

**Understanding Recognition of Prior Learning  
in the context of Organised Labour:**

**Opportunities and Challenges**

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*The purpose of this presentation is to critique an understanding of RPL from organized labour's perspectives as COSATU; the largest labour movement in South Africa played a critical role in the promotion of the concept of recognition of prior learning. The critique argues that very little has been done in the development of plans and structures to ensure that RPL benefit those who need it most, that is, the workers. This critical analysis conceptualizes RPL. It also emphasizes its importance for skills development in the country, particularly for the workers by stating the role that organized labour can play in implementing RPL to upskill its membership; and its implication for addressing national skills priority. In the final analysis it looks at the challenges of RPL in the South African context. The analysis concludes by making an assumption that RPL should be conducted in a more focused way in quest for real development pathways and real employment benefits to address the demands for skills development in the workplace.*

## **Introduction**

During the early 1990s the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the largest labour movement in South Africa, promoted the concept of recognition of prior learning (RPL) as the principle to redress the inequalities of apartheid. The intention of RPL was to create career pathways and access routes for the historically disadvantaged groups who receive inferior education during the apartheid era.

Since 1994, a number of Acts have been passed to ensure more integrated education and training system, and which foreground: access for previously disadvantaged learners to all levels of the education system, the redress of the inequalities of the past, the development of quality education across the system, and the development of the full potential of all learners. The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is one of the central pillars of the National Qualification Framework (NQF), and is seen as a mechanism for facilitating access to further learning, as well as accelerated progression through qualifications for adults who may have credible learning developed in the contexts outside of the formal education system.

RPL has since been included in South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as a key redress principle and is promoted in legislation as a necessary step in Further and Higher Education qualifications. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) is a framework on which standards and qualifications, agreed to by education and training stakeholders throughout the country are registered. It has been designated to combine education and training into a single, national system, and to make it easier for learners to enter the education and training system and to move and progress within it (SAQA, 2006: NQF Brochure).

In addition, legislation such as Skills Development and Employment Equity Acts provides clear directives to employers that access, redress and training issues in the workplace are national priorities. The Skills Development Act has made provision for the establishment of Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) to develop and implement sector appropriate

education and training plans that are in line with the NQF, and that meet the needs of both economic and social development agendas. All SETAs will establish Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies that will accredit training providers and assessors, and monitor the quality of education and training provision within their sectors. All education and training providers, as well as ETQAs, are required by SAQA to develop RPL implementation and quality assurance guidelines that will help to ensure attainment of South Africa's developmental goals.

**However, since the late 1990s there has been very little impetus in the form of projects, development plans or funding from government and funding structures to ensure that RPL benefits those most in need. Even the labour movement has not effectively popularized the notion of RPL since the early 1990s.**

The questions that arise from workers' perspective and that this presentation will attempt to answer are the following:

1. What is our understanding of RPL from our perspective as an organized labour?
2. What should be the role of organized labour in the development of RPL to upskill its members?
3. Why is RPL central to workers' demand for skills development?
4. What are the opportunities and benefits in implementing RPL in the South African workplace; and
5. What are challenges of RPL in South Africa?

## **Conceptualization**

In many countries, practices, approaches and methodologies used in higher and further education and training to recognize prior learning have changed significantly over the last twenty or so years. In the main these changes have not been analysed. Many policy makers and practitioners continue to uncritically and somewhat triumphantly advocate the 'obvious good' of RPL (Harris, 1997). The concept of RPL currently occupies a place in South African education and training policy, particularly as a main tenet of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). It also features in both the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE, 1996) report and the Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation (Department of Education, 1996).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) (2000) has expressed the view that better recognition of the skills of individuals would be beneficial for both the employer and the employee. These benefits include social, economic and political benefits. While concurring with this view, it can be argued that these benefits will only be realized if workplace RPL is implemented within the paradigm of workplace pedagogical practice, as opposed to traditional pedagogical practice. To achieve this, the RPL implementer must be aware of the paradigm of

workplace pedagogy and workplace restrictions, and understand why RPL has not been widely implemented in the workplace.

The Recognition of Prior Learning has attracted renewed interest in recent years. This development has been associated with efforts in promoting lifelong learning internationally and the development of competency based qualifications or national qualifications frameworks in some countries. The objective of promoting learning has been strongly indicated by the recent EU initiative on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

In the International Labour Office, the importance of RPL has been discussed since the International Labour Conference (ILC) in 2000. As one of the key elements of HRD practice, the discussion highlighted the importance of:

*.... skills learned and competencies gained, irrespective of how and where they have been learned, e.g. through formal and non-formal education and training, work experience and on-the-job learning.*

and that:

*Every person should have the opportunity to have (such) experiences and skills assessed, recognized and certified (ILO, 2000)*

Broadly stated, RPL is a practice that gives currency and recognition to a person's previous learning, regardless of how and where that learning was acquired. This recognition can be in the form of academic credits or advanced placement (SAQA, 2001). However, the way RPL is defined and implemented is largely determined by the educational context and policies of the institution implementing RPL (Harris, 2000).

In South Africa, there are many contexts within which RPL can be practiced, including higher education (HET), further education (FET), general education (GET), Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET), workplace-based training centres and in the workplace itself. Also, each classroom and workplace context will be different and not even two workplaces within the same industry will be identical.

Despite the South African government's frequently stated role for RPL as a tool for 'social transformation' (SAQA Act, 1995; SAQA, 2002; Departments of Education and Labour, 2002) the SAQA policies give no national implementation plan to guide RPL implementation specifically in the workplace. This could be one of the reasons why there has been little implementation of RPL in South African workplaces (Deller, 2007).

### **Understanding RPL from Organised Labour's perspective**

COSATU has consistently argued that we need to ensure that workers gain recognition for the skills and knowledge that have been acquired through years of experience at the workplace and

in the communities (Vavi, COSATU: Learning and Work RPL, 2000). While workers daily demonstrated a range of abilities, this is generally not formally recognized- either by employers or by educational institutions. In many cases workers are required to perform a range of activities in the workplace- but this does not translate into a promotion in the grading structure, or an increase in pay. In other cases, lack of recognition for the skills and knowledge that workers have leads to inefficiencies in the workplace because of limited way in which individuals abilities are utilized.

The General Secretary of COSATU, Comrade Vavi (2002) stated that **“workers are often disadvantaged and denied access to promotion opportunities in favour of others that have formal academic qualification- yet it is those same workers that are ten required to assist the person that has been appointed to undertake their role. The reversal of this situation is central to the proper implementation of Employment Equity”**.

According to (Skills Working Paper No. 21, 2005) RPL has the potential to be part of a strategy to increase the overall skills base in an organization or industry. It can be used to conduct a skills audit, as the basis for developing targeted training. It can assist organizations to recognize existing skills against the requirements of industry awards and national qualifications and it can also be used as a mechanism for preparing workers to find other employment or enter training when organization downsize.

Recognition of Prior Learning is critical to ensure that workers are able to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge that have been developed in a range of different ways. Thus workers can be assessed against nationally agreed upon unit standards, and can receive credits towards a qualification. This recognition can open up access to path ways and opportunities- a central goal of the National Qualification Framework. However, it is not enough to simply have the skills and knowledge that- employers or educational institutions define as important- recognized. Rather the struggle is for the National Qualifications Framework is also about recognizing the value of the skills that members of the working class have acquired through the different activities that people are involved in during their daily lives. When shopstewards are involved in negotiations this requires a range of skills- gathering information about the options available, consulting union structures, presenting options to workers seeking a mandate from workers, presenting these positions to management and so on. This requires a range of skills that have traditionally not been valued; moreover it locates these skills within the collective. It is these values and skills that we need to introduce into the education and training system.

We need to ensure that the standards that workers are assessed against incorporate the kind of skills that workers have, and that the system we build is one that opens access and does not serve as a way of entrenching status quo. The RPL process can assist to enable COSATU to realize the principles of ‘closing the wage gap’ and of ensuring equity in the workplace and in society.

### **Why is RPL central to workers' demands for skills development?**

COSATU has played a key role in developing the new education and training policy framework, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The labour movement supported the NQF because it promises to set up systems that will result in the **development of workers through making access to education and training much easier, and therefore hopefully to career paths** (COSATU, 2000). COSATU has strongly supported RPL to ensure that the new education and training system is able to meet the needs of workers and **broaden access to education and training**. In formally recognizing what workers already know, understand and can do, the NQF and RPL open up grading structure and success learning opportunities.

As RPL is intended to achieve the goals of **redress** and the advancement of the individual, the society and the economy, it carries a heavy burden. It is therefore important that RPL must be carefully thought about and implemented so that it can deliver on these promises- otherwise it could entrench the oppression of workers. Worker demands and reasons for wanting RPL are to meet the following human developmental challenges:

- Social justice;
- Access to education and training;
- Validation of knowledge;
- Personal and social empowerment;
- Improving the education and training system; and
- Job opportunities.

### **The Role of Organised Labour in developing RPL to upskill its members**

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is one of the key challenges facing the South African Government and other key stakeholder towards the process of transformation of the entire education and training sector. Over the past years, a number of industries have run Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) projects for various groups of employees. RPL has the potential to allow learners that have been denied formal recognition for their learning, the opportunity to attain this recognition. Through RPL, it is intended that learners will be able to access further opportunities both in their career and to further education and training (Heitmann, 2000). It has become clear that in order for RPL projects to achieve the maximum access, they must involve workers in all stages of the RPL process.

Therefore COSATU initiated in 1997 a research project which explored the RPL processes that have been implemented in industry in order to learn from these experiences and develop a policy and guidelines for RPL. The first phase of the project was completed in December 1997. Subsequently a second phase was planned to assist COSATU affiliates to work with employers to pilot aspects of this new policy in order to enrich the guidelines and to build capacity in shop

stewards who are then able to implement RPL processes. COSATU presented in 1998 a project proposal to the National Training Board (NTB) /National Skills Authority (NSA) which is responsible for the implementation of capacity building projects for stakeholders. The NTB/NSA agreed that external assistance from German Technical Co-operation (GTZ) is required to support the capacity building project within COSATU.

The RPL capacity building project, which commenced in December 1998 was assisted by the GTZ-SDSI Support Programme with around R 250 000 made available by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Co-Operation and Development. The capacity building project created competencies within the participating affiliates. In addition, that capacity building project has made an important contribution to the broader national process of developing the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in ways that ensure workers will gain maximum benefit from the new education and training system (COSATU: Learning and Work RPL, 2000).

### **Opportunities and benefits for implementing RPL in South African workplace**

RPL in South Africa is closely associated with broad education, training and industrial strategies in the post-apartheid era. One consequence of apartheid has been an associated with levels of education and training. As a consequence there has been a major drive for investment in adult education and training, including the establishment of a national training system and a national qualifications framework. The huge economic and social development needs combined with the legacy of social and economic exclusion of the apartheid era require the country to find ways of more rapidly widening access to education and training. RPL is regarded as a developmental tool more broadly in education and training in South Africa. It has been formulated following the establishment of democratic government and an explicit agenda of nation building and social inclusion. Thus RPL can be used to examine historical rigidities and barriers that might continue to exist in education and training particularly regarding the inclusion in curricula knowledge and knowledge systems that traditionally fall outside formal recognize academic discourse.

RPL should be seen as a more important investment than in almost any other country. At once RPL offers the potential for reducing the costs of delivering education and training and thus widening access, and of redressing previous and continuing disadvantage. These purposes are within a policy context that makes education a priority for social and economic purposes. The models of RPL should attempt to reconcile learner centredness, negotiated procedures, and flexible assessments with rigorous standards and quality assurance systems for recognition. To an extent this should be attempted through the set of relationships between the workplace, the SETAs and the SAQA, and the respective roles of RPL advisers, assessors and moderators. As several of the industry-based models will indicate, this has implications for costs and the particular challenge is to educate all of the participants and stakeholders in the concept and requirements of RPL and get sufficient numbers of candidates to achieve economies of scale.

### **RPL as a National Priority**

During the earlier period of the Education and Transformation, RPL was placed high on the list of priorities. In fact many organizations and institutions began grappling with the issue of RPL, its implication for institutional readiness to implement RPL and the development of appropriate policies and systems to accommodate RPL. Low-skilled employees in the legal and policing sector as well as the home-based care sector were placed on up-skilling programs which included RPL. The Department of Education had embarked on a large scale teacher upgrading program which included RPL. An RPL momentum had begun in earnest (Annual Review, 1998).

Thereafter there was a lull in the pursuance of RPL. Fewer institutions felt compelled to incorporate RPL in their education programs. Funding for ongoing RPL capacity development was limited. Projects undertaken by SETAs were few and far between. However, since later 2005, a number of organizations and institutions have begun to reconsider the value of RPL. The focus of the Department of Education, Department of labour and other national initiatives such as the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA) and the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills (JIPSA) is now refocusing on skills development of the young and unemployed. They are also looking at the problems of scarce and critical skills required for South Africa's ongoing participation in the global economy. This renewed focus in education and skills are put in place to assist education and training providers to address skills development in a holistic manner. Greater emphasis is placed on recognizing prior learning and developing a skilled nation. These initiatives have created an enabling environment for the environment for the development of excellence and Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges that become more responsive to the current education needs (Annual Review, 2000).

### **Challenges of RPL in South Africa**

One challenge for RPL is that recognized learning must be aligned with the SAQA registered unit standards or qualifications. This means that informal learning is assessed only against outcomes that are specified in the unit standards or qualifications. Learning that falls the specific outcomes is not assessed, or is set aside to be assessed at another stage. Candidates need to demonstrate competency in every specific outcome in a unit standard to gain credits against it. This process unfortunately identifies gaps in learning and places RPL candidates on a wider spectrum of learning pathways, making the achievement of recognized credits or qualifications an arduous task for the learner who may have had very little exposure to formal learning previously. In addition, there is no formal procedure available for recognizing and formalizing indigenous knowledge.

A more debilitating challenge has been the lack of impetus from the government to drive the implementation of RPL. Government funding earmarked for skills development may or may not include RPL. However, practitioners are not trained to implement RPL, which practically speaking restricts the skills development to training only. In addition, many higher education institutions are not readily embracing the principle of RPL, and are therefore not making the

necessary adjustments to accommodate such students. There is no directive from the governing and statutory bodies to enforce the implementation of RPL within the higher education sector.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the critique from this analysis of RPL from the organized labour perspective, it can be concluded that although the national policy context allows for cautious optimism, it is conceivable that the problems within the present policy frame could undermine the opportunities for the advancement of RPL practices for workers in the workplaces. RPL practices should be based on experience, reflection and knowledge. The experiences need not be mined for knowledge as to do so reinforce Enlightenment dualisms and modernist thinking. If we want to avoid RPL being an uncritical late modern project we will have to engage with, for example, experience as embedded in social context and social practices. As South Africa is undergoing a renewed drive to develop a skilled nation in a more focused way than in the past, the lesson learned from workers' perspectives should assist in ensuring that RPL is conducted in a more focused way, together with the identification of real development pathways and real employment benefits.

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