

Chapter 3

A strategic framework for implementation

Introduction

“Of all the expectations placed on the NQF, the aspiration for a system of recognition of prior learning (RPL) was perhaps the most significant;” (Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework; Department of Education: April 2002).

The extract above reflects the **high priority** accorded throughout the system to the establishment of a **credible, sustainable system** whereby previously acquired learning can be recognised and credited. However, RPL cannot be seen as the answer to all the questions in the emerging education and training system. In the words of the study team:

“On its own, it is not a solution to either inequalities or unemployment”, but it is an important strategy to address access to education and training for those previously excluded. As such, RPL should be seen as a key developmental strategy – both for the system and for individuals wanting to receive recognition for their learning achieved outside of formal institutions. For this reason it is placed within a framework for the enhancement of lifelong learning. ETQAs and their constituent providers must commit to the principles of access and redress and develop context-specific plans to make this possible.” (Report of the Study Team on the Implementation of the National Qualifications Framework; Department of Education: April 2002).

This policy offers a set of criteria against which to formulate a more detailed strategy. Such a strategy cannot be developed and implemented at the macro level alone – it needs to be elaborated and implemented by all key stakeholders in the system, i.e. ETQAs, accredited providers and workplaces, education and training practitioners, assessors, moderators, administrators and managers.

To this end, the following **strategic framework** for implementation is proposed:

3.1 Strategic framework

1. Audit of current practice

The self-audit tools (Chapter 2) could be refined for use by ETQAs to determine the extent and depth of RPL delivery within their constituencies. They could also be used by constituent providers and workplace-based assessors to measure their progress against agreed implementation targets.

2. The development of detailed sector-specific plans

ETQAs and their constituent providers have to develop detailed sector-specific plans for implementation and quality assurance.

3. Capacity building of resources and staff

In line with the implementation plan, the capacity development of assessors and other key staff, as well as appropriate resources, is key to the success of implementation.

4. The design and moderation of appropriate assessment instruments and tools

Appropriate assessment instruments and tools are critical to ensure the credibility of the assessments, and the integrity of the system.

5. Quality management systems and procedures

The development of review and reporting mechanisms is critical to the integrity of the system.

6. The establishment of a research base

Opportunities to, and commitment from all stakeholders to engage in the debate and development of a credible, sustainable system is critical to the integrity of the system.

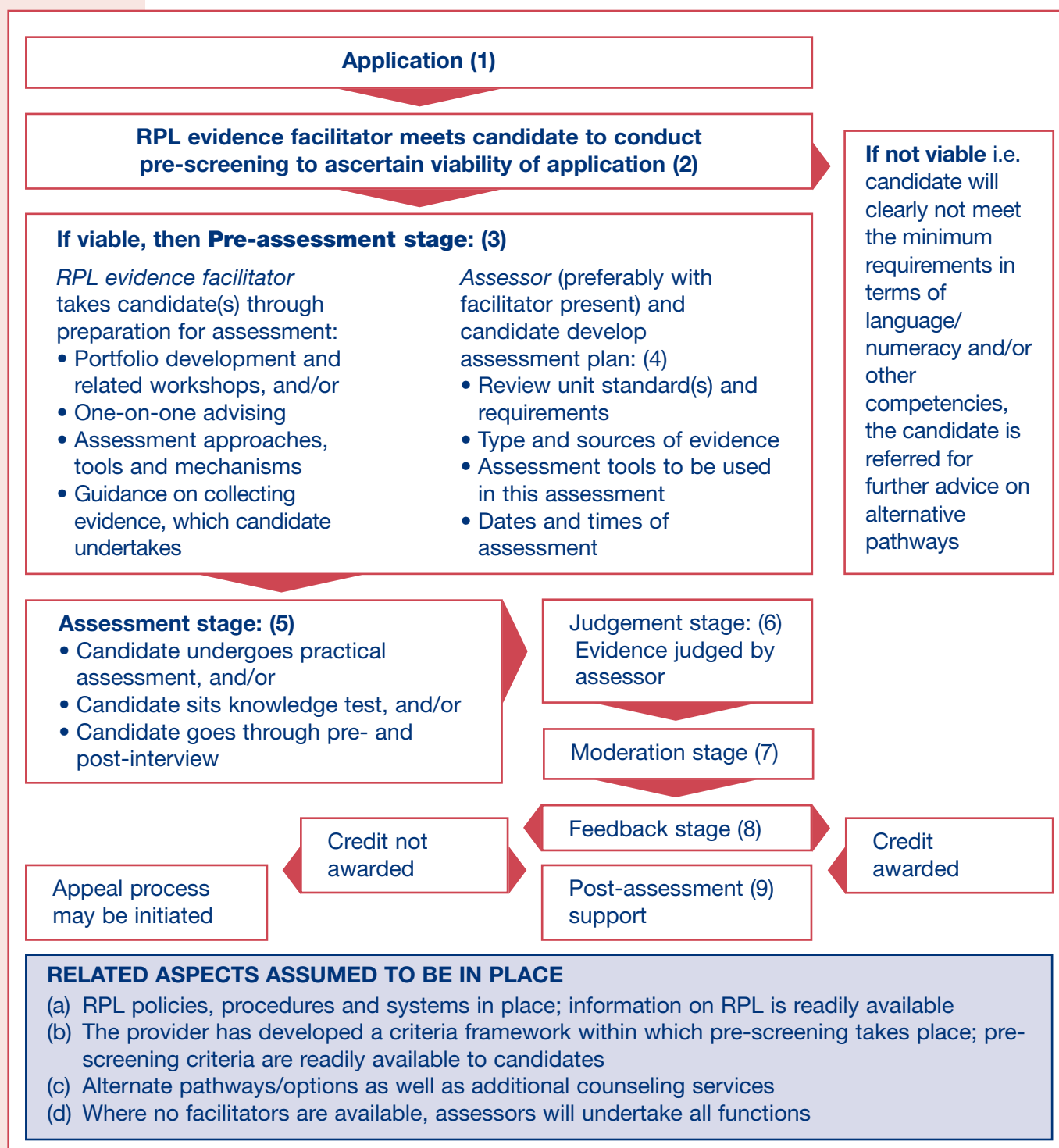
3.2 Conclusion

In developing an RPL policy, it cannot be assumed that because the policy has been approved, the system will be in place. As in the case of all the approaches, processes and procedures in the new education and training system, it is acknowledged that the development of such a system takes time. The level and extent of implementation will be determined by the ETQAs in consultation with their constituencies.

It is also acknowledged that lessons will be learnt on the road to full implementation and that **we should learn these lessons**. Recognition of Prior Learning is not a precise science, rather it builds on international best practice, takes from the lessons that which is valuable and establishes a system that is responsive to the needs of learners, but also balances this with the need for integrity of the system.

Appendix A

Example of a generic RPL process



Appendix B

Unit standards

TITLE:

Facilitate the preparation and presentation of assessment evidence by candidates



Unit standard number	12544
Unit standard level	4
Credits	4
Field	Education, Training and Development
Sub-field	Adult learning
Issue date	February 2003
Review date	This standard should be reviewed within three years of issue.

Purpose

This unit standard will be useful to people who assist candidates to prepare and present evidence for assessment. Such evidence facilitators will add value to the assessment process by ensuring candidates are ready to present well organised and complete evidence to registered assessors. Their value will be particularly felt when assisting candidates who are competent in their field, but are unable to present coherent evidence of that fact for reasons unrelated to their skill area.

People credited with this unit standard are able to:

- Provide information to candidates about assessment in general and their assessment in particular;
- Advise and support candidates to prepare, organise and present evidence; and
- Evaluate and give feedback on candidate evidence.

Learning assumed to be in place

The credit value is based on the assumption that people learning towards this unit standard already understand the key principles of an outcomes-based system, and seek to apply the assessment facilitation skills within the context of their given area of expertise.

Range statement

References to “evidence facilitator” concern the person who wishes to achieve this unit standard. References to “the candidate” in this unit standard concern the person who the evidence facilitator is helping to prepare for assessment, and do not refer to the evidence facilitator.

Assessment of the evidence facilitator against this unit standard is to take place within the context of given organisational assessment policies and procedures, using given assessment instruments that are fully designed in relation to registered unit standards.

This unit standard does not distinguish between “RPL assessment” and any other form of assessment. The reason for this is because all assessment involves gathering, judging and giving feedback on evidence in relation to agreed standards. Therefore, it does not matter whether the evidence facilitator is assisting a candidate to prepare and present existing evidence in the RPL sense, or whether the evidence facilitator is assisting candidates to produce evidence afresh.

Specific outcomes and assessment criteria

Specific outcome 1: Provide information to candidates about assessment

Range: *The information provided to candidates is to include:*

- *General assessment principles and procedures;*
- *Organisational assessment policies and procedures; and*
- *The requirements of the particular assessment at hand.*

Assessment criteria

- 1.1. Basic information is provided about key concepts and principles concerning the outcomes-based system of learning and assessment, within the context of the National Qualifications Framework. Explanations of these key concepts promote understanding of the context of assessment and possible implications for the candidate at individual, organisational, industry and national levels.
- 1.2. Interactions with candidates have the potential to set them at ease and promote understanding of the organisational assessment policy and procedures and the specific assessment process and expectations. Opportunities are provided for clarification concerning the process and the expectations.
Range: *Expectations to be addressed as defined in the relevant unit standards and associated assessment instruments.*
- 1.3. The information helps candidates to identify potential sources of evidence in relation to their circumstances.
- 1.4. The information enables candidates to identify the most appropriate and effective means for producing evidence for the assessment given their circumstances.
- 1.5. Information to candidates is clear, precise and in line with instructions provided in the assessment instruments.

Specific outcome 2: Advise and support candidates to prepare, organise and present evidence**Assessment criteria:**

- 2.1. Potential barriers to gathering evidence and special needs of candidates are identified, and appropriate proposals are provided to overcome such barriers and to address special needs.
Range: *The proposals could be made to candidates and/or assessors and other role-players.*
- 2.2. The advice and support enables the candidate to identify appropriate, effective and efficient means of producing evidence of their competence.
- 2.3. The advice and support provided does not interfere with the candidate's evidence but promotes the candidate's ability to present valid, relevant, authentic and sufficient evidence.
- 2.4. Interactions with candidates enable them to organise and present evidence in a manner that contributes to the overall efficiency and effectiveness of the assessment, but without compromising the reliability and validity of the assessment.
- 2.5. The nature and manner of advice and support takes into account lessons learnt from previous such interactions as well as information from assessors.
- 2.6. Support is given in a way that builds candidates' capacity concerning assessment and promotes independence for the future.

Specific outcome 3: Evaluate and give feedback on candidate evidence

Range: *The evaluation is limited mainly to an evaluation of the completeness and appropriateness of the evidence, and is not expected to amount to an assessment judgement as would be appropriate for an assessor.*

Assessment criteria

- 3.1 The evaluation is carried out in terms of the validity, authenticity, relevance and sufficiency of evidence.
- 3.2 Evaluations are made concerning the readiness of the evidence for presentation to registered assessors, and recommendations contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of the assessment process.
Range: *Recommendations to candidates and/or to registered assessors and/or to supervisors or managers.*
- 3.3 Gaps in the evidence in relation to the requirements are identified and dealt with appropriately.
Range: *“Appropriate” means advice or coaching is only given in cases where the gaps do not reflect a lack of competence on the part of the candidate. In cases where a lack of competence is discerned, feedback is provided in such a way that directs the candidate to further learning and/or practice, and in accordance with organisational policies and procedures.*
- 3.4 Feedback about the evidence is communicated to candidates in a culturally sensitive manner and in a way that promotes positive action by the candidate.

- 3.5 Documentation is completed in line with organisational format requirements. The documentation contains a complete and accurate reflection of the entire process and the evidence produced.
- 3.6 Key lessons from the facilitation process are recorded for integration into future interactions with candidates.

Accreditation options:

- An individual wishing to be assessed, including through RPL, against this unit standard may apply to an assessment agency, assessor or provider institution accredited by the relevant ETQA.
- Anyone assessing an evidence facilitator against this unit standard must be registered as an assessor with the relevant ETQA.
- Any institution offering learning that will enable achievement of this unit standard must be accredited as a provider with the relevant ETQA.
- Moderation of assessment will be conducted by the relevant ETQA according to an agreed Moderation Action Plan.

Notes:

Critical crossfield outcomes

The following critical crossfield outcomes are addressed by this unit standard:

- Identify and solve problems using critical and creative thinking: *planning for contingencies, candidates with special needs, predicting problems that could arise during the gathering of evidence, and making proposals to address difficulties.*
- Work effectively in a team using critical and creative thinking: *working with candidates and other relevant parties prior to, during and after evidence gathering.*
- Organise and manage oneself and one's activities: *planning, preparing, conducting and recording the evidence gathering.*
- Collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information: *gather and evaluate evidence and the facilitation process.*
- Communicate effectively: *inform candidates about assessment, communicate during evidence gathering and provide feedback.*
- Demonstrate the world as a set of related systems: *understanding the impact of assessment on individuals and organisations.*
- Be culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts: *work with candidates and give feedback in a culturally sensitive manner.*

Essential embedded knowledge

The following essential embedded knowledge will be assessed indirectly through assessment of the specific outcomes in terms of the stipulated assessment criteria. Candidates are unlikely to achieve all the specific outcomes, to the standards described in the assessment criteria, without knowledge of the listed embedded knowledge. This means that for the most part, the possession or lack of the knowledge can be inferred from the quality of the candidate's performance.

- Principles of assessment
- Principles and practices of RPL
- Methods for gathering evidence
- Potential barriers to assessment
- Feedback techniques
- The principles and mechanisms of the NQF
- Assessment policies and ETQA requirements

Supplementary information

Definition of terms:

- *Assessment* – a process in which evidence of performance is gathered and evaluated against agreed criteria.
- *Performance* – includes skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes, and the ability to transfer these to new situations.
- *Assessment criteria* – state the type and quality of performance against which the candidate is assessed.

Principles of assessment:

- *Appropriate*: The method of assessment is suited to the performance being assessed and the activities in the assessment mirror the conditions of actual performance as closely as possible.
- *Fair*: The method of assessment does not present any barriers that are not related to the evidence.
- *Manageable*: The methods used make for easily arranged, cost-effective assessments that do not unduly interfere with learning.
- *Integrated into work or learning*: Evidence collection is integrated into the work or learning process where this is appropriate and feasible.
- *Valid*: The evidence produced focuses on the requirements laid down in the standard; i.e. the assessment is fit for purpose.
- *Relevant*: The evidence is relevant to the outcome.
- *Authentic*: The evidence is attributable to the person being assessed.
- *Sufficient*: The evidence collected establishes that all criteria have been met and that performance to the required standard can be repeated consistently.
- *Systematic*: The assessment process is sufficiently rigorous to ensure that assessment is fair.
- *Open*: Learners can contribute to the planning and accumulation of evidence. Assessment candidates understand the assessment process and the criteria that apply.
- *Consistent*: The same assessor would make the same judgement again in similar circumstances. The judgement made is similar to the judgement that would be made by other assessors.

TITLE **Plan and conduct assessment of learning**



Unit standard number:	ASSMT 01
Unit standard level:	NQF 5
Credits:	15
Field:	Education, Training and Development
Sub-field:	All sub-fields
Issue date:	14 February 2001
Review date:	14 February 2004

Purpose

This unit standard is for people who assess or intend to assess candidates against unit standards and/or qualifications. This unit standard will contribute towards the achievement of a variety of Education Training and Development Practices and Human Resource Development related qualifications.

People credited with this unit standard are able to assess learner performance against standards and qualifications registered on the NQF, using pre-designed instruments. This will be carried out in a fair, valid, reliable and practicable manner that is free of all bias and discrimination, paying particular attention to the three groups targeted for redress: race, gender and disability.

Learning assumed to be in place

The credit calculation is based on the assumption that learners have no previous assessment experience when starting to learn towards this unit standard. A candidate being assessed against this standard should have a prior qualification or equivalent competence in the relevant field of expertise. This qualification or equivalent competence should be at or above the level of qualifications/ unit standards that are to be assessed. Although it is not a requirement, it is recommended that those intending to achieve the unit standard "Design assessment instruments and guides", should do so before attempting this unit standard.

Specific outcomes

- Specific outcome 1:** Plan and prepare for assessment
- Specific outcome 2:** Prepare candidates for assessment
- Specific outcome 3:** Conduct assessment
- Specific outcome 4:** Evaluate and record evidence and make assessment judgements
- Specific outcome 5:** Provide feedback to relevant parties
- Specific outcome 6:** Review assessment

Specific outcomes and assessment criteria

Specific outcome 1: Plan and prepare for assessment

Range:

- *Planning for assessment following learning processes and for RPL.*
- *Planning assumes access to a range of pre-designed assessment instruments relevant to organisational assessment policies.*
- *Planning must include assessments that require special needs of candidates to be considered.*

Assessment criteria

- 1.1 Plans address all the assessment requirements of the unit standards or qualifications to be addressed.
Range: *assessment requirements include performance to be assessed, types of evidence to be collected, assessment methods used, timing of assessment, resources required, sequence of activities, accountabilities, deadlines, arrangements for reviewing assessment plan.*
- 1.2 Planning addresses the need for cost-effectiveness and takes into account the results of previous assessments, special needs of candidates, the assessment context, the accessibility and safety of the environment and contingencies.
- 1.3 The assessment activities, instruments and resources selected are appropriate to the outcomes and enable valid and sufficient evidence collection.
- 1.4 Assessment documentation is prepared to facilitate efficient and effective assessment. The documentation provides all details of the assessment process needed to ensure fair, open, reliable and consistent assessment.
Range: *Details include instructions to candidates, assessors and other relevant parties.*
- 1.5 Potential unfair barriers to achievement by candidates are identified and plans are made to address such barriers without compromising the validity of the assessment.
Range: *Unfair could relate to issues such as language or disabilities.*
- 1.6 Required physical and human resources are ensured to be ready and available for use. Logistical arrangements are confirmed with relevant roleplayers prior to the assessment.
- 1.7 Provision for moderation is made in accordance with relevant assessment policies and ETQA requirements.
- 1.8 A variety of assessment methods are described and compared in terms of strengths, weaknesses and applications.
Range: *The description of methods should cover situations for gathering evidence of abilities in problem solving, knowledge, understanding, practical and technical skills, personal and attitudinal skills and values.*

Specific outcome 2: Prepare candidates for assessment

Assessment criteria

- 2.1 Assessment details are made explicit, in terms appropriate to the candidate's language level and in a manner that sets candidates at ease. Opportunities for clarification are provided and responses promote understanding of the requirements.
Range: *Assessment details cover the purpose, process, expectations, roles, responsibilities and appeals procedures.*
- 2.2 Clear explanations are provided to the candidate of the key elements and implications of standards-based assessment within the context of the NQF.
- 2.3 Checks are carried out to ensure candidates are ready for assessment. In cases where candidates are deemed to be not yet ready, actions taken are in line with assessment policies.
- 2.4 Opportunities are provided for input from the candidate on possible sources of evidence that could contribute to valid assessment. Modifications made on the basis of the inputs maintain and/or improve the validity of the assessment.

Specific outcome 3: Conduct assessment and document evidence

Assessment criteria

- 3.1 The environment and assessment practices are ensured to be conducive to effective, fair and safe assessment and where applicable, in line with recognised codes of practice and learning site or worksite standard operating procedures.
Range: *codes of practice could include personal, product and worksite health, safety and environmental practices, and current legislation.*
- 3.2 The assessment is carried out in accordance with the assessment plan. The assessment approach is adapted as required by the situation, and unforeseen events are addressed without compromising the validity or fairness of the assessment.
- 3.3 Language and expressions used are at a level appropriate to the candidate and provide for clear understanding of what is required without leading candidates.
- 3.4 Questioning techniques are appropriate and have the potential to successfully elicit appropriate responses.
- 3.5 Sufficient evidence is gathered, including evidence generated over time, to enable valid, consistent and fair assessment judgements to be made.
- 3.6 The recording of evidence is sufficient for the purposes of making assessment judgements, meaningful feedback, moderation and possible appeals.
- 3.7 Key principles of assessment are described in terms of their importance and effect on the assessment and the application of the assessment results.

Specific outcome 4 Evaluate evidence and make assessment judgements

Range: *The ability to make assessment judgements must be demonstrated using diverse sources of evidence and in situations where:*

- Special needs of candidates need to be considered;
- Candidates meet all criteria;
- Candidates clearly do not meet the criteria;
- Candidates meet some, but not all criteria; and
- More evidence is required in order to make a judgement.

Assessment criteria

- 4.1 Evidence is evaluated for authenticity, validity and sufficiency.
- 4.2 The quality and type of evidence is evaluated in terms of the assessment outcomes, against the criteria in the relevant unit standard or qualifications.
- 4.3 The evaluation of evidence includes making allowances for contingencies beyond the control of the candidate without compromising the fairness or validity of the assessment.
Range: *Contingencies include unforeseen events, breakdowns, changed circumstances.*
- 4.4 Assessment judgements are justified by the quality and sufficiency of the evidence. Judgements can be substantiated in terms of the consistency and repeatability of the candidate's performance and evidence from various sources and time periods.
- 4.5 Evidence and judgements are stored in line with the Quality Assurance system used by the organisation.

Specific outcome 5: Provide feedback to relevant parties

Range:

- Parties include candidates, educators, trainers, officials, managers and moderators as applicable to the situation.
- Evidence must be provided of the ability to give written and oral feedback.
- The ability to give feedback must be demonstrated in situations where:
 - Special needs of candidates need to be considered;
 - Candidates meet all criteria;
 - Candidates clearly do not meet the criteria;
 - Candidates meet some, but not all criteria; and
 - More evidence is required before a judgement is possible.

Assessment criteria

- 5.1 Feedback is given to relevant parties in accordance with confidentiality requirements, in an appropriate sequence and within agreed timeframes.
- 5.2 Feedback focuses on the quality and sufficiency of the candidate's performance in relation to the agreed outcomes and criteria.
- 5.3 The type and manner of giving feedback is constructive and related to the party's needs. Sufficient information is provided to enable the purpose of the assessment to be met, and to enable parties to make further decisions.

Range: *Further decisions include awarding of credit and redirecting candidates to learning or re-assessment.*

- 5.4 Feedback on the assessment process is obtained from the candidate and opportunities are provided for clarification and explanation.
- 5.5 Disputes that arise are dealt with in accordance with the assessment policy.
- 5.6 Agreements reached and key elements of the feedback are recorded in line with organisational quality assurance systems.
- 5.7 The feedback process and models are described in terms of the potential impact on candidates and further learning and assessment.

Specific outcome 6: Review assessment

Assessment criteria

- 6.1 The review identifies good and bad practice in assessment design and process, and notes these for incorporation in assessment redesign.
- 6.2 Feedback from relevant parties is used to effect future assessments positively.
- 6.3 Weaknesses in the assessment design and process that could have compromised the fairness of assessment are identified and dealt with in accordance with the assessment policy.
- 6.4 Weaknesses in the assessment arising from poor quality of unit standards or qualifications are identified, and steps are taken to inform relevant bodies.

Accreditation process

An individual wishing to be assessed, (including through RPL) against this unit standard may apply to an assessment agency, assessor or provider institution accredited by the relevant ETQA.

Anyone assessing a learner-assessor against this unit standard must be registered as an assessor with the relevant ETQA.

Any institution offering learning that will enable achievement of this unit standard must be accredited as a provider with the relevant ETQA.

Moderation of assessment will be conducted by the relevant ETQA at its discretion.

Range statements

This is a generic assessment unit standard, and candidates can be assessed within any field of learning in line with their subject matter expertise. For the purposes of assessment of this unit standard, candidates should have access to pre-designed assessment instruments.

Further range statements are provided in the body of the unit standard where they apply to particular specific outcomes or assessment criteria.

Notes

Critical crossfield outcomes

The following critical crossfield outcomes are addressed by this unit standard:

- Identify and solve problems using critical and creative thinking: *planning for contingencies, candidates with special needs, problems that arise during assessment, suggesting changes to assessment;*
- Work effectively in a team using critical and creative thinking: *working with candidates and other relevant parties during assessment, as well as post-assessment;*
- Organise and manage oneself and one's activities: *planning, preparing, conducting and recording the assessment;*
- Collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information: *gather, evaluate and judge evidence and the assessment process;*
- Communicate effectively: *prepare candidates for assessment, communicate during assessment, and provide feedback;*
- Demonstrate the world as a set of related systems: *understanding the impact of assessment on individuals and organisations; and*
- Be culturally and aesthetically sensitive across a range of social contexts: *plan, conduct and give feedback on assessments in a culturally sensitive manner.*

Essential embedded knowledge

The following essential embedded knowledge will be assessed through assessment of the specific outcomes in terms of the stipulated assessment criteria. Candidates are unlikely to achieve all the specific outcomes, to the standards described in the assessment criteria, without knowledge of the listed embedded knowledge. This means that for the most part, the possession or lack of the knowledge can be directly inferred from the quality of the candidate's performance. Where direct assessment of knowledge is required, assessment criteria have been included in the body of the unit standard.

- Principles of assessment – *see assessment criterion 3.7*
- Principles and practices of RPL
- Methods of assessment – *see assessment criterion 1.8*
- Potential barriers to assessment
- Feedback models – *see assessment criterion 5.7*
- The principles and mechanisms of the NQF
- Assessment policies and ETQA requirements
- Moderation requirements

Supplementary information

Definition of terms:

- *Assessment* – a process in which evidence of performance is gathered and evaluated against agreed criteria.
- *Performance* – includes skills, knowledge, understanding and attitudes, and the ability to transfer these to new situations.
- *Assessment criteria* – state the type and quality of performance against which the candidate is assessed.
- *Candidate* – person whose performance is being assessed by the assessor.

Principles of assessment:

- *Appropriateness*: The method of assessment is suited to the performance being assessed.
- *Fairness*: The method of assessment does not present any barriers to achievements, which are not related to the evidence.
- *Manageability*: The methods used make for easily arranged, cost-effective assessments that do not unduly interfere with learning.
- *Integration into work or learning*: Evidence collection is integrated into the work or learning process where this is appropriate and feasible.
- *Validity*: The assessment focuses on the requirements laid down in the standard; i.e. the assessment is fit for purpose.
- *Direct*: The activities in the assessment mirror the conditions of actual performance as closely as possible.
- *Authenticity*: The assessor is satisfied that the work being assessed is attributable to the person being assessed.
- *Sufficient*: The evidence collected establishes that all criteria have been met and that performance to the required standard can be repeated consistently.
- *Systematic*: Planning and recording is sufficiently rigorous to ensure that assessment is fair.
- *Open*: Learners can contribute to the planning and accumulation of evidence. Assessment candidates understand the assessment process and the criteria that apply.
- *Consistent*: The same assessor would make the same judgement again in similar circumstances.

The judgement made is similar to the judgement that would be made by other assessors.

Appendix C

Models and issues for practice

Introduction

As part of the development of this policy, a review of international and local RPL projects and practices was undertaken, so that lessons learned from other contexts and in South Africa could be used to inform the development of a forward-thinking RPL policy for South Africa. The approach taken in this description is briefly to outline a few RPL case studies that speak to some of the issues and principles that are being highlighted in this document. It will not seek to provide great detail on how RPL is practised in each context, nor does it cover all countries internationally that implement RPL.

A holistic model for portfolio development

In Canada we find an example of innovative prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) among indigenous communities. The First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) in Ontario is an Aboriginally owned and managed education institution that has developed an 'alternative' set of practices within portfolio development. In this context, the portfolio is used not only as a method of assessment in a narrow academic sense but also as a way to explore a wide range of individual and collective learning stemming from colonialism and social and cultural oppression. In a context in which both personal healing and cultural renewal are seen as part of the whole educational programme, educators and learners are encouraged to develop a wide range of learning, assessment and therapeutic skills with which to reconstruct their lives, their communities and the whole approach to education and training. According to FNTI, a valid assessment of past learning cannot take place outside this context; when constructing a portfolio of past experiences, individual students inevitably confront the barriers to learning and assessment, both those that arise from its structural and political realities, as well as from the ways in which adult learners have painfully internalised them (Michelson 1997).

Increasing adult learner participation rates in higher education

It is in the USA that prior learning assessment (PLA) developed approximately 25 years ago. One of the most interesting features of the USA model is its commitment to lifelong learning and to increasing access to learning opportunities for adults in meaningful and cost-effective ways. Thus, since the 1970s, there has been a concerted effort in many institutions in the USA to increase access to HE for adult learners. This has been successful to the degree that, in 1999, 41.1% of all undergraduate students at USA colleges and universities were over the age of 24 (Dumbleton & Strain 1999). Some universities, such as DePaul University in Chicago and New York State University, have colleges dedicated to adult learners (School for New Learning and Empire State College respectively).

One of South Africa's earliest RPL pilot projects was started at the University of the Free State. A 'niche' qualification, targeting working adults in positions of management and leadership, but without having formal qualifications, was started in 1999. Two of the programme's cornerstones are its RPL component (of which portfolio development is a significant part) and its flexible curriculum structure that allows learners to adapt their learning programmes to suit their learning and career needs. The portfolio development course (PDC) is compulsory for all candidates wishing to enter the Bachelor in Management Leadership (BML). For those candidates who have the necessary matriculation exemption, the course is credit-bearing. For those candidates without matric or matriculation exemption, the PDC has been approved by the Matriculation Board as an alternative entry onto the BML, and these candidates make up the extra credits elsewhere in the course. The demand for the course has been extremely high, and the course is now offered off-campus and in other provinces of South Africa.

Creating an enabling framework for RPL through a National RPL centre

In the Netherlands, *Erkennen van elders of informeel Verworven Competenties* (EVC) is being applied in order to contribute to the skills shortage by increasing the flexible 'deployment' of individuals by identifying their current competencies and using educational planning to fast-track appropriate new learning that is individualised. RPL practice in the Netherlands has not yet moved much beyond an experimental phase, and its implementation success is due largely to 'enthusiastic pioneers'. For this reason, the Dutch government set up the Knowledge Centre APL, with funding, at the beginning of 2001 for a period of four years. The functions of the Knowledge Centre APL are: the development of expertise and dissemination of information on APL; research and development of best practices; networking; and supporting the new vocational qualifications framework.

Models of regional RPL provisioning

Two very different types of regional RPL arrangements have been found in North America. The one, representing institutional collaboration, is one of very few of its kind. The other type of arrangement, a community-based and/or semi-independent RPL centre, is more common.

Vermont State Colleges (VSC)

The VSC is a partnership between 15 community colleges in Vermont, USA. The VSC RPL service is aimed at learners who do not fulfill the conventional college entry requirements, or who have learning from experience for which they wish to gain credit towards a formal college qualification. Most of the learners who do the programme request first or second year college credits. Learners can sign up at any participating institution in Vermont, and the portfolio development course (the main assessment tool) is implemented from a common template. Furthermore, the learner need not necessarily apply for further learning at the institution where s/he is receiving portfolio development assistance.

The programme is co-ordinated from a central office with two staff members who play a co-ordinating and administrative role. The VSC draws its assessors from the participating institutions, and industry where appropriate. Each participating institution has instructors (or advisors) trained in helping learners understand and complete the portfolio, which is then submitted to the central office. Copies of the portfolios are subsequently redistributed to subject-specific **panels** of academic assessors representing the member institutions, as well as to an industry representative where appropriate. The assessors individually assess the portfolios and then come together at the central office to compare notes and consensually agree on and **recommend** a result. The credit(s) is **transferable**, not only across Vermont but also across the US, although it is up to the individual institution, where the RPL candidate may be applying to enter a programme of learning, to accept the RPL credit recommendation(s). The New England Association of Schools and Colleges certifies academical viability and transferability of credits across institutions.

The greatest strength of this model is the participative collaboration of all institutions, from delivering a common PDC, to jointly developing assessment criteria, and awarding of credit through panels of assessors.

PLA Centre, Halifax

The PLA Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada offers RPL services to individuals **and** organisations that have a range of development needs, from education and training; to those facing unemployment or retrenchment; to career advancement. The PLA Centre is a joint project involving five Halifax universities, the provincial community college system, representatives from community groups, voluntary organisations, labour, the private sector and government.

The Centre has a small staff of 4 to 5 housed in the ground floor of a shopping mall tower block in central Halifax. While most PLA in Canada focuses on helping learners access post-secondary education (PSE) the Halifax Centre process might include PSE access at some point in the learner's development, but this is not its main emphasis. Assessors, advisors and trainers are drawn from the partner institutions. The Centre offers individuals and groups a range of RPL programmes and services, namely: individual interviews with a PLA advisor, the Transferable Skills Workshop, and a 30-hour portfolio development course.

Some of the strengths of this approach include its practicality for industry and large organisations like the navy, particularly given the rapidly changing nature of the world of work, and the need to re-skill people in the face of retrenchment. Also, RPL plays an important role in steering people away from social assistance and welfare, towards gainful employment and a sense of empowerment over their own life path and choices. Lastly, the Centre is accessible in terms of location and structure of services.

Workforce development projects

There are examples of RPL-inclusive workforce development projects in the USA, many of which are quite large, e.g. Ford Motor Company, Qwest, and IBM. However, such projects are not the norm. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) has pioneered a model of workforce development that takes “the employed adult worker as the focal point, linking the needs and interests of employees, employer demands for skilled and flexible employees, and the capacity of educational providers” (Flynn et al 1994:2). The approach is collaborative and participative, and includes the following components: career and education planning, **assessment of prior learning**, motivational workshops, financial assistance for tuition, and a comprehensive information and fund management system through which all data, contracts and reports are processed.

In the *Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Education and Training Authority (MERSETA)* in South Africa, a model that is moving towards a holistic approach to RPL and related services is emerging. A RPL pilot project has been undertaken in the New Tyre Chamber. This project emerged from an evaluation of an early assessor training course in which components relating to bias and sensitivity, and RPL were inadequate. A new assessor training course, substantially inclusive of these components and aligned with the national unit standards for assessors, has been developed. Workers are provided with time off to attend a one-day ‘Returning to Learning’ workshop, in addition to one-on-one guidance, in order to assist them in preparing for their assessments. Various components of the project have been concerned with using and adapting similar strategies found in the FNTI model.

In 1997, the *Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)* undertook a participatory RPL research project in the auto and mining sectors. The project is important in highlighting some of the problems that can undermine RPL implementation if not addressed in the planning and consensus-building stages. For example, it emerged that management and workers had different purposes in mind for the RPL activity (management wanted a skills audit, while workers assumed that they would be recognised, receive higher pay and have access to further education and training opportunities). A number of factors contributed to workers being disillusioned with RPL: information relating to RPL procedures and assessment tools was not readily made available; some of the assessment tools used were inappropriate; many workers were given no opportunities to prepare for their assessments and nor did they have access to the standards or criteria against which they were to be assessed; many workers disregarded the outcome of their assessments, as the grading system was not explained, and no verbal feedback was provided. One of the spin-offs was that the RPL exercise mitigated against the development of a notion of lifelong learning. Also, the equity agenda so often assumed inherent in RPL practices did not meet the goal of certifying large numbers of workers.

The findings from the research were used to develop an RPL policy for COSATU affiliates that sets out eight implementations, including developing a union mandate, establishing a Joint Committee, agreeing on the purpose(s) of RPL, putting in place support structures for workers, in order to create a worker-supportive and participatory RPL framework for workplaces (COSATU 2000).

Some overall comments and issues emerging from the case studies

The discussion above highlighted a number of diverse approaches to providing RPL services and programmes, all of which reflect innovative responses to particular contexts, issues and stakeholders. However, in reviewing these case studies for the purpose of learning lessons for a broad-based implementation of RPL in South Africa, a number of important contextual issues and/or differences need to be highlighted.

Firstly, a number of case studies are from First World countries that are not faced with the same issues relating to levels of literacy, participation of citizens in formal education, or unemployment rates as occur in South Africa. Secondly, RPL in those contexts often takes place in a situation where one of the concerns relating to groups such as immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, is on assimilation into the culture, language and economy of the receiving country. Issues relating to the transformation of society to reflect the developmental needs of the majority are generally not part of the discourse or practice of RPL in the First World contexts examined. Thirdly, although much of the literature examined indicated that financial resources for RPL in these countries is insufficient, the resources that are available for RPL implementation is quite considerable, such as in the Netherlands. Fourthly, the issue of language, as in South Africa where the majority of people do not speak English, is less of an issue in these other contexts. Finally, the experience of the COSATU research, with regard to the social redress and equity agenda of RPL being undermined unless carefully designed, is an issue that has been foregrounded by the FNTI experience. It is evident that all stakeholders involved in RPL implementation and quality assurance will need to ensure that their processes are inclusive, participatory and stakeholder-driven.

On the other hand, these case studies point to the fact that it is possible to provide RPL services more cost-effectively in a context of scarcer resources. The two regional models represent the basis on which more cost-effective options for South Africa can be explored. Secondly, the UFS case study indicates that where institutional will exists, non-traditional groups of learners can be accommodated within institutions in meaningful ways. The MERSETA case study demonstrates the possibilities for developing a holistic model within an economic sector.

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