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1 September 2009

Mr. M. Fransman (MP)
Chairperson
Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training
P.O. Box 15
CAPE TOWN
8000

Dear Mr. Fransman

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

On a request from the HET Portfolio Committee, following a presentation to the committee by SAQA, a briefing note on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was requested, particularly relating to any 'legislative gaps' and the fact that RPL is an 'unfunded mandate'.

Background

The intention of RPL as developed from the early 1990s was to build a more inclusive education and training system. It was to provide ease of access to different levels and forms of learning to those who had been disadvantaged by the previous system i.e. it is a system for redress and greater equity. There have been ten years of developing pockets of excellent practice; deepening understandings through doctoral research, publishing journal articles and books; and development of institutional and national policy guidelines (SAQA; HEQC; some SETA ETQAs). In other words, a great deal of experience has been obtained and there is a growing realisation that RPL is made up of complex pedagogical, organisational, political, administrative and resource-related dimensions. In order for it to be able to deliver on its promise, a national initiative is required which brings both the political will and the resources to bear.

Progress and challenges in RPL

1. Early progress in South Africa

RPL was placed on the post-apartheid agenda, with RPL as a key principle of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Two conceptual and implementation guides for RPL were developed by SAQA in 2002 and 2004. Changing norms and standards for some professions and occupations (such as school teachers; financial advisors; construction workers) required new qualifications that included recognition of elements of workplace experiential learning. In order to recognise the skills of staff against these new qualifications, a number of large-scale RPL projects for affected staff were implemented (e.g. developing and monitoring the National Professional Diploma in Education for teachers).

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Institutional experience and good practice regarding RPL was achieved at, for example, the Universities of Western Cape (UWC)(access), Free State (UFS) (National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) and South Africa (UNISA) (access); at the Workers' College in KwaZulu-Natal (access to social science degrees), the Insurance SETA (INSETA) (registration of financial advisors) and Construction SETA (CETA) (registration as artisans).

It has been a challenge that there has been no officially earmarked funding for RPL programmes and services offered at public institutions. Students and institutions are left to make their own decisions regarding the extent to which they will support RPL or not. Many RPL students are not able to access funding from the National Student Fund as they are 'part-time' and the assumption is that they are economically secure.

The provision of suitable guidance and counselling for RPL students is key to their success, as is the professional competence of the educators / facilitators involved in various aspects of RPL services (such as portfolio development courses and assessment). These services require skilled and dedicated personnel and resources, which have thus far been offered in an un-coordinated way by individual institutions.

2. Lessons learnt

There is evidence that some RPL students are more successful than 'regular students' once they have accessed learning opportunities (for example, at UWC there is evidence of first year 'stop out' rates being half of that of regular students). It is known that system flexibility through modularization; clearly described outcomes; Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT); creating partnerships for delivery; and proactive advisory and advocacy systems are catalysts for spreading the use of RPL. Best practice needs to be disseminated widely. Best practice and trends in all aspects of RPL need to be recorded and monitored, through for example capturing results on the National Learners' Record Data Base (NLRD).

RPL within education and training, and within the workplace, has differing requirements, and its implementation across these different contexts must accommodate the specialized and formative nature of learning in these settings (e.g. business and workplace practice; formal education and training at further and higher levels; civil society; trade unions). Good guidance and counselling is essential to guide individuals through the changing requirements for qualifications and how these relate to career choices; and to succeed through the different stages of the RPL process. Coordinated professional development of RPL advisors, assessors; educators and trainers is necessary. More research is required into what makes for successful RPL practices.

Inhibitors need to be addressed, the greatest of these being cost, complexity, lack of acceptance, epistemological issues, and lack of systematic quality assurance. RPL is not a cheap option and funding incentives for institutions at all levels in the system are essential so that it moves away from being an 'unfunded mandate'.

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3. Ways forward

1. Address gaps in the statutory framework so as to ensure proactive development and expansion of RPL services and programmes as an alternative access route into the formal education and training system, and recognition in the workplace (e.g. advocacy and advising regarding RPL services; nationally benchmarked portfolio and other RPL programmes and assessment tests for different categories of learners). This would need to be supported by a clear and coherent CAT policy, and regulations to ensure articulation within and across different learning pathways in the system. Also needed are clear national guidelines for systemic quality assurance of RPL and CAT, and for the formation of partnerships for delivery. Quality assurance needs to include follow-up on the implementation of policy). Specific regulatory inhibitors that need addressing are:
 - a. the "residency clause" contained in the Higher Education Act, which limits the extent to which RPL can take place in HE (only a maximum of 50% of credits can be awarded);
 - b. rigid entrance requirements for HE;
 - c. lack of formal RPL policy and legislation in specific sectors (e.g. the FET sector; the workplace);
 - d. difficulties associated with accreditation of assessment-only institutions (at present providers offering assessment only – and not training – are excluded from accreditation);
 - e. ensuring sector-specific implementation of national RPL policies.
2. Create viable funding mechanisms to ensure provision for the systems, resources, and personnel required to offer credible RPL advisory services and programmes available at public and private further and higher education and training institutions.
3. Develop a nationally benchmarked set of credible RPL assessment methods and routes of access (e.g. learning portfolios; tests) to all learning pathways and levels.
4. Have a central RPL nodal point which can advise institutions on how to implement effectively.
5. Provide a national helpline for potential RPL learners to access information; have face to face drop in centres around the country – this will assist in the flushing out of 'unscrupulous providers'.
6. Co-ordinate and support RPL-related research across sectors and sites, to deepen understandings of successful practices; synthesize and integrate national and international research conducted so far; and measure progress in RPL.
7. Create a National RPL Association, a membership organization with an Executive Committee with coordinating and communicative functions.

4. Conclusion

SAQA is committed to take this matter of national importance forward in a constructive way. For these efforts to be successful, the Portfolio Committee's support for the following initiatives is sought:

- a. Creating a legislative framework suitable to the South African context, to ensure the development and expansion of RPL practices
- b. Creating viable funding mechanisms to ensure that institutions are able to offer credible RPL services
- c. SAQA's proposed establishment of a national helpline that will assist learners to navigate the system, including access to RPL information.

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Thank you for your continued interest and commitment to improving the education and training system in South Africa. I would like to assure you of SAQA's support in these endeavours.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'JOE SAMUELS', written over a horizontal line.

JOE SAMUELS
ACTING EXECUTIVE OFFICER

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