

## Strengthening Education for All of South Africa through RPL

*By Aneesha Mayet, RPL Project Manager, JET Education Services*

During the early 1990s the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), the largest labour movement in South Africa at the time, promoted the concept of recognition of prior learning (RPL) as *the* principle to redress the inequities of Apartheid. The intentions of RPL were to create career pathways and access routes for the historically disadvantaged groups who received inferior education during the Apartheid era.

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 first 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 designed to combine education and training into a single framework, which brings separate education and training systems 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).

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.

Despite the absence of support from government and labour, and the lack of a national drive by larger stakeholders, there have nevertheless been some advances in RPL that have been driven by a few non-governmental organizations, Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), higher education institutions and a few government departments.

### **Background**

The development of RPL in higher education in South Africa was largely funded and supported by the Ford and W. K. Kellogg Foundations. An initiative known as the Workers' Higher Education Project (WHEP) was established in 1995 as a project within the Joint Education Trust to assist in the promotion and implementation of RPL in universities and technikons (technikons are degree-granting technical schools that have since been merged with the university system). At the Ford Foundation's recommendation, CAEL was asked to provide the initial expertise for this endeavour.

CAEL's role in promoting RPL in higher education included training of assessors and RPL advisors, materials development, advocacy, and research. CAEL consultants Elana Michelson, Pat Dewees, David Justice, David Levin, and, CAEL Associate Vice President Diana Bamford-Rees have all contributed to what South Africans call "capacity-building," the development of local professional expertise in RPL.

## **Models and Purposes of RPL in South Africa**

Currently various RPL models are used in South Africa. An RPL Centre has been set up in the Free State Province which provides services to three education institutions in the province. Further, a 3-Day Portfolio Development Course, based on the model developed by Prof. Elana Michelson of the Empire State University of New York, for the Sapekoe Tea Plantation, was successfully used when upgrading 4500 Early Childhood Development (ECD) practitioner skills from NQF level 1 (General Education Certificate level) to level 4 (Matriculant or Further Education and Training level). The tools in this model supported the development of portfolios of evidence which demonstrate competency against learning outcomes. Other models include challenge exams, demonstrations, and performance assessments.

The intended outcomes of these processes vary across the spectrum of awarding credits for learning, creating access to formal learning, identifying gaps in learning, and developing an individual learning plan. RPL is closely linked to the notion of lifelong learning and one of the expectations of a successful RPL assessment is the placing of learners on a learning pathway that will aid in the learner's career development as well.

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

The education and training system overhaul in South Africa since 1994 has helped to streamline the previously disparate education system. There is now one education and training system for all racial and ethnic groups, and all institutions are required to align their qualifications and learning programs to the new system. The main thrust of the transformed education system is Outcome Based Education and Assessments. Qualifications are offered in a manner that will ensure that exit level outcomes are achieved by graduating learners. In addition, some qualifications are unit standard-based. Unit standards are smaller learning units which specify specific outcomes against which learners are assessed. Adhering to rules of combination as established by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), the unit standards are combined to make up whole qualifications. Unit standards are credit based and learners can achieve a number of credits in order to achieve the whole qualification.

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 outside of the specific outcomes is not assessed, or is set aside to be assessed at another stage. When conducting competency based assessments, the usual starting point is the selection of relevant unit standards and qualifications, although the job competency may require a selection of learning specified in a combination of unit standards or qualifications, and not necessarily of one complete unit standard. Candidates need to demonstrate competency in every specific outcome specified in a unit standard to gain credits against it. In competency-based assessments, the candidate may demonstrate competencies in a few specific outcomes of a number of different unit standards. If the candidates wish to gain credits for all of their learning, then they have to demonstrate competency in every specific outcome of every relevant unit standard. 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 or learning.

There were also a number of challenges facing the initial objective of offering RPL to large groups of candidates. Our experience informs us that mass based RPL is a useful way of ensuring sharing of knowledge and understanding, facilitating the development of complete portfolios of evidence, and recognizing prior learning in a cost effective way. However, it is not always feasible to implement RPL in a mass based context. Too many employees need to be absent from work at the same time, which can be untenable for employers. In addition, not all potential RPL candidates may be on the same or similar learning route, hence their prior learning may not necessarily be similar. The motive for mass based RPL also created some anxiety for the candidates, as traditionally re-skilling programs were associated with retrenchments (layoffs) or staff rationalization (downsizing).

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 higher education sectors.

Usually, RPL is embraced by institutions or organisations that have made it their mission to do so. However, due to its social development nature, very few financial recoveries are made from such an endeavour, forcing these organizations to place RPL on the low-priority list. Linking prior learning assessment with formal learning programs is also not an easy task. It requires institutional buy-in to RPL and its benefits first.

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

During the earlier period of the Education and Training transformation, RPL was placed fairly 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. The Construction SETA had managed a large scale, European Union-funded RPL process across the country and hosted an international RPL conference. The Joint Education Trust had hosted two international RPL conferences and worked closely with RPL stakeholders in the country to develop models for RPL practices. In addition other SETAs had begun developing RPL toolkits and support processes for their constituencies. The Department of Education had embarked on a large scale teacher upgrading program which included 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. An RPL momentum had begun in earnest.

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 late 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) are 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 development also includes RPL to a greater and more focused extent than in the past. New initiatives 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 development of centres of excellence and Further Education and Training (FET) Colleges that will become more responsive to the current education needs. There is an impetus by the National Business Initiative (NBI) to begin assisting with the capacity development of these centres and colleges.

## **Conclusion**

In essence, South Africa is undergoing a renewed drive to develop a skilled nation in a more focused way than in the past. The lessons learned from our experiences in the recent past have assisted in ensuring that RPL is conducted in a more focused way, together with the identification of real development pathways and real employment benefits. While RPL still needs a national champion to ensure the sustainability of this promising redress practice, there is a general re-thinking among major stakeholders that RPL is here to stay.

## **References:**

Joint Education Trust (2000): Annual Review

Joint Education Trust (1998): Annual review

SAQA (2006): NQF Brochure