

## **Part 2: Workplace RPL – factors that contribute to a more successful implementation**

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### **Abstract:**

The concept of RPL tantalizes the South African economy with its inherent promise to allow working adults from all walks of life the means to acquire a formal qualification without returning to a formal classroom. The promise is clear - RPL is a tool that can lead to the transformation of a society like South Africa because working experience can equal a qualification; and having a qualification will mean improved career prospects, better opportunities and ultimately greater earning potential. But the reality is far removed from the promise. RPL is not widely available to working adults, and vast amounts of money and time are spent each year to train working adults to gain qualifications in the very disciplines they have been working in for years. A recent PhD thesis shows that one of the main reasons for this widespread rejection of RPL in favour of traditional classroom training is simply that the RPL models available do not cater for the working adult in a working environment. This is simply because the only models for RPL implementation are those that draw on the experiences of higher education.

This is the second of a two part article. The first part described why workplace RPL is problematic and this second part presents research to show that these problems can be overcome as long as the implementers are aware of them.

### **The research**

The research for these papers was conducted as part of a PhD thesis (Deller, 2007). The research was conducted as a formal programme evaluation of an RPL

programme that was implemented using the generic RPL model proposed by SAQA. The client was a listed short term insurance company that needed to ensure that its staff met the academic requirements stipulated in the Financial Advisory and Intermediary Services Act (Act 37 of 2002 – also known as the FAIS Act). Broadly, and in term of this Act, all financial advisers and intermediaries were required to become licensed with the Financial Services Board (FSB) if they wished to offer advice and sell financial services. In order to be awarded the Financial Services Board license to continue advising/selling, the advisers and intermediaries needed to prove that they met minimum qualification and competency requirements. The FAIS Act was passed to create a new level of professionalism in the South African insurance industry and to protect the consumer (Insurance Sector Education and Training Authority, abbreviated as INSETA<sup>1</sup>, 2004a).

The number of affected advisers and intermediaries was estimated to be 75 000 in 2004 (INSETA, 2004a). Those who were unable to prove compliance had two options if they wanted to continue as a licensed financial service professional: they could either attend a formal training programme and be formally assessed to acquire the required minimum qualification or they could apply to have their current insurance competencies assessed for academic credit without first attending any training programme. This latter process obviously embodies what is referred to as *recognition of prior learning* (RPL) by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)<sup>2</sup>.

A number of large employers researched the issue of RPL as a possible solution to the impending crisis of non-compliance and they contracted with a single provider to develop a robust RPL implementation model for the sector that would assist

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<sup>1</sup> INSETA is the authority responsible for the quality assurance of vocational training within the insurance sector.

<sup>2</sup> The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) is the authority responsible for maintaining the National Qualification Framework (NQF) in South Africa.

advisers to achieve the FAIS credit requirements so that they could remain employed by the sector. RPL was seen by these employers as the ideal solution for their non-compliant staff because, although they mostly lacked formal qualifications, they generally had a great deal of practical work experience. Other considerations were that the RPL solution was less expensive in terms of both time out of the workplace and money than traditional training and the RPL would be completed faster than the traditional training. These considerations are summarised in Table 1 below. However, no clearly defined model was available for the workplace RPL implementation, and the guidelines issued by INSETA were considered by all involved to be inadequate to guide practical implementation.

Table 1: Considerations in the decision between RPL and traditional training

<b>RPL</b>	<b>Traditional training</b>
Less than 20% of the training cost.	More expensive cost per learner due to the necessity for learners to have to repeat modules that were pre-clustered into single exams even though learners may already have the credits.
Less time out of the workplace – most effort is expended in learners own time at their own pace according to their own schedule.	Pre-scheduled examinations and lecture times meant that all staff would need to be out of the office at the same time to attend lectures, write exams and study for exams.
More flexible delivery options.	Learners could only select from pre-scheduled combinations of credits.
Provided recognition for practical workplace learning, which enhanced	Workplace experience not recognised – all learners had to re-learn material

the credibility of their workplace practices.	in format prescribed by the training institution, with no opportunity to recognise the value of workplace input or systems.
No need to write formal examinations.	Relies on formal exams which many employers found stressful.

Initially, 227 staff from a single employer elected to try the RPL option and this group was placed on an RPL process that was largely informed by the SAQA and INSETA guidelines for RPL implementation. The experiences of these 227 candidates were evaluated and subsequently used to recommend improvements to the RPL implementation model in the sector.

The implementation process for this pilot group followed the roll out plan shown in Figure 1 below:

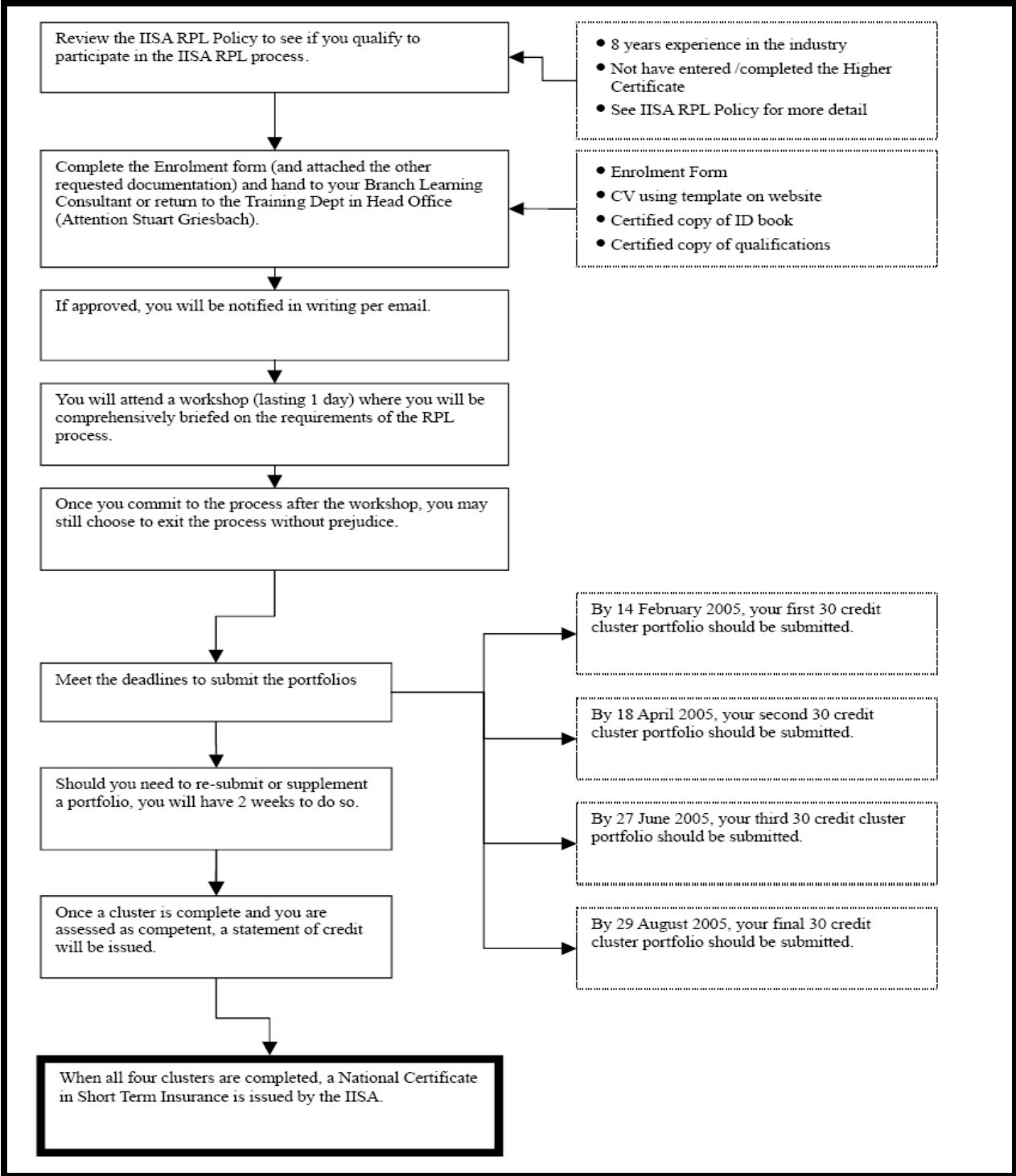


Figure 1: Roll out of the initial RPL programme

The preparatory session (fourth block from the top on the left) covered the following aspects:

- Introduction to RPL at the company and the internal rules pertaining to RPL sponsorship, etc.;
- Overview of the new academic environment (SAQA, INSETA, etc);
- FAIS requirements;
- Assessment under the new academic paradigm;
- Introduction to RPL as an assessment practice;
- The qualification being assessed – review of the unit standards;
- Discussion on how to present evidence as a portfolio;
- Where to go for help;
- Time-line and what needs to be done before the next coaching session;
- Some motivation to get started.

Tight deadlines were imposed for each submission because the employer needed to wrap up the process within the financial year. This provided approximately nine months for those who were prepared in the first session and seven months for those prepared in the last session. Once the full RPL programme was completed and all candidates had received their results the research commenced. The programme evaluation did not commence sooner as there was a fear that candidates might be less than honest simply because they were afraid they would not obtain a competent outcome.

### **The programme evaluation and data analysis**

In this research the data was collected in a variety of ways, i.e.:

- On-line chat room;
- All candidates' reflective statements;
- Extreme candidates were purposefully selected to be interviewed.

In addition, a secondary data analysis was conducted on 18 international workplace RPL case studies presented by Dyson and Keating (2005). Their study was commissioned by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to showcase workplace RPL practice because 'few studies have examined the practice of RPL in the workplace, despite its potential contribution as a means of enhancing employability, labour mobility and career prospects' (Stewart, 2005, quoted from the foreword of the ILO research). The intention of this secondary analysis was to provide support (or contradiction) for the factors emerging from the primary research.

Upon completion of the data analysis (which was conducted using a methodology known as grounded theory) and the secondary data analysis, five broad factors emerged as being critical for workplace RPL candidates. These were:

- The circumstances leading to the RPL process and candidates' initial reactions to it;
- The personal mastery skills (based on a self-assessment of self-confidence, personal values, ability to cope and a knowledge of academic conventions) displayed by candidates;
- The role of team support and/or group processes throughout the RPL process;
- The candidates' evolving perception of the RPL process;
- The meaning that the outcome of the RPL process had for the candidates upon completion.

These five factors were then compared to the data from the secondary data analysis and significant RPL theory and workplace learning theory. The intention of

this step was to search for support, or lack of support, for the five factors identified in this research. From this analysis emerged a logic model<sup>3</sup> to guide the future implementation of workplace RPL in sectors that faced similar circumstances to those faced by the financial services sector.

## **Observations that emerged from the data analysis**

From the data collected, the following observations emerged:

1. The RPL candidates all stated that they felt forced to embark upon the RPL process to gain their FAIS credits. Technically, this was not true because they could have attended training and written exams in the traditional way to acquire their credits, but regardless of the reality, the candidates appeared to all express the view that they were compelled to do the RPL programme. This caused a sense of resentment that was initially directed at the RPL process;
2. Most candidates (75%) claimed to have worked in either a small group or a dyad made up of workplace colleagues. In most cases these were people that they worked with on a daily basis. The remainder of the candidates claimed to have worked on their RPL activities alone. However, every candidate was able to name at least one person who had encouraged or motivated them to continue when they felt like giving up;

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<sup>3</sup> Patton (2002, p. 162-163) defines a logic model (also termed a theory of action) as a logical and graphical representation showing the connections between programme inputs, outputs and processes that is used to guide and predict practical implementation. Simply put, a logic model provides a step-by-step view of a process that can be followed when implementing whatever process it is representing.

3. Most candidates (62%) claimed that did not understand what was required from them initially, and that this only become apparent after they had started to work through the activities;
4. Candidates who believed (self-assessment) they had high levels of personal mastery had a statistically higher chance (78%) of being found fully competent than candidates who did not assess themselves as high;
5. A large majority of the candidates (82%) reported that they become more positive about the RPL process as their personal mastery skills improved and as their team mates become more positive. As their positivity increased, so did their average competency rates (they were submitting sections of their assessment evidence in clusters). Thus there was a positive correlation between improved competency rates, personal mastery and positive team support.

## **Significance of this model for workplace RPL practice and theory**

The data analysis revealed that many RPL candidates were ill-equipped with the necessary personal mastery skills to tackle the RPL process and that they needed support and feedback that was not always forthcoming in the workplace. The secondary literature analysis reinforced these conclusions. The literature review of workplace learning theory revealed that learner-readiness and learning in a supportive community of practice was critical for successful workplace learning. The significance of this revelation for practical workplace RPL implementation is a major contribution of this study because RPL implementation models are traditionally designed for individuals who approach academic institutions requesting RPL in isolation from their workplace. Thus, the issue of workplace and candidate readiness is not considered in other RPL models. Also, because RPL candidates traditionally seek out RPL on their own, they appear to have a level of self-

motivation and a desire to succeed that is not always evident in candidates who are 'forced' into doing RPL for some external reason (for example, to become FAIS compliant). By incorporating both a personal mastery assessment and a workplace support assessment prior to the implementation of RPL it is anticipated that the RPL process will yield better success rates and more satisfied RPL candidates at the end.

Another significant practical contribution of this study is the step-by-step logic model that can be followed to guide workplace implementation within the insurance sector, and other similar sectors. Practically, this adds to the current body of literature because the perspective and orientation is different to what is usually described by RPL theorists who are drawn from a more academic perspective where particular factors (like workplace power relationships) are not considered significant.

As to the significance of this research for RPL theory: traditionally RPL theory has evolved from within formal, mainstream education (Harris, 2002), and as such it is underpinned by the epistemological standpoint of formal education. This includes a particular view of what constitutes knowledge, what constitutes learning and what constitutes fair and valid assessment of that learning. Within this epistemological standpoint, learning has currency once it is assessed and matched to the requirements of a qualification that already exists. Prior learning that does not conform to that found within the formal education system is not valued, and theoretical and written forms of knowledge are privileged over practical and oral forms of knowledge (Smith, 2007). The key theoretical contribution of this research is that it presents an alternative epistemological perspective, one that values practical knowledge and takes cognisance of the workplace context.

## Recommendations for RPL implementation and policy development

This section concludes with some suggestions for RPL implementation and policy development as a result of the primary research conducted.

### ***Recommendations for RPL implementers***

*Obtain buy-in from all stakeholders:* The logic model proposed by this research implies the importance of obtaining buy-in from all relevant parties to ensure the successful implementation of RPL. This is an important step in planning the programme implementation and ensuring consistent implementation. It is important to understand:

- The purpose of recognition – for candidates and employers;
- The role of the ETQA and any reporting that is needed;
- The role of the trade union and employer bodies;
- The role of industry professional bodies or legal bodies.

*Understand the context* – it is important to understand the environment and the prevailing learning culture. Companies should undergo a learning culture profile to assess their readiness to be able to support RPL candidates through to success. If the learning culture is not fully ready to support the RPL then an intervention should take place before the RPL commences. Team support structures may have to be implemented to support RPL candidates.

*Offer an alternative to on-site RPL* – if RPL cannot take place at the worksite, either due to a lack of supportive learning culture or confidentiality, etc., then candidates should be able to complete their RPL off-site through an independent RPL centre set up specifically to offer RPL to an industry segment.

*Profile RPL candidates for RPL-readiness* – prospective RPL candidates should be assessed prior to RPL commencement to ensure they have the required level of prior learning and the required level of personal mastery to manage the RPL process.

*Develop a logic model and activity plan that is context-specific* - as with all other organisational strategic changes or adoptions, it is expedient to develop a strategy for the implementation of RPL within an organisation. This will obviously entail some form of research before implementation. Although RPL is clearly recommended for widespread consideration, it is conceivable that, in some circumstances, RPL might simply not work and initial research will give an indication of these and other issues. Lockett (1999b, p. 69) emphasises the issue of determining the purpose of RPL before designing a system to achieve it. This would include decisions on assessment goals as well as on whether the need is for diagnosis/access, or accreditation/exemption. Also stressed by Lockett (1999a, p. 15) is the importance of an assessment approach that is locally-controlled, site-based and context sensitive and includes learners in the process of judging their work.

*Use this research as a blueprint for workplace implementation* - the logic model for workplace RPL implementation proposed by this research can be tested for generalisability in other employment sectors. These tests should be written up as case studies and shared within a community of RPL practice to ensure that lessons are learnt and communicated so that the practical implementation of RPL can be furthered.

*Use tools other than the portfolio of evidence and consider 'communities of practice'* - within a corporate environment it is probably true that the most valid form of

assessment is observation by the assessor while the candidate performs her/his duties in the workplace (Van Rooyen, 2000, p. 22). This needs to be tempered with the need for practicability and cost management, but care needs to be taken to use assessment methods that are not too individualistic.

*Plan candidate feedback* – deliver feedback that adds value to the learning process under way and that supports the candidate through their predicted changes in perception towards the RPL process. Build in ongoing support, counseling and motivation to ensure successful outcomes.

### **Recommendations for workplace RPL policy makers**

SAQA (2002, p. 4) sees the key challenge for the implementation of RPL in SA as the sustainability of the system. More than just serving a redress function, which would give an RPL system a rather limited lifespan, such a system should be used to increasingly incorporate the principles of life-long learning. This underscores the SAQA intention of making RPL part of a holistic approach (SAQA, 2002, p. 6), which should assist in preventing RPL assessment from becoming merely a technically applicable practice.

*Form context-specific or industry specific RPL assessment centres* – given this research, which echoes others like Osman (2001) and Harris (2002), one of the more sustainable and cost effective approaches for wide scale RPL implementation would be the establishment of industry-specific RPL centres that only do RPL and assessment (not training). This allows for the establishment of a community of practice for assessment staff (including implementers), cost saving and increased acceptance of the outcomes by the industry. It allows stakeholders to collaborate and cooperate to achieve the RPL vision for the sector.

*Build communities of RPL practice* – if industry-specific RPL centres are established, allow them to cooperate across sectors to share practices and research in order to develop a full community of workplace RPL practice.

*Assess all knowledge and skill for equivalence not only the literal matching of outcome to outcome* - in answer to the question of whether RPL can help to overcome a history of educational discrimination and disadvantage, Michelson (1996a) offers the opinion that the kinds of knowledge that are by-products of political struggle should be assessable through RPL, for instance leadership and public speaking. Strong capabilities would probably have been developed in this regard and it makes for a valid suggestion to translate these into skills for use in the business environment. She also adds that the syllabi of assessment courses should have some component of social analysis included, so that concepts such as self-assessment and confidence-building can be grounded in a concrete examination of educational and political history. It is also suggested that such inclusions in RPL practice can further add value to corporate organisations, as the very characteristics and capabilities that are necessary in management in general. This type of RPL could further be included in improving BBBEE / EE<sup>4</sup> compliance in organisations.

*Encourage and support workplace learning research* – more research is needed to investigate learning in the South African workplace. SETAs should sponsor this research so that a defensible practice of workplace learning can be established that positions the workplace as a valid site of learning in the knowledge economy. This will position RPL more favourably amongst traditional academics.

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<sup>4</sup> BBBEE = Broad based black economic empowerment and EE = Employment Equity. Both of these are South African strategies to redress inequalities brought about by government policies prior to 1994.

## **Conclusions**

The underpinning assumption in this paper is that recognition of prior learning is intrinsic to lifelong learning policies in mass post-compulsory education and training systems, and mechanisms to increase its implementation need to be streamlined, particularly in the workplace where uptake has been slow. This would allow RPL to become the tool for social transformation envisaged by SAQA, because it will have wide potential to enable skills development and the ongoing acquisition of qualifications in the workplace.

It is the ultimate conclusion of this research that the concept of RPL is, in actual fact, too broad to allow a definitive theoretical model that will be of practical use within all contexts, especially for application outside the academic world. It appears to be more sensible to apply the logic modelling approach to plan each RPL implementation within the various contexts and within the confines of the different workplaces. It is suggested, therefore, that referring to and designing an 'RPL strategy' or 'RPL logic model' will be more appropriate than simply designing a universal RPL meta-model. This will ensure that consideration is taken of the assumptions, results, activities and resources necessary to achieve agreed success within each context. A contextual logic model will maximise the value of each RPL implementation, and ensure a wider application of RPL within South Africa. This could lead us closer to true social transformation.

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