

# **Prior Learning**

*what and why*

**R**ecognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is critical for achieving the labour movement's objectives on the new education and training system. COSATU has consistently argued that RPL is critical to ensure redress and that workers are able to gain recognition for the skills and knowledge they gained through years of experience.

RPL is a key component of the implementation of the Employment Equity Act and the Skills Development Act. However, we have found that many difficulties arise in implementing RPL processes and there is a danger that our objectives for RPL will not be achieved. For this reason COSATU has developed a policy and guidelines to inform the way in which RPL is undertaken at the workplace.

## **What is RPL?**

RPL is a process to give people recognition for the skills and knowledge that they already have, but which have not been formally recognised. It gives formal credit for learning through experience, whether that learning happened in a course, in work, or in life.

The RPL assesses people against the same standards and therefore gives equal credit to the knowledge and skills gained through experience and those gained through formal education and training.

*Trade unions have consistently argued for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). Carmel Marock outlines and gives motivations for COSATU's policy and guidelines on RPL.*

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## **RPL's importance**

It is easy to see why the union movement should support RPL activities. RPL is vital for a number of reasons and contributes to:

- ☐ redressing historical disadvantages;
- ☐ validating people's skills and knowledge (credits towards a qualification - ie accreditation);
- ☐ the broader development of individuals (including development of confidence, lifelong learning and access to education and training);
- ☐ access to jobs and progression in career paths;
- ☐ recognition in terms of grading and pay;
- ☐ planning (skills audits, education and training, career paths, change process);
- ☐ restructuring the workplace;
- ☐ democratising and transforming education and training institutions.

In 1995 and 1996 a number of RPL pilots took place in industry, and early rumblings indicated that RPL may not always achieve



the results that we would like. For this reason, the COSATU Participatory Research Unit (PRU) initiated a participatory research process in August 1996.

The research focused on the pilots in the auto and mining sectors. There was also some research carried out in the hospitality and construction industries. Through this research, we were able to understand the problems that can arise during RPL processes. These issues were discussed in different COSATU fora and a RPL policy emerged.

### RPL's purposes

*'Nothing has happened because of RPL, no payment increase, no training.'* (Auto worker)

*'We are not really sure if there has been an RPL process - we were asked questions but are not sure what has happened with this or what it was for.'* (Hospitality worker)

A key concern that arose across all the pilots was that workers were unclear about the purpose of the RPL exercise. While management stated that they had wanted a skills audit of workers in the company, workers had expected to be regraded (and receive higher pay) after the RPL process. They also thought that they would have access to further education and training.

These different perceptions lead to high levels of frustration and tension. In many cases workers were not informed about their results, or as in the case of the mining industry, they were informed very late. This vacuum following the RPL process, lead to considerable disillusionment with RPL and workers expressed doubts about its value.

Key principles that emerge from these experiences are that:

- ☐ the purposes of an RPL process must be

clearly defined and agreed;

- ☐ RPL must be deliberately designed and implemented to meet its agreed purposes;
- ☐ RPL must be linked to other relevant processes, such as education and training, accreditation etc, so that it can meet its purposes.

### Methods and principles

*'What does the colour yellow mean to you?' (Assessment question in an auto plant)*

Workers raised a number of concerns about the relevance and fairness of the assessment methods and tools. One example is when the assessor asked workers what the colour yellow meant to them. Of course there were a range of answers - however the 'correct' answer was that yellow indicates that an area is hazardous. Other workers raised concerns about the fact that they were asked to write down the procedure for carrying out certain activities.

Workers argued that they would be able to demonstrate the activity and explain it, but had difficulties in trying to write down the steps in an abstract context. Try writing down for somebody how to ride a bicycle - it is far easier demonstrating this and explaining the steps while you are doing it.

These questions highlight the problems that can occur if the assessment methods and tools are not fair, and there is no clear agreement as to how assessment should be undertaken. Principles that emerged from this are that assessment methods should:

- ☐ be accessible and appropriate for the learning which is being assessed;
- ☐ be appropriate for the ways that the learning is used;
- ☐ be appropriate for the level and context of the assessment;



- ☐ be transparent, valid, fair, reliable, relevant and developmental;
- ☐ be selected openly;
- ☐ not use language and written requirements unnecessarily;
- ☐ allow people to show their knowledge and skills and not put barriers in their way;
- ☐ not be biased against particular groups of people;
- ☐ be cost-effective (This must be regulated, through for example, using time frames. It should not be the overriding principle.);
- ☐ be linked with appropriate support for candidates.

## Language

Many workers felt that they were being assessed in a language that they were not most fluent in and that this biased the results. The following principles therefore emerged:

- ☐ Candidates must be assessed in the language of their choice.
- ☐ Assessors must be able to communicate in the languages chosen by candidates.
- ☐ Equal status must be given to all languages at all levels.
- ☐ RPL must be available to people who use sign language.

## Unit standards

*'The assessment did not assess me against what I knew but asked me about things I had not done before.' (Auto worker)*

*'The standards were schoolish and did not relate to the communication that we use in the mines.' (Miner)*

A concern that emerged was that workers were not always assessed in terms of their experience, but were assessed against standards that had been developed in other contexts. In the case of the auto standards, these were standards that had

been adapted from the Australian standards and assumed that workers were multi-skilled. Workers also argued that the communication standards related to the school syllabus and did not assess the manner in which people communicate in their working life. Thus through using inappropriate standards, the RPL served to assess what people did not know rather than what they did know. This undermines the rationale for RPL, and highlights the importance of using relevant standards in the RPL process. Key principles that emerge are that the unit standards used for RPL must:

- ☐ validate workers' knowledge and skills;
- ☐ reflect how workers' knowledge and skills are gained;
- ☐ reflect how workers' knowledge and skills are used;
- ☐ be jointly agreed by the stakeholders;
- ☐ be relevant to workers' contexts and experiences;
- ☐ be approved by SAQA.

However, the area of unit standards is a contentious one. While we agree that unit standards should be written to describe what we think people should know and be able to do, they should also be written to describe what we want for the future. This might be different to what people have had the opportunity to learn. The unit standards must be the same for both RPL and other forms of assessment and these competing requirements create a real tension. We therefore emphasise that candidates must be able to access further learning opportunities so that they can close any gaps that are identified through RPL.

The construction project, which was targeted at the unemployed, could not provide a list of candidates that were successful. Nor were there opportunities for these candidates to access further training to enable them to attain the





*Unit standards must reflect how workers' knowledge and skills are used.*

standard or qualification. This is a crucial aspect of RPL if it is to play a developmental role. The sectoral and skills plans are important mechanisms to facilitate this in the future, and the appropriate linkages between these instruments need to be found.

### **Support systems**

*'We did not know what the RPL process was about or why we had to do it.'*  
(Mineworker)

In many cases workers were unclear about the purpose of RPL and what was expected of them. Workers were not clear as to which standards they would be assessed against, and there were concerns that RPL was racist in that, in the case of the mineworkers, it was primarily black workers that were involved in the RPL exercise. In the case of the mineworkers,

the RPL process involved an exam as well as a project.

Workers were not all aware that they were required to undertake the project, and expected that once they had completed the exam they could be assessed. There was also no support for workers to assist them in carrying out the project – this related both to assistance with the project as well as practical arrangements such as time off to carry out the project.

Principles that flowed out of these concerns include:

- ☐ RPL must include strong support mechanisms for all involved (candidates, assessors, stakeholders),
- ☐ support includes transparent communication at all levels and all stakeholders must play a role in this communication strategy;



- ☐ RPL must be affirming and developmental;
- ☐ support services should be available during paid time off work

### Assessors

*'Where there were shopstewards involved we could trust the process and it was fairer' (Worker)*

Generally workers argued that the process was fairer when shopstewards were present during the assessment process. They also felt that it was important that the assessors understood the context in which the assessment took place. Key principles that emerged include:

- ☐ assessors must be well-trained and affirming of candidates;
- ☐ assessors should include union representatives in their capacity as accredited assessors;
- ☐ assessors should come from all levels;
- ☐ assessors and any assessment agency must be accredited by SAQA;
- ☐ a monitor should be present at every assessment to make sure that the process is fair;
- ☐ assessors should be trained within a context, in order to build capacity in that context;
- ☐ the selection of assessors should happen by the joint structures.

### Managing an RPL process

RPL must involve the union to ensure that the labour movement's objectives are pursued and met.

The following principles should guide an RPL process:

- ☐ RPL should be jointly managed by the employer and the union;
- ☐ there must be joint control of budgets for RPL;
- ☐ joint management should happen through powerful joint structures at all

levels;

- ☐ real power and decision-making must lie with joint structures;
- ☐ representatives on joint structures must be properly trained and supported to fulfil their role;
- ☐ joint structures for RPL processes should have clear relationships to national, industry and local education and training structures;
- ☐ RPL must be designed and implemented to meet mass demand. This could mean on-going provision of a quality service.

### RPL agreement

RPL agreements between unions and companies should be guided by the following principles:

- ☐ RPL should be available to all;
- ☐ participation in an RPL process must be voluntary and individuals must be given the appropriate support to choose whether or not they want to participate;
- ☐ RPL must not be used to downgrade a worker;
- ☐ there must be no loss of benefits as a result of RPL. (RPL should not be used to negatively affect any individual's work position, grading or pay. The trade union must monitor RPL to make sure there are no negative effects on candidates);
- ☐ an individual person can be assessed through RPL for certain purposes. If he/she is found competent in the skills assessed, he/she should not have to be reassessed;
- ☐ RPL should be available all the time for people who want to be RPL-ed.

### Finance for RPL

RPL will have several costs associated which will require funding, including:

- ☐ various support services;



- ❑ assessment processes;
- ❑ suitable and accessible venues for preparation and assessment;
- ❑ transport for candidates;
- ❑ time for workers to attend RPL processes;
- ❑ training of assessors.

There must also be sufficient resources to meet RPL demand over time.

RPL linked to education and training could contribute to significant increases in productivity, from which the employers will benefit. RPL can enable training to be more cost-effective because it helps avoid unnecessary re-training.

It can also provide a cost-effective skills audit and training needs analysis for employers. For all of these reasons, employers must provide significant proportions of the funds for RPL.

Much of this funding will be drawn from the monies paid to the skills levy. However, there may need to be other monies allocated to this activity. In addition, government (through the National Skills Fund) could contribute towards RPL for the unemployed and those people participating in employment creation projects. State provision of RPL services could add to those provided by the employers.

National validation for RPL processes must be gained through:

- ❑ link to SAQA and relevant Education and Training Quality Assurers;



*RPL could contribute to increases in productivity.*

- ❑ using standards that are registered with the NQF

Government support could include creating, financing and maintaining this enabling environment.

## Conclusion

There are still many issues that need to be confronted relating to RPL processes. However, we must attempt to implement the above model and continue to evaluate its impact and the extent to which it meets workers' needs. ★

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*Carmel Marock is COSATU's national educational and training co-ordinator.*