewide proof of the candidate. Its nature is diagnostic for summative as well as for formative purposes. It is strongly steered and managed by the candidate (Tillema, 2001).
3. The *personal portfolio* also aims at documenting learning results from the past. It can be used for any RPL-procedure and is highly (self-)reflective. The candidate first fills the portfolio with descriptions of his/her activities and achievements so far. Then he/she reflects on these activities by describing the personal competences that were necessary in the activity. This self-reflection can be strengthened by reflection from 'third parties'. The outcome of this process is a personalized portfolio that provides answers to questions like 'what are my strengths and weaknesses?', 'what are my key-qualities?', 'how can I build further on my personal achievements?', etc. Only then he/she might make up a personal action plan and decide to choose a specific developmental goal. Such a personal portfolio has a holistic character since it covers the person's lifespan and experiences regardless of external standards. (also see [www.ch-q.nl/english](http://www.ch-q.nl/english)).

By working with a portfolio most people go through a cyclical process: which of my competences are strong developed or weak? Which of my competences fit in with my career- or learning needs? How to show my value to others? How to develop myself further?

When asking oneself these questions by looking at the personal development-potential, people can decide which portfolio-type will meet their personal needs. In all cases, the portfolio is taken as a starting point for new learning issues from a RPL-embedded situation. The entire process of recognition, then, begins and ends with the portfolio since the new learning or development results will be added to the original portfolio. This enriched portfolio might at the same time be the basis for new development steps and start a new RPL process. This is known as the "portfolio loop" (Dukekot 2006).

## **2.5 The RPL-process**

RPL in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of one's competences, recognition of personal competences, valuation and assessment of these competences, (advice on the) development of one's competences and finally structurally embedding this competence-based development process into a personal or organisation steered and owned policy (Dukekot 2005). Together these five phases constitute the RPL-process:

### *Phase 1: Commitment and awareness*

An individual has to be aware of his/her own competences; of the value, he/she is giving him/herself to these competences and the value it has for others in certain contexts at certain moments. Being able to keep up your competences in a 'made-to-measure way' is vital for this understanding. A competence is actually to know how to act in a certain way. Whether someone is competent becomes clear from his or her actions. Society has a major interest in capitalising on this, whether through formal learning pathways in the school system during certain periods in life or through Non-formal and informal pathways in other periods.



For organisations, it is vital to understand that investing in people means investing in the goals of the own organisation. This awareness should culminate in setting specific targets for the investment in individuals and the support the organisation can give to this *human resource development*.

This phase consists of two steps: raising awareness and setting the targets for RPL within a specific context. This phase is the real critical success factor for RPL since if an organisation doesn't sense the necessity to think or rethink its mission and connect this need to strengthen or even start up a pro-active form of human resource management. In general, this phase takes as much time as the other phases together!

#### *Phase 2: Recognition*

Identifying or listing competences is usually done with the help of a portfolio. Apart from a description of work experience and diplomas, the portfolio is filled with other evidence of competences acquired. Statements from employers, professional products, references, papers or photos undeniably show the existence of certain competences. The evidence can be aimed at the profession or position the RPL procedure is developed for. In other cases it can be an 'open' portfolio or a complete overview. Evidence is sometimes aimed at recognition, in other cases at personal profiling. The participant compiles the portfolio him/herself, with or without help.

This phase is made up of a preparatory and a retrospective step. The preparation aims at articulating the actual need for competences in the organisation in the different function-profiles. In the retrospective step, the involved individuals fill in their portfolios and acquire the necessary proof of their learning in the (recent) past.

#### *Phase 3: the valuation or assessment of competences*

Then the content of the portfolio is being valued or assessed, when necessary, followed by an extra assessment. This usually takes place by observation during work or by means of a criterion based interview. Assessors compare the competences of an individual with the standard that has been set in the given context. That standard will be used to measure the qualities of the participant. His/her learning path followed is unimportant, only the results count. This second step results in either a recognition on an organisational, sector or national level in the form of certificates, diplomas or career moves, or in a recognition in the form of an advice on career-opportunities.

This phase needs different steps:

- Setting the standard of the specific RPL-process. It can in principal be any standard that meets the needs of the individual and/or the organisation, e.g. a national or sector qualification-standard or an internal standard. Together with the standard a choice can be made of the way the assessment will take place;
- The recognition itself, being the assessment of the portfolio and recognizing it with correspondence to the given standard and targets of the organisation;
- The recognition of the learning evidence within the given standard.

After this phase, the retrospective part of the RPL-process is concluded. The next phases concentrate on the prospective power of RPL.

#### *Phase 4: the development plan*

This phase of the RPL procedure aims at the development of the individual by turning the recognition and/or advice into a personal action plan. On the basis of the valued competences and clarity about the missing competences or available strong competences, a personal development plan is made up. This plan is about learning activities that will be done in formal or non-formal learning environments, in work situations, during a change of

position, by offering coaching or by creating an environment in which informal learning is stimulated.

This phase has two steps. First, a match should be made between the individual's development plan and the goals of the organisation. This match could be made by simply stating that any kind of individual learning is also for the benefit of the organisation. Mostly, however, the match will be agreed upon by making the personal development plan a formal part of the broader organisation plan.

Secondly, the actual learning or development of the individual will be started up. In this step, the individual learns/develops his or herself on a 'made-to-measure basis', which means learning/developing irrespective and independent of form, time, place and environment.

#### *Phase 5: structural implementation of RPL*

The last phase of the RPL-process focuses at the structural implementation of RPL in a personal strategy for updating the portfolio or in the human resource management (HRM) of an organisation. The results of a RPL-pilot have to be evaluated in order to show the way the implementation can take place on a 'made-to-measure basis'. An organisation should be able to use RPL structurally for the specific goals that had been set in the pilot. Any new goals should also be added easily to this new policy. The same goes for the reciprocity of setting learning goals by the individual him/herself in the dynamic learning society.

RPL offers a personal development-strategy in which the organisation-context and public/private services are crucial for keeping up with the speed of competence-development in the learning society. On the individual level this calls for filling in the five phases of RPL. The phases take in total ten steps as shown in figure 2 below.

<b>Figure 2: The process of 'Recognition of Prior Learning'</b>		
<b>Phase</b>	<b>Step + question</b>	<b>Action individual</b>
<b>I. Preparation</b>	<b>1. awareness</b> <i>Where and how did I learn so far? Which necessity is there for self-investment?</i>	Open mind to lifelong learning. Inventory of personal learning wishes. Start self-management of competences.
	<b>2. setting targets</b> <i>Which learning targets are relevant?</i>	Self-assessment. Personal SWOT-analysis. Formulate learning targets.
<b>II. Recognition</b>	<b>3. setting a personal profile</b> <i>how to determine the need for competences?</i>	Writing a personal profile. Choosing a portfolio-format.
	<b>4. retrospection</b> <i>how to describe and document learning outcomes/prior learning?</i>	Filling in a portfolio. If needed, portfolio-guidance.
<b>III. Assessment</b>	<b>5. standard setting</b> <i>what is the relevant standard related to the targets?</i>	Choosing a standard to refer to. Re-arranging the personal portfolio. Self-assessment. Inventory of career-opportunities.

	<b>6. valuation</b> <i>How to prepare the assessment?</i>	Investigation of the portfolio. Pre-advice on certification- and career opportunities.
	<b>7. assessment</b> <i>How to be assessed?</i>	Turning the pre-advice into proper certification/qualification and career-evaluation.
<b>IV. Development</b>	<b>8. prospection</b> <i>How to set up a personal development plan (PDP)?</i>	Turning recognition into a PDP for reasons of certification, employability, empowerment. Arranging learning-made-to-measure.
	<b>9. implementing a PDP</b> <i>Working on learning targets</i>	Executing the PDP.
<b>V. Implementation</b>	<b>10. Structural implementation</b> <i>How did it go? If ok, how to embed RPL structurally in a learning strategy?</i>	Evaluation of the process. Maintaining portfolio-documentation.

Source: Duvekot, 2005.

In the figure a few elements are crucial:

1. **Raising awareness** of the necessity and opportunities of lifelong learning for individuals in any given context is the heart of the process of recognizing/valuing prior learning. Without this, learning will remain school- or company-steered and cannot effectively be based on individual talents and ambition.
2. In Phase II **the portfolio** is introduced as the red thread in the process. After learning targets have been set, the portfolio is designed and filled; its content is assessed and an advice is added on possible qualification- and career-opportunities; it is subsequently enriched by learning-made-to-measure and finally, the starting point of a new process in which new learning targets can be formulated. The portfolio, so to say, is on the one hand both the starting as well as the end point of the individual learning process. On the other hand any end point is again the starting point of a new learning process. This is called a *portfolio-loop*.
3. In Phase III **self-assessment** is the crucial element because without this a person can only partially become co-designer of his/her personal development. A person needs to be focused on his/her own prior learning achievements before making a link with a pre-set standard in learning or working processes.  
There are different methods available for self-assessment, such as the Swiss *CH-Q* instrument (Schoor et al, 2003). It is an integral system, consisting of methods for building a portfolio, (self-) assessment, career- & action-planning, quality assurance and accompanying training programs. In general methods like CH-Q aim at personal development or career-planning and/or creating flexibility and mobility of the individual learner to and on the labour market. They create added value by revitalising the learner's responsibility of being co-designer by:
  1. providing the basis for a goal-oriented development and career-planning,
  2. the stimulation of personal development,
  3. the support of self-managed learning and acting,

4. stimulating young and adults to document continuously their professional- and personal development
4. **The role of the assessor** is vital for starting up personal development in any kind of form. Reliable assessment is the *bridge builder* between a portfolio, including a personal action plan, and the specific development steps advised by the assessor. In any given context, an assessment-policy has three functions: (1) raising levels of achievement, (2) measuring this achievement reliably and (3) organising the assessment cost-effectively.

Assessment in this broad context is the judgement of evidence submitted for a specific purpose; it is therefore an act of measurement. It requires two things: evidence and a standard scale (Ecclestone, 1994). Evidence is provided with the portfolio (or showcase) of the candidate. The standard that will be met, depends on the specific objective of the candidate. This means that the role of the assessor is all the more crucial because this professional has to be flexible with regard to the many objectives in order to be able to provide a custom-oriented recognition and/or valuation. On top of that the professional should be able to use dialogue-based assessment forms. On the basis of the advice of such an assessor further steps for personal development will be set in motion.

The choice of a specific assessor role largely depends on the objective of the assessment, which can vary greatly. Assessments for formal recognition of competences with certificates or exemptions for accredited training programmes demand the involvement of an assessor from an institution offering competence-based accreditation and adequate measures to guarantee the quality of the assessor. Assessments for accrediting competences at the company or institution level or merely to acquire insight into someone's competences do not require the involvement of an institution offering competence-based certification. In these cases, the assessor is also often a colleague, supervisor or the individual himself.

In order to guarantee good 'quality' of the assessor on the one hand and prevent the rise of a new quality control-bureaucracy on the other hand, it is recommended to formulate a 'quality-light' procedure for recognition-procedures. A further advantage of a 'quality-light' procedure is that it is cost-effective and more transparent to candidates.

Possibilities for organising 'quality-light' are:

- any assessor should first design and fill in his/her own portfolio and personal action-plan; only then they can be given entrance to assessor-trainings,
  - a professional register for assessors should guarantee their assessment-competences and professionalism,
  - every two years a new assessor accreditation should guarantee professionalism by ensuring assessor quality. Assessor quality can be maintained by means of refresher and updating courses. This new accreditation could be carried out by an official national agency, and tripartite governing (authorities and social partners),
  - quality of assessors implies being able to refer to a standard for assessors: this standard needs accreditation in a given national application (a role for the government).
5. Regarding the *development-steps* one might say that, when following the personalized path of RPL, lifelong learning is extended to a wider range of objectives, not only from learning to certification but also from learning to empowerment and employability. This calls for a strong involvement of the different stakeholders. Stakeholders that are

involved in establishing systems for recognition should not only be ‘educationalists’ and ministries but also employers and trade unions. RPL calls for a clear responsibility of not only certification-systems but also from human resource systems.

6. Proper **evaluation** and **feedback** finally is necessary to structurally embed the process into personal behaviour.

## 2.6 Supporting RPL in practice

The central question of this chapter was ‘how to activate RPL as an effective instrument for linking competences and credits in lifelong learning that appeals to citizens, strengthens their empowerment and also is beneficial to the other stakeholders in society?’. With this question in mind, we aimed at showing the potential of RPL as a matchmaker between these stakeholders and the critical success factors for developing and implementing RPL in a diversity of contexts. In all contexts the RPL-process follows more or less the same phases and steps. This can help in demonstrating how and where to set up interventions for strengthening RPL as a matchmaker for the sake of creating time- and money-effective and - above all – efficient lifelong learning-strategies with a variety of learning objectives and on a win-win-win-basis for ‘me’, ‘my organisation’ and ‘my learning provider’.

RPL can in this respect best be explained in the following statements:

- RPL shows the real human potential on the basis of the analysis and recognition of personal competences, documented in a portfolio.
- RPL is the process of assessing and valuating/recognizing personal competences within a specific socio-economic context and offering a personal development strategy.
- Organisations benefit from *RPL* since individuals develop within their context.
- The RPL process in general consists of five phases: commitment and awareness of the value of one’s competences, recognition of personal competences, valuation and/or assessment of these competences, (advice on the) development of one’s competences and finally structurally embedding this competence-based development process into a personal or organisation steered and owned policy.

Crucial in practising RPL is acknowledging the self-managing role of the ‘empowered’ learning individual in making lifelong learning a reality! The active participation of individuals in decisions about form and content of lifelong learning and the implementation of lifelong learning strategies from work-based or school/university-based is supported by RPL for many perspectives:

- 1 ... *for improving opportunities for empowerment and deployment*: improved empowerment and deployment of individual talent is the most important motivation underlying RPL. It increases the opportunities for the individual in one’s private life and on the labour market by highlighting the competences he or she already has and how these competences can be deployed and strengthened. This can apply both to those already in employment and to job seekers. For employers and trade unions, the emphasis lies on improving the employability of employees within the working context.
- 2 ... *for creating a more demand-led labour market*: improving the match between the learning system and the labour system is essential for the organisation of RPL. In order to improve deployability, labour market functions must be expressed in terms of competences. These competences must in turn be linked to a demand for learning. The learning system must be receptive, transparent, flexible and demand-led in order

to be able to provide the customised approach required.

- 3 ... *for making learning more flexible*: the recognition of informally and non-formally acquired competences will boost people's desire to keep on learning, i.e. will promote lifelong learning, since the accreditation of competences can lead directly to an award of or exemptions for qualifications. The recognition approach can also make visible or recognisable existing competences and qualifications within or outside the labour process. This promotes the transparency of the many opportunities for learning. The learner will not only want to learn in a customer-oriented fashion but will also know better than now how, what and when to learn, and why he is learning.
- 4 ... *for optimising other forms of learning*: other learning environments and forms of learning must be formulated and/or utilised more effectively, since RPL also shows which learning environment and/or form of learning is best for a particular individual. This could include (combinations of) on the job training, mentoring/tutoring, independent learning, distance learning, and so on. The recognition of competences and qualifications will inevitably lead to an adjustment of the existing qualification structure in professional education. The existing description of exit qualifications in the current qualification structure for professional education does not always tie in with the competences required on the labour market.

So, there's a lot to gain with RPL. Let's find out into more detail how RPL works in practice. The framework can be used as a model for this purpose when describing and analysing practical case studies in a diversity of contexts: across sectors, types of organisations and learning environments; with different target groups, personal approaches and goals; in the diversity of dialogues between the learning individual, the learning system and the labour system. The 'practice' of RPL is revealed in four main strategies.

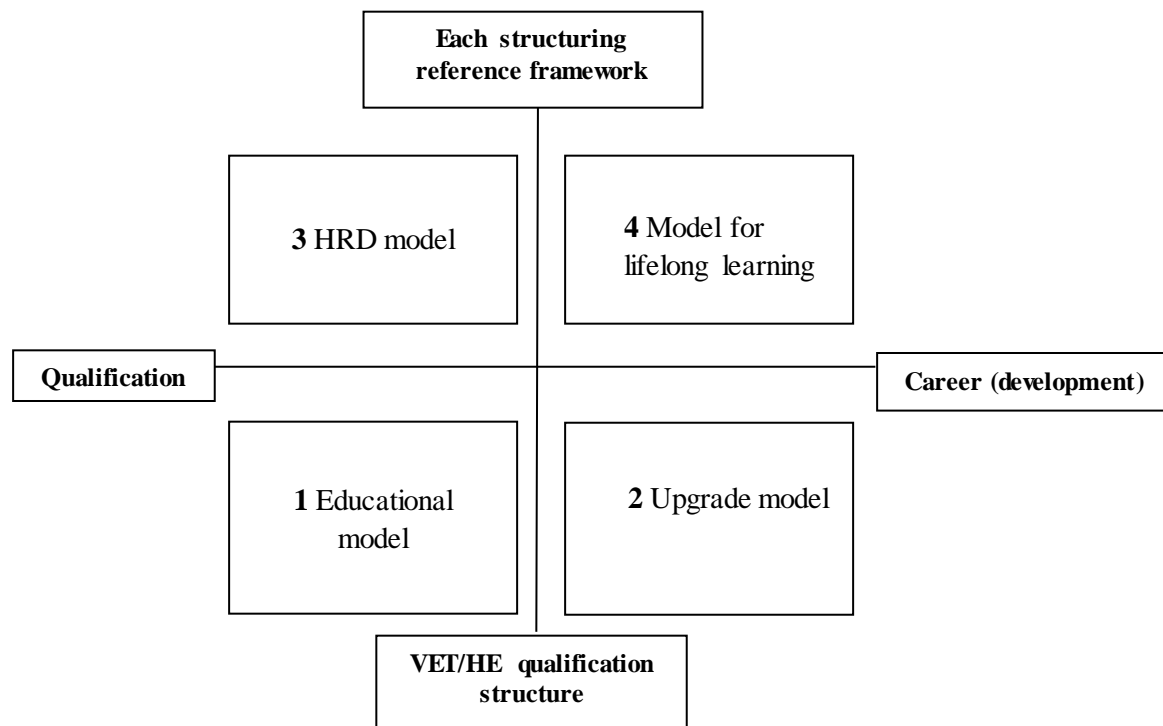
## **2.7 Four models for RPL-enhanced learning strategies**

Recognizing Learning is intended to recognise and to value both visible and invisible skills of people. It is not focused on highlighting the lack of knowledge and skills but precisely the opposite – to take stock of existing knowledge and skills. In RPL-practices this vision is always acknowledged; the 'face' of RPL may differ however and shows itself in four main models of Recognizing Learning as:

Procedures for Recognizing Learning are implemented in a variety of ways. Three steps can always be distinguished: identifying competences and raising awareness (recognition), assessing competences (assessment) and planning new learning activities (personal development). Possible implications of these procedures are promoting personal self-management of competences and personal development activities. Apart from that building bridges between non formal and formal learning and between education and the labour market in order to facilitate lifelong learning from the diversity of perspectives on the four models is at the heart of implementing Recognizing Learning as a principle in VET and HE.

Despite the diversity, a structure can be defined for the demand and supply sides within the broad field of recognition-services. The structuring is based on *the objective* (what is the expected effect?) and *the context* (which reference framework or benchmark is applied?). Interpreting these two lines as a pair of axes, gives us four fields in which Recognizing Learning can be used to serve a particular goal within a particular context: the four models of Recognizing Learning.

**Figure 3: the 4 models of ‘Recognizing Learning’**



Source: Feenstra et al, 2003.

A short typology of the four models produces the following description:

*1. Recognizing Learning as a bridge between VET/HE and the labour market: the educational model*

The function of recognizing learning in this model is aiming primarily at providing qualification on the levels of VET and HE. The two most important forms in which this model occurs:

- Traditional exemption policy based on previously acquired qualifications, which looks only at prior formal education and the relevant certificates;
- Exemption policy based on broader evidence; competences acquired non-formally or informally are also assessed.

A proper quality of the qualification is the primary benchmark, as it must be *recognized* and *accredited* on the responsibility of the provider (the qualifying educational institution). The goals that applicants aim to achieve by obtaining qualifications, and whether qualification is the best way to reach these goals, are not the provider's primary concern. In this model, the provider supplies a good quality product: qualifications and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere.

Development is offered in this sphere by providing a customized, educational package.

*2. Recognizing Learning as model for acquiring initial qualifications: the upgrade model*

Recognizing Learning in this model focuses on the contribution made by accreditation and certification to obtaining or retaining employment. Forms that occur in this sphere are:

- Recognition and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation pursued by the candidate. The procedure and tools used are tailored as far as possible to the individual work environment.

- Recognition and accreditation of competences that have been acquired (formally and informally) in the context of the occupation that the candidate intends to maintain or pursue.

Recognizing Learning is tailored to the employment goals of the candidate. The competences in his/her specific context are tailored to that objective. Obtaining initial qualifications in an effective and efficient way is at the heart of this model: only the necessary training – if needs be – has to be formulated.

Providers select and design the way in which the whole process is shaped, and within that process educational institutes act as suppliers of all or part of the services. Development is provided by offering customized forms of both formal learning and informal learning.

### *3. Recognizing Learning as model for upgrading competences within any structured context: the HRD model*

In this model Recognizing Learning is aiming primarily at the recognition of competences (provision of diplomas, qualifications or partial certificates) outside the context of VET/HE.

People acquire competences that cannot always be related to existing VET/HE-qualifications in a variety of ways, in formal and informal learning and/or in work situations. Sector training institutes, company schools and voluntary organizations with a high professional content (sports associations etc.) are examples of organisations (or providers) that work with recognition of competences based on other standards.

The aim of Recognizing Learning in this model is to upgrade individuals within their specific context in order to keep them employable and provide them with concrete career opportunities. The provider supplies a good quality product: certificates and diplomas for competences acquired elsewhere. Personal development is offered by providing recognition and learning at the workplace.

### *4. Recognizing Learning as model for lifelong learning*

The fourth model may be viewed as the integrated model within which the other three spheres are subsumed. 'Lifelong learning' outlines the situation of members of our society who are engaged in a process of self-development in line with their own development requirements on the one hand and the demands of their environment on the other. This model shows the learning individual who is developing himself or herself continuously and in that process makes use of the facilities provided for the recognizing the competences that he or she has acquired personally or professionally. He/she might also use them to make it clear what he or she has to offer to employment organizations and other collaborative efforts.

The many forms in which this model emerges are offered by providers (employment organizations, head-hunters for senior posts, employability coaching) who guide individuals in the development of their portfolios. Where necessary, teachers and trainers act to certify competences. The characteristic feature is that the development programme is determined and controlled by the person in question. While institutions facilitate and provide support, they do not set the direction.

## **2.8 Examples of RPL**

Several good practices illustrate the way to act in the different modes of the RPL-enhanced learning strategies, for the benefit of employees and employers as well as learning facilitators and society as a whole.



The Rockwool Group in the Netherlands is the world's leading supplier of innovative products and systems based on stone wool. This case offers a good example of the HRD-model, using also the benefits of the Educational model.

Since the 1990s learning is a key element in the human resource management-policy of Rockwool. In the plant in the Netherlands this HRM-policy can be regarded as an ongoing process of linking learning and working for each individual employee by means of competence-steered assessment methods and work-based development-programmes:

- Assessment is considered as a summative and a formative method for enhancing performance of not only the employees for the company but also of the company for the employees.
- Learning goals are oriented towards employability and qualification on the one hand for strengthening the working-processes, and on the other hand for creating empowerment and opening up internal/external career-opportunities for the employees.
- Development is focused on facilitating learning trajectories that are beneficial for employability, personal development and internal/external career-steps of the employees.
- RPL is the method for linking the potential of employees with the need for competences. It is utilised as a multi-targeted method for sustainable HRM.

On April 11, 2014 Rockwool was awarded in Rotterdam, the Netherlands at the 1<sup>st</sup> Global VPL Biennale the International Prize 2014 for Validation of Non-formal and Informal Learning. ([www.vplbiennale.com](http://www.vplbiennale.com)).

The International Women's Centre (IVC) in Den Helder, the Netherlands provides an example of the lifelong learning model ([www.int-vrouwencentrum.nl](http://www.int-vrouwencentrum.nl)).

RPL at the IVC aims at contributing to the emancipation, participation and integration of migrant women in the Netherlands. One of the activities of the IVC is a structured training for self-management of competences. The aim is to teach the women to get a good grip on their personal skills and competences for the sake of empowerment and to find their way in Dutch society. The outcomes of the training can be used for setting up career opportunities in further learning, in volunteering and paid work and for embedding their personal life in a country with different cultural customs. During the training the awareness of their personal values is strengthened.

The training is arranged according to the Swiss CH-Q method (a Swiss vocational qualifications programme that has developed tools to document skills). CH-Q follows the steps of the RPL-procedure: raising awareness, documentation, presentation, assessment and certification.

The main focus of CH-Q is to enable individuals to manage their own careers, articulate their own development needs and build up their own competences.

After passing the training and presenting their personal action plan, the students receive an approved certificate. The CH-Q training has been offered since 2009 and is successfully continued every year (see [www.ch-q.nl](http://www.ch-q.nl) for more detail). The training is offered twice a year; since 2009 45 women participated in the training; of this group, many found jobs (paid and voluntary work) or started up a study program at a VET-school or university.

A Danish case study focused on the Knowledge Centre Mid-West (Ecotec, 2007). The main focus of this Centre was to bring competence assessment into real life conditions and assess skills and competences in the workplace, where the competences can be demonstrated and where they are normally used. The main reasons for such a choice were:

the fact that the vast majority of the target group (immigrants) did not have any previous work experience and the view that the best way to assess a person's skills was to do that in the workplace. Moreover, since most of the immigrants did not have any previous education, assessment by educational institutions was not considered to be as relevant as an assessment by companies. In this sense this is a case in which the HRD model is very functional with both the Educational as well as the Upgrade model supporting the success of RPL for the target group.

The unemployed immigrants are supported by consultants at the job centers for a workplace competence assessment. After the assessment period is finished, the immigrant is issued with a 'competence card', which describes actual competences as they are observed. The competence card can be used as a recommendation when looking for another job (or being recommended by a job consultant to on-the-job training).

Assessment, through observation, is carried out in the workplace by a mentor. The process is facilitated by an online tool, which specifies which skills and competences are to be assessed for a particular job. The tool contains descriptions for each job and specifies the range of skills that ensure proper execution of tasks envisaged by a given job function. The development of standards was based on the existing national occupational standards. However, the process of constructing job descriptions went further by breaking down the skills and competences into functions.

During the three to four week assessment period, personal competences, professional, language, computer and basic skills are assessed in relation to the tasks performed. The reasons for prioritizing these competences was the fact that the employers often perceive immigrant workers as lacking key personal competences needed in a Danish workplace.

Due to the initial low or no level of education of the target groups, the types of jobs that are performed are those corresponding to an unskilled labour level, such as cleaner. In some cases, the skills acquired can correspond to qualification levels and are usually complemented by vocational training in an education institution. Whenever the qualification serves the purpose of getting a person into employment, this option is chosen. This is especially relevant to the social services sector where the demand for labour, especially at lower skill levels, is high and offers a very effective bridge into employment for immigrants.

During the assessment period the employers can be compensated with a wage subsidy for a learner. In many cases learners are offered further training in the company, where companies can benefit from training subsidies and a learner is paid a minimum wage for their work.

The system is also useful for other target groups that lack proper professional experience. It receives considerable support from employers who are, first of all keen to take on new trainees and secondly, satisfied with the new standardized tools that minimize their time spent on giving feedback while at the same time allowing for comparability of the assessment results.

In Finland, Koskisen Oy has been developing training and assessment methods in order to recognise and, at the same time, broaden the skill levels of its employees since the early 1990s. Their initiative has not only benefited the employees and the company itself but it has had a wider impact on the industry sector. This is a case (Ecotec, 2007) that shows how the lifelong learning model works in the context of profit-sectors. This is absolutely the case for the company itself. For the employees, employability was their primary target to be reached with the assistance of qualifications. But in the end, it turned out to be more a kind of an empowerment strategy for the employees since RPL helped them to learn and work on the basis of their own strengths and talents.

Koskisen Oy is a manufacturing company in the field of wood production. During the past 10 years some 400 employees (approx. 37% of all employees) have been able to validate the skills and the learning they have acquired at work and have obtained an official qualification.

The company offers 'in-house' training, which together with work experience provides employees with an opportunity to attain one of a range of nationally recognised competence-based qualifications (e.g. various wood production and management qualifications).

The skills are assessed by a team consisting of an external assessor and employer and employee representatives. The assessment is made up of practical and written skills tests. All the participants are required to possess 1-2 years of work experience.

The recognition and certification has had significant individual, company and industry level effects, both for the employees as well as for the company.

The Welfare sector in the Netherlands finally provides a good example of RPL embedded in the HRD-model on sector-level, using the educational model for standard setting. In 2011-2012 a pilot project on RPL and tailor-made learning was initiated. The project focuses on the mobility/promotion from group leader to senior group leader in the Welfare sector. Prior work experience and learning outcomes are assessed and recognised in an RPL procedure, using both sector standards as well as HE qualifications (Ervaring, 2012). An examination committee of the university evaluates the RPL-report of the candidate that he/she obtained in the APL-procedure as part of the intake for a qualification-programme (incl. portfolio and assessment). The aim of this evaluation is to either obtain directly the HE-qualification that is linked to the sector-standard for senior group leader or obtain a tailor-made learning programme, taking into account prior learning outcomes and filling in the remaining learning targets in the HE-programme.

Fifteen candidates from one youth care institute participated in the RPL-programme. Of these, 13 received an APL-report (or in formal Dutch procedure 'a national experience certificate' that is obligatory when accessing HE by means of RPL). This report is the basis for programming further development and learning for the candidate. On top of this, the candidates could also receive a sector-certificate if they complied with all criteria in the sector-standard. Only one candidate received this certificate during the pilot-phase.

The RPL-procedure was managed by an RPL-manager from the university, two portfolio-advisers (from the university and from the employer) and two assessors (internal-university and external-sector).

The exam committee from the department of Pedagogics (Professional HE) acknowledged the sector-standard as a relevant standard to match with the HE-standard of Pedagogics. A matrix for general comparison was designed and used by the exam committee.

Furthermore, all stakeholders also acknowledged the relevance and value of both standards (sector and national) and the steps in the RPL-process.

This project is interesting because it offers recognition in higher professional education qualifications for experienced youth workers. Furthermore, because of the use of RPL in a multiple targeted policy for employability (formative) and qualification (summative). This multiple-targeted RPL is used at the welfare-institute for linking two purposes:

1. the purpose of addressing an employee's learning needs (knowing how to invest best in yourself),
2. for creating horizontal and/or vertical employability chances (knowing where to come to your best).

An interesting Swiss case on multidimensional and multi-target approaches to RPL (Bednarz & Bednarz, 2014) focused on the group of HE-qualified immigrant women, having difficulties in valuing their prior learning and competences in the local job market. The case analyzed three different aims addressed by activating an RPL path: *individual empowerment*, through the self-recognition of competences, as a means for better planning redeployment and spend one's own skills and competences in the job market; *access to lifelong learning*, through the valuation of prior learning as a means for overcoming barriers and reducing the duration of a formal tertiary education path; and finally *access to an official qualification*, as a means for achieving visibility and accountability of skills and competences via recognition and Recognition of informal and non-formal learning. Different RPL modes, often coexisting ones, could be identified in practices focused on:

- *reflective RPL* comes always to the fore, as far as the reflective elaboration of life, work and learning biographies of individuals is the basis for building up personal portfolios and for designing action plans
- *formative RPL*, enables learners decide what/where/how to spend their prior learning, both for valuing it in the job market, for further developing their profiles or formulating a career-step with the portfolio as a starting point
- *summative RPL* finally plays a central function, both in access to lifelong learning and to a qualification, where personal portfolios are built up against pre-set standards, looking for an official diploma or for exemptions.

This Swiss case shows to which extent heterogeneity is the key word explaining how RPL actually works, confirming therefore the usefulness of multidimensional and multi-target approaches. Goals of RPL-users largely depend on the kind of RPL targets (empowerment, recognition, certification), as well as from the positioning of the persons in the life cycle, by their biographical background and professional identity. Local learning cultures and traditions also play a fundamental role. Diverse dimensions and RPL modes appear to be integrated, and should be considered under the lens of crosscutting links: between personal and professional goals, formative and summative meanings of RPL, roles of education, training and experience in formal and informal learning settings, targets of empowerment (individual), social and institutional recognition.

These examples show that large groups from very different contexts and with different objectives can use Recognizing Learning. The bottleneck for making use of Recognizing Learning is less the knowledge infrastructure or organizations and more the individual's unfamiliarity with Recognizing Learning. This means that it is primarily the transition to individual empowerment that is causing the present underutilization of Recognizing Learning as gateway to employability and lifelong learning strategies of social partners and schools/institutes. Additionally, the examples show that the reason for this does not by definition lie in authority relationships. The individual is given adequate leeway to arrange a personal track with the individual learning biography, even if that lies outside the individual's own professional column. This stimulation of the learner offers opportunities for capacitation at sector levels since it's at the level of the work environment where learning strategies come to full bloom, both in terms of looking backwards into a learner's biography as well as forward when formulating further learning tasks for employees. The sector level is best situated to enhance this since the sector has the best view of the organisation's needs of capacitation within the sector and the network with learner providers for linking the worker's prior learning to efficient, further learning strategies. The sector reveals itself in this way as *the bridge builder* between learner and organisation by stimulating RPL-enhanced learning strategies.

Within the South African context, RPL has the specific agenda to support the transformation of the education and training system. It is a means by which redress for past inequalities and equity can be promoted in the country. RPL is a tool which can be used to allow opportunity for previously disadvantaged individuals who have, in the past, been denied an education and therefore mostly acquired their skills and competences informal or non-formal. These people are to a certain extent still denied access to formal learning opportunities because they do not meet the minimum entry requirements into programs being offered at education and training institutions. This also adversely affects their chances for promotion and maintains inequality in the society.

### **3.1 RPL on a national level**

Although RPL has since long been imbedded within the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), it has not yet fulfilled its promises. This is according to a report by the Ministerial Task Team National Strategy for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in 2013 (MTT, 2013).

Pre-Independence in South Africa, the unions ANC and COSATU produced literature on RPL that was meant to be included in the policies of post-independence. RPL was mainly linked to the projected development of the NQF which was based on the Australian competence based vocational and training system. At that point, and probably to date, RPL was and is viewed as a redress mechanism. This doesn't cover the full potential of RPL, since RPL also is a tool for promoting lifelong learning of the generations who were integrated into the work environment without the proper formal training and picked up immense amounts of skills along the way by means of non-formal and informal learning.

Post-independence, numerous documents have been published regarding RPL. Among them, and of major significance is the 2002 policy document entitled "The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework (SAQA)" (SAQA, 2002). It stated that an RPL policy was needed and that it should be structured in such a way that it could meet the needs of all stakeholders, e.g. quality assurance bodies, the SETAs, the training providers, employers and the beneficiaries of RP, i.e. the learners. It was also noted that RPL should be holistic, contextual and situational, geared at accumulation of learning outcomes and be used for both summative as well as formative assessments. RPL should be implemented in such a way that learners should not be divided in groups of learners that accumulated credits by means of formal learning and those that accumulated them by non-formal and informal learning trajectories.

SAQA also published a guideline document in 2004 entitled "Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning" (SAQA, 2004). It sought to give guidelines to education and training providers on the implementation of RPL in line with

the RPL policy of 2002. This document incorporated examples from international and national case studies. It took these providers through the following steps in implementing RPL:

- Making a start: an audit of current practice.
- Planning: the development of sector-specific/context-specific plans.
- Getting ready: the capacity building of resources and staff.
- The tools: design and moderation of assessment.
- Review and evaluation: quality management processes.

This policy of 2002 and the guidelines of 2004 set the foundation for the development of sector policies on RPL and the implementation of RPL pilots by institutions such as the SETAs, Technikons and the Department of Labour.

These structural steps regarding the NQF and consequently the reach of quality councils and policy changes resulted in RPL being viewed as a mechanism to support the provision of education and training to allow the utilisation of all skills and knowledge that people acquired by informal means.

At the same time as changes were taking place with the provision of the NQF, SAQA also worked on reviving the issue of RPL in South Africa by participating in the OECD study on “Recognising Non formal and Informal Learning” in the period of 2007-2010 (Werquin, 2010). This global study oriented at a strong focus on the personal nature of learning, both in terms of prior learning as well as future learning. RPL was to be embedded in policy, aiming at providing individuals with an opportunity to validate their skills and competences that hadn’t been formally recognized before. This study marked OECD’s swing towards RPL and the individual entitlement of learning. It resulted in a worldwide review of twenty-two countries, including South Africa. The advantages of recognizing non-formal and informal learning outcomes, taking stock of existing policies and practices were explored. The benefits for all stakeholders in RPL were clearly pointed out: for individuals, employers, trade unions, learning providers and governments. The outcomes were reflected in recommendations for strengthening, improving and promoting RPL, therewith allowing it to realise its full potential for making visible the human capital people already have. The challenge for lifelong learning policies was to find the right balance by developing recognition processes that can generate net benefits to both individuals and to society – and its organizations – at large.

Recommendations for South Africa on the implementation of RPL were as follows:

- Provide financial support for new and fledgling institutional RPL services.
- Establish an RPL practitioners’ network.
- Develop the capacity of the FET sector, given its crucial location in skills development.
- Review, at a national level, systemic barriers to RPL and access/admissions policies
- Address the current gap in RPL access/provision (from higher education/sectors where qualification upgrading is a requirement to using RPL for “recognition of knowledge, skills and competences towards employment for those who are unemployed or in informal or casual labour”)
- Ensure that high-level and coordinated advocacy and awareness-raising for the
- SAQA needs to ensure that the bodies it regulates deliver on their RPL commitments and that they comply with regulatory requirements;
- SAQA needs to review its data collection requirements in relation to RPL, and to ensure that ETQAs are reporting accordingly; and

- SAQA needs “to be brave in the application of its regulatory powers” in cases where ETQAs are not complying.

In 2011, SAQA, moving forward from the results of this OECD study, began working on a national strategy towards an integrated RPL system for South Africa. This resulted in the SAQA-RPL conference of 2011 on the theme of “Bridging and Expanding Existing Islands of Excellent Practice”. A number of abstracts were presented based mainly on South African research and practice. The resolution of the conference stated that a National Strategy should be developed and that a Ministerial Task Team should be set up (SAQA, 2011a).

SAQA also established a reference group responsible for the review of the RPL policy which was finalised and published in 2013 (SAQA, 2013). Key priorities in the new *National Policy for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* were formulated. This included a common understanding of RPL with its variety in forms, purposes, roles and responsibilities for all RPL stakeholders. It replaced the former policy document on RPL from 2002 (SAQA, 2002) and established the basic core principles and priorities for RPL as part of the further development and implementation of the NQF in South Africa.

The national policy goes into detail on the ways in which RPL should be implemented, for example by ensuring quality assurance and the benchmarking of RPL-activities as overseen by SAQA and three Quality Council, focusing on the barriers to implementation of RPL. It also provides for national co-ordination to assist the Quality Councils, institutions of learning, and RPL practitioners. SAQA clearly stated that this new RPL policy is meant to coordinate the development of policies and practices of the quality councils, education institutions, skills development providers, workplaces, assessment sites, professional bodies and RPL practitioners. It is intended to be applicable to full and partial qualifications within the NQF.

The national policy of 2013 acknowledges that RPL in South Africa needs to be addressed as a contextualized phenomenon which is geared at personal development, further learning and advancement in the workplace, and recognition within the three sub-frameworks of the NQF. This kind of RPL would be ideal at sectorial level allowing employees to obtain recognition within a sector, especially considering most of the qualifications for posts in this sector are of a practical, *hands-on* nature.

The policy of 2013 clearly presented the priorities for resourcing RPL in terms of infrastructural, human and financial capacities to be built and sustained in RPL programmes and services within the national learning system. ‘Redress’ is the policy-priority, with equitable access to RPL for all as its main objective. Government and other subsidiaries must be identified, at the same time ensuring that the investment in RPL programming is secured in both the private and public sectors. The policy furthermore notes that quality assurance needs to be a priority as it touches on how using qualified personnel and instruments fit for purpose can ensure the positive impact of RPL. The national RPL policy also goes into detail on the responsibilities of SAQA itself, the Quality Councils, educational institutions and skills development providers, professional bodies, RPL practitioners as well as the RPL candidate.

Related developments to this making of a national RPL-policy included the creation and work of a Ministerial RPL Task Team, that led to development of a *National Implementation Strategy for RPL* (MTT, 2013).

The ministerial Task Team was installed to:

- Develop a national strategy for the wide-scale implementation of RPL in the post school sector;
- Advise on the personnel, training and quality requirements of a national RPL strategy, including the feasibility, structure and function of a national RPL institute;
- Advise on the legislative requirements for implementation of the national RPL strategy;
- Develop an action plan for the implementation of the national RPL strategy;
- Advise on the resource implications of the national RPL strategy;
- Devise a funding model to support the national RPL strategy that takes into account the interests of the skilled unemployed and out-of-school young people;
- Advise on the roles and responsibilities of all major relevant parties in the implementation of the national RPL strategy; and
- Advise on any other matter that would advance the systematic application of RPL in the post-school education and training system.

### **3.2 RPL in the sectors**

The policy of 2002 and the guidelines published in 2004 established a foundation for the development of both sector policies as well as the implementation of RPL through pilots by institutions such as the SETAs, Technikons and the Department of Labour. Most SETAs have included the implementation of RPL in their strategic objectives of the Sector Skills Plans, therewith addressing the various NSDS III goals, such as:

- (4.2) Increasing access to occupationally-directed programmes.
- (4.3) Promoting the growth of a public FET college system that is responsive to sector, local, regional and national skills needs and priorities.
- (4.5) Encouraging better use of workplace-based skills development.

By 2007, about 26.000 RPL achievements were on record, with 90% of those having been achieved by only 2 ETQA's, an indication of how marginalised RPL still was at that time in South Africa. RPL activity in trades, occupational sectors and workplaces have since than especially been increasing, probably as a result of the increased number of private RPL consultants within these sectors. Another stimulating factor was that various SETAs teamed up with the unions and other quality assurance partners to develop new qualifications and the capacitation of assessors and moderators. SETA commitment and union involvement were the drivers for training the so-called RPL champions (MMT, 2013, p. 25).

A stimulus was also the research into national and international policy and practices. The Ministerial RPL Task Team looked into RPL practices within all the 21 SETAs and into various models and legislature of RPL in the Netherlands, Canada, USA and France. SAQA funded a review on SETAs RPL practices. This research made a few general trends visible:

- SETAs implemented RPL policy mainly based on SAQA's RPL policy of 2002 and therewith their understanding of RPL reflected the focus of that era on RPL as especially being an assessment practice and not so much as well a development or empowerment oriented approach.
- RPL policies were organised in three main ways: (1) as part of the assessment policy (six SETAs); (2) as stand-alone policies (14 SETAs); and (3) delegated to Quality Assurance Partners (QAPs) in the case of FASSET.
- Four SETAs didn't include RPL implementation in their accreditation criteria.



- The main methods for assessment included portfolios of evidence assessments, on-the-job observations and practical assessments.

A total of 16 SETAs indicated that they had implemented RPL in their sector. Of these 16, at least eight SETAs were involved in researching RPL practices, discovering another two trends:

- There was a high concentration of RPL implementation in sectors where previously legislative changes occurred. These changes resulted in practitioners being required to have a particular skills programme or a qualification in order to be recognised as a practitioner in their respective fields.
- SETAs were driven by the need for the development of artisans within their particular sectors.

The National Learner Records Database (NLRD) keeps record of learner achievements, including those awarded through RPL. Statistics on the NLRD however differ from those provided by the SETAs. The SETAs reported a total of 53,843 candidates up to 2012 that had been awarded either as partial qualifications or qualifications through RPL (MTT, 2013). About two-thirds of this number was reported by INSETA and the Bank SETA with a combined candidate number of 38,586 candidates.

### **3.3 EWSETA's needs and RPL**

Apart from the need to be a strong partner in the quantitative dimension of RPL in the SETAs, several other, more qualitative, needs have been identified within EWSETA in order to properly implement RPL.

First of all, the policy on RPL is up for renewal. There is a need to further align it to the latest policy on RPL published by SAQA in 2013. For example, the SAQA policy describes RPL as a process through which non-formal learning and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or workplace. RPL processes can include guidance and counselling, including extended preparation for assessment. The current process at EWSETA and in its policy is not yet accommodative to this kind of RPL. The principles for ensuring a holistic approach in the implementation of RPL are quite clear but of these, the one missing from the EWSETA's RPL policy is that of providing candidates guidance and support in the preparation of evidence for assessment.

There is also a need to structure the policy based on international practises of implementing RPL in a partnership of authorities, social partners and education/training institutes, united in their focus on tuning in to national qualifications frameworks. The Dutch *Kenniscentrum EVC* for example facilitated and managed such partnerships in many sectors, incorporating also small companies, re-integration companies and volunteer organisations in a more devolved way. ETQA's like EWSETA could be run in a similar way.

RPL in the workplace is different from that in the education sector as it is affected by political and financial issues raised by employer as well as employee representatives. The report by the Ministerial Task Team, completed in January 2013, suggested a state- and employer-driven funding and resourcing model for RPL. The SETAs need to team up with employers to fund RPL initiatives and this can be done using discretionary grants for

example. That being established, RPL comes down to the need to have a tailor made RPL approach to cater for the workplace and another for education and training. With this perspective in mind, the EWSETA needs to come up with an approach to RPL that not only ensures redress but also creates access to study programmes and facilitates articulation within and across institutions at various NQF levels. The involvement of FET's and universities is imperative if the issue of articulation is to be properly addressed. The EWSETA's RPL policy should also accommodate the possibility of RPL being used for workplace purposes to allow promotion within organisations or and facilitate employee mobility in the sector. For this purpose, RPL tools and procedures need to be developed at sector level so as to properly meet existing needs. It should be noted in EWSETA's context that an internal diversity is apparent, being the different contexts for learning and working in the Water Sector and the Energy Sector. The nature of RPL will differ depending on the qualifications to be assessed; this calls also for internally an approach towards a variety of contexts in which RPL needs to be embedded (tailor made RPL).

The lack of skills and know how amongst the assessors, advisors and moderators is also a concern within the EWSETA. It resulted in RPL being considered a cumbersome, time consuming and costly exercise which is not at all attractive to the employer and the employee. Capacitation is needed for RPL practitioners and this includes the Quality Assurance staff at EWSETA. With the availability of qualified RPL practitioners also comes the capacity for EWSETA to establish RPL Assessment Centres across the country. Awareness has to be created on how successful RPL can be as well as to how all stakeholders can benefit from it. A raising awareness campaign organised by EWSETA could make employers more aware of the positive impact that RPL can have on the daily management of the organisation, both in economical as well as in social returns.

This chapter reports on *‘the what’* of RPL on a sector-level. Main purpose of this chapter is to answer the question ‘What to do when implementing RPL in the EWSETA-context, on a sector level with linkages to the national level?’.

In general RPL means that the sector and its organisations acquire a clear picture of their competence demands and requirements, work on the formulation of their demand, and invest in their ‘human capital’. For the education/training partners in the sector, RPL means acting above all as a ‘listening’ partner, initiating and offering customized learning/training. The employee has to (be) prepare(d) for the exploration, identification and development of his/her personal competences so that he/she can work proactively on enhanced employability and career opportunities. RPL and custom work are outstanding tools with which the individual can attain this enhancement if guided by transparent competence-based standards in the sector and supported by well-trained professionals (guides and assessors) and supportive actions from the education & training-sectors.

With this notion of ‘partners in RPL’ in mind, first the stage is set for both conclusions as well as critical success factors regarding the implementation of RPL-systematics in the sector context. Next the potential linkages are described between the 2013 Guidelines of the National Policy for implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning and the 2008 policy paper on RPL (ESETA, 2008).

### 4.1 Conclusions on ‘the what’ of RPL

In order to be able to recognise the developments regarding RPL within the sector and within the variety of goals and contexts more clearly, four different RPL-steered models for learning strategies were introduced. On the basis of these models the following conclusions – relevant for EWSETA’s context - can be drawn:

1. RPL has everything to do with the potential of (lifelong) learning for learners and organisations in terms of employability and empowerment. A strong focus on the self managing role of the ‘learner’ him- or herself is a crucial part in exploiting this potential to the fullest:
  - a. the learner can be in charge of putting together and maintaining the portfolio. The portfolio is the basis for the formation of a lifelong learning strategy. Guidance from the organisation is essential;
  - b. the sector/organisation is responsible for formulating the organisation’s competence needs in transparent competence-standards (in terms of explicit learning outcomes) and to facilitate investment in its *learning* employees;
  - c. the education/training partners must be able to respond to the various learning needs of the learning individual, in other words be able to offer learning/training programmes that can be implemented custom-made with respect to learning objectives/forms/environments (blended learning).

2. Commitment is essential for the idea that the learner plays a key role in establishing, being able (or supported in being able) to co-design and -implement any learning strategy up to a certain level<sup>3</sup>. This investment in human capital calls for co-designing responsibilities for the learner him/herself. At all times the primary process here is the process of moving towards the desired learning goals, both in determining an individual's starting situation as well as during an individual's development course, leading to the expected (new) learning outcome.
3. The portfolio is a powerful way to give structure and content to this learner's responsibility of co-design. Guidance from within the sector and companies could be a welcome push in this direction by offering:
  - a. training in self-management of competences. This is a useful way to start the formation of the desired portfolio.
  - b. help in putting together a portfolio in the work situation. An expert on the subject, easily approachable, who can offer help in designing a portfolio, is of great value in actually realising portfolio formation.
  - c. self-assessment tools, for instance, to help determine the competence and ambition level of the learner. This could be of great use in determining goals and direction in the learner's learning objectives, of course with respect to the sector needs.
4. In the light of the different goals that can prevail in sector-based learning strategies, further research is needed into the motives for and the design of learning strategies. The four models (educational, upgrade, HRD and lifelong learning) can then be pushed forward with more speed on the basis of their own dynamics in the dialogues between learner, sector/organisation and education/training partners, in which the three main actors can deal effectively with their respective responsibilities.
5. RPL as a bridge between the portfolio of the learner and the competence-based standards of the organisation, supported by education/training partners, only becomes relevant when on 'the one side of the bridge' concrete learning needs have been formulated, which than 'on the other side of the bridge' can be answered efficiently by education/training partners. The basis for all learning needs is deciding what the starting situation of the individual is when being assessed against a sector-standard.
6. On the basis of a specific learning need a learning trajectory can be offered that is adapted to the specific context; this could be a diploma trajectory but also personal enrichment by learning in the form of modules, action learning, distance education, work guidance or otherwise.
7. RPL may serve as a bridge between the competence needs of, on the one hand, the organisation and, on the other, the learner. This calls for two forms of RPL:
  - a. Synchronizing competence systems of organisations on the one hand (with their competence management grounded in the function-descriptions, formulated in the (sector-or organisation-based) HRM-system and on the other hand the NQF of schools and institutes, with their competence-based curricula and training programmes. The goal of this synchronization is to determine which competences and learning programmes can best be linked to the determination of the learning needs of the learner in the assessment of his/her portfolio; in this way the portfolio

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<sup>3</sup> 'a certain level' has a bandwidth from autonomous and self-helped till dependent and fully coached/guided.

of the learner can be fed and upgraded from within the HRM and the (professional) educational and training system. This form of RPL is top-down oriented and strives for a harmony between competence systems in the areas of supply (education/training) and demand (sector, organisations).

- b. Through this synchronisation the learner can make clearer choices with regards to the strategies for enriching his/her portfolio. The recognition that the learner seeks (dependent on the learning goals that prevail in the RPL-set-up) can then be supported by a personalized procedure. In this way RPL can provide concrete indications of what the most appropriate learning route for personal development is. In doing so, the learner can also make use of the competence acquisition that can be supported from within the own organisation or through external organisations. This form of RPL is bottom-up oriented and aims at creating a balance between personal and organisational development issues and links these issues to the most appropriate learning programmes and tailor-made designs. This links the portfolio of the learner with the sector's HRM and (potentially) also to the NQF.

## 4.2 Critical Success Factors

Various critical success factors (csf's) concerning the further implementation of RPL in the sector can be distilled from the policy-development and the practical evidence presented in this report. Concerning the subsequent phases in the sector-driven RPL-process these csf's are:

### *Phase 1: Preparation and recognition of competences*

- Concentrating on marketing of RPL is highly important. The learner should be addressed especially, because if he/she fails to see the need for learning, there will be no learning at all!
- Collection of practical RPL-examples from all levels, i.e. on individual, organisational and systemic levels can assist in this marketing.
- Supportive infrastructure: communicate also existing, favourable legislation, financial arrangements and regulations for RPL.
- Educational awareness should be raised in an organisation or company: investing educationally in someone's potential always pays off.
- Communication and guidance on the why/how/what of RPL must be crystal clear to the learner. This is closely linked to the provision of well-trained guides within the organisation/sector.
- Self-management of competences is crucial: in the division of roles between those involved, the emphasis for the learner is on personal process management; for the organisation on the formulation of learning needs; and for the education/training institutions on the development of flexible learning-made-to-measure programmes. This step involves the creation of personal portfolio-formats and – possibly – structured portfolio-training and portfolio-guidance for employees.

N.B. The level up to which the learner is capable of - autonomously or guided - building-up his/her portfolio gives a clear image of the level in self-steered learning that the learner is probably up to when it comes to design and implementation of the personalized learning strategy.

### *Phase 2: Recognition of competences*

- A candidate must work with a clear portfolio(format). Depending on the goal and the context there are three main forms available.

- Training-programmes for self-management of competences must be offered. Such a training is very helpful in designing, filling and managing one's portfolio.
- Setting standards involves selection of a standard from educational or human resource systems by the candidate dependent on goal & context of RPL.
- The function of guidance should be strengthened, especially in the 'empowerment-model'.
- The accessibility of a chosen standard is extremely important in the candidate's self-management.

#### *Phase 3: Validation and Assessment of competences*

- Transparency, uniformity, harmonisation and collaboration at sector level and creating linkages with national qualifications is important.
- Match competence systems from organisations and educational systems. RPL is the bridge.
- Impartial assessment must be safeguarded in the RPL procedures, so that an objective and independent assessment can take place.
- No distinction between diplomas acquired on the basis of formal, informal or non-formal learning needs to be the basis for the sector's learning culture.
- RPL should be possible at all qualification and function levels.

#### *Phase 4: Further development of competences*

- Organisations need to facilitate personal development plans, provide guidance and offer transparent competence management.
- Function-standards need to be formulated in terms of learning outcomes which are based on task-oriented competences.
- Education must value the workplace as a rich learning environment.
- Employees need to self-manage their personal development programmes as much as possible, when being active in a RPL procedure. This ownership means that it is up to them to make choices in the degree of self-determination or external direction within their development. These choices range between 100% self-management of form and content of the programme (*empowering*) and 0% (*pampering*).

#### *Phase 5: Embedding RPL*

- Organisations must ensure that their formulation of demands is effective. Clear formulation of demands means that there is clarity concerning (1) the competences that are present within the organisation, and (2) the required competences within the framework of the organisational aims. 1 and 2 can be combined to ensure the development of (3) the competence demands within the organisation, and ultimately (4), an action plan for the recognition and development of available and required competences.
- Research into the effects of RPL: research is needed into the added value of RPL, among other things focussed on its economic, financial and social effects.
- Integration of RPL in HRM-systems: there must be a better integration of RPL into HR policy and practice and sector-based qualifications, aimed at enhancing employability and mobility, increasing voluntary participation and working towards achievable goals.
- Linkages with the NQF to enhance the role of learning within the sector.

### **4.3 Linking EWSETA's RPL policy to South Africa's national RPL policy**

EWSETA's RPL-policy is based on the ESETA policy paper on RPL from 2008 (ESETA, 2008). It is mainly geared at the RPL-mode of further training/learning with linkages to formalized learning modules, certificates and/or qualifications. Utilization of the policy can be enhanced by giving more attention to creating dynamic HRD, therewith enforcing the RPL-systematics for more purposes, namely of:

- Strengthening people's self-management of competences and their personal development within/outside work. This purpose especially strengthens people's motivation for learning.
- Linking people's personal/private developed competences to the public sector-tasks by focusing also on informal and non-formal learning achievements outside of the formal learning and working grounds. This purpose helps learners and organisations to understand the full potential of RPL.
- Re-training the sector-staff in sustainable talent management for:
  - o linking work-tasks in the best way possible to worker's talents,
  - o for taking care of designating further learning tasks to employees with high value for money (only training-tasks that are necessary)
  - o offering career-guidance by validating employees in their actual functioning.This action helps creating a favourable sector-infrastructure for HRD that can be organisation- and/or learner-steered.

When tied in more closely to the objectives of the national RPL-policy (SAQA, 2013; Michelson, 2012) and taking notice of the state of the art in South Africa (MTT, 2013; Naudé, 2012), the Energy & Water Services Sector could make big steps in rolling out RPL within the sector. This depends on acknowledging the value and the width of the learner's autonomous learning achievements and being able to link these achievements to sector-based learning strategies in which any model for Recognizing Learning can be activated. Preconditions for successful implementation in the sector are so to say in store, especially when observing the state of the art on RPL-utilization in South Africa up to 2013:

- a. the momentum lies on the level of the SETAs,
- b. RPL is in most cases conducted as an assessment-tool for assessing informal and non-formal learning outcomes against NQF-based qualification-standards.
- c. the highest numbers of RPL-candidates are in those SETAs where there is much pressure on proving one's skills due to formalized obligations to prove capacity through qualification. These obligations are based on legislation/regulation describing quality-indicators for practising specific tasks in a sector. This practice prevails in financial-administrative SETAs.
- d. the main focus is on reaching out to national qualifications, especially on levels 4-5,
- e. there is much sector-diversity in terms of financing and quantity of RPL-candidates.

The recommendations for further implementation of RPL therefore aim at making progress through :

- increasing the number and the quality of further learning programmes for RPL-candidates ('provider quality'),
- increasing the number and the quality of staff for performing RPL, such as assessors and moderators ('learner support'),
- developing a coherent RPL-system across the sector ('systemic approach'),
- creating a common RPL-language and understanding of the RPL-process ('advocacy').

#### 4.4 EWSETA's challenge

Taking account of existing policy and practice, EWSETA faces a real challenge when activating its RPL-policy. Big steps are possible when acknowledging the international and national recommendations and valorising the critical success factors. When tuning in to the different models for RPL-strategies, EWSETA can create its own momentum in sector-steered RPL-practices.

It's evident that EWSETA needs to make clear how the practical use of *the National Policy for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning* (SAQA, 2013) can come to full bloom in the sector. Relevant questions are: how to support all stakeholders in the process? Which problems and which ambitions can be made transparent? Who does what and with what motive? Which learning-demand is relevant and with which intended learning outcome? How does lifelong learning refer to the general framework that authorities and social partners are maintaining?

These questions relate in a high degree to sector priorities and its linkage to the National Guidelines for RPL (ESETA, 2008). As the policy is now, it is mainly focused on the RPL-mode of further training/learning, with linkages to formalized learning (modules, certificates and/or qualifications). There could however also be attention for creating dynamic HRM, therewith taking advantage of the RPL-systematics for enhancing:

- People's self-management of competences and their personal development within/outside work.
- Linking people's competences to their public sector-tasks.
- Re-training HRM-staff in the sector to be able to support/facilitate sustainable talent management for empowerment and personal development on the workplace by:
  - o linking work-tasks in the best way possible to worker's talents,
  - o taking care of designating further learning tasks to employees with high value for money (only training-tasks that are necessary),
  - o offering career-guidance by validating employees in their actual functioning and strengthening them in their career.

Some suggestions for updating or clarifying the sector-policy on RPL:

- I. The purpose of RPL should be broad formulated and linked to a division of responsibilities between (1) employer, (2) HRM-staff, (3) employee, (4) learning/training-providers and (5) sector-based RPL-professionals <sup>4</sup> such as assessors, moderators, advisors and quality-verifiers.
- II. Broad purpose means utilizing RPL both in the learning/training fields as well as in the working spheres; this entails a broader focus on people's competences that just for training purposes; it's all about better work performance. RPL helps people to recognize their own potential and only thereafter come objectives concerning utilizing and strengthening their potential. This not only means a focus on qualification and credits but also a focus on designating new/other tasks in their present (and future) functioning.
- III. There's more to learning experiences than just job-related experiences. What to say of the potential value of people's competences developed in social activities, citizenship, volunteering, household management, etc.? What is needed, above all, is a strong focus on prior formal, informal and non-formal learning experiences!

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4 Possibly based in a Sector RPL Centre.



It's with this focus that impact can be generated for both employees as well as for employers.

- IV. The legislative context is secured but there should be transparent sector-regulation formulated for linking EWSETA's context, mission, functions and tasks to this legislation.
- V. If the policy needs to be "learner centred and developmental advocated", there should be mentioning of an RPL-process geared at the learner recognizing his/her prior learning experiences and documenting them.  
RPL is not just about assessment; it's more about recognizing, documenting and (personal) valuing, before it comes to assessment and validation. Therefore after the portfolio build-up, it's time for assessment. In this order, the assessment can be more effective since the employee is more motivated and empowered by knowing his/her strengths and weaknesses.
- VI. The linkage from the sector to the NQF is the next step in RPL-process. This step has to be formulated, based on the sector's identity and its mission concerning sustainable HRD:
  - a. Linked to the sector's function- or job-profiles.
  - b. Including RPL-services: information/raising awareness, identification & documentation of learning experiences, portfolio-training and follow-up activities (training, job-rotation, tutoring, mentoring, recruitment, job-promotion, etc.).
- VII. Take notice that 'assessment' is more than merely "making a judgment". RPL is about empowering both organization and employees and creating dynamic learning organizations with responsible employees.
- VIII. In the support section the best platform for utilizing RPL to its fullest potential is a form of a sector RPL centre that functions as a platform for employees to get a better grip on their prior learning achievements and linking them to sector needs. This means support in terms of raising awareness and portfolio build-up. It is advised to master the technique of portfolio build-up also on the level of the sector HRM-staff.
- IX. In terms of finance it is recommended to pay attention to making transparent when the 'return in investment' in RPL is paying its debts: getting insight in the revenues of RPL (e.g. less absence; higher productivity, etc.) and less money spend on low-effective training but more on high-value, personalized training on the workplace.
- X. The grant policy should be accessible for more training objectives than just formalized objectives in terms of certificates/qualifications.
- XI. The issue of quality assurance could be facilitated by training a group of experts in accrediting the outcomes of individual RPL-processes.
- XII. The step 'assessment' should be performed by autonomous and accredited assessors to safeguard an impartial verdict on the value of someone('s portfolio).

An update of the sector guidelines for RPL is recommended for this purpose:

1. Guideline 1 - *To facilitate RPL processes that lead to national recognition for learners* - could be widened to recognition in the workplace (empowerment and social inclusion) and on sector level standards.
2. Guideline 2 – *Approaches to portfolio assessment* – can be considered as the core activity in the RPL process because without a proper portfolio, the assessment is not going to be effective. A focus on portfolio build-up is necessary in this respect.

3. Guideline 3 – *Financing of RPL* – has to cover all kinds of grants being offered in this respect. Maybe there are other/new financial opportunities to consider as well, like tax-reduction or Human Capital Accounting methods?
4. Guideline 4 – *The costing template for RPL* - should include the costs for supporting portfolio build-up and (re-)training of RPL-staff.
5. Guideline 5 – *Experience required by interviewer/advisor prior to the RPL process* - should include the following competences for assessors and advisors:
  - a. *Reviewing*  
The assessor/advisor is able to adequately provide an assessment of the competences of the participant, using a number of common competence-based assessment forms such as the portfolio, the criterion based interview and practical simulations. He can apply these assessment forms integral within a VPL procedure. The assessor/advisor is able to perform an assessment on the basis of a standard (competence-profile), to assess the provided evidence of the candidate on the basis of the prevailing assessment-criteria and to assess answers of a participant using the standard.
  - b. *Observing*  
The assessor/advisor is able to adequately observe the participant and to link an assessment-report to this observation, in relation to the standard that was used as a basis for the assessment..
  - c. *Interviewing*  
The assessor/advisor is able, by using specific questions and interview techniques in an assessment-situation, to make the competences of the participant transparent and to compare these competences in the interview with the standard. The assessor asks questions to investigate the value of the personal learning experiences.
  - d. *Providing feedback*  
The assessor/advisor is able to provide feedback to the participant in a constructive and motivating way and to indicate the results of the assessment, customized to the level of the participant. The assessor/advisor can explain and substantiate the decisions based on the assessment and indicate at which points the participant is competent.
  - e. *Written communication*  
The assessor/advisor is able to write a clear, detailed and structured assessment report. The assessor describes the competences of the participant that are valid for the used standard. Personal characteristics are only added when applicable.
  - f. *Technical competence*  
The assessor/advisor is technical competent and must have sufficient experience and qualifications in the appropriate discipline (professionally). The assessor can prove that he has sufficient technical skills and is willing to keep abreast of developments in the sector. The technical level of the assessor must be at least as high as that of the participant. The assessor is familiar with the assessment (VPL) procedure and objectives, the assessment tools and the methodology. The assessor/advisor is familiar with the sector or company standards (job descriptions, qualification profiles) and has knowledge of the labor market and vocational education programs for the sake of the assessment.
6. Guideline 6 – *Criteria for developing RPL instruments* - needs to be rewritten to include identification/documentation tasks linked to portfolio build-up and a section of guidance on follow-up activities.

Both conclusions and critical success factors regarding the implementation of RPL-systematics in a sector context, as well as a roadmap for using general guidelines for this purpose, are provided. The roadmap is focused at embedding RPL in EWSETA's context and objectives with linkages to the national RPL-policy.

With the above-mentioned suggestions for updating the sector-policy on RPL in mind, the sector can be strengthened and utilized to its full potential, with a focus on the core building-blocks of RPL: (1) portfolio build-up for RPL in the four RPL-models, (2) portfolio-guidance and –assessment and (3) embedding RPL in the sector's function-profiles and linking them to NQFs. For this purpose a roadmap can be formulated for moving from policy to practice:

- a. Further utilize *the National Policy* of SAQA as a starting point for upgrading the sector-based framework of RPL-systematics that favours the four main RPL-models, which will stimulate and strengthen different learning-strategies within the sector.
- b. Put the learner with her/his portfolio in the position of co-designer of career-opportunities. Offer – if necessary or appropriate – training-opportunities in portfolio build-up for groups of RPL-candidates. Offering RPL-candidates a self-scan for getting a good view of their chances for a successful RPL-procedure is in this respect also helpful in having the learners engaged and committed.
- c. Focus on learning outcomes instead of learning-input and secure that the RPL-process is portfolio-steered; i.e. recognition, assessment and development-steps are based on the assessment of the learner's portfolio.
- d. Make sure the standards for qualification and sector-based competence-management are transparent and interchangeable between sector standards and national standards. The job profiles of the sector, the sector certificates and the qualifications in the National Qualifications Framework offer good reference material to set up levels in standards, both in education and training as well as in human resources management. This entails a focus on the specific sector needs for communication-strategies, tools and methods for exploiting RPL to its full potential for learner and organisation.
- e. Ensure 'trust' in the RPL-process by making sure that the moderators are trained well and can ensure the quality of each assessment. In this case a code of conduct for moderators needs to be formulated concerning their impartiality, quality and experience.
- f. Both systems (qualification-standards & competence-management) must be linked in order for the individual to take a pick where, how and why to employ and enrich one's portfolio,
- g. Moving from policy to practice is especially about setting up a training programme for assessors and moderators as well as a pilot for making these assessors and moderators accustomed to the sector's needs in RPL. Piloting also has the advantage of being able to create role models for successful RPL-usage by learners. These role

models can be used for disseminating the benefits of RPL for the sector and its organisations and workers/learners.

- h. Learning/training is about stimulating the main stakeholders to pick up their respective responsibilities:
  - i. Authorities, with a responsibility to create a favourable learning culture for RPL.
  - ii. The learner, with a responsibility in portfolio-build up.
  - iii. The sector/organisation, with a responsibility in filling-in competence-based HRM.
  - iv. Education/training partners, with a responsibility in offering 'learning-made-to-measure'.

In this way, RPL connects all stakeholders in lifelong learning strategies! Short-term goals are:

- Stimulating the awareness of the learner by offering courses in self-management of competences for portfolio-build up and self scan or advice for getting a view of the chance for success.
- Helping organisations to articulate their need for competences and embed this need in pro-active competence-management.
- Making a match between the already articulated demand for competences on the labour market and the already developed supply of competences in education/training/guidance.
- Preparing the development of new supply of learning-made-to-measure in order to make better matches with the learning-demand deriving from one of the perspectives of the RPL-models:
  - 1. RPL as an educational model for utilizing a particular diploma-programme;
  - 2. RPL as an upgrade/update model for determining an individual's educational and training needs for obtaining initial qualifications,
  - 3. RPL as a HRD model for matching and upgrading employees' competences to match organisational aims;
  - 4. RPL as a lifelong learning model for supporting individual career-opportunities.

When the roadmap is followed, commitment amongst the stakeholders can develop fully. There will be plenty of space to build strong commitment for new ways of learning both within circles of government, education and amongst the social partners as well as the citizens. Commitment after all is the most essential precondition for making use of RPL and thereby changing the 'looks' of the formal learning and working systems. Commitment means that all parties involved will take up their own responsibility.

Finally, but not least at all, competence-based learning and RPL might contribute to making learning more a matter of fun again, since learning will be personalized and 'made more to measure'. The motivation of learners to learn and use their learning for fulfilling their tasks better will therefore be more empowered and inclusive. For employers, managers, HRM-staff, recruiters, teachers, trainers, guides, and others, this will as well be stimulating and inspiring. In this sense one could state that learning will not only be a matter of *empowerment & employability* but also of *enjoyability*!

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