

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for Accredited Public Administration Qualifications

The Case of the South African Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA)

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) serves as a pivotal mechanism in facilitating access to education and training, particularly within the context of the South African Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA) when accrediting Public Administration qualifications. However, the absence of standardised guidelines for Skills Development Providers (SDPs) in implementing RPL poses challenges in ensuring consistency and fairness in assessment processes. This article presents an empirical

study aimed at uncovering potential guidelines for SDPs to conduct RPL assessments for credit against PSETA accredited Public Administration qualifications. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative data collection through interviews with quantitative analysis of RPL assessment outcomes. Participants include representatives from SDPs, PSETA, and learners who have undergone RPL assessments. Through thematic analysis and statistical techniques, the study identifies key challenges, best practices, and stakeholder perspectives regarding RPL implementation.

INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of Public Administration education and training, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has emerged as a vital tool for promoting access and equity, particularly within the realm of the South African Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA) accredited qualifications. RPL offers individuals the opportunity to have their prior learning, whether formal or informal, recognised and accredited, thereby facilitating their progression in educational and professional pathways (Chetty & Moodley 2022; Dykes 2014; Garnett & Cavaye 2015). Within the context of PSETA accredited Public Administration qualifications, RPL holds significant promise for recognising the diverse skills and experiences of individuals engaged in public service roles and functions. However, the effective implementation of RPL hinges upon the clarity and consistency of assessment processes, a challenge exacerbated by the absence of standardised guidelines for Skills Development Providers (SDPs) (Bolton *et al.* 2017; Marchard *et al.* 2016; Tywabi 2020). Without clear directives, SDPs generally struggle to conduct RPL assessments in a manner that is fair, transparent, and aligned with PSETA accreditation requirements (CHE 2016; Khunoethe & Reddy 2023; Makhatsane 2020; PSETA 2023). Consequently, there exists a pressing need to develop comprehensive guidelines that delineate the procedures and criteria for SDPs to conduct RPL assessments for credit against PSETA accredited Public Administration qualifications.

This article presents an empirical survey that was aimed at addressing this gap by systematically investigating the current practices, challenges, and opportunities associated with RPL implementation within the public sector of South Africa. By engaging stakeholders from SDPs, PSETA, and learners who have undergone RPL assessments, the study seeks to gain insights into the intricacies of RPL processes and identify areas for improvement.

Through a mixed-methods approach encompassing qualitative interviews and quantitative analysis of RPL assessment outcomes, the study endeavours

to develop guidelines that will empower SDPs to conduct RPL assessments in a standardised manner. These guidelines will not only enhance the consistency and rigor of RPL processes, but also ensure alignment with PSETA accreditation standards, thereby fostering greater trust and credibility in RPL outcomes. Such guidelines aim to promote consistency, transparency, and rigor in RPL assessments, ultimately enhancing the quality and credibility of RPL processes related to Public Administration educational programmes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The recognition of prior learning as a concept sprouted in the United States (US) in the 1950s and early 1970s. It was considered as a viable option in the post-World War II era when American war veterans declined to pick up from where they left off with their studies upon return (i.e. RPL for advanced standing) (Bohlinger 2017). Globally, different acronyms are used in different regions. South Africa has derived the term RPL from the Australians, while the term used in the United Kingdom (UK) is accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). In the US, the same concept is referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA), while the Canadians use prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) (Alves *et al.* 2020; Kizito 2006; Osman 2003).

The highly ambivalent heuristic perspectives, conceptualisation and applications of RPL are recognised by scholars such as Assinger (2023), Deutscher and Winther (2022), Ikäheimo (2017), and Singh (2015). There is general scholarly consensus, however, that it refers to accepting, accrediting and valuing learners' previously received non-formal training and formal qualifications and certificates. It essentially compares and matches acquired knowledge and skills of individuals with the content and outcomes of existing educational programmes (Deutscher & Winther 2022; Harris *et al.* 2014; Miguel *et al.* 2016). It thereby contributes to their upward employment mobility and supports social inclusion in education and the idea of lifelong learning (Radović *et al.* 2021; Winstanley & Cunningham 2023). Candidates may seek RPL for various reasons such as gaining access into a qualification for which the candidate does not meet the minimum academic entry requirements; receiving credit for a full qualification completed or only in part; pursuing career advancement opportunities in the workplace; or for obtaining a professional designation (Tywabi 2020, p.8).

Literature suggests that RPL is specifically promoted by countries with educational access, equity and social inclusion in mind. Similar policy outcomes are pursued in South Africa. Brennar *et al.* (2021), Khunoethe and Reddy (2023) and Tywabi (2020) confirm that there has been a significant movement across South Africa's education sector to widen access and participation in higher

education. Fundamentally, the sector recognises the need to address the legacies of under-development and inequitable distribution of learning opportunities for all (Makhatsane 2020). These learning opportunities are based principally on the constitutional guarantees of equal educational rights for all persons founded on non-discrimination (Chetty & Moodley 2022; Osman 2004).

The South Africa Qualifications Association (SAQA 2020) defines RPL as “a process through which non-formal and informal learning are measured, mediated across different contexts, and certified against the requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in a formal education and training system or workplace” (p. 8). The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA 2021) in turn defines it as “... principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and/or skills of a person are made visible and are assessed for the purposes of certification, alternative access and admission and future learning and development” (p. 14). RPL is multi-dimensional in nature and non-formal, informal and formal learning are measured across different contexts and certified against credit, access, inclusion, or advancement placement within the framework provided by the National Qualification Framework (NQF). The NQF is an integrated system which comprises three co-ordinated qualifications sub-frameworks, namely:

- General and Further Education and Training Sub-Framework;
- Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework; and
- Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework.

Legacy qualifications are qualifications and unit standards registered before 2009 and are also referred to as ‘Historically Registered’ Qualifications. Legacy qualifications were issued with credentials before the establishment of the Quality Council for Trade and Occupations and Occupational Qualification Sub-Framework, while occupational qualifications obtain credentials that are intricately connected to a specific trade, occupation or profession (GH Skills Solutions 2023).

The Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) Policy (DHET 2021) was designed to facilitate the development and registration of occupational qualifications on NQF Levels 1 to 8 which are based on industry standards, as they are designs to equip learners with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in a particular occupation. The purpose of the OQSF is set out in Section 3 of the OQSF Policy (DHET 2021) and can be summarised as follows:

- to facilitate education and training of learners who will contribute to the development of South Africa and participate in the skills needed in the global economy;
- to be comparable with international standards of occupational qualifications;
- to be flexible to accommodate the development of trade and occupational qualifications;
- to establish an easily understood and user-friendly environment for the occupational education and training system;

- to facilitate articulation of occupational qualifications in the OQSF and between the OCQF and the other NQF Sub-Frameworks; and
- to facilitate life-long learning by assisting learners to identify options for progression such as entry, exit and learning pathways.

The main differences between legacy qualifications and occupational qualifications are that legacy qualifications consist of several separate unit standards, each catering for the achievement of practical competencies (outcomes), theoretical knowledge (essential embedded knowledge) and critical cross-field outcomes. Occupational qualifications are curriculum-based and have specifications for knowledge modules, practical modules and work experience modules. In general, legacy qualifications are not compared internationally, although this should be done during the design process. QCTO qualifications are compared internationally to ensure that South African qualifications are on par with international requirements and trends (GH Skills Solutions 2023; Kilian 2023; Nel 2023).

Legacy qualifications, due to their outdated features, no longer effectively reflect the current needs of specific industries, or possess the necessary relevance and the transition to occupational qualifications which seek to bridge this gap (GH Skills Solutions 2023). Currently the legacy curriculums as well as QCTO model curriculums are registered on the NQF. Occupational Certificates (OC) will be replacing legacy qualifications and are geared towards certain occupations and professions (Kilian 2023). The transition from legacy qualifications to occupational qualifications is part of the National Skills Development Plan 2030 and intends to address the growing demands and advancements in industries, ensuring better alignment with the knowledge, skills, and competencies required in various fields (GH Skills Solutions 2023).

The Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (OQSF) Policy (DHET 2021) ensures that the processes for RPL are supported. The QCTO must firstly ensure that RPL forms part of the Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework (Section 2.2.5) by recognising that occupational qualifications can be obtained via multiple routes, including RPL (Section 5.11). Competency for occupational qualifications is demonstrated through the successful completion of a final supervised assessment which can be accessed through RPL (Section 5.12). Access to occupational qualifications include RPL and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (Section 12.1).

The South African Public Sector RPL Process

The procedure for the implementation of RPL in the public service is outlined in the Directive on Policy Guidelines and Procedure for the Implementation of RPL in the Public Service (DPSA 2021, pp. 28–34).

The first step is only to evaluate entry into the process and is not the RPL process itself. The pre-entry phase is to ensure that information about the RPL services is available and accessible. The candidate completes an application form including a motivation for the intervention, which must align with the business needs and objectives. Once the relevance of the RPL process has been determined, the candidate will begin the formal application process. The candidate will complete a self-assessment and submit the required documentation to indicate that the prior learning matches the outcomes of the qualification in question. An RPL assessor will screen the documents and inform the candidate accordingly.

During the second step, the candidate is required to undergo preparation prior to the RPL assessment taking place. This takes place during a pre-assessment workshop where aspects such as the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, and the process of assessment are discussed. A formal RPL Assessment Plan is agreed to and signed by the candidate and the RPL Advisor/Assessor.

In Step 3, the candidate, with the assistance of the RPL Advisor, collects the necessary evidence according to the assessment plan and the evidence is submitted to the RPL Assessor for formal assessment. The RPL Assessor alone will conduct the actual assessment and make an assessment decision. The assessor provides a final assessment report indicating a judgement of Competent or Not Yet Competent for the qualification or standard. This report will be furnished to the candidate after the moderation process has been completed. Should the candidate be declared Not Yet Competent, the way forward with regard to re-assessment must be clearly defined by the assessor in the assessment report.

Internal moderation is conducted in Step 4 by a registered moderator against the relevant qualification/part qualifications and the most appropriate sampling methodology is used. The moderator provides a moderation report on conclusion of moderation. If a full qualification must be awarded, the Provider must apply for external moderation to the relevant ETQA. The results of the moderation will then be submitted to the provider prior to certification taking place.

Within fourteen days of the completion of the assessment by the assessor, the candidate must receive feedback (step 5). The candidate is provided with a copy of the RPL Assessment Report. In the case where remediation is needed, the way forward will be discussed with the candidate and a learner development plan is developed. The candidate has an opportunity to appeal against the assessment decision. In the case where no remedial action is required, the candidate is deemed competent and the way forward regarding certification is explained.

When remediation is required, the candidate may submit further evidence to prove competence (Step 6). The additional evidence is assessed by the RPL Assessor, and an assessment decision is made which will be subjected to moderation.

In the final Step (7) candidates who have been successful in the assessment against the relevant qualification or standard will be certificated by the relevant ETQA. Results are uploaded unto the National Learner Records Database and the candidate will receive the relevant acknowledgement of his/her qualification from the relevant ETQA (DPSA 2021, p. 29).

The role of the Public Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA)

The Skills Development Act 97 of 1998 gives credence to the establishment of Sector Education Training Authorities (SETAs). SETAs play a significant role in the country's overall education and training system. They are industry-led bodies established to help facilitate skills development and training within specific economic sectors. Each SETA covers a specific sector of the economy, such as agriculture, finance, education, training and development, healthcare, or manufacturing amongst others. Every industry and occupation in South Africa, is thus covered by one of the 21 SETAs. The role of SETAs provides a clear indication as to how they fit into the overall South African education system (South Africa 1998). Their main roles include the following:

- SETAs are responsible for promoting skills development within their designated sectors. They identify the skills needs of industries, develop sector-specific skills plans, and facilitate the implementation of training programmes to address these needs. This function is crucial for ensuring that the workforce is equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute effectively to their respective sectors.
- SETAs facilitate workplace-based learning initiatives, including internships, apprenticeships, and learnerships. These learning programmes allow individuals to gain practical experience and industry-specific skills while working in real-world settings. This practical exposure is invaluable for preparing individuals for the demands of the job market.
- SETAs are responsible for ensuring the quality of training programmes within their sectors. They accredit training providers, assess the relevance and quality of training courses, and monitor the outcomes of training initiatives. This quality assurance role helps to maintain high standards in skills development programmes.
- SETAs provide funding and grants to support skills development initiatives. They collect levies from employers in their sectors, which are then used to fund various training programmes, learnerships, and other skills development

Table 1: Registered Public Administration qualifications

SAQA Title	Type of programme	NQF level
National Certificate: Public Administration	Skills Programme	3
Further Education and Training Certificate: Public Administration	Skills Programme	4
National Certificate in Public Administration	Skills Programme	5
National Certificate in Public Financial Oversight and Accountability	Skills Programme	6
National Diploma: Public Administration	Skills Programme	6
Public Administration Practitioner	Learnership	3
Public Administration	Learnership	3
National Certificate in Local Employment and Skills Development Practices	Learnership	4
Human Resources Management and Support	Learnership	4
FETC: Public Administration	Learnership	4
Supply Chain Management	Learnership	4
FETC: Public Administration (Supervisor level)	Learnership	4
Inspection and Enforcement	Learnership	5
National Certificate in Public Administration	Learnership	5
National Diploma Public Finance Management Administration (Provincial and National spheres)	Learnership	5
National Certificate: Public Administration (Leadership level)	Learnership	5
National Certificate: Public Administration (Procurement level)	Learnership	5
Immigration Services	Learnership	5
Immigration Law Enforcement	Learnership	5
National Certificate: Public Finance	Learnership	5
Provisioning Administration	Learnership	5
Refugee Services	Learnership	5
Public Financial Oversight and Accountability	Learnership	6

Source: <http://pseta.org.za>

projects. This funding mechanism ensures a sustainable source of financial support for training efforts.

- SETAs collaborate with various stakeholders, including employers, educational institutions, industry experts, and government agencies. These partnerships help to align training programmes with industry needs, promote innovation, and ensure that the education and training provided are relevant and up to date.
- SETAs align their training programmes with the NQF, which provides a standardised system for comparing education and training achievements. This alignment ensures that qualifications obtained through SETA programmes are nationally recognised and contribute to the overall education and skills development goals of the country.

The PSETA, similar to all other SETAs, is mandated in terms of the Skills Development Act 97 of 1998, to facilitate skills development for the Public Service sector. The focus of the PSETA is primarily on transversal skills within the Public Service sector. These are the skills which are labelled as the “business of government” (PSETA 2018, p. 13). Transversal skills and functions comprise administration, management, planning, legislation and policy development, which form the focus to drive the development of skills and competencies in areas that will make the delivery of the business of government more effective and efficient. The PSETA must continuously review and evaluate the impact and outcomes of its qualifications and skills development programmes in the Public Service sector. This evaluation practice further ensures that the qualifications and skills development programmes are aligned with the policies and regulations that govern its functions (PSETA 2018). The Public Administration learning programmes registered on the NQF are listed in Table 1.

The quality of qualifications offered by PSETA is of critical importance in the Public Service sector, as it ensures that PSETA supplies the Public Service sector with quality graduates who are able to compete equally in the labour market with their peers holding equivalent qualifications (PSETA 2018). The PSETA Quality Assurance (QA) is currently reviewing and assessing the curriculum content of all Public Administration qualifications ranging from NQF level 3 to NQF level 5 with the purpose of providing recommendations for further development of occupational qualifications for the sector. The objective is to “develop occupational qualifications that are responsive to the labour market needs” (PSETA 2022, p. 48).

A skills programme is an occupation-based learning programme, aimed at building skills that have economic value, and which incorporates at least one unit standard. It is registered by a SETA and delivered by an accredited training provider and leads to a qualification registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) (PSETA 2022).

Table 2: PSETA Registered Skills Programmes

SAQA Title	NQF level
National Certificate: Public Administration	3
Further Education and Training Certificate: Public Administration	4
National Certificate in Public Administration	5
National Certificate in Public Financial Oversight and Accountability	6
National Diploma: Public Administration	6

Source: <http://pseta.org.za>

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this survey was to conduct an empirical study towards the development of guidelines for Skills Development Providers (SDPs) on the implementation of RPL for credit against the PSETA accredited Public Administration qualifications. The outcome of the survey is intended to guide the standardisation of RPL assessments by PSETA accredited SDPs.

The first phase of the survey involved a literature and desktop survey to identify international and national benchmark best practices in terms of the implementation of and implications of RPL in the public sector. It also entailed the review of legislation, policies and frameworks on RPL in the South African public sector.

During Phase 2, a comprehensive range of research methods was used to build on the desktop research of prior empirical studies, planning documents, regulatory frameworks, opinion papers, annual reports and other relevant documentation. Data collection was further done by means of semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire. The interview schedule and questionnaire were pre-tested (piloted) with a small sample of the target population. The questionnaire was administered online by means of SurveyMonkey consisting of Likert-scale and open- and closed-ended questions.

Phase 3 entailed data entry for on-line questionnaires; coding; coding of open responses; numerical data entry; management of missing values; data modification; as well as data correction and validation of results.

The final phase (4) entailed the cross-referencing of findings and the identification of key observations made.

Target population and sampling

The key stakeholders (TG3) identified included representatives from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), the Department of Public

Table 3: Target population and sample size

Target groups (T1-4)	Sample size	Data collection method
TG1: SDPs that have been awarded PSETA discretionary grants to implement its RPL for credit against the Public Administration qualifications at various NQF levels.	4	Questionnaire and/or interviews
TG2: RPL champions, inclusive of SDFs from the respective (sampled) departments that have benefited from the PSETA-funded RPL projects.	10	Questionnaire and/or interviews
TG3: PSETA and key stakeholders.	5	Focus group interviews
TG4: RPL Process beneficiaries.	5	Questionnaire and/or interviews
Total sample size (n=)	24	

Service and Administration (DPSA), the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), and the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO). These stakeholders were involved to evaluate the alignment of the existing RPL assessment tools to the DPSA RPL policy directives, and to make recommendations to align the PSETA RPL Guidelines for SDPs to the DPSA and SAQA RPL assessment mechanisms and processes.

As far as Target Group 4 (TG4) is concerned, a sample of RPL beneficiaries (i.e. candidates) was used to ascertain their perceptions of the process, value gained, as well as possible areas for improvement.

RESULTS

The demographical profile of participants from TG1, consisting of SDP representatives who were individually interviewed by means of semi-structured interviews showed that 25% are in chief executive positions, while 75% are directors. The majority (75%) has between 11- and 20-years experience.

The profile of TG2 (RPL champions) revealed that 50% are RPL advisors, 17% are work skills plan officials, 17% are provincial coordinators, and 15% are quality assurance assessors. TG3 consisted of senior research managers, learning programmes managers, deputy directors of research and analysis, director of assessments, senior researchers, and ministerial RPL Inter-departmental Committee members.

The profile for TG4 showed that the majority of the RPL beneficiaries interviewed are located in the North-West province (40%), followed by Gauteng (20%), Free State (20%) and Mpumalanga (20%) provinces. The pre-study

levels of education for the RPL beneficiaries varied: Bachelor's Degree/Advanced Diploma (31%), Diploma/Advanced Certificate (40%), Higher Certificates (16%), and a Matric Certificate (NQF4; 13%). The majority (80%) of beneficiaries are employed, mainly in the public sector (80%). The majority of RPL Beneficiaries indicated that they completed their RPL process within the last 18 months (80%), whilst the remainder completed the process between 2 to 3 years ago. Forty percent of the respondents indicated that it took between 7 and 12 months to complete the RPL process, while 40% indicated that it took less than 6 months. It took up to 24 months for the remaining 20%.

Results per theme

Theme 1: Compliance with and alignment between a candidate's RPL application and the provisioning of credits against the PSETA-accredited Public Administration qualifications

The majority (75%) of respondents of TG1-3 confirmed that there is ample evidence that there is compliance with and alignment between a candidate's RPL application and the provisioning of credits against the PSETA-accredited Public Administration qualifications. They furthermore maintain that the RPL process is an intensive, rigorous process of assessing a candidate using a variety of given assessment instruments to collect evidence, evaluate it, make a judgment on evidence and make a decision that is appropriate for the candidate's demonstrated competency. Candidates are put through an assessment process to determine to which degree they already have the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that are required by the qualification and the occupation. Respondents from TG1, 2 and 4 confirmed that during the assessment process, so-called applied competencies were assessed, as these are the foundational knowledge, the practical competencies demonstrated in the workplace, as well as the theoretical understanding of systems and processes as compared to the requirement of the qualification in question.

Some of the assessment instruments or assignments are drawn from the question banks of full-time students who are on the same programme, as there should be no difference between a learner that has been assessed through recognition of prior learning and one that has been on traditional learning attending a formal learning intervention for the same qualification. The assessment of learning outcomes is aligned with the exit-level outcomes of the qualifications that are being assessed. Respondent 3 of TG1 clarified this aspect as follows: *"We end up with a process that assures you that the person is really competent. If you do it unit standard by unit standard, you will comply because you make sure that you provide all of the evidence for that credit"*. Should the learner be competent in all of the modules, credits are granted after the integrated summative assessment

has been completed, assessed and moderated as required. Should the learner not meet all of the requirements of one or more of the modules, a competency gap/s is identified which needs to be closed through so-called gap-closing training. During this period, the candidate is given access to the module study guides of the qualification and is expected to study for a period of time and complete formative assessment and summative assessment, and submit their assignments for evaluation by the registered education practitioner. This ensures compliance with the requirements of the registered qualification as well as the RPL policy of the institution and that of the PSETA.

Respondents from TG3 furthermore confirmed that learners are also enrolled in the SETA learner management system for reporting and tracking purposes. RPL advisors advise learners accordingly throughout the RPL process and guide them in terms of the type of evidence required such as previous training attended (certificates, short courses attended). In addition, the PSETA stakeholder group (TG3), supported by the SDF respondents (TG2) recommended an external moderation at every stage of the RPL process. They suggested that after pre-screening, the PSETA should conduct external moderation of processes of pre-screening. The PSETA should also monitor to check compliance with regard to those processes that the SDP has indicated to the learners, to fill the gaps to confirm and approve the initiatives. Once the learner has been credited, the PSETA should conduct external moderation to verify the whole process of credit transfer.

Theme 2: Advice, guidance and support to RPL candidates to fill identified gaps

Some of the verbatim responses obtained from TG1-4 are collated in Table 4.

Table 4: Advice, guidance and support to RPL candidates

Key Theme identified	Responses
Conduct needs analysis	■ "Identify potential barriers to gathering evidence and the special needs of candidates"
Assist in identifying sources of evidence	■ "After identifying the gaps, information is provided to identify possible sources of evidence and the most appropriate and effective means for producing evidence". ■ "The RPL advisor will have a workshop first and then in the second step tell how to collect the evidence and also support the learner in compiling the POE".
Learner Guidance	■ "Subject requirements, vocational/career options, workplace policies and procedures". ■ "Develop learning plans which are personalised to each candidate's needs". ■ "Arrange access to online learning material and research".

Key Theme identified	Responses
Counselling	■ "Learner Support is given on socio and psychological levels to balance their life as adults and as students". ■ "Establish a WhatsApp group of the learners to share challenges and to allow people to ask questions and support each other".
Formal training to address the gaps	■ "Provide gap training: formal training gap identified, to be assessed and moderated". ■ "Allow officials to attend relevant training programmes to address any gaps they may have".
Career Guidance	■ "Career guidance to assist the learner in closing competency gaps". ■ "At the workplace some mentors are usually the supervisors guide towards the type of programmes they can enrol for if they want to pursue their careers, and that is based on their knowledge, experience and current role".

Theme 3: Current limitations or weaknesses in the RPL application and credit allocation process

The following main limitations (Table 5) were identified by respondents from TG1-4:

Table 5: Limitations or weaknesses in the RPL application and credit allocation process

Limitation (theme)	Responses
Inconsistencies in the application of RPL	■ Lack of clear minimum standards for application as an RPL candidate. There is no clarity on what constitutes a potential candidate so different degrees of readiness are deemed to be sufficient for RPL vs full-time learning. ■ Providers do not know what to take into consideration. ■ Application processes to be simplified but stricter.
Lack of recognition for the RPL process	■ Intuitions of higher learning are not in favour of RPL as an alternative to full-time learning. ■ Learners perceive RPL pathways as an easy way to obtain a qualification.
Lack of resources	■ RPL is expensive therefore those who are supposed to benefit from it are unable to do so due to the cost incurred. ■ Documentation required to support RPL applications can be burdensome or difficult to access by some learners.
Reliance on supervisory support	■ Officials do not submit Summative Assessments (POEs) and are not held accountable for non-submission.

More than half (57%) of the respondents view the RPL evidence collection requirements as "effective" and "fair". However, some of the aspects identified that

hamper the effectiveness include a lack of engagement between learners, facilitator and supervisor, to discuss the evidence collected, and the current additional learning will not take place. Learners also do not necessarily understand the content of the evidence to be collected, which results in the system being perceived as unfair or difficult.

Theme 4: RPL Evidence Collection Tools

Respondents (TG1-3) indicated that the typical RPL evidence collection tools and requirements utilised or adopted are as follows:

RPL Tool Item	Description
RPL interview	■ Formal screening to assess the learner to make sure that your experience matches the objectives of the qualification as set by SAQA. ■ Assesses the learner's eligibility to be accepted into the programme. ■ Questions starting with biographical information, highest qualification, highest score living level work experience, further training that was completed on the job etc. This is matched with modules in the qualifications for which the learner is applying. ■ Learners to complete the questionnaire of that unit standard which training/ experience/skills they have—pre-screening. ■ Determine the %: the learner has to determine who is suitable for the RPL. ■ Use a cut-off of 70%, can look at 60% but if there is a gap between 30–40% the applicant is better suited to the traditional mode of training. ■ RPL advisor would also review and agree.
RPL observation	■ Essential when practical competencies are being assessed. ■ Criterion that is used to evaluate the learner's ability to demonstrate that they can do what they are claiming they can do. ■ The RPL advisor would go in-depth into what the learner said and ask for evidence. ■ Workshop is given on what evidence is required, where to collect and where to go for support. ■ This is done for each unit standard. ■ Once the learner qualifies, as per the documents provided and interviews, then the learner is entered into the process for each unit standard. ■ Sessions and top-up sessions where required but not above a certain principle (70/30 principle). ■ The evidence provided must match the outcome of the qualification.
Gap analysis tool	■ Connects what the learner produced during the interview and observation to match it to the outcomes of the qualification that is being sought. ■ Allows the education practitioner to identify the extent to which the learner can be further assessed through RPL. ■ The RPL advisor (must be PSETA accredited and trained in RPL) will assess and determine whether there are gaps—if the entire unit standard must be completed or only a few gaps. ■ If the entire unit standard—could be filled by going through traditional formative and summative assessment to address the gap.

RPL Tool Item	Description
Integrated summative assessment	■ If there is no gap the learner can write an integrated summative assessment which is in the form of an examination. ■ This assessment captures all of the competencies or outcomes that are crucial to every module in the learning programme. ■ Tests theoretical understanding of processes and outcomes of the qualification in public administration for example. ■ If the candidate is competent on the integrated summative assessment a moderation process will then be done by a PSETA registered moderator who must have the scope of the qualification. ■ After internal moderation an external moderation process is initiated with the PSETA to award the qualification. ■ Submit to PSETA as the Quality assurer—when they moderate they start by verifying the RPL advisor's qualification and registration, as well as that of the moderator. If not there, the process starts from the beginning. ■ PSETA does external moderation of learners' outcomes and QA on all of the processes—if agree, they declare the learner competent and then the learner can receive the qualification. ■ Once they have verified, the PSETA then issues a verification report and if upholding our process, they issue the statements of results as well as the certificate.
Portfolio of evidence (PoE).	■ Application form and ID. ■ Comprehensive and updated CV. ■ Proof of qualifications for credit and non-credit bearing unit standards, including any form of short courses completed by the learners, and formal qualification acquired for credit and non-credit bearing courses (informal/formal training). ■ Motivational Letter from the supervisor or immediate manager motivating that the candidate should go through RPL. ■ Job profiles/job descriptions are evaluated to match the 70% requirement. ■ Letters of Service from the employer indicating years of experience and competencies that the learner has acquired – should cover the job description as well. ■ Performance agreements (signed and agreed), and appraisals. ■ Learner can also write a letter motivating himself for going through RPL – must cover the competencies that he/she has covered as well. ■ Also accommodate other approaches such as interviews or presentations where the learner can come and present before a panel with the knowledge and skills which he possesses.

Theme 5: Recommendations towards the compilation of the guidelines for the implementation of RPL for credit against PSETA-accredited Public Administration qualifications to strengthen the role and contributions of SDPs in this process

The items listed below are a summary of the responses received:

- The RPL requirements must be clear and standardised in terms of the process to be followed for an RPL for credit application.

- Guidelines should be a high-level guide to direct the process in terms of requirements, standards and timelines (if possible) for all of public sector occupational qualifications.
- The responsibilities of each role-player should be clearly described and defined.
- Inclusion of consideration of career paths and how the qualifications could enable officials to improve on their expertise.
- A section on assessment to confirm that the applicant would be able to cope with the RPL process and programme, for example, minimal knowledge/numeracy and literacy requirements, as well as topical knowledge i.e. knowledge of current politics for Political Science.
- Inclusion of a mid-term moderation by PSETA, instead of only at the end of the process.
- Guidelines should give direction on how to accommodate RPL candidates who are not conversant in English.
- Standards for quality assurance to be included to monitor the effectiveness of the RPL process by SDPs. This will also ensure consistency and allow for evaluation of the RPL processes.
- Requirements for uniform Standard Operating Procedures must be clear.
- Consultations with each sector. The significance of collaboration between the SDP and other educational institutions can be incorporated to make sure that the RPL assessments are still relevant to the needs of the industry/organisations.
- Inclusion of a commitment/undertaking that is signed by each official undergoing these programmes.
- Over and above the recommended aspects for inclusion, the following important aspects are worth noting:
- A toolkit/RPL Mechanism for each registered occupational qualification must be developed, linked to evidence requirements for that specific qualification/assessment criteria, minimum requirements, legacy skills that are considered, the cut-off percentage RPL vs skills training learner route and internal assignment. Different qualifications should have different guiding questions for each stage of the process.
- Continuous research to improve the system.
- Existing RPL Frameworks and examples to be taken into consideration.
- PSETA to provide for an RPL policy for Public Sector Occupational Qualifications over and above the guidelines.

Theme 6: Recommendations for improvement of the RPL process

Respondents from TG1-4 made the following recommendations for the further enhancement and improvement of the RPL process. These recommendations are extracted verbatim from the responses obtained.

- “Consider amending the title of the PSETA RPL competency letter and issuing such at the beginning of the process. Given that the letter is used to register the learner after the employer declares the nomination of the learner, it is recommended that the documentation should not be issued after the SDP has selected the learner”.
- “Benchmarking and standardisation of RPL toolkits”.
- “More programmes need to be offered to departments so that officials may be adequately equipped to perform their duties”.
- “Ensure that the SDP understand the public sector space and the type of evidence that is relevant in the public sector”.
- “Provide additional funding to train all training and development practitioners as RPL champions”.
- “Ongoing research to determine the programmes that the sector needs”.
- “An approved RPL policy guideline is required”.
- “Advocacy of RPL and where it should be used. Learners see RPL as a quick and easy way to obtain a qualification”.
- “Increase employer involvement in the recommended PSETA RPL policy, which should expand on the DPSA policy (the DPSA RPL policy is to be finalised, approved and implemented in the public sector in due course)”.
- “Improved adherence to the process through monitoring and evaluation and consequence management for non-compliance”.

DISCUSSION

The main findings of this study confirm RPL as the formal process to assess prior knowledge and skills for access, recognition, certification or further learning, valuing learning in formal, informal and non-formal contexts. Competence is measured based on unit standards and qualifications. South Africa’s RPL system aims to promote lifelong learning and employment opportunities through legislation, policies, and guidelines. RPL is generally viewed as a comprehensive process that measures and mediates learning outcomes for recognition across various contexts. It focuses on learning rather than institution status, ensuring equal achievement and confidentiality. Employers can benefit from RPL in South Africa by meeting employment equity targets and aiding succession planning. Quality assurance, awareness, publicity, appeals, and skills gap training are essential components of RPL.

Most SDPs are attempting to comply with QCTO accreditation processes, but concerns have been raised about clarity on the accreditation of training venues. The limited PSETA-registered occupational qualifications have also raised concerns. Respondents expressed differing opinions on the amended accreditation

procedure and the shift from legacy degrees to occupational qualifications. Forty percent of SDP respondents were unaware of the updated procedure, while 50% of SDP respondents felt “well-informed”. Positive aspects include the QCTO now accrediting SDPs under SAQA regulations, requiring providers to reapply for accreditation, and RPL learners must take the External Integrated Summative Assessment (EISA).

The QCTO assumes responsibility for accrediting SDPs, which was previously PSETA’s responsibility. There is confusion about site-specific accreditation, but it is not a new requirement. The limited number of occupational qualifications registered hinders accreditation efforts. PSETA stakeholders suggest having a developed RPL mechanism for every qualification. Most SDPs have established internal quality assurance procedures and use PSETA guidelines or a QCTO checklist.

The survey highlights the importance of providing RPL applicants with guidance and assistance to close gaps, including analysing needs, locating evidence, learner assistance, formal learning interventions, and career counselling. However, concerns have been raised that RPL for credits is not being used for the right reasons. The findings emphasise the role of all stakeholders in providing quality advice, guidance and support, including adhering to the SQAQ Policy, having accredited SDPs with registered assessors and moderators, having RPL champions at the workplace, having an RPL policy in every employer, and guiding the transition to occupational qualification accreditation.

The RPL process in South Africa faces several challenges, including legislative issues, a lack of understanding of higher education level learning, and unrealistic expectations. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are autonomous in implementing RPL policies, admission requirements, and application procedures, with senators and Councils having the power to establish specific rules. The voluntary RPL process has been overlooked by employers, leading to a lack of incentives and integration into the education and training system. Many candidates with experiential knowledge may not understand the arguments for and against particular approaches and may not realise the level of assessment needed by the RPL process. Additionally, not all qualifications needed by candidates are available on the RPL system. Implementation is also challenging due to language barriers, demanding processes, and distances for rural employees. The RPL Coordination Policy provides funding for the National Coordinating Mechanism and Implementation Fund, but additional funds are essential.

SDPs use various mitigation strategies to address the challenges experienced in the RPL process. These strategies include seeking guidance and support from PSETA and referring to the SAQA policy, regular follow-ups to PSETA and QCTO, contacting supervisors to assist learners and requesting cooperation from all parties involved. In addition to these strategies, SDPs also emphasised individual motivation, communication of benefits, engagement with managers, signing contracts

with learners, virtual sessions, and random roll calls to address poor attendance. Additionally, they include induction sessions before training and request learners to commit to completing their own RPL process, submitting evidence, and attending training sessions.

Responses from the target groups illustrate sufficient understanding of the South African RPL system as an integrated system which requires active participation from various stakeholders, including the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), SAQA, SETAS, the National Coordinating Mechanism, Quality Councils, Education and Training Institutions, Recognised Professional Bodies, Employers, Labour Unions, RPL Practitioners, Assessors, Moderators, and RPL Candidates. The DHET provides regulatory guidelines, secures funding, and monitors RPL implementation. SAQA governs the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act, ensuring quality assurance and registration of qualifications. The QCTO oversees occupational qualifications, part-qualifications, and skills programmes, guiding providers and assessment centres. PSETA ensures industry-specific quality assurance and monitoring of public sector-related qualifications. It upskills trainers as RPL facilitators and assessors to develop and support the RPL programme in the public sector, awards discretionary grants for implementation, registers occupational qualifications and RPL mechanisms, identifies needs in Sector Skills Plans, and facilitates the development of an RPL policy in Sector Skills Plans.

The typical RPL evidence collection tools include an initial interview, observation session, and gap analysis tool. The RPL advisor interrogates the learner's request and identifies required evidence, which may include workshops on evidence collection and support. An integrated summative assessment is conducted to assess the competencies or outcomes crucial to every module in the learning programme. If the candidate is found competent, a PSETA-registered moderator performs a moderation process. An external moderation process is initiated with PSETA to award the qualification. PSETA performs external moderation of learners' outcomes and QA all processes before declaring the learner competent to receive the qualification. This process includes a verification report, statements of results, and a certificate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To further improve RPL processes and procedures and to establish guidelines for credits, several recommendations can be made. The first recommendation is that RPL applications, requirements and processes should be clear and standardised with a detailed description of user-friendly assessments to be conducted. Quality assurance standards should be included to monitor the effectiveness of the RPL process.

The guidelines should further incorporate uniform standard operating procedures for SDPs. Such operating procedures should be formulated in close consultation with stakeholders from each sector, to ensure relevance to industry/practice needs.

A second recommendation for improving the RPL process includes benchmarking and standardising of toolkits. Such benchmarking and standardising endeavours should make provision for ensuring that SDPs fully comprehend and appreciate the public sector space and the nature and scope of relevant RPL evidence. It should also aim to improve adherence to standards through appropriate monitoring, evaluation and consequence management procedures in cases of non-compliance.

Further recommendations are supported by the verbatim responses made by respondents from TG1-4. These include the following:

- “We need to have roadshows by QCTO and PSETA to increase awareness of RPL. RPL needs to be made more visible, for example posters in the department to make officials aware of programmes available through RPL”.
- “We need a forum for all RPL stakeholders to benchmark activities and to share best practice”.
- “RPL funding should be extended to other PSETA qualifications and for lower Public Administration qualification (i.e. NQF levels 3 and 4)”.
- “We need impact studies of RPL students to track their successes”.

CONCLUSION

This article has endeavoured to address the critical need for standardised guidelines to facilitate the implementation of RPL for credit against PSETA accredited Public Administration qualifications. Through an empirical investigation involving stakeholders from SDPs, PSETA, and RPL candidates, the survey has shed light on the complexities and challenges inherent in RPL processes within the South African public sector.

The findings of this survey have underscored the importance of clarity, consistency, and transparency in RPL assessments, highlighting the need for structured guidelines to guide SDPs in their implementation efforts. By synthesising insights from qualitative interviews, focus groups, and quantitative analysis of RPL assessment outcomes, the study has identified key considerations and best practices that can inform the development of practical guidelines for SDPs. These guidelines, once developed, have the potential to revolutionise the landscape of skills recognition within the public service sector. By providing a standardised framework for assessing prior learning, the guidelines aim to enhance the credibility and reliability of RPL processes, thereby fostering greater trust and confidence among stakeholders. Moreover, by ensuring alignment with PSETA accreditation requirements, the guidelines will contribute to the overall quality and consistency of education and

training in the public administration domain. This study thus represents a significant step towards enhancing the inclusivity, efficiency, and excellence of RPL processes within the public sector. By empowering SDPs with standardised procedures and criteria, the guidelines should aim to facilitate greater access to education and training opportunities, thereby advancing the overarching goals of capacity development and professionalisation in public administration. This will contribute to South Africa's education and skills development objectives, creating a competitive, skilled and adaptable workforce, thereby supporting the national development agenda.

It is imperative to acknowledge that the development of guidelines for SDPs on RPL implementation is not a panacea for all challenges associated with skills recognition. Continued collaboration and dialogue amongst stakeholders will be essential to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of the guidelines in addressing evolving needs and contexts within the public administration sector.

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