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An investigation into the factors enabling and constraining the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): A case of the public service sector in two South African provinces

by

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Research Report Submitted in Fulfilment of the Masters' Degree in Education

in the

Faculty of Humanities

(School of Education)

at the

University of the Witwatersrand

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September 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and offer my sincere gratitude to all those who have made the compilation of this Research Report possible. The following people have supported and guided me through this research:

My Supervisor, Dr Presha Ramsarup whose patience, experience, expertise and motivation supported me throughout my research process, thus making this Research Report a reality.

The research participants who openly shared their experiences and thoughts to ensure that RPL in the Public Service sector could be more meaningful in future.

I would like to make special appreciation to my life partner, Nomagcina and son, Imitha who supported me in this journey and made it possible for me to focus on and complete my degree. A special thanks also goes to Daryl who pushed me to go for it!

Abstract

The South African economy is in need of skilled workers, yet many competent employees are underutilised and disadvantaged owing to them not being able to produce evidence of their competence in the form of academic qualifications.

The National Development Plan (NDP) calls for the building of a “capable state”. According to the National Planning Commission (NPC) the state is capable to the extent “that it has the capacity to formulate and implement policies that serve the national interest” (NPC, 2012). A capable and developmental state is one that has the means to identify and deal with the causes of poverty and inequality in South Africa.

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in South Africa must build on the commitment of all role-players to remove barriers to learning and develop a visible, usable and credible system as an effective and creative vehicle for lifelong learning. This research report is an interpretive study which is dependent on the views of key persons in understanding the factors enabling and constraining the implementation of RPL for credit in the public service sector. A case study of two South African provincial government department who have implemented RPL. The RPL was implemented against the Public Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA) registered workplace-based learning National Certificate in Public Administration qualification were investigated. Hence this study does not necessarily present a comprehensive account of the implementation of RPL in the two provinces that were studied. The research study seeks to describe the experiences and to link such experiences to the literature that describes workplace/ experiential learning in relation to the implementation of RPL.

This study aims to establish implementation practices of RPL for credit in the public service sector and forge a deeper understanding of the factor that contribute to the successful implementation of RPL for credit. It also aims to identify barriers and constraints in the implementation of RPL for credit.

The findings of the research revealed that the participants who are employees in the two provincial departments sampled derived a range of emancipatory benefits from the RPL programme. The RPL programme has enabled previously disadvantaged employees to obtain credits towards a full qualification registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). This research study is conceptualised against the background of Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory. This is a conceptual framework which has widely contributed to understanding adult and professional learning. The analysis of the study is then brought together by Cooper and Ralphs’ framework that considers RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice that cannot be

theorised as a conventional form of transmission, acquisition and assessment of knowledge from a single body or source.

DECLARATION

I **Siviwe Tywabi**, student number **1559742**, declare that this research report entitled: "What are the enabling and/ or constraining factors to the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the public service sector in South Africa" is my own work and that I contributed adequately towards the research findings which have not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other University. I am submitting this paper in part as fulfilment of the requirements for the Masters in Education at the University of the Witwatersrand. All the sources I have used or quoted from have been indicated and acknowledged as complete references.

Name of Student: Siviwe Tywabi

Signature of Student **Date:** 28 September 2020

Name of Primary Supervisor: Dr Presha Ramsarup

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CHE	Council on Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
DPSA	Department of Public Service and Administration
ETQA	Education and Training Quality Assurance
HET	Higher Education and Training
HRD	Human Resource Development
HRDSF	Human Resource Development Strategic Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
NLRD	National Learner Records Database
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NSDS	National Skills Development Strategy
NDP	National Development Plan
PDI	Previously Disadvantaged Individual
PoE	Portfolio of Evidence
PSET	Post-School Education and Training
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SDA	Skills Development Act
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1. Introduction to the Study

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) within the South African context is defined as the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed for the purpose of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development (SAQA, 2015).

The concept of RPL in South Africa is premised against the Australian competency-based vocational education and training reforms and is led by the Department of Higher Education and Training (2013, p1). RPL is implemented globally as a means of honouring and building on mature learners' past experiences. It can thus be construed as a policy provision that can contribute to the social inclusion of historically marginalised groups within society. Pockets of good practice are emerging in the public sector and therefore it is important to consider whether RPL could be implemented in a more systemic and coordinated manner.

In this research study the constraints of implementing RPL in the public service sector in South Africa is investigated, within the context of the Public sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA). In addition, the study focuses on RPL that relates to the two specific qualifications for the public sector, namely, the National Certificate: Public Administration and National Diploma: Public Administration at NQF at NQF levels 5 and level 6 respectively.

Pockets of good practice are emerging in the public sector and therefore it is important to consider whether RPL could be implemented in a more systemic and coordinated manner to support clear learning objectives. Within this study, the public service sector refers to government departments (excluding local government) which form the Public Service sector of the South African government. The study focuses on two provincial departments that have implemented RPL. It is important for the reader to note that this is an interpretive study which is dependent on the views of key actors in the implementation of RPL and does not necessarily present a comprehensive account of the implementation of RPL in two provinces in the public sector. The case study thus provides the empirical context for studying RPL implementation practices in the sector, however the findings are not representative of all RPL practices in the public service sector. In the context of this study, RPL 'candidate' is used to refer to the employee who has gone through RPL assessment whilst the RPL 'coordinator' refers to an employee who is responsible for facilitating the implementation of RPL in the government departments.

1.2. Background and Context of the Study

The legacy of apartheid has contributed to large gaps in education, training and skills development for the majority of South Africans. Apartheid has contributed to inequality, low literacy levels and a lack of employment opportunities. The first democratic elections in South Africa were conducted in 1994, marking an end to the 40 year long legacy of apartheid and brought about more equitable access to education and training. From 1998, the Skills Development Act was promulgated to usher in new policies in the education and training system (Ngcwangu, 2014).

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was identified as a mechanism to transform education and training in South Africa and is linked to the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and Higher Education policy (Harris, 2001).

RPL was conceptualised as the major mechanism to redress inequality and promote access to restructure education and training as a way to phase out the Apartheid system of inequality and fragmentation

The aim of RPL within the policy context in South Africa is for the purposes of "RPL for access" into higher education institutions for academic studies and "RPL for credit" which results in the formal award of a full or part-qualification against the NQF. This study thus focuses on RPL for credit against the workplace-based learning National Diploma in Public Administration, which falls within the domain of the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority (PSETA). The process of RPL is further explored in Chapter 2 of this research report.

RPL is part of a larger debate as a mechanism for up-skilling and multi-skilling a workforce for improved access to further education and training. It is part of the socio-economic development agenda for the country. South Africa has a clearly formulated set of policies and principles for RPL. These principles form part of the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is *inter alia* designed to open up second chance opportunity for those who were not able to access further education and training (Bolton, Samuels, Mofokeng, Akindolani, & Shapiro, 2017).

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) expressed that there has been a *laissez faire* approach towards RPL in South Africa and that it has not been taken seriously enough due partly to the lack of incentives to implement and embed RPL in the education and training system (DHET, 2016, p. 4).

1.3. Problem Statement

Despite policy and rhetorical commitments to use RPL as a vehicle to redress inequalities and promote access to education and training, there appears to be a lack of clear empirical examples that highlight issues in the successful implementation of RPL practices in the Public Service sector. Also there are not many guidelines to operationalise RPL.

The empirical problem is that RPL implementation is profoundly influenced by the public sector institutional context and there is no standardised approach to the implementation of RPL. Hence there is no generic understanding of and little insight into implementation challenges. Such understanding and insight would enable and allow for improved conceptualisation and implementation of RPL.

The public service is an important empirical context considering that Statistics South Africa reported that the South African government employs over 2,1 million employees (which excludes the local government sector) of which approximately 1 574 500 employees fall within the public service sector (i.e. employees employed under the Public Service Act) and distributed across national, provincial government departments PERSAL (2018). The National Development Plan (NDP 2030) recommends that building a skilled and professional public service, recruitment and promotion processes needs to place an overriding emphasis on skills and experience and the state needs to focus on its role in producing and enhancing skills (DPSA, 2016).

Existing literature postulates a general approach and guidelines to implementing RPL yet sector specific nuances are not considered in the guideline and this study thus proposes that generic guideline are acceptable but must be adapted to the specific context. In addition, the overall agreed-upon approach should be aligned with the awarding of credits as outlined in the policy document *Draft Policy and Procedure on Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Public Service*, (2016)

1.4. Introducing Research on RPL

Anderson, Fejes & Sanderberg (2013, p. 405) note that researchers from different contexts have different conceptions of what RPL is and identify the three contexts of RPL as follows:

I. Where RPL can be the basis of admission as well as acceptance of credits or granting of advanced standing, particularly in secondary adult education and in tertiary education.
II. RPL in the working life context where varying practices of RPL are developing in employment services, in specific companies, in certain trades and industries.

III. Where RPL takes place through unpaid voluntary work, an area attracting growing interest in gaining a deeper understanding the value of learning taking place in this context.

Anderson et al. (2013) further note that Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory can be viewed as a kind of ideological-theoretical base for much research on RPL, but acknowledge that it restricts the philosophy of analysing RPL from other theoretical perspectives. It follows that RPL can thus be categorised as hybridised discourse of experiential learning.

Cooper & Ralphs (2016) argue that a number of prevailing models of RPL practice have been proposed over time, and that there is a growing consensus amongst researchers of the need for a much closer look at the specialised nature and limitations of RPL practices given the complex differences of knowledge production and learning across academic and work-based practices. These models of RPL have provided useful insights that informed the conceptual framework for analysing the data collected for the study and are further outlined in Chapter 4 of this study.

In this section, the debates that continue to unfold in understanding RPL as a specialised pedagogy are presented. The sections that follow examine the South African policies that lay the foundation for the implementation of RPL in the country.

1.5. Aim of the Study

This study aims to establish implementation practices for RPL for credit in the public service sector and forge a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to the successful implementation of RPL for credit, identifying barriers and/or constrains in the implementation of RPL for credit.

1.6. Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to investigate the enabling and/or constraining factors to the implementation of RPL in the public service sector in two South African provinces. This study seeks to contribute to education research in South Africa, in particular in the public service sector. The study aims to achieve the following:

i. Provide empirical examples of current RPL practices in the Public Service sector;
ii. Identify and explain the enabling and/or constraining factors in the implementation of RPL in the Public Service sector;
iii. Make recommendations based on empirical evidence based on the insights of RPL implementation within the Public Service sector;

iv. The study consolidates inputs from the implementers, and employees who have benefited from the RPL programme for the purpose of developing a public sector approach for RPL.

1.7. Research Questions

The main research question to be explored is the following:

"What factors enable and/or constrain the implementation of RPL in two South African government departments in two provinces?"

In order to support the collection of data to respond to the main question above, the sub-questions were formulated:

1. How have selected public service sector employers implemented RPL?
2. What RPL best practices exist for successful implementation in the public service sector?
3. What are the constraints to implementing RPL in the public sector?

1.8. Significance of the Study

The study seeks to make a contribution to refine and improve RPL policies and processes for the Department of Education and Training and SAQA. The research seeks to inform Higher education institutions about models, approaches and challenges in awarding credits towards qualifications.

It would hence be enriching to contribute to the body of knowledge that continues to unfold around RPL and to be part of a process that strengthens the effectiveness of key policy imperatives in creating a better education and training system in South Africa. This can be achieved by recognising public service officials who have never stopped learning and now, increasingly, have the opportunity to be recognised for their contributions. The study aims to contribute to the RPL body of literature in order to strengthen policy implementation for the sector.

1.9. Structure of the Research Report

The structure of this research report firstly outlines the contextual background of the study in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 reviews literature on RPL practices emerging in existing literature that supports the research question and juxtaposes South African RPL implementation practices with three international country contexts. Chapter 2 further explores the conceptual

foundations that shape RPL as a specialised pedagogy and how these were considered for the conceptual framing of this research report. Chapter 3 describes the research methodology undertaken for the study and explores the nature of RPL practices in two provincial government departments in South Africa, focusing on the methods used for each of the two case studies. Chapter 4 outlines the analysis of the case studies premised against the specialised pedagogic nature of RPL by exploring elements of knowledge, pedagogy, learner agency and institutional contexts within which RPL is enabled or constrained in the public service sector in South Africa. The final chapter, Chapter 5, provides a summary of the findings of the research study and offers possible areas for consideration to assist the sector in adopting a common language for the standardised implementation of RPL practices in the sector.

1.10. Conclusion

This chapter attempts to provide the reader with the contextual background that informs the research study and the knowledge area to which it seeks to contribute. The following chapter will unpack the literature which forms the backdrop to the conceptual framing of this research study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter traces the key literature underpinning this study to develop a conceptual framework to guide the investigation. The literature review commences with analysis of various South African policy documents and frameworks that support and guide the implementation of RPL in the Public Service sector. This is followed by conceptual overview of the conceptual frameworks and related RPL 'models', international best practices and a review of three country studies. The policy analysis involved examining the background and context of the South African RPL policy documents in relation to RPL practices in the sector under investigation.

The literature review was done to broaden the understanding of RPL and the theoretical assumptions that determine the relevance of the research study.

Wheelahan (2003) acknowledges that South Africa has considered RPL more thoroughly than other countries as a consequence of the scope and scale of the task involved in rebuilding education and training in post-apartheid South Africa. Harris (1999) further supports the idea that RPL is positioned as a central pillar of redress, and can be seen as having the capacity to widen access to education and training, enhancing the qualification status of historically disadvantaged adults.

The literature review begins with a the discussion of universally accepted definitions of RPL in relation to the South African Qualifications Authority policy provisions in the context of experiential learning, followed by other South African government policy frameworks. Finally, international best practices are juxtaposed to review three country studies on the implementation of RPL against South African RPL practices.

2.2 The Definition of RPL

The Recognition of Prior Learning is a phenomenon with variations in practice, contexts, concepts as well as conceptions (Anderson & Harris, 2006).

In comparison with elsewhere in the world, the implementation of RPL in South Africa has maintained a stronger focus on equity and access. RPL was first introduced to the South African education and training system in the early 1990s driven strongly by the labour movement, and it was one of a number of other elements driving systems level reforms (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016).

South African education policy conceptualises within the perspective of the accreditation of learning from informal experience, provided it can be matched against pre-determined learning outcomes. This is done through the production of evidence against the pre-determined learning outcomes or through outcomes-orientated portfolios in order to award credits against specific learning outcomes (Anderson & Harris, 2006).

Davey (1998:15) makes a distinction between two forms of RPL, namely, “equivalence” and secondly, documentation and demonstration of achievement. Furthermore, Davey (1998:p16) proposes that credit transfer or formally awarding credit by an institution for part of a qualification or for a full qualification can be given towards an intended qualification.

For the purpose of the study the definition of RPL provided by National Standards Bodies Regulations (No. 18787 of 1998), issued in terms of the South African Qualifications Act No.58 of 1995, was adopted. The South African Qualifications Authority (2014) defined RPL as the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner against the learning outcomes of the specific qualification to assess the degree to which the requirements of that qualification have been fulfilled.

2.3 Sources of Prior Learning

Cohen (1993:9) recognises that there are numerous sources of prior learning and identified the five main sources of learning, namely, work experience, informal courses, life experience formal courses and higher education programmes.

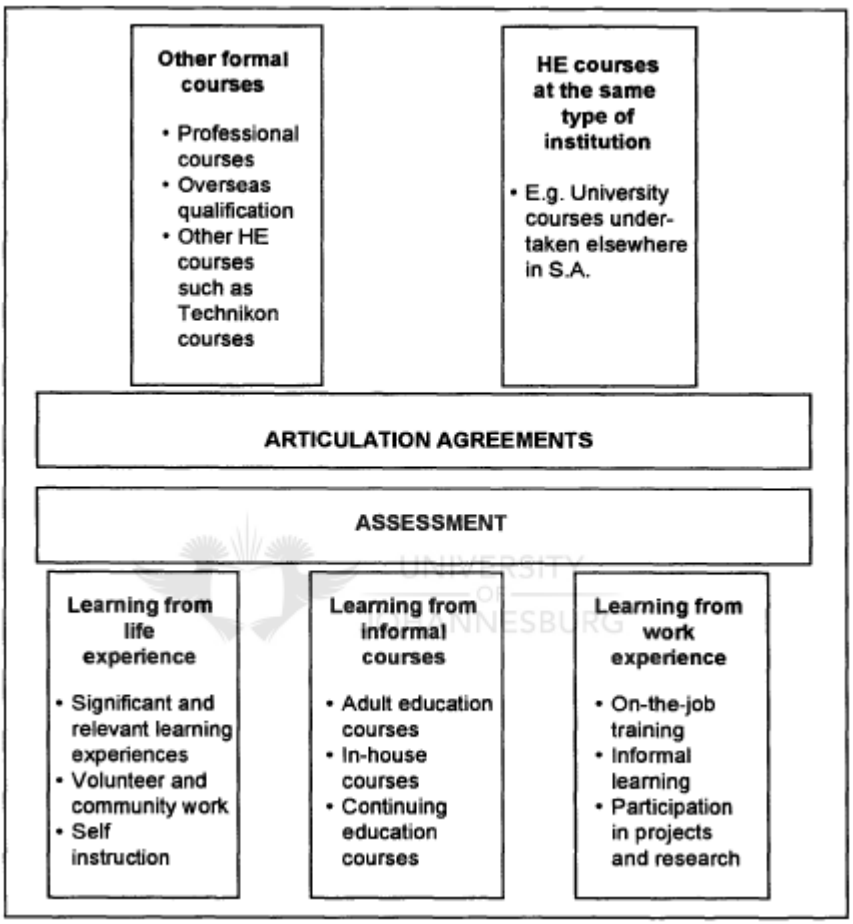

Figure 2.2: Forms of prior learning (Cohen, 1993)

2.3.1 Higher education courses

This refers to learning that had taken place in one university (A) and the students wants to continue with their studies at another university (B). The academic transcript and learning content can be assessed to determine if the credit can be given (equivalence) towards a qualification or part of a qualification.

2.4 Understanding of RPL

Harris (2004, 2006) as cited in Cooper, Harris, & Ralphs, (2018, p. 230) note that most conceptualisations of RPL are drawn from Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), which is rooted in the cognitive and humanist psychology which emerged in 1960s and 1970s. Harris (2006, p. 6-7) further notes that historically, the most commonly accepted theorisation of RPL has been through Experiential Learning Theory and related concepts in cognitive psychology. Harris, as cited in Cooper & Ralphs (2016, p.24) argues that reliance on these accounts suggests that RPL “seems to have lagged behind contemporary developments in social and educational theory”. However, in the context of South Africa, the study recognises

the hybridised nature of RPL and is aligned to Cooper and Ralph's postulation that recognises RPL as a Specialised Pedagogy which is further unpacked later in this chapter. The researcher also studies the inner workings of RPL as a specialised pedagogy and later formulates a conceptual framework for understanding the implementation of RPL as a specialised pedagogy in the sector by looking at two provincial departments.

Knowles (1980) as cited in Anderson & Harris, (2006, p. 86) emphasises the value of adults' experience describing it as the 'richest source of learning' in an adult education setting which, if ignored or devalued, will be perceived by adult learners as rejection of themselves. Kolb (1984) outlines that experiential learning typically involves not merely observing the phenomenon, but also doing something with it, such as testing the action and interaction to learn more about it, or applying the theory to achieve some desired result. The element of learner agency greatly assists this study in analysing the role of the experiences of RPL candidates in relation to how the knowledge gained through workplace experience is assessed.

The section below will cover various models of RPL, namely, the credit exchange model, the learning and development model and the radical model. The discussion of RPL relates to the public sector.

The section below will cover various conceptual understandings of RPL in the namely, credit exchange model, learning and development model and radical model. In the presentation of these conceptual ideas below, I have attempted to link the discussion to the public sector in South Africa.

2.4.1 The Credit Exchange model

Shalem and Steinberg (2006: p.99) argue that according to the Credit Exchange model the RPL candidate compares knowledge acquired to learning outcomes and assessment criteria of a qualification or unit standard. RPL to assess knowledge acquired through a legacy qualification requires matching previous learning content against the current qualifications and unit standards. This model applies to employed people that were beneficiaries by attending courses and training to develop cognitive skills (Osman, 2004: p.140 and Harris, 1999: p. 3-4).

2.4.2 The Learning and Development approach

The learning and development approach to RPL proposes that an RPL applicant is supported to meet the relevant learning outcomes by preparing a portfolio of evidence (PoE) by reworking and interpreting his\her own knowledge on a specific topic against learning outcomes or

learning content of specific unit standards, programmes and qualifications. This approach provides the RPL applicant with an ability to reflect on their knowledge and follows an intensive and time consuming process of completing formative assessments. The RPL candidate will receive feedback on the evidence provided as the portfolio is being developed. Furthermore, Volbrecht (2009: p. 20) argues that the success of the programme is contingent on including reflective activities and personal information from formal and informal settings. In some instances a panel interview will be conducted to assess the portfolio of evidence and fully explore the extent to which the RPL candidate has the requisite knowledge.

2.4.3 Retrospective and prospective RPL

Shalem and Steinberg (2006: p. 99-101) postulated that in assessing the portfolio of evidence two insights are evident. The first insight is that previous learning and achievements in a specific area of work is assessed (*retrospective action). The other aspects of assessment relates to evaluating the learner's readiness to pursue studies (prospective action).*

2.4.4 The Radical Model

Michelson (1996: p. 185) and Harris (1999: p. 6-7) proposed a different approach to RPL which was referred to as "outsider knowledge" that transcends the academic ways of knowing and that there may be other forms of knowledge and experience that go beyond the conventional curriculum. These scholars also propose that RPL is designed to recognise knowledge and experience that transcends traditional curriculum.

2.4.5 Experiential Learning Theory

According to Kolb (1984, p. 20) Experiential Learning Theory offers a fundamentally different view of the learning process from that of the behavioural theories of learning based on an empirical epistemology or the more implicit theories of learning that underlie traditional educational methods that are mostly based on a rational idealist epistemology.

Kolb (1984), proposed that the process of experiential learning emphasises four critical aspects of the learning process from experiential perspective:

i. emphasis on the process of adaptation and learning as opposed to content outcomes;

ii. knowledge as a transformation process, being continuously created and recreated; and not an independent entity to be acquired or transmitted;

iii. learning transforms experience in both its objective and subjective forms;

iv. to understand learning, the nature of knowledge must be understood and vice versa.

Although Kolb's theoretical framework provides useful insights, critics have argued that the theory offers a rather simplistic framing and understanding of RPL. Independent of the criticism, Bergsteiner et al. (2010) suggest that Kolb's experiential learning theory offers an alternative to traditional didactic and behavioural classroom approaches, providing for personal change and development as part of a learning cycle. Bergsteiner et al. (2010) acknowledge that Kolb's experiential learning theory has been widely influential in adult learning for understanding adult and professional learning. It is with reference to the experiential learning theory that this research investigates how experiential (workplace-based) learning is assessed, mediated and recognised within government departments.

According to Cooper (2005) as cited in Cooper & Ralphs (2018, p. 230) experiential learning is often hybrid in its nature as it comprises articulations of different forms and dimensions of knowledge. Cooper et al. (2018) investigates the extent to which RPL can contribute to a critical understanding of the relationship between education, work and social transformation and between different cultures of knowledge and expertise. These theories are critical of the analysis of the elements of knowledge or the process of the RPL which allow candidates to draw on their prior workplace learning to demonstrate what they know against the exit outcomes of a qualification.

2.4.6 Pedagogising Knowledge

In order to understand the structuring of knowledge, Cooper, Harris, & Ralphs, (2018, p. 243) proposed that Bernstein's (2000) notion of the pedagogic device can be used. The pedagogic device demonstrates ways in which RPL may challenge the traditional notions of what counts as specialised knowledge and they argue that specialised knowledge is not only produced in academic sites of knowledge production, but also in the work context. Cooper et al., (2018) argue that RPL should not only be viewed as a form of assessment, but rather as a specialised form of boundary pedagogy for navigating the differences between experiential knowledge and codified knowledge.

2.4.7 RPL as a Specialised Pedagogy

According to Cooper & Ralphs (2016, p. 35), RPL cannot be theorised as the conventional transmission and acquisition of knowledge from a single of epistemological authority as it is a distinctively specialised process for mediating knowledge.

To this end, Cooper & Ralphs (2016, p.10) explored the affordances and constraints of different RPL practices which were aimed at developing an understanding of the 'inner workings' of RPL as a pedagogic practice and to develop a conceptual framework for

theorising and comparing the specialised nature and modalities of the practice in different contexts. The practices of RPL were studied at four sites to ascertain what a more 'optimally inclusive' approach to RPL might require. The studies were based on four lines of enquiry, namely:

i. Knowledge: focused on the relationship between knowledge gained through experience and knowledge that is codified in qualifications
ii. Pedagogy: focused on the content, methods and processes used in all aspects of RPL provision
iii. Institutional context: focused on the systems, rules and resources governing RPL provision in the different institutional contexts
iv. Learner agency: focused on the biographical profiles of the learner to ascertain the capabilities and limitations that learners must negotiate in order to access the opportunities and barriers of the evolving national learning system in South Africa (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016, p. 11–12).

Cooper & Ralphs (2016, p.145) suggest a conceptual framework and language of description for considering RPL as a specialised pedagogical practise within and beyond the knowledge boundaries of the NQF. Their suggested framework locates RPL in relation to the contested system of knowledge production and distribution, aligned to the interlinked fields of knowledge production, knowledge contextualisation and the field of pedagogic practice.

As depicted in figure 1 below, Cooper & Ralphs (2016, p. 130) point out that what distinguishes RPL as a pedagogic practice is that it cannot be theorised as a conventional form of transmission, acquisition and assessment of knowledge from a single body or source. According to Cooper & Ralphs (2016) RPL is a distinctive and specialised process for mediating knowledge claims that originate from two or more sources: firstly, claims originating in experiential learning on the one hand, and, secondly, knowledge claims based on the evaluation criteria specified in the curriculum of codified knowledge on the other. These ideas are useful to this study as they provide a lens through which to investigate the implementation of RPL with the assistance of explanatory language.

Thus, (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016) state that RPL functions as a form of boundary pedagogy and attempts to broaden the evaluative rules of the pedagogic device. Figure 1 below outlines RPL as a specialised pedagogy in relation to the production and distribution of knowledge. In attempting to identify the distinctive features of RPL as a specialised pedagogical practice, Cooper & Ralphs (2016) locate key elements that shape the unconventional RPL tools and methods within a dynamic and purposeful community of practice, bound by specific rules and

division of labour. Cooper & Ralphs (2016) suggest that this model provides a framework for understanding the hybridised nature of learning in which learners are situated both as subjects who need to acquire and provide evidence of specialised knowledge of the qualification on the one hand, and as agents who play a pivotal role in the construction and mediation of pedagogical knowledge in their workplace contexts on the other. The figure below, adapted from Cooper & Ralphs (2016), summarises the specialised pedagogic approach to the inner workings of RPL.

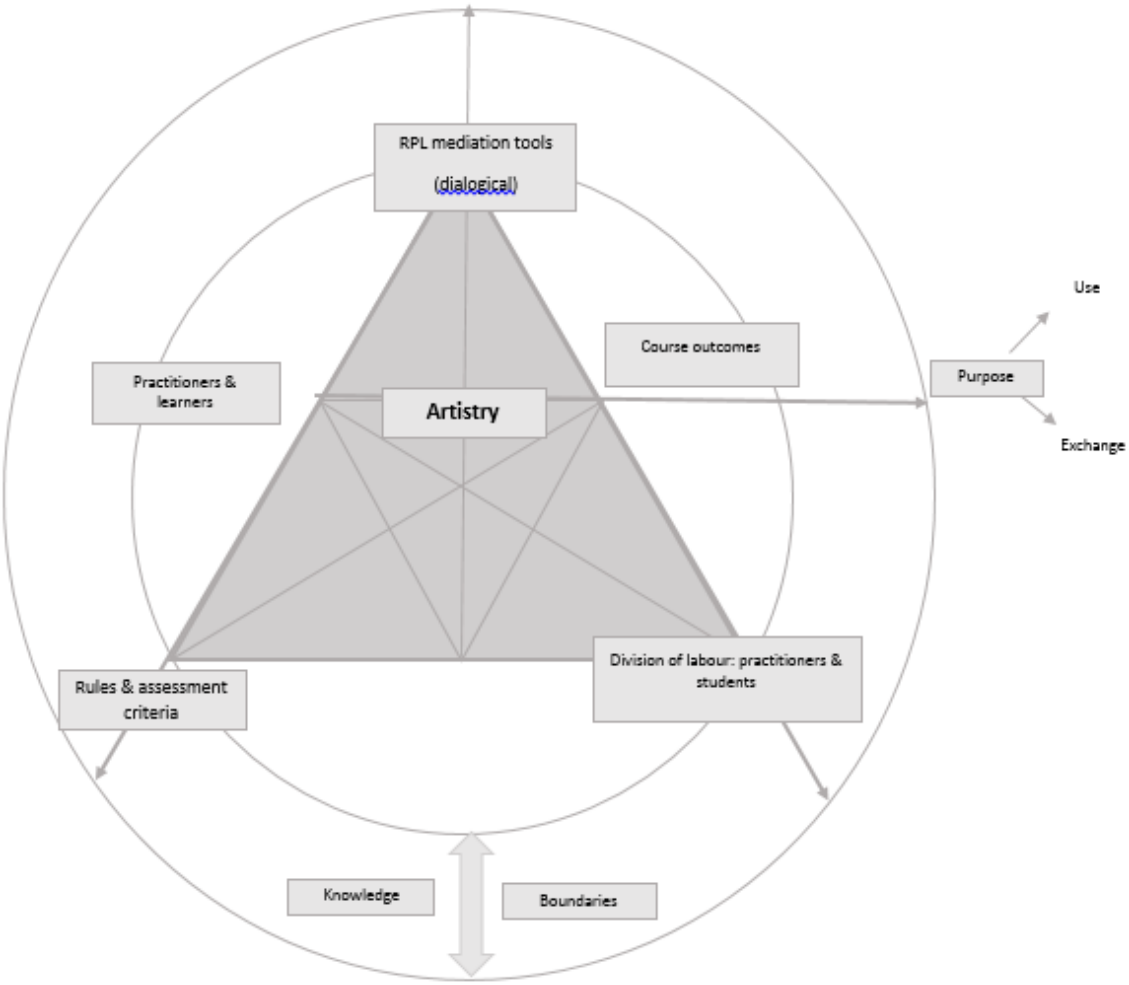

Figure 1: RPL as a specialised pedagogy: inner workings and artistry Source: (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016, p. 132)

With reference to this model, the following principles that underpin RPL as a specialised pedagogy can be classified in the following domains: knowledge, pedagogy, institutional context and learner agency. This is particularly useful to this study as the researcher supports the position that in the analysis of RPL implementation practices, the elements of knowledge, pedagogy, learner agency and the institutional context make up a well-rounded RPL

assessment. This research seeks to gain insights into how the elements of knowledge, pedagogy, learner agency and the institutional contexts that contribute to enabling and or constraining the implementation of the in the public service sector.

2.4.8 RPL as Boundary Work

The RPL process is a multi-dimensional one. It is a process through which non-formal learning and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, accessed, included or advanced in the formal education and training system, or workplace (SAQA: 2014, p. 6).

By its nature RPL attempts to cross traditional boundaries as it is one of the strategies recommended by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to ensure that the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) contributes to the full development of each learner and to the social and economic development of the nation. Hence the conceptualisation of RPL as boundary work can be useful to this study.

Harris (2001) describes Boundary-work as the active, socially constructed process through which boundaries and spaces are re-enacted and re-negotiated and have become widely used to map contemporary social practices. She argues that boundaries and boundary work represent a bigger conceptual move and offers a potentially more textured way of looking at the inner workings of RPL practices.

In building up RPL as boundary work, Edwards 1997 (as cited in Harris, 2001, p. 4) highlights key lines of enquiry in relation to RPL as ‘boundary work’, namely:

i. What boundaries and where - referring to the nature of boundaries and their degree of permeability, and where they are placed;

ii. What is in/out - with reference to positioning, placings and marginalisation;

iii. Who or what sets the boundaries and maintains, mediates, manages, controls, and polices them;

iv. Who or what is ‘working’ the boundaries - re-enacting, negotiating, crossing, blurring, shifting boundary identities and function;

v. How they are being ‘worked’ - the interplays and elisions between boundary differentiation and de/redifferentiation

vi. The framing of the key line of enquiry *“What boundaries and where - referring to the nature of boundaries and their degree of permeability and where they are placed”.*

This body of literature has been useful to this study as it has shaped and guided the identification of the nature of constraints in the implementation of RPL in Public Service sector.

2.4.9 Barnett's approach to the concept of vocational pedagogy

Barnett (2006: p. 147) designed the model below to explain that a knowledge claim by an RPL candidate involves the two shaded areas which represent all that is known. In addition, the discussion covers knowledge that was attained before entry into the university and knowledge acquired thereafter. The area shaded in purple represents knowledge claims before entry into the university.

- Situational knowledge relates to knowledge associated with specific jobs and tasks gained through experience which includes workplace based learning and knowledge that is tacit and explicit.
- Acquisition of a specific repertoire which is associated with work specific terminology, words, methods philosophies and paradigms. Bernstein (1999: p. 160) also recommends that when assessing experiential learning evidence it is important to consider the repertoire that the RPL candidate used in providing evidence. Bernstein further claimed that repertoire is also extended to a set of strategies that context, concepts, systems, processes, equipment and software used by the RPL candidate to solve business problems.
- Reflection in the workplace entails demonstrating how through trial and error the RPL candidate has the capacity to resolve organisational challenges through reflection.
- Vocational pedagogy is what the person has learnt in the workplace through on-the-job-training, experiential learning, attending training, mentoring and coaching.
- Technological and organisational problems entail the opportunity that RPL candidates have to learn through solving organisational problems.

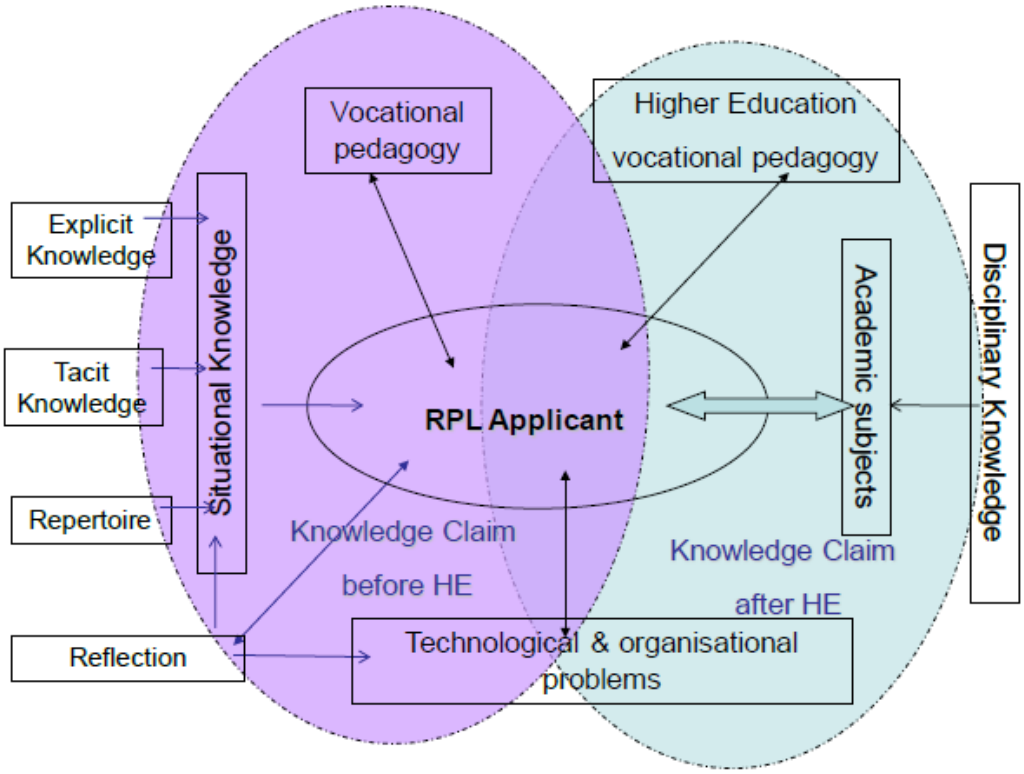

Figure 2.1 Positioning knowledge claims within RPL (De Graff, 2010, p. 34)

2.4.10 The discipline-specific approach

Breier (2005: p. 59) proposes that this approach considers the nature and structure of the discipline. This approach requires "one to consider the nature and structure of the discipline or field concerned", the relationship between formal and informal knowledge and "the extent to which the pedagogic discourse mirrors the relationship". The relevance of this literature to this study is that I sheds light on understanding that in assessing informal learning, the context must be taken into consideration as well as the level of the educational programme.

2.5 Other formal courses

This category includes any other formal courses that were done abroad, professional courses, and whether or not the students wants to switch from a technikon or college to a university.

2.5.1 Learning through experience

This form of learning involves learning that took place informally devoid of learning outcomes and guidelines, for example, internship or volunteer work. An example can be in-house training offered at work.

2.5.2 Learning from work experience

Learning from work experience entails learning on the job, learning through participation on projects, observation, shadowing, mentoring, etc.

2.6 Barriers and challenges in implementing RPL

According to Venter (1999: p. 65) RPL is pivotal to creating access to, and transformation of, the educational landscape in South Africa. It therefore imperative that the challenges are recognised and managed to continually improve RPL processes. Below are some of the challenges encountered in the implementation of RPL.

2.6.1 Articulation agreements

The review of existing literature on articulation and articulation practices to award credit for a qualification or part qualification shows the need for standardisation that is clear across institutions and within institutions. The consequence of the absence of standardisation is that if there are sub-standard educational practices, it then negatively affects the awarding of credit. The implication is that intuitions of learning would have to collaborate to improve RPL assessment processes. Institutions that do not collaborate with other institutions could pose a risk for RPL.

Awarding credit is not understood uniformly across institutions and different practices could therefore emerge to attributing credit for a module or a full qualification.

2.6.2 Social redress

The nature of RPL in South Africa is inevitably and irrevocably linked to addressing political, economic, socio-economic, educational inequalities, and access to learning. The objective of RPL is to transform the workplace, society, communities and to empower individuals to manage their lives. By implication this means that departments must ensure that employees are subjected to fair and objective standards of assessment and gaps in knowledge and skills must be identified and addressed where applicable. Creating access to education is the objective of RPL, but standards and quality must not be compromised to achieve this objective.

2.6.3 Demand for RPL

The initial implementation of RPL in the public service sector was low as employees were not aware of the facility to acknowledge credit and prior learning related to informal learning and work experience. The rate of RPL implementation is increasing which demonstrates a demand for RPL. Moreover, as employees are successful in obtaining qualification through RPL, the demand will spike further.

2.7 Legislation, good practice and guidelines for RPL

2.7.1 SAQA National Policy for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning

SAQA provides a non-prescriptive framework that allows for continual engagement with aspects impacting on the implementation of RPL as it acknowledges that RPL is multi-contextual. The National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (as amended in March 2019) states that RPL may be developed and implemented differently depending on the purpose for which it is implemented. For example, it could be either for the purposes of personal development, advancement in the workplace, or obtaining credits against the NQF. The two main reasons for RPL in the South African context are RPL for access – which provides an alternative access to higher education for those who do not meet the formal entry requirements for admission, and RPL for credit – which provides for the awarding of credits towards a part or full qualification that is registered on the NQF. The objectives of the NQF underpin the importance of developing enabling mechanisms to facilitate access to, mobility and progression within education, training and career paths; and to accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and development opportunities (SAQA, 2019).

The international literature that has foregrounded RPL in South Africa differs in approach from other countries (Osman, 2006). Further highlights that international approaches to RPL are not necessarily framed within the discourse of redress, equity and access, but rather within the discourse of personal development and empowerment.

The South African RPL discourse has incorporated some international elements. Kistan (2002), however, agreeing with Osman, points out that RPL is not considered to be a major social imperative elsewhere in the world. However, in South Africa it is considered an important vehicle for social transformation and redress.

To this end, the National Development Plan (NDP 2030), recommends building a skilled and professional Public Service by placing an overriding emphasis on skills and experience. The state consequently needs to focus on this role in producing and enhancing skills. RPL therefore seeks to introduce a systematic approach, which allows for institutional autonomy and contextual practices, and at the same time, an overall agreed-upon approach that protects the integrity of qualifications and the awarding of credits.

The commitment to RPL reflected in the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) National policy above is echoed in the Department of Higher Education and Training White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, which states that RPL remains a key approach

to redressing past injustices and recognising competence gained through practical work experience. The Minister of Higher Education and Training in February 2016 published a Recognition of Prior Learning Coordination Policy to provide clarity and establish an enabling environment to address the challenges and approaches to RPL implementation. The RPL Coordination Policy also provides for the establishment of a national coordinating mechanism for RPL (Policy and Procedure on Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning Coordination Policy, 2016).

The Department of Public Service and Administration's role in the public service sector is to support an efficient and effective Public Service through the establishment of policies, structures, operational processes and other institutional mechanisms for developing capable and high performing employees. One such policy instrument is The White Paper on Public Service Training and Education (1997), which emphasises the need for ongoing staff development and 'life-long learning'. This White Paper recognises the need to address the legacies of under-development and inequitable development as well as the provision of learning opportunities to all, based on the constitutional guarantees of equal educational rights for and non-discrimination of all persons.

As part of its mandate, the Department of Public Service and Administration in October 2016, drafted a policy and procedure on RPL as an integral component of the Human Resource Development Strategic Framework (HRDSF) for the Public Service DPSA (2016).

The objectives of the DPSA RPL policy and procedure are to:

i. present a policy framework and implementation plan for RPL within the Public Service as an integrated component of the overall HRD Strategy;

ii. present a framework for the successful implementation of RPL within each department;

iii. present RPL as a capacity development tool that can be used by each Public Service department to fast track public servants' acquisition of formal qualifications by recognising workplace learning and informal learning which match the requirements of the qualification and/or the job profile;

iv. present a vision for RPL in the Public Service as a vehicle which can be accessed by all employees in a flexible, adult-friendly and learner-centred environment;

v. position RPL within pillar 1 of the Public Service HRDSF as a tool that can be used to increase capacity development; and

vi. present and explain the social, pedagogical and legal contexts that frame RPL so as to avoid confusion and the creation of unrealistic expectations.

The national RPL Strategy and National RPL Policy must therefore be contextualised and implemented within institutional contexts to maximise its effectiveness and impact. This study focuses on the institutional context of RPL implementation practices against the above policy provisions that are applicable the public service sector.

In the following section the researcher provides a brief overview of how RPL is implemented in South Africa, by making reference to the policy provisions that guide its implementation in South Africa. A summary of how other countries such as Australia, Portugal and Sweden implement RPL in their respective country contexts is then provided.

2.8 RPL Landscape in South Africa

The Recognition of Prior Learning in the South African context is geared towards redressing past injustices pertaining to access to education and training and providing for equality and access for predominantly previously disadvantaged citizens as a result of apartheid laws. However, researchers have documented the progress towards redress in the workplace as limited. RPL is thus significant in the skills development agenda of South Africa as it not only fosters lifelong learning, but it also contributes to social justice, economic development and the emancipation of employees by recognising workplace knowledge for credits against qualifications registered on the NQF.

The National Policy for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (Amended in 2019), recognises that the RPL process is multi-dimensional as it measures non-formal and formal learning for recognition across different contexts and such knowledge is certified against requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or in the workplace.

2.8.1 The Ministerial Task Team on a National Strategy for the Recognition of Prior Learning in South Africa

The Ministerial Task Team on a National Strategy for the Recognition of Prior Learning noted that although RPL is rooted in the NQF it has not fulfilled its potential and promise of contributing to redress and increased articulation into and mobility within further education and training opportunities (DHET, 2013). The strategic vision for RPL is that it will become a fully integrated, universally accepted mechanism, allied with education and training provision, to permit optimum utilisation of knowledge and skills acquired by South Africans outside the conventional channels of institutional and workplace learning (DHET, 2011, p. 34–35).

Notably there is limited documented evidence about its implementation practices and challenges in the Public Service sector. SAQA (2014: p. 9) further notes that as one of the

effective delivery mechanisms, RPL in the workplace and in education institutions needs to be expanded with clear targets set.

RPL is aimed at ensuring that the skills and knowledge that individuals acquire in the workplace as well as life experiences (as opposed to only formal structured learning) are recognised and accredited so as to afford them the opportunity to gain access to further learning and better job opportunities (Cooper: 1998, p. 149). This study attempts to provide better examples of the current RPL practices in the Public Service sector as revealed by the data collected.

2.8.2 The Effectiveness of RPL in South Africa

In post-apartheid South Africa labour unions played a leading role in the development of a new education and training system which places high priority on RPL (Harris et al., 2014).

According to Cooper, education and training proposals were made by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). These proposals were to intended to ensure that workers have access to lifelong education and training and transferable skills ensuring horizontal and vertical mobility, thereby ensuring the possibility of career pathways and better job stability (Cooper, 1998).

In the South African Public Service sector this study has noted the seeming absence of the voice of organised labour in advocating for a more rigorous approach to the implementation of RPL in the sector.

In the sections above the researcher has attempted to illustrate the policy context of RPL in South Africa. Further, it is illustrated that at policy level, the support for RPL implementation is synchronised across strategic social justice policy frameworks of the country, namely the National Development Plan, South African Qualifications Authority, the Department of Public Service and Administration's White Paper on Public Service Training and Education of 1997, as well as the Department of Higher Education and Training's White Paper for Post-School Education and Training of 2013. These policy provisions are a clear indication of the political will to firmly locate RPL as a vehicle for social justice and redress in the country. In the section that follows I present three country examples of how RPL is implemented in Australia, Portugal and Sweden.

2.9 International RPL Implementation Practices

In this section the different contexts in which RPL is implemented in other countries is summarised in an attempt to assist the reader to further understand the background and foundation of RPL in those countries in comparison to the South African context.

2.9.1 RPL Practices in Australia

The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) defines RPL as recognition of competencies currently held, regardless of how, when or where the learning occurred. Under the AQTF, competencies may be attained in a number of ways, including through a combination of formal or informal education and training, work experience or general life experience (Bowman et al., 2003, p. 17). The AQTF prescribes that prior to granting RPL, the assessor must be assured that the RPL candidate is competent against the endorsed industry competency standards or outcomes as specified in Australian Qualifications Framework accredited courses (Bowman et al., 2003). RPL candidates are required to provide evidence in the form of certificates, reference letters from past employers, testimonials from clients and work sample when they are assessed for RPL. The assessor must then be confident that the evidence provided is authentic, valid, reliable, current and sufficient.

2.9.2 RPL Practices in Portugal

According to Lima & Guimaraes (2016), RPL in Portugal is part of a national policy agenda based on the European Union guidelines for lifelong learning and has been implemented since 2000. The literature outlined three approaches to RPL in Portugal, the first being the democratic emancipatory education policies, which stress the influence of critical pedagogies which focus on viewing education as a means of supporting social justice and a social right. The second approach is the use of education for modernization and state control – which is based on the interplay between democracy and economics, and which affords equal opportunities for all. Lastly, the focus is on education policies for human resources management which is based on redistributive principles including increasing productivity, competition and flexibility. This study asserts that learners learn throughout life and in places outside the school context.

2.9.3 RPL Practices in Sweden

Anderson & Fejes (2009) state that in Sweden RPL is a tool for making informal and non-formal learning visible and making education and training shorter and cheaper which then benefits both the individual and society. In Sweden, the focus of RPL is intended for finding ways of recognising a person's prior leaning and focuses on two questions. Firstly, in which

way is RPL and prior experience present in in-service training as an integral part, and secondly, in what ways is learning an aspect of the process of recognising prior learning and experience. It further draws attention to three aspects of RPL, those being social justice, economic development and social change. As demonstrable in the above three country examples, RPL is used for the purposes of social justice, economic development and social change.

The above country studies are applicable to this study as they provide qualitative examples that highlight a systematic and coordinated manner in which RPL is implemented. South Africa can draw from these approaches for the purposes of the RPL (for credit), and for assessment done within a workplace context.

In this section the researcher has attempted to provide an overview of the different country contexts of implementing RPL in an attempt to provide an understanding of RPL models internationally. In the section below, different South African studies on the evolution of RPL implementation practices are highlighted, in an attempt show how RPL is implemented in divergent contexts, are highlighted.

2.9.4 RPL Implementation in South Africa

As foregrounded above, the South African context of RPL is highly regulated by government and therefore its implementation relies heavily on government leading the way. It is worth noting that the South African RPL discourse has incorporated some international elements. Kistan (2002), however, agreeing with Osman (2006), points out that RPL is not considered as a major social imperative elsewhere in the world, while in South Africa it is considered an important vehicle for social transformation and redress. While RPL is not an imperative elsewhere in the world, for both ideological, political and historical reasons, in South Africa is it an important means of social transformation and redress'. The South African model is therefore different (or opposed) to the Australian competency-based approach.

The National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (as amended in March 2019), provides for the implementation of RPL for qualifications or part qualifications in terms of the SAQA RPL policy. RPL for Credit provides for the awarding of credits for, or towards a qualification or part-qualification, registered on the NQF. RPL for Access provides an alternative access route into a learning programme, professional designation, employment and career progression.

In South Africa RPL recognises that learning occurs in all kinds of settings, formally, informally and non-formally. In the SAQA policy (2014) the process of RPL is described as taking form in the following steps:

i. Identifying what the candidate knows and can do;

ii. Matching the skills, knowledge and experience of the candidate to specific standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification;

iii. Assessing the candidate against those standards;

iv. Crediting the candidate for skills, knowledge and experience built up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past (National Policy for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning (Amended in 2019), 2014, p. 41).

The South African model of RPL is based on the assessment and achievement of credits towards or against a qualification that is registered on the NQF.

In this section, RPL practices were outlined in the South African context, and in the section that follows the conceptual framework the researcher seeks to unpack how the conceptualisation of RPL has evolved over time into one which sees RPL as a form of specialised pedagogy. Finally, the researcher unpacks the conceptual frame that was adopted to examine the implementation of RPL in the public service sector.

In this section, RPL practices were outlined in the South African context. In the section that follows, the researcher seeks to analyse (or unpack) the way in which RPL has been conceptualised over time, effectively evolving into a paradigm that sees RPL as a form of specialised pedagogy. Furthermore, the conceptual frame adopted over time in the public service sector is analysed.

2.10 Conceptual Framework

This section will draw elements from the theory explored and provide the study with a conceptual framework. Liehr & Smith (2014) argue that a conceptual framework helps to plan the analysis of variables, and helps the researcher establish limits to investigate the research problem. Once data is collected the framework helps the researcher to compare his/her findings with the concepts, theory or state of art acquired. If discrepancies exist, the researcher may ask him/herself if the framework is useful to explain the findings (Imenda, 2014). It also provides an explanation of why the research problem exists by relating the variables or concepts to each other.

According to (Liehr & Smith, 2014), a conceptual framework provides context and an integrated way to examine main ideas and concepts of problem in the study. It provides an interconnected understanding of ideas and concepts in a particular research study. Imenda (2014) holds that a conceptual framework is an outcome of combining various related concepts that explain a particular problem to create a wider understanding of the problem studied.

Below is a depiction of a conceptual framework that will be utilised in analysing the data collected. The conceptual framework below will assist in comparing the research findings with the concepts and theories outlined in the literature. The conceptual framework will be utilised to analyse the implementation of RPL in the public service sector in line with policy provisions, theories on knowledge, pedagogy, institutional context of RPL implementation and learner experiences in the programme.

The conceptual frame of this study analyses the elements of knowledge, pedagogy, institutional context of RPL implementation and learner experiences in the programme. The conceptual framework provides an outline of connected ideas, concepts and variables used to describe and interpret concepts of knowledge, pedagogy, institutional context of RPL implementation and learner experiences in the programme in an attempt to create a wider understanding of the challenges and success experienced in the implementation of RPL in the sampled departments in the two provinces that fully participated in the research. These concepts are important to this study in that they assisted the researcher in understanding the relationship between knowledge and the experience gained by RPL beneficiaries through their work experience in the departments as expressed in terms of the views of the nature of knowledge espoused by policy and practice in the RPL implementation process. The element of pedagogy assisted the researcher in understanding the relationship between the assessor and candidates in the assessment context in order for the researcher to see the factors that enabled and constrained RPL in the implementation process.

The diagram below represents the conceptual framework outlining main ideas, concepts and themes to guide study's data analysis.

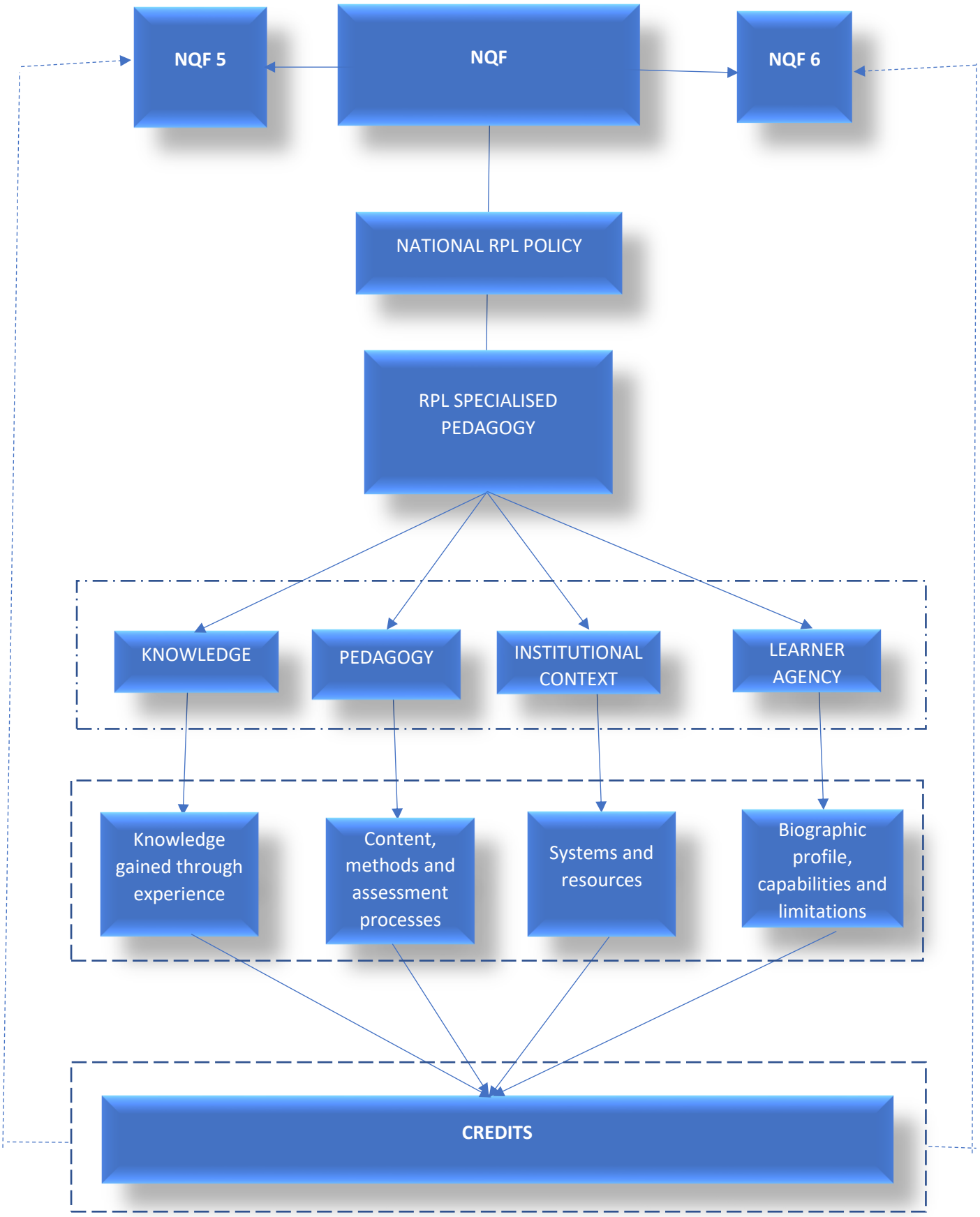

Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for this research as Developed by the researcher

Working from top to bottom, Figure 2 starts with the conceptualisation of the broad NQF from which RPL is premised. All stakeholders implementing RPL must do so in the spirit and intension of the NQF legislative requirements. This is followed by the consideration of the SAQA National RPL Policy which provides guidelines on how the RPL process must be undertaken. Thereafter, the researcher aligned the research with the four elements that consider RPL as a specialised pedagogy, by examining learner agency, pedagogy, knowledge which comprises knowledge gained through experience and the institutional context of where the RPL candidate is employed. As illustrated above, these factors include legislative factors, institutional factors and also individual factors that contribute to an RPL candidate being able to demonstrate what they have learned through workplace experience.

2.11 Conclusion

In this section the conceptual framework is used to analyse the experiences of RPL beneficiaries who acquired learner agency and then juxtaposed with how the learner dealt with opportunities and limitations experienced during the RPL process.

It also provided the researcher with opportunity to analyse how the knowledge drawn from prior experience by the RPL candidates is brought to the fore for RPL assessment purposes. The framework further posed limitations to examining the pedagogy fully as the research tools were more institutionally directed. In this case only the processes followed by the skills development provider in assessing RPL candidates against the Public Administration qualification was examined. Finally the researcher was able to examine the existing institutional policy provisions that enable the implementation of RPL and also to understand what constrains the implementation of RPL.

In the Chapter that follows the researcher unpacks the methodology that was used to conduct this research.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

In this section, the research design and methodology is outlined. In addition, the chapter covers the research philosophy, research strategy, sampling, sampling techniques, data collection instruments, data analysis approach, and ethical considerations for the study.

3.2. Research Philosophy

According to Saunders (2019), research philosophy "refers to a system of beliefs and assumptions about the development of knowledge". These assumptions refer to what is human knowledge and how it is constructed (epistemological assumptions); the experience encountered in the research process (ontological assumptions) and takes account of how the researcher's own values and assumptions influence the research process (axiological assumptions). The axiological assumptions of the researcher influence the understanding of the research questions, the methods that are selected to do data collection and the interpretation of the research findings. Creswell (2013) argued that the interpretivist approach creates a layered, nuanced and rich understanding of the phenomenon of RPL implementation in the Public Sector.

3.3. Research Methodology

Research methodology is the process used to collect information and data for the purposes of research. The methodology may include publications, research, interviews, surveys and other research techniques and could include both present and historical information (Malhotra & Birks, 2012). Research methodology gives direction on how the research is to be conducted. Brynard & Hanekom (2006) state that research methodology is a reflection of the planning, structuring and execution of the research in order to comply with the demands of truth, objectivity and validity.

The research took the form of a qualitative study. A qualitative research methodology was applied to strengthen analysis of concrete and time-bound cases under specific contexts (Flick, 2009). The qualitative approach allows for research participants to share their experiences of the RPL implementation. The approach adopted allowed for the research participants to fully engage and provide an in depth exploration of RPL implementation.

Flick (2014, p. 5) defines qualitative research as the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it . It is also applied

to discover and describe issues in the field or structures and processes in routines and practices.

Qualitative research examines people's expressions and activities under particular circumstances (Flick, 2009). A qualitative approach to research promotes understanding of human conditions. It is used to enhance understanding of human behaviours and experiences (Weinreich, 2009). It gives a voice to subjects under study. It is used to discover and direct information and lived experiences of the issues on a specific theme under examination. It is underpinned by relationships between the researcher and respondents, rather than only the empirical results of the study.

The findings of the research seek to contribute to the body of knowledge that continues to unfold around RPL and to be part of a process that strengthens the effectiveness of key policy imperatives in creating a better education and training system in South Africa. Such contributions can be done by recognising public service officials who have acquired learning in informal and/or non-formal settings and now, increasingly, have the opportunity to be recognised for their contributions in the form of credits against qualifications registered on the NQF.

The study investigates factors that enable and constrain the implementation of RPL in the Public Service Sector in two provincial government departments that have successfully implemented RPL. The research participants in the study are government officials who have selected the RPL route to attain credits against the National Certificate and National Diploma in Public Administration, which is registered against Level 5 and 6 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The qualitative approach enabled the researcher to investigate the experience of RPL candidates, RPL Coordinators and the skills development provider in the implementation of RPL

3.4. Research Strategy

According to Creswell (2013), a research strategy is selected when the objective is to understand the context of research and the processes that are followed in that context. In addition, multiple cases are used to determine if the phenomenon found in one context is prevalent in other cases as well. This study followed a case study strategy to understand RPL implementation in more than one setting (case) and sought to determine whether or not the findings from one case were applicable to another case in a public service setting.

3.5. Research Design

According to Saunders (2019), an exploratory study is a design to gain new insights and discover if there are new dimensions and new ways of understanding a phenomenon. An exploratory study can conduct research by reviewing the literature, doing in-depth interviews and focus group interviews.

The study is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand the phenomenon of RPL implementation in two case studies by conducting in-depth interviews and focus group interviews with public sector officials.

3.6. Research Question

The research question of this study is “What are the factors that enable and/ or constrain the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the public service sector in tow South African provincial government departments?”

3.7. Research Sites

The research took place at different sites where participants were based. The Gauteng provincial department interviews took place at the respective department’s HRD Boardrooms and participants were called into the boardroom for their interviews by the RPL Co-ordinator in the department.

The Limpopo provincial department focus group interviews were also conducted the in the HRD boardroom and co-ordinated by the RPL Co-ordinators in the department. In both departments, it was only the RPL candidates who were office bound that presented themselves for the interviews as scheduled. An additional interview with the Eastern Cape RPL coordinator took place in the participant’s office. However, no RPL candidates consented to being interviewed.

Taherdoost (2016) distinguishes between probability sampling which allows the sample an equal chance of chosen from the population. The sample is randomly selected from the population. Whilst for non-probability sampling the sample is deliberately selected and is linked to the qualitative research paradigm. The study thus adopted non-probability sampling techniques to select the research participants. Chromy (2008) succinctly describes non-probability sampling as the sampling approach that does not aim to select and choose a random sample from a population of interest. Rather, this type of sampling relies upon the pre-determined elements of the population in deciding upon the sample. Non-probability sampling, in its nature provides no claims of generalisability in this study as the external validity is weak.

This approach would suit this study for the reason that it would allow the study to determine the potential research participants that met the pre-determined criteria.

The sampling technique utilised for this study was a sample-based in a predetermined group and RPL beneficiaries were selected from the predetermined group (Saunders, Thornhill & Lewis, 2019). The study relied upon pre-determined criteria to select the research participants. The pre-determined criteria involved the selection of provincial government departments that had successfully implemented RPL for credit against the Public Administrative qualification.

Sampling is essential in a study because it is impossible to include everyone due to time and cost restrictions. It is vital to set clear criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the study. In addition, after quota sampling a purposive sampling approach was selected to enable the researcher to select participants who will provide appropriate data required for the study. Sampling decisions are therefore made for the explicit purpose of soliciting possibly the richest and most relevant source of information to answer the research questions (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Purposive sampling is used to identify and select research participants that have participated in RPL implementation and have relevant experiential knowledge, and are accessible to participate in the research study.

As briefly outlined above, the two provincial departments that were sampled are those that have implemented RPL, that being in the Limpopo and Gauteng provincial departments, as well as the skills development provider who implemented RPL for these departments. In the Eastern Cape it was only the RPL coordinator who consented to being interviewed for this study. In these departments the responses of the four RPL coordinators are included - representing three provinces, namely Limpopo, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape. It is to be noted that none of the Eastern Cape RPL beneficiaries consented to the interviews for reasons undisclosed hence the findings are based on only two provincial department. RPL candidates as well as the skills development provider were recorded to ascertain the process followed in implementing RPL.

3.8. Research Participants

The participants were selected from those candidates who had successfully completed the National Diploma: Public Administration, SAQA ID NO: 67460 NQF Level 6 were from Gauteng province. These participants had been certified as competent on NQF level 6 and a qualification had successfully been awarded for the full qualification. The participants who had completed the National Certificate: Public Administration, SAQA ID NO: 50060, NQF Level 5 were from Limpopo province. The Limpopo participants had been assessed against the NQF

level 5 qualification had fulfilled all the necessary assessment requirements and await verification and certification of the programme. The age profile of the participants ranged from 35 years to 55 years, and formed a 60% representation of male employees and 40% of female employees that were interviewed. All the participants may be classified as black South Africans.

For the selection of participants, a letter was developed to explain the purpose of the research. The letter was sent to the RPL Co-ordinators in the two provincial departments who selected RPL candidates based on their availability on the proposed interview dates. The RPL Co-ordinators were also interviewed in order to gain a clear understanding of how the RPL process was conducted in the departments. The one-on-one interviews as a method of data collection were conducted in a boardroom in the premises of the Gauteng department. In the boardroom only the researcher and the participant were present and individual consent forms to this effect were individually signed. The focus group interviews were conducted in a boardroom where beneficiaries and provincial coordinators were separated and interviewed in different boardrooms.

The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) as a policy department was also selected to participate in the study. However, an interview with them did not take place as their policy on RPL had not been officially approved on the scheduled interview date. The phase that followed was an interview with the skills development provider who had implemented RPL in both departments in order to gain deeper insights on RPL (for credit) implementation in the sector.

The table below outlines the key informants that were interviewed for this study. (See Annexure A for interview schedule)

Table 1: Study sample

Category	**Successfully interviewed Sample**	**Motivation for inclusion in Sample**	**Size of Sample**
1. Employer	• Gauteng Provincial Department	The official representing the employer can provide insights into how they managed RPL process in their province	1 RPL coordinator interviewed
	• Limpopo Provincial Department	The official representing the employer can provide insights into how they managed RPL process in their province	1 RPL coordinator interviewed

Category	Successfully interviewed Sample	Motivation for inclusion in Sample	Size of Sample
	• Eastern Cape Provincial Department	The official representing the employer can provide insights into how they managed RPL process in their province	1 RPL coordinator interviewed
2. Officials: RPL candidates	• RPL beneficiary who completed the RPL programme	These officials can provide insights into the motivation for their choice of pathway to RPL, as well as the nature of support that their respective department provided in the facilitation of their RPL journey	4 RPL candidates interviewed in Gauteng 15 RPL candidates interviewed in Limpopo
3.	• Skills Development Provider	The SDP can provider practical insights on how RPL for credit assessments were conducted.	1 SDP interviewed as he implemented the Gauteng and Limpopo RPL assessments
Total Number of Participants interviewed			**23 interviewed**

The participants for this study encompassed both candidates and implementers who facilitated the implementation of the programme. On the part of the beneficiaries, in-depth face-to-face interviews were held with the beneficiaries who were on the National Certificate Public Administration NQF level five (5) and those who were on National Diploma Public Administration NQF level six (6) qualifications through RPL. In-depth interviews were also held with provincial coordinators who coordinated the implementation of the programme as well as the skills development provider.

The participants were selected by provincial coordinators based on their expert knowledge of the RPL beneficiaries. In this instance, a sample of the beneficiaries and coordinators of the RPL programme were selected. This sampling approach was selected because there is no intention to generalise the findings to the population.

3.9. Data collection instrument

The data collection for this study relied mainly on interviews. An interview guide was used as an instrument to collect data; which is attached in Appendix A. The interview guide consisted of both open-ended as well as open-ended questions. Considering that the three categories

of participants namely RPL coordinators, RPL beneficiaries and a skills development provider. The interview guide was adjusted and structured in such a manner that each of the three categories of participants were able to adequately share their individual experiences. According to (Bryman, 2014) an interview guide should not be too structured and should allow for some flexibility in the asking of questions.

The questions in the interview guide are structured in a standardised manner to ensure that all participants respond to the same questions to allow for aggregation of data. Bryman (2014) argues that the reliable aggregation of participant responses can only be achieved if participants' responses are in relation to identical cues. According to Bryman (2014), the disadvantage to closed questions is that spontaneity in the participants' responses may be lost.

The research questions were formulated to address the purpose of the research study. The questions were formulated according to themes into an interview guide (Appendix A). The interview guide was structured according to the following themes, namely:

i. Individual Background – provided an indication of the biographical details of the RPL candidates as well as their designations in the departments;
ii. Awareness of RPL in the department – provided insights on RPL advocacy in the departments;
iii. RPL for credit application process – provided insights on the administration of RPL (for credit) in the departments;
iv. Assessment Process – provided insights on the stages followed in assessing prior learning;
v. Individual experiences – provided open-ended discussions about individual experiences during the RPL process; and
vi. Post-RPL further studies – provided an indication of whether participants intend to further their studies academically after RPL.

The structuring of these themes was guided by the literature in order to examine the elements of knowledge, pedagogy, learner agency and institutional contexts in the RPL process.

The primary research method used was in-depth face to face interviews. As defined by Bryman (2014), a research method is a system for gathering information, which could include an instrument such as a structured interview, self-completion questionnaire, participant observation or an interview guide.

3.10. Pilot Testing

Creswell & Plano (2010: 86) and Babbie (2010: 122), argued that a pilot study is done after the data collection is validated and before the data is collected. Furthermore, the purpose of the pilot study is to detect possible problems in the research design with the semantics, sequence of the questions, to determine the time to conduct the interview or focus group, and to ensure that all the questions are understood.

To do the pilot study, four public service officials were interviewed from two government departments and these research participants were excluded from participating in the main study. Whilst conducting the interview, the researcher ensured understanding of the research questions, the sequence of the questions was changed to enable better flow of the discussion, and some questions were removed from the interview guide. The feedback from the four pilot participants were also used to ensure that the data from the pilot study is used to check if the data answers the research questions. Another observation is that the interview was completed within 45 minutes, although one of the interviews took only 30 minutes as the fourth participant was more familiar with implementing RPL in their department.

3.11. Data Analysis

According to Flick (2013:3), qualitative data can be analysed using the methods of thematic analysis, discourse analysis, grounded theory, and content analysis. The primary goal is to analyse the materials and visual texts. Thematic analysis was chosen to analyse the qualitative data to extract themes and sub-themes.

Malhotra (2015:36) and (Baker, 2009:56), define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data”. A theme captures some important aspects about the data in relation to the research question. Thematic analysis also involves the interpretation of various aspects of the research topic.

After the data was collected through interviews, the audio data was transcribed into written notes. The primary data that was collected through interviews was first transcribed by reducing audio data into written notes. The first step in thematic analysis is to repeatedly read the transcribed data to become familiar with the data that was collected. In addition, the process is to identify important ideas that relate to the research problem. Thereafter, the ideas are assigned codes and are analysed to identify themes and sub-themes that are linked to the research problem. Afterwards the themes are further defined and refined.

The data that was collected from the face-to-face interviews and focus group interviews was scanned and stored on the shared drive in a password protected folder. As suggested by

(Bryman, 2014), on conclusion of the scheduled formal interview, the researcher should continue the audio recording in order to capture some issues that may emerge after the interview is concluded.

3.12. Ethical Considerations

Ethics can be described as a set of widely accepted principles that support people, businesses, institutions, countries and other organisational bodies, which demonstrate a conduct and commitment to not doing any harm through recognising issues that might cause harm (DeVos, Fouche, & Delport, 2005).

Bryman (2014) outlines that ethical principles or the transgression thereof in social research tend to revolve around issues of whether harm was inflicted on participants, lack of formal consent from participants, invasion of the privacy of participants or whether participants were deceived. Adhering to ethical standards enhances the integrity of one's research.

The research study followed a number of ethical consideration. Firstly, the researcher sought permission from the two departments to conduct the study. Permission to conduct the study was granted. After securing permission to conduct the study the researcher developed an informed consent letter to present to the research participants. The informed consent letter provided information on the nature and purpose of the study, indication of how data will be collected, with regards to explaining the data collection instruments, the participation requirements and limitations. In addition, the research participants were assured of anonymity, confidentiality and were that participation is voluntary and research participants are able to withdraw their participation at any point in the research process.

In the Gauteng Department the relevant participants were individually interviewed in the HRD boardroom for ease of access. In Limpopo, due to departmental arrangements, a focus group interview was arranged, wherein participants were interviewed and in such a case, the participants were presented with attendance registers in which to record their details.

After the approval of the research proposal, the researcher applied for ethical clearance prior to conducting the research study. Ethical clearance was granted on the 24 June 2019 with an ethical clearance certificate number 2019ECE014M. The research was conducted ethically and professionally, taking into consideration that no harm must be inflicted on research participants. The informed consent letter (Appendix B) was provided to ensure that research participants are protected from harm, understand the level of purpose, and can withdraw from the study at any point in time. The Participants, upon their verbal consent were requested to append their signatures on the consent form prior to the commencement of the interview. In

addition, departmental permission letters were sent to the departments to ensure that research participants felt assured that all ethical considerations were duly considered in the research process.

In order to adhere to, and maintain confidentiality, each participant that was individually interviewed in the Gauteng department was called one-at-a-time while others where based at their workstations. All the documents that were completed by participants were filed and no information was shared with any other person throughout the research process. Anonymity was also assured by not mentioning the names of the participants and the departments that they represent. The information for the study was stored and will be recorded for a period of five years and there is a commitment to not share the information with any third party.

The main sources of data for the study were interviews and document analysis. In the following section data analysis will also include explanation and interpretation of national policy documents on RPL against existing/non-existing departmental policies in order to ascertain whether the implementation of RPL is clearly articulated and aligned to national policy directives.

3.13. Limitations of the study

The limitation of this study is that RPL for credits in the public service sector is a fairly under explored skills development intervention and knowledge area. There was a limitation of peer reviewed and published body of literature related to specifically to RPL for credit and more so in the public service sector. Factors that further limited the study were that there is insufficient peer reviewed and academic body of literature in the field of RPL assessments for credit in the South African context. The study as such has had to narrowly focus on the elements of knowledge, institutional context, learner agency and pedagogy. It was then not possible to fully examine all aspects of pedagogy which further posed limitations in fully relating the data to all the elements of the researcher's conceptual framework. The RPL knowledge area continues to evolve and its implementation is largely dependent on context and industry which made this study quite challenging and difficult. While RPL is being implemented across many departments in the public service sector in technical skills, RPL for credit in transversal skills remains under implemented. Notably, this requires further study. That the study was based on the case study of two provincial departments leaves room for further exploration of this phenomenon at a deeper level.

3.14. Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to investigate what enables and or constrains the implementation of RPL in the public service sector based on two government departments. The methodology as outlined above assisted in collecting the relevant data that enabled the researcher to gain insights into the RPL for credit implementation practices in the public service sector as provided by the two departments under study.

CHAPTER 4: INTERPRETATION, ANALYSIS & FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter involves an in-depth analysis of the data collected through semi structured interviews.

The generic steps involved in data analysis are: organising and preparing the data by transcribing it into different types of information, obtaining a general sense of the data by reflecting on its overall meaning, analysing the data by coding it, generating a description by thematising the data, conveying the findings of the data analysed and making an interpretation of the meaning of the data (Coetzee & Schreuder 2014, p. 35).

This chapter reports on the analysis and interpretation of the data collected for the purpose of gaining insights into the RPL implementation practices in the Public Service sector. The framework for analysis consists of four areas of enquiry in seeking a deeper understanding of specialized nature of RPL. The four categories that aided the analysis included:

i. analysing the relationship between knowledge and the experience gained by RPL beneficiaries through their work experience in the departments against the expected outcomes of Public Administration qualification;
ii. analysing the methods and processes that the skills development provider used in conducting RPL assessments towards the Public Administration qualification;
iii. analysing the systems that are in place in each departmental context that enable the implementation of RPL; and
iv. analysing the learners' experiences in as far as how they were able to demonstrate what they have learned in the workplace against the assessment requirements and the challenges (if any) that were experienced in compiling their portfolios of evidence against the exit level outcomes of the qualification.

The discussion below presents the key findings as presented by RPL beneficiaries, RPL coordinators and the RPL skills development provider that are key stakeholders to the implementation of RPL in their respective departments. The findings are presented in key emergent themes and contributions of RPL implementers in the case study.

4.2 Findings of the Study

The steps involved in data analysis are: organising and preparing the data by transcribing it into different types of information, obtaining a general sense of the data by reflecting on its overall meaning, analysing the data by coding it, generating a description by thematising the

data, recording the findings of the data analysed and making an interpretation of the meaning of the data as stated by Coetzee & Schreuder (2014, p. 35).

The respective departmental protocols and consent was requested to conduct research in the departments. When consent was granted by the delegated officials, the RPL Co-ordinators secured interview time-slots with the selected RPL beneficiaries within their departments. During the process of conducting interviews at the Gauteng department, two participants fell outside of the scope of the research study as these participants were beneficiaries of RPL on artisanal trades and their responses could not be included in the report. The researcher predicted that human error and miscommunication could occur in the process of the field work and also that not all identified participants would present themselves for the interview as it was stressed that their participation was completely voluntary.

This chapter reports on the analysis and interpretation of data collected. Chapter 4 responds to the research question and its sub-questions as outlined in chapter 1.

The principle data for the study was the primary data collected from the beneficiaries, coordinators and the skills development provider using interview guides developed for the study. The study managed to gather information from a total of 23 participants. Responses from the participants were captured on a Microsoft word document. The transcription of the data was analysed to identify broad themes that reflect meaning. Thereafter the coding was done and themes were identified. After the data was coded themes and sub-themes were identified. In cleaning the data, selected segments of text and phrases which were seen as relevant to the research questions were placed under relevant themes. Table 2 below seeks to unpack the different components that were considered in interpreting the data collected and importance of these elements to the study.

Table 2: Framework for the Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Framework for the Analysis and Interpretation of Data		
Component	***Area of analysis***	***Importance to the Study***
Knowledge	Knowledge gained through experience	To draw insights and link the insights gained from RPL candidates and literature on RPL and workplace learning in order to understand the candidates' experiences in the RPL process. To redefine and reconceptualise current RPL implementation practices in the Public Service sector.

Framework for the Analysis and Interpretation of Data		
Component	***Area of analysis***	***Importance to the Study***
Pedagogy	Content, methods and assessment processes	To understand the pedagogical practices that were followed by the skills development provider, the assessment process and tools used, best practices in the implementation of RPL assessments as well as areas for further improvement in the implementation of RPL in aid of effective and efficient practices going forward
Institutional Context	Systems and resources	The workplace norms surrounding human resource development as these influence the success if there is a culture of learning in the organisation. The support of the supervisor/ management towards the RPL programme considering the fact that where management is supportive of the RPL programme, greater success rate of implementation may be derived. The technology (internet) available to support the RPL candidates' progress towards attaining credits towards the qualification. It can be argued that these differ from organisation to organisation and could have an impact on the generalisability of this research.
Learner Agency	Biographic profile, capabilities and limitations	The demographics of the learner: race, age, geography and position in the organisation. Each RPL candidate brings their unique individual factor into the RPL process.

The conceptual framework that gave clarity to the above components is as presented in Chapter 2, section 2.9 above. Further, the data from interviews that was analysed and interpreted is presented in full below.

4.3 RPL Beneficiaries

This section presents the empirical research results collected from the research participants as outlined in the methodology chapter. The presentation of study findings is organised according to the categories of participants where, firstly, data from the RPL beneficiaries is

presented and analysed, followed by data collected from the RPL coordinators and finally data collected from the skills development provider. This section also presents a synthesised presentation of the study findings of face-to-face interviews as well as the focused group sessions. In the section below, the data collected from RPL beneficiaries was used to analyse learner agency in the process of RPL.

4.3.1 RPL Awareness in the Department

In responding to whether there is sufficient knowledge about RPL in the department, research participants responded that there is sufficient knowledge about RPL in the department in that there are policy provisions for the implementation of RPL. The "Learner Agency" component remained central to this study. The study asked RPL candidates the questions below (4.3.1 to 4.3.6), in an attempt to ascertain their individual experiences, capabilities and the limitations in their RPL journey. While the majority of the focus group noted there is no official RPL policy in place, they acknowledged that the Office of the Premier has provided leadership in ensuring that the existing draft DPSA policy be utilised.

Gauteng department Participant B indicated that:

> *"Yes, because everyone has been given a chance or an opportunity to be exposed to the RPL."*

From the data one can thus extrapolate that there is a reasonable understanding of how the RPL policy works in the departments even though the DPSA has not finalised the policy to guide departments in standardising RPL implementation practices in the Public Service sector. Therefore it can be construed that in the institutional context, there is an enabling framework for upskilling public service officials. To support this position the participants further indicated that a departmental workshop was conducted to outline the RPL process to the selected candidates.

4.3.2 The RPL Application Process

In probing as to how RPL candidates found the RPL application process, the focus group felt that the process was fairly easy as their human resources department took them through the process and allocated RPL coordinator who held their hand throughout the process. As stated by one member of the focus group:

> *"The process was easy, the HR people guided us throughout the process"*

All the participants found the process of applying for RPL fairly easy after being workshopped on what is required of RPL candidates and how RPL would benefit them. At institutional level,

there seems to be conducive measures in place in guiding RPL beneficiaries through the process. There is also a process for selecting RPL candidates as well as adequately capacitating candidates in the administrative requirements associated with the application requirements of the RPL programme. The signing of application forms and motivation letters during the application phase by the line managers/supervisors further validated and provided credibility to the claimed experience by the candidates.

The data collected from candidates demonstrated the learner agency of the RPL beneficiaries who had to draw from prior workplace experience gained for their capabilities against the qualification to be validated and credited. Noteworthy are the emancipatory benefits which the RPL beneficiaries associated with the programme from the onset which acted as intrinsic motivation to complete the qualification.

4.3.3 The RPL Implementation Process

When asked whether there was sufficient support provided in terms of understanding RPL and the requirement of compiling a portfolio of evidence, the focus group unanimously expressed that they experienced challenges when it came to answering assessment questions and compiling a portfolio of evidence. However, they commended the efforts of the coordinators in assisting them in aligning their daily work activities against the assessment questions. Participant A indicated that:

> *"Yes, there was a high degree of support and communication is done effectively."*

While another participant from the focus group stated that:

> *"We sometimes experienced challenges on how to answer questions for the PoE because some of the concepts used are not used in our everyday working environment, but facilitators from the department came on board to assist us better understand these".*

With reference to learner agency, the limitations were experienced by some learners in the process of assessments where they were not able to adequately articulate what they know in relation to the qualification assessment requirements. This can mainly be attributed to the industry jargon that is used in the workplace which is not necessarily in line with the expected academic understanding of terms and concepts. In terms of institutional will, the data revealed that departments are duly utilising RPL for the purposes of social justice, economic development and social change, albeit that implementation is currently on a small scale.

4.3.4 RPL Assessment process

In response to whether the RPL candidates were trained in the areas where there were gaps against the qualification as registered on the NQF, the participants expressed that the skills development provider structured their assessments in such a way that it allowed for candidates to align their portfolios of evidence to the knowledge they apply in their daily work activities and those that they had learned in their previous positions.

Participant C responded:

> *"With my 25 years of experience there were no gaps identified."*

This supports the key argument that learning by experience enhances understanding and transferability of knowledge and skills. This is in line with the argument of Cooper (2006), that in the implementation of RPL, the selection and use of specialised tools plays an important role in determining whether the RPL facilitator is able to 'unlock the knowledge' that learners potentially bring with them. The skills development provider pedagogical practices in this regard were tailored for candidates in the public sector setting, and it can be assumed that the qualification exit level outcome requirements were not compromised.

As stated by one member of the focus group:

> *"The timelines were tight, with a lot of work, the year was not enough, and they had to compete with work duties, work weekends as well".*

In this context, the learner agency in relation to their biographical profiles, socio-economic status, cultural dispositions, brought about positive spinoffs as they engaged in the RPL assessment processes which in turn yielded the successful completion of the RPL programme in both provinces that were sampled for the purpose of this study.

4.3.5 RPL Beneficiaries individual Experiences

In relation to individual experiences, participant A expressed that he had derived immense career growth and a change in his work environment to a more stimulating and challenging one as he had recently been promoted to act in a higher position in the department upon completion of his qualification.

One focus group participant expressed that:

> *"I thought it would be easy, I did not know I had to read school books again, and become a member of the library again. The programme was demanding, I had to collect evidence and write assignments".*

This supports the argument that what an RPL candidate brings with him to the RPL process is strongly influenced by their biographic profile. As analysed in the data, most of the female participants expressed that the RPL process had made them realise the potential they possess as women and had provided them with the opportunity to realise their capabilities and self-worth. This, they expressed, motivated them enough to apply for registration for a higher qualification.

Participant D indicated that:

> *"It gave me an opportunity to realise my worth as a young woman and my capabilities and motivated me to register for higher qualification."*

This richly illustrates the emancipatory benefits derived by RPL beneficiaries who were awarded credits against the Public Administration qualification.

Another focus group participant shared a similar view that:

> *"The programme gave me an opportunity to understand policy implementation in public administration, as well as decision making in the Public Service"*

When further probed about what the candidates liked about the RPL programme, they expressed that the programme was able to validate the knowledge they already apply in their daily work and the process felt like a refresher course as nothing was new to them apart from their knowledge not having been acquired in the classroom.

A view shared by a focus group participant was that:

> *"The programme gave me self-assurance that this qualification will open doors for me in future and will allow for mobility of employees to apply for other jobs in the Public Service sector"*

This clearly demonstrates the existence of the relationship between knowledge gained through experience and the knowledge required for earning credits against the outcomes of the qualification registered on the NQF as candidates were able to demonstrate their knowledge against the requirements of the qualification. The RPL beneficiaries further expressed their desire to continue to develop themselves on a higher NQF level of education.

To contribute to best practices in RPL practices in the sector, the RPL beneficiaries recommended that the respective Directors responsible for the work against which RPL candidates will be assessed must be requested to present the processes of their areas of

responsibility in a workshop format to aid RPL candidates' understanding of those business processes. In the institutional context, there is a clear need for departments to make more (human) resources available to support candidates in articulating their knowledge in a specific work area that is being assessed.

4.3.6 Post-RPL Further Studies

Most of the RPL beneficiaries expressed that they had applied for registration in the National Diploma: Public Administration at NQF Level 7 as they feel confident that they would be able to achieve this milestone. The general view of the RPL beneficiaries was that RPL is a useful vehicle to assist employees who have long service in the department to attain recognition and acknowledgement for their extensive knowledge in public service administration. They emphasised that the RPL opportunity should be spread more widely for more colleagues to benefit from its emancipation benefits.

In the focus group, another participant expressed that:

> *"Without a qualification your experience in the Public Service is nullified, so this programme aims to close this gap"*

A glaring institutional context constraint to an RPL candidate is regulated minimum qualification requirement that states that a bachelor's degree is required. An RPL candidate will still be excluded from accessing senior positions in the department as the RPL qualification is equivalent to a national diploma on the NQF. Lack of a full qualification in the Public Service sector can be construed to be a barrier that excludes highly skilled and employees with long service due to their lack of recognised qualification, which goes against the political voice of the democratic government whose will it was to ensure that the skills discourse was renegotiated in South Africa as the post-apartheid government introduced a number of public policies related to the education and training system. The minimum qualification requirements into the public service sector further undermine the DPSA's own expressed will "to adopt a wide set of options for capacity development in order to respond to the varying needs and requirements of the Public Service and to build the capacity of employees to undertake their responsibilities."

A focus group participant specified that:

> *"DPSA must issue a directive to recognize the RPL qualification"*

The data in this regard suggests RPL implementation should be prioritised in the Public service sector. Quoted verbatim one focus group member expressed that RPL was to:

"Assist us to get a qualification, for example, I did teaching but with no Public Administration or related qualification, so this RPL programme assisted me in getting the Public Administration qualification to match the knowledge acquired through the years in the department"

The analysis as presented above illustrates that all the participants felt that they were encouraged and supported by the departments in their RPL journey. Although there is a notable absence of a National Policy from DPSA, the provincial departments have utilised other policy provisions in their implementation of RPL. The RPL beneficiaries derived a range of emancipatory benefits from the RPL programme. The data collected from RPL beneficiaries revealed that all participants regardless of the positions they occupy, gender or age category were intrinsically motivated on acquiring the Public Administration qualification. They felt that the RPL coordinators were well versed with RPL and its benefits were communicated with them through various departmental platforms. The data collected from participants revealed that the RPL programme has brought about a positive impact in their careers. One of the RPL beneficiaries has been promoted to act in a higher position as a result of acquiring an NQF Level 6 qualification and a letter of appointment to act in a higher position was provided for the researcher's perusal in this regard.

The data supports the wider institutional position of the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS) as well as the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) that have foregrounded increased adult participation in further and higher education as key principles in achieving their transformation objectives. The data profoundly illustrates that RPL is an important vehicle for facilitating the access of adult learners to further and higher education. The RPL beneficiaries opined were of the opinion that there was no fundamental difference in the competency levels of an individual who acquired their qualification through the academic route and those of the one assessed through RPL as they have to work equally hard to demonstrate their knowledge and competence against a qualification.

In the focus group, one participant shared that:

"*It's not easy for public servants to attend formal courses in HEIs, a programme like this assists public servants to acquire qualifications based on the experience they have gained over the years in the Public Service".*

The reflections of the RPL beneficiaries above resonate with the objectives of the NQF that underpin the importance of developing enabling mechanisms to facilitate access to, mobility

and progression within education, training and career paths; and to accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and development.

Moreover, the will of the RPL candidates to draw on past work experience and be able to present that as evidence for credits is itself boundary crossing as the process of compiling and submitting a portfolio of evidence of knowledge differs from candidate to candidate.

The data strongly demonstrated that the participants also benefited from the confidence boost derived from the RPL programme as they feel more confident in their respective roles in the departments and others even intend furthering their studies going forward.

4.3.7 RPL Coordinators

In this section, the data collected from RPL coordinators is presented. The questions (4.3.8 to 4.3.11) in this category of participants were crafted in such a way as to analyse the institutional contexts of RPL implementation. The institutional context component sought to gain insights on workplace norms surrounding human resource development, policy provisions, systems and resources in place to support RPL implementation.

4.3.8 RPL Policy Guidance

In terms of policy guidance, the RPL coordinators acknowledged the existence of the DPSA Draft Policy on the implementation of RPL in the public service. However, they noted that in their respective departments they were guided by internal policy provisions in coordinating the implementation of the National Certificate and National Diploma: Public Administration through the RPL model and therefore did not consider the DPSA policy.

When further probed as to whether there is an institutional base for systematic RPL implementation from the DPSA, the participants noted that the DPSA had consulted and provided guidance to the provinces through the Offices of the Premiers. They added that there was no official DPSA policy in place and in its absence the Heads of Departments advised the Human Resource Department to adhere to the principles of the National RPL policy and not await a directive from the DPSA.

RPL coordinator participant A indicated that:

> "*There is a draft policy, but we did not consider it when we implemented our RPL programme.*"

The policy commitment to RPL is also reflected in the DHET White Paper for Post-School Education and Training which cements the understanding that RPL remains a key approach

to redressing past injustices and recognising the competence gained through practical work experience. The DHET further established a Recognition of Prior Learning Coordination Policy that provides for the establishment of an enabling environment to address the challenges and approaches to RPL implementation. At this stage it is a glaring omission that the DPSA as an institution whose role it is to support an efficient and effective Public Service through the establishment of policies has failed to approve a policy that would adequately guide the Public Service sector in formulating institutional RPL policies congruent to National RPL Strategy and Implementation Policy and Procedure.

Given these challenges, it is quite clearly illustrated in the data that departments who are committed to utilising RPL as a tool to increase capacity in their departments have to formulate their institutional policies against the SAQA National Policy for the implementation of RPL. A lack of standardised institutional systems in the sector exposes the inconsistencies in the implementation of RPL.

4.3.9 RPL Policy Support

In examining policy support provided to the departments, RPL coordinators reflected that coordinators were identified in departments and were exposed to a DPSA RPL Advisors' workshop. Notably a great number of participants emphasised that the capacity building intervention was not adequate to equip them to deal with the specialised nature of RPL coordination as it is not coordinated like other learning interventions.

The RPL coordinator participant E shared that:

> *"There was RPL Advisory training, but we don't understand why it was actually done."*

In their view, the participants felt that the current Assessor and Moderator NQF aligned skills programmes should include an RPL unit standard within such skills programmes. Critical to this is the adequate resourcing of departments with RPL coordinators who are well trained in order to be confident in their role.

From the implications of legislation, skills development and human resource development initiatives, it is clear that RPL is one of the mechanisms intended to support transformation in the South African education and training system. However the data in this study revealed that departments are left to self-lead in terms of developing and implementing their institutionally contextualised RPL policies.

Another RPL coordinator participant expressed that:

"*But coordinators in government departments do not have the right qualifications at times and the RPL process can be complex."*

Considering the highly regulated nature of the public service sector, it becomes a legitimated expectation on the part of departments to seek clear direction from the key institution charged with the responsibility of policy formulation in the sector.

In addition, the Human Resource Development Strategy (HRDS) as well as the National Skills Development Strategy (NSDS) are initiatives that have sought to foster an increased adult participation in further and higher education as key principles in achieving their policy objectives. However the absence of policy support from the policy making institution can be construed to mean that RPL is not prioritised as an important vehicle for facilitating the access of adult learners to further and higher education.

4.3.10 RPL Candidate Database

The RPL coordinators acknowledged their weakness in not tracking and maintaining a database of employees who have been developed and attained qualifications through the RPL route as this is the first cohort in the departments.

This is congruent with a large body of SAQA literature that argues that data on RPL beneficiaries is not readily available due to difficulties experienced when uploading learners on the National Learner Records Database (NLRD) and that certificates issued to RPL graduates do not specify that an RPL route was followed. In the spirit of the NQF this is acceptable as it should not be necessary to indicate the assessment route followed in declaring an individual competent against a qualification. What should matter is that the individual is certified as having met the required exit level outcomes against a qualification registered on the NQF.

It is to be further borne in mind that the National RPL policy clearly states that there is no fundamental difference in the assessment of skills and knowledge previously acquired; and the assessment of skills and knowledge acquired through current learning programmes. The policy argues that the difference lies only in the assessment route and notes that RPL as an alternative assessment route should be fully integrated into all learning programmes.

4.3.11 Departmental RPL Experience

In response to the constraints to the implementation of RPL in their departments, the RPL coordinators identified the following constraints and barriers:

i. RPL coordinators were not adequately trained by the DPSA as a leading department.

ii. The lack of an approved policy direction and strategy for standardised implementation of RPL in the public service.

iii. The lack of a special funding mechanisms to prioritise the implementation of RPL in the public service given the great demand for this intervention.

iv. The lack of administrative direction from the Sector Education and Training Authority in the Public Service sector in guiding the sector adequately in the implementation of RPL.

v. The need to review the DPSA recruitment and selection processes to remove the barrier to access to higher positions by implication based on the inclusion of the exclusionary "appropriate bachelor degree" phrase is increasingly becoming a matter of equity urgency. By implication, retaining this policy provision acts as an automatic barrier to career progression to individuals with qualifications that are not attained through the academic route. By implication a human resource official tasked with shortlisting candidates for any position in the public sector is compelled to only consider applicants who possess the prescribed qualification criteria. The secondary condition of "or equivalent qualification" thus places applicants who do not have an appropriate bachelor's degree on the back foot from the onset rendering the recruitment and selection process not equitable and the government an "unequal opportunity" employer as it does not afford fair competition based on knowledge and skills for career progression.

In this regard, one RPL coordinator participant added that:

"RPL should be used to make decisions on employment by DPSA."

While a focus group RPL coordinator shared a similar view to say that:

"RPL can be used to promote transformation and to accelerate skills development."

The views of the all the interviewed RPL coordinators further highlight the systemic institutional barrier that the seemingly linear view of qualification by the policy department which continues to close doors to RPL who have attained knowledge and skills against the NQF and no provision is made for this in the recruitment advertisements.

When probed about what worked well in implementing RPL in the department, participants cited that it is the willingness and commitment of the RPL candidates that made it possible to have 100% completion rate in the department.

One of the fifteen focus group participants interviewed stated that:

"The RPL project was good return on investment for the department."

They also noted that there was also increased career growth prospects as one candidate had left the department for a higher position in government institution on completion of the RPL programme.

In reflecting on their general experiences in the implementation of RPL, the RPL coordinators recommended that the DPSA issue a directive to recognise qualifications attained through RPL and also finalise the RPL policy in order for department to finalise the formulation of their institutionally relevant RPL policies.

In investigating what needs to improve for RPL to be implemented effectively in the public sector, the RPL coordinators highlighted that more advocacy on RPL needed to be conducted. RPL coordinators opined that standardisation of RPL implementation processes in the sector is necessary, suggesting that DPSA issue a directive which specifically guides RPL standardisation in this regard. RPL coordinators emphasised the necessity to prioritise RPL implementation as a vehicle to accelerate skills development in the public sector as long serving officials' career growth has been stifled by the lack of recognised academic qualifications although they possess a wealth of knowledge in public sector administration.

As expressed by one RPL coordinator participant:

> *"The RPL process is currently not being given the required support and priority."*

RPL coordinators further pointed out the seeming lack of policy direction in promoting the RPL agenda as a consequence of institutional weakness on the part of the DPSA with the RPL Policy that remains in draft status.

The RPL coordinators expressed lack of support from the DPSA and they acknowledge the capacity building workshop on RPL that was conducted by the DPSA, however they felt that the workshop alone was not sufficient. The data collected from RPL coordinators revealed that the department is prioritising the implementation of RPL and the beneficiaries will be considered for another RPL intervention on NQF Level 7, however it is not clear at this point as to whether the RPL for access or credit route will be followed. The RPL coordinators were of the opinion that RPL can be used to promote transformation and to accelerate skills development.

The data revealed that in order for RPL to be fully realised as part of a democratic learning system, it needs to be given concrete expression in the policies and practices of education and training providers and practitioners, and these must be properly resourced. Within the principles of the NQF, RPL is intended to be used as a mechanism to contribute to the

achievement of national policy goals for social equity and redress which seeks to broaden access and increase participation for learners who were previously excluded from the education and training system. According to the SAQA RPL policy, RPL practices need to explicitly address the visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment and this principle should arguably follow in the recruitment and selection practices of the Public Service sector.

Evaluating the experience of RPL coordinators deepened my understanding of how RPL is implemented within the institutional context.

4.4 The Skills Development Provider RPL Assessment Practices

This section presents both the empirical results and analysis of responses gathered from the skills development provider in relation to "Knowledge" gained through experience and "Pedagogy" which reflects on the content, methods and assessment processes. This section details the views of the skills development provider (4.4.1 to 4.4.6) in relation to how the overall programme was implemented. This includes the pedagogical practices that were followed, the assessment process and tools used, best practices in the implementation of RPL assessments as well as areas for further improvement in the implementation of RPL in aid of effective and efficient practices going forward.

4.4.1 RPL Assessment Process

In outlining the RPL process the skills development provider outlined the following process to implement the RPL programme, the skills development provider elaborated by saying that:

"I follow our own internal process in the following manner:

I. *Identifying what a person knows and can do.*
II. *Matching the person's knowledge, skills and experience to specific unit standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification.*
III. *Assessing the learning against those unit standards.*
IV. *Crediting the person for skills, knowledge, and experience built up through formal, and informal learning.*
V. *Recording the evidence and review the processes."*

The diagram below illustrates the steps taken by the skills development provider in conducting RPL assessments from the point of pre-screening candidates to the level of competence as per the process flow represented below:

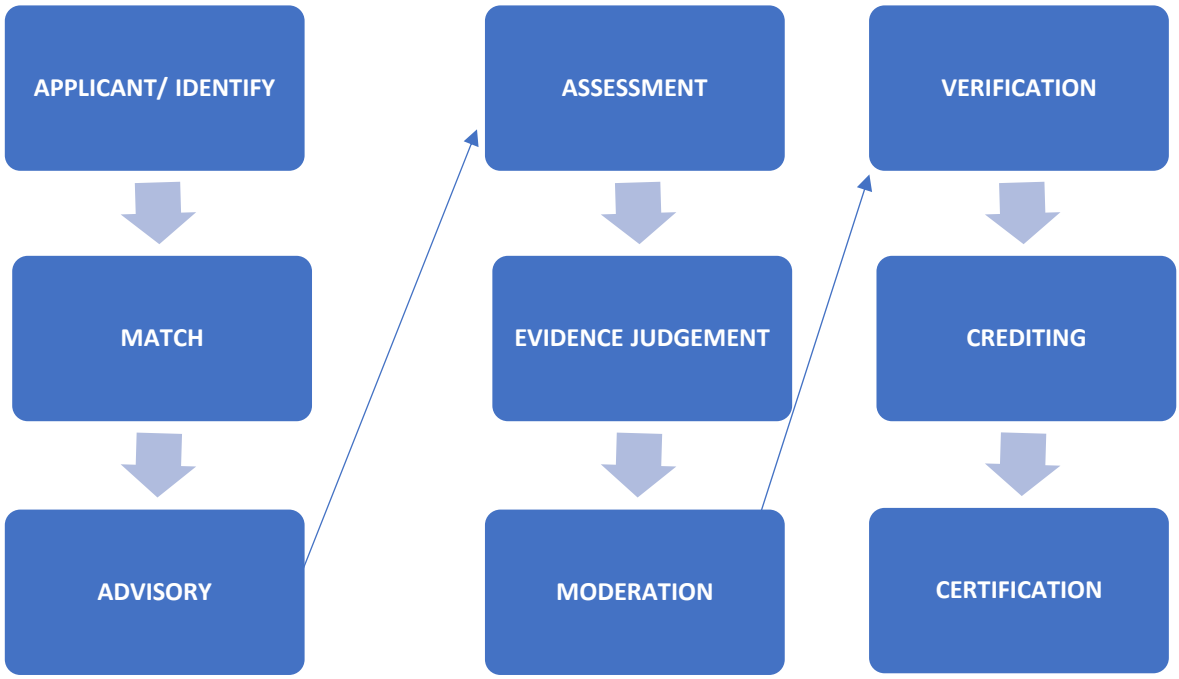

Figure 3: SDP RPL Process

The skills development provider noted that the process to implement this RPL programme started with sending invitations to candidates who felt the need for their experience to be recognised, to apply. They utilised their developed criteria to select the ultimate candidates that involved the utilisation of a model where the skills development provider linked the knowledge that a candidate has gained in the workplace to the outcomes of the qualification (matching process). After the matching process, face-to-face interviews were held with candidates. This was to test their knowledge on each module that forms the qualification. The skills development provider supplemented the face-to-face approach with the observation method. This is where candidates were observed whilst they were performing their respective work duties. This is clearly in line with the specialised nature of RPL as multiple pedagogies are utilised to assess candidates. To strengthen evidence collected from the candidates, the skills development provider further received testimonials and signed job descriptions from the supervisors of respective candidates by way of evaluating what the candidate knows. After the skills development provider concludes the matching of knowledge and experience of candidates to specific unit standards, the next step was the advisory process, which is where candidates are advised about the qualification outcomes, whether they meet the requirements or are not yet competent. Where candidates were found “not yet competent”, the advisory process guided them on how to close the gaps and what kind of evidence were required including schedules for remediation, mentorships. Once this was done, they were re-assessed.

Alarmingly, the skills development provider utilised their developed criteria to select the most suitable candidates for the RPL programme from the pool of candidates pre-selected by the departments. Notably there are no standard tools to select the candidates in place. This has the potential to open up the RPL candidate selection process to discrepancies and biases in the ultimate selection of candidates to go through RPL. This is especially true when the selection process and associated tools are not quality assured by the Public Service Sector Education and Training Authority and it is noted that there are no regulated systems in place in the sector.

The data collected resonates profoundly with the idea of RPL as a specialised pedagogy as RPL attempts to broaden or contest the evaluative rules by acting to mediate between the discourses of experiential knowledge and codified knowledge. This supports the argument of Young (2011) who states that life experience contributes to the concept of knowledge, and that learning cannot be considered to be a linear process as specialised knowledge acquired in the structured manner in schools is unevenly distributed, and this contributes to an individual learner's learning experience and how they then relate to curriculum. This is demonstrated in the different steps undertaken by the skills development provider in the assessment process and each learner in the assessment process does not follow a linear process as each learner brings with him unique skills gaps in the RPL assessment process and the skills development provider can therefore not follow one size fits all pedagogic practices. In terms of the principles embedded in the SAQA RPL policy, it is not experience alone, but learning from experience, that is considered for recognition in RPL practices.

4.4.2 Eligibility criteria utilised by the SDP to select the RPL beneficiaries

In responding to the criteria used in selecting RPL candidates, the skills development provider noted that the eligibility criteria was based on the minimum workplace learning assumed to be in place by the qualification (which is NQF level 5 or NQF level 6 Public Administration), the standard descriptors from SAQA were utilised during this sifting process.

4.4.3 Frameworks and policies which guided the SDP in the implementation of the programme

In seeking insights on the policy environment, the skills development provider expressed that in implementing the programme they mainly utilised their own RPL policy and guidelines which were developed through benchmarking against the SAQA National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of RPL (2019 as amended), and international studies on RPL.

A notable shortcoming is institutional resources in the sector that potentially compromises RPL practices as the skills development provider utilises their in-house policies. This clearly indicates a lack of uniformity and standardisation to how the RPL programme is implemented in the public service sector. By implication this may be construed to imply that various skills development providers in the public service sector are at liberty to utilise their own policies in implementing the RPL programme. This sharply points out the lack of process standardisation in a sector that is portrayed as highly regulated. Further this profoundly highlights the void in the DPSA institutional leading voice in this regard.

4.4.4 Instruments utilised in the assessment of candidates

When probed about the tools utilised in the assessment of candidates, the skills development provider noted that they had developed their own assessment tools and outlined the use of their tools in the assessment process as outlined below.

Assessment procedures:

i. The skills development provider utilised various assessment methods and tools. These included interviews with students on the subject matter (written), knowledge tests, workplace observation (where applicable) and projects (where applicable). The assessors utilised assessment tools that they had deemed suitable for the assessment and evidence they wished to collect.
ii. Methods of evidence collection: written interviews (questionnaire completion by the candidates), oral interviews (written to create evidence), assignments (they are like exams), workplace observation, knowledge assessment, case studies. Assessments are conducted continually to provide candidates with explicit and constructive feedback regarding their competencies.
iii. Workplace observation: in order to answer the knowledge question, observers checked the following elements: does the candidate demonstrate understanding of basic workplace procedure? Does the candidate perform tasks according to actual job expectations? Does the candidate demonstrate basic understanding of the job requirements as aligned to the qualification outcomes/title of the unit standard? Does the candidate demonstrate sensitivity when working with others in teams? Does the candidate demonstrate ability to practice within the profession in which RPL is being sought? Does the candidate demonstrate sufficient workplace experience against the qualification exit level outcomes in order to be awarded credits? Based on these observations, the assessor would then conclude whether the candidate is competent or

not yet competent on the job depending on whether the evidence observed meets the requirements.

iv. Moderation: internal moderation (to check the quality of assessment which the assessor has conducted in terms of processes and procedures) further examines the quality of the evidence to establish whether or not it meets the requirements of the qualification. Then they must write a moderators report, utilising a moderator's checklist.

v. The moderation tools test the assessment against the principles of good assessment practices: Validity, Authenticity, Currency, and Sufficiency.

vi. All of the assessments are summative assessments as the nature of RPL.

vii. To ascertain the credibility of one's knowledge and workplace experience, testimonials by supervisors of candidates were utilised.

The data collected from the skills development provider revealed that instruments utilised by the skills development provider in the assessment of candidates were in-house tools. The assessment of candidates is a pivotal aspect of the RPL process, and therefore the lack of standardised instruments aimed at uniform and scientific recognition of a candidate's experience presents gaps in the standardised implementation of the RPL practices in the Public Service sector. Although the skills development provider's assessment processes seem elaborate and thorough, the PSETA, as the education and training authority charged with the responsibility of education and quality assurance in the sector has not demonstrated its role in providing standardised tools on how RPL assessments should be conducted uniformly against their accredited Public Administration qualification. The SAQA RPL policy further stipulates that prior to the award of certificates against accredited qualifications, Education and Training Quality Assurers must be convinced that the RPL process and assessments have taken place in accordance with their requirements. It is therefore an institutional policy weakness that no standardised assessor and moderator guides and tools have not been developed to be used by skills development providers who implement RPL against PSETA registered qualifications.

4.4.5 Preparedness of the employer to implement the programme

The skills development provider noted that supervisors of candidates were inducted together with candidates for ease of their buy-in. That which was expected from them, and the kind of support required from them were all clarified during the induction phase. Thus, the employer was prepared to implement the programme, and in some cases the coordinators were even assisting candidates with evidence collection. This, from the data collected, demonstrated institutional will to foster lifelong learning in the departments. The data revealed that although there are policy intentions in the form of the DPSA draft RPL policy, the departments are

unable to fully comply with the draft commitments made by the policy department in ensuring that RPL support is provided to candidates. The absence of the dedicated RPL helpdesk as contemplated in the draft policy for the public sector is a clear barrier to standardised implementation of RPL in the sector.

4.4.6 Support provided to the candidates

The skills development provider provided support to the candidates through face-to-face support workshops which included one-on-one sessions twice a month, and the candidates had study groups, and there were attendance registers to enforce candidate attendance. Online support in the form of emails and WhatsApp platforms was also provided to the candidates.

The data collected further illustrated that the signing of contracts by candidates bound them to complete the programme and acted as a mechanism for curbing learner attrition in the programme. It further aided as an extrinsic benefit for the candidates to complete the programme as the departments would then recognise this milestone in their respective career paths.

Table 3 below summarises the key findings of the study linked to the researcher's conceptual framework presented in Chapter 2 of this research report. You misunderstood me the critique of examiner was you need to bring together the findings and the conceptual framework.

Table 3: Key findings linked to conceptual areas

Findings linked to key conceptual areas		
Component	**Area of analysis**	**KEY INSIGHTS FROM DATA**
Knowledge	Knowledge gained through experience	In the area of knowledge the skills development provider structured their assessments in such a way that it allowed for candidates to align their portfolios of evidence to the knowledge they apply in their daily work activities and those that they had learned in their previous positions. This is in line with the argument of Cooper (2006), that in the implementation of RPL, the selection and use of specialised tools plays an important role in determining whether the RPL facilitator is able to 'unlock the knowledge' that learners potentially

Findings linked to key conceptual areas		
Component	**Area of analysis**	**KEY INSIGHTS FROM DATA**
		bring with them. To strengthen evidence collected from the candidates, the skills development provider further received testimonials and signed job descriptions from the supervisors of respective candidates by way of evaluating what the candidate knows. After the skills development provider concluded the matching of knowledge and experience of candidates to specific unit standards, the next step was the advisory process, which is where candidates are advised about the qualification outcomes, whether they meet the requirements or are not yet competent. Where candidates were found “not yet competent”, the advisory process guided them on how to close the gaps and what kind of evidence were required including schedules for remediation, mentorships. Once this was done, they were re-assessed and deemed competent.
Pedagogy	Content, methods and assessment processes	The pedagogical practices that were followed in the assessment process and tools used in the implementation the skills development provider utilised various assessment methods and tools. These included interviews with students on the subject matter (written), knowledge tests, workplace observation (where applicable) and projects (where applicable). The assessors utilised assessment tools that they had deemed suitable for the assessment and evidence they wished to collect. Methods of evidence collection: written interviews (questionnaire completion by the candidates), oral interviews (written to create evidence), assignments, knowledge assessment, case

Findings linked to key conceptual areas		
Component	**Area of analysis**	**KEY INSIGHTS FROM DATA**
		studies. Assessments are conducted continually to provide candidates with explicit and constructive feedback regarding their competencies. The skills development provider provided additional support to the candidates through face-to-face support workshops which included one-on-one sessions twice a month.
Institutional Context	Systems and resources	The institutional context component gained insights on workplace norms surrounding human resource development, policy provisions, systems and resources in place to support RPL implementation. The study found that in the absence of an official DPSA policy, the Heads of Departments advised the Human Resource Department to adhere to the principles of the National RPL policy. It is quite clearly illustrated in the data that departments who are committed to utilising RPL as a tool to increase capacity in their departments have to formulate their institutional policies against the SAQA National Policy for the implementation of RPL. The study noted that a lack of standardised institutional systems in the sector could potentially expose the sector to inconsistencies in the implementation of RPL.
Learner Agency	Biographic profile, capabilities and limitations	The data collected from candidates demonstrated the learner agency of the RPL candidates who had to draw from prior workplace experience gained for their capabilities against the qualification to be validated and credited. RPL candidates derived emancipatory benefits from the programme which acted as intrinsic motivation

Findings linked to key conceptual areas		
Component	**Area of analysis**	**KEY INSIGHTS FROM DATA**
		to complete the qualification. With reference to learner agency, the limitations were experienced by some learners in the process of assessments where they were not able to adequately articulate what they know in relation to the qualification assessment requirements. RPL enabled candidates to feel motivated enough to apply for registration on a higher qualification, while others were considered for career progression. This finding illustrates the imancipationary benefits derived by RPL beneficiaries who were awarded credits against the Public Administration qualification.

4.5 Conclusion

The findings of the empirical investigation were reported in this chapter. The analysis of the qualitative data revealed that factors that enable the implementation of RPL in the Public Service sector lie in the area of the critical need for a coherent national RPL policy which clearly documents the process of RPL implementation in different contexts that is easy to follow, from beginning to end. However, at institutional level, the national policy places the responsibility on institutions to establish their own enabling environments for the implementation of RPL. The notable constraining factors as extrapolated from the data demonstrate the lack of congruent strategies that mainly point at the lack of a standardised approach to implementing RPL due to the lack of a national policy dealership. This acts as a systematic and institutional barrier to the successful implementation of RPL in the public service sector. The constraints are further exacerbated by the lack of administrative support from the SETA's capacity constraints in providing adequate quality assurance leadership to the implementation of RPL against the qualification under their accreditation.

As argued above, if RPL is a specialised pedagogy that can develop knowledge, in conducive institutional contexts, deploy relevant pedagogical practices and learner agency, the data has

strongly demonstrated that it is only when all four of these elements are firmly in place, that RPL the implementation of RPL results in sector be exemplary.

CHAPTER 5: RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reported on the findings and interpretation of data gathered from policy documents, literature, semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions. In this chapter the researcher presents some conclusions based on the analysis from the previous chapter. The researcher also presents the final recommendations which seek to address some of the issues presented in chapter 2, 3 and chapter 4 above.

5.2 Findings from the literature review

Some research has been conducted on the theory of RPL, RPL policy formulation and implementation strategies. The recommendations derived from these studies have been shared widely in an attempt to guide implementation on the ground.

The review of the existing literature showed that there are two forms of RPL in South Africa, namely “RPL for access” into a Higher Education Institution (HEI) for academic studies and “RPL for credit” which results in formal award of a full or part-qualification against the NQF. The literature further demonstrates that there are many different models of RPL, namely, the radical model, experiential learning model and pedagogising knowledge. The models have been discussed extensively in Chapter 2 of this research report.

5.3 Findings from the primary research

Notably there seems to be a slower uptake in the Public Service sector with regards to RPL than anticipated by policy intent. While the South African Public Service sector implements RPL in the various departments, there appears to be a reasonable lack of standardisation of RPL implementation processes in the implementation of RPL against transversal skills in the sector. The notable challenges that have been revealed by the sampled departments include the inadequacy of resources, coupled with the absence of policy guidance. While departments acknowledge the existence of the national criteria and guidelines for the implementation of RPL, they indicated that a directive from the policy department would assist with the standardisation of RPL practices in the sector. Of major concern is the lack of adequate capacity building for departmental RPL coordinators to operate from an informed approach that is grounded in sector policy direction. The study thus concludes that despite policy commitment and acceptance of RPL in principle in the sector, there is substantial room for continuous improvement on the part of policymakers and implementers alike as illustrated in the summary of key findings. On the other hand, RPL beneficiaries unanimously acknowledged the benefits of RPL, especially in relation to their career progression. This is

evident with two RPL candidates already having derived upward mobility in their careers after completing the RPL programme.

The objective of this research was to investigate the enabling and/or constraining factors to the implementation of RPL in the public service sector in South Africa. This study sought to contribute to education research in South Africa, with particular focus on the implementation of RPL as a transformation tool in the Public Service sector. The study documented the findings linked to the research objectives below:

i. Provided empirical examples of the current RPL practices in the Public Service sector that can potentially guide the policy department to strengthen policies that guide the standardised implementation of RPL in the public service sector going forward.
ii. Provided insights that RPL policy formulators in the Public Service sector may draw insights that could strengthen the revised HRD Strategic Framework in the sector.
iii. Shared insights on the successful implementation of RPL assessments for credit in the Public Service sector; that conducted in a flexible, adult-friendly and learner-centred environment as informed by RPL beneficiaries, coordinators and the skills development provider practices in the implementation of RPL.
iv. Shared insights on the challenges to the implementation of RPL in the Public Service sector as provided by the departments studied. This study uncovered a profound gap brought about by the lack of policy direction from the policy department in the Public Service sector in the absence of a regulated national policy. This study revealed some shortcomings in the Public Service sector in this regard, namely that the sector has no clear institutional mechanisms nor regulations that consider the recognition of non-conventional qualifications. In addition, the lack of recognition of extensive sector experience in lieu of academic qualifications for career progression should the candidate meet the outcome assessment requirements as outlined in the SAQA National RPL policy. In the Institutional Context: The systems, rules and resources governing RPL implementation are not clearly articulated in departmental policies as departments await guidance from the policy department in the sector. The study noted that although national policies are in place, they serve as frameworks against which the institutionally contextualised policy provisions are to be mapped.

The boundaries that remain for RPL candidates are in relation to limited career advancement should the sector maintain the requirement of a Bachelors qualification for higher positions. This by implication would still exclude a candidate who acquires a qualification at the requisite NQF Level 7 through the RPL assessment route instead of the academic route which would earn him/her a Bachelor's Degree. The degree to which this barrier is permeable rests with

the policy department in the sector as it is the one authorising body that sets the minimum standards according to which the sector must operate.

This study has attempted to consolidated inputs from the RPL implementers, employees who have benefited from RPL programmes, and the skills development provider in an attempt to solicit inputs that may be considered for the effective implementation of RPL in the public service sector. These insights have been built into the recommendations below.

5.4 Conclusion

This study examined the experiences of sampled candidates from the Gauteng and Limpopo provincial Departments who were successfully awarded credits against the Public Administration qualification registered on the NQF. Despite the general recognition of the importance of RPL in the Public Service sector, research in this area has apparently not been well documented. Of particular focus are case study research reports that bring forth experiences of candidates and coordinators who have been involved in the implementation of the limited RPL programmes that have been implemented in the Public Service thus far. This study was, thus, aimed at gathering lessons learned from experience in implementing the PSETA-accredited Public Administration qualification through the RPL assessment. The study conducted semi-structured interviews as well as focus group sessions with candidates, coordinators, and the implementing skills development provider. The participants were selected through non-probability sampling techniques (purposive sampling), and responded to respective interview guidelines developed for the study.

The outcomes of this study have demonstrated that there are inadequate institutional policy frameworks and guidelines in place in the sector that guide the implementation of transversal RPL programmes for both the skills development provider and government departments. The presence of sector specific frameworks would bring about alignment and standardisation in how the RPL programme is implemented in the Public Service sector. In the absence of these critical frameworks RPL implementation is subject to different interpretations and the adoption of differing methodologies for implementation and opens up different tools for assessment of candidates. This being the most glaring and critical error / problem discovered by this study.

5.5 Recommendations

While the research acknowledges the protocols involved in the approval of regulations, directive and policies in the Public Sector, this section presents recommended points of action for stakeholders, particularly the Department of Public Service and Administration and the Department of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, who are pivotal in the

implementation of RPL in the sector. After careful reflection on the literature, data analysis and findings, as informed by the research objectives of the study, the researcher offers the following recommendations to guide and strengthen RPL implementation practices in the Public Service sector.

One of the strategic study objectives is “Making contributions to the agenda of RPL as a capacity development tool that can be used by each Public Service department to fats track public servants’ acquisition of formal qualifications by recognising workplace learning and informal learning which match the requirements of the qualification”. After careful consideration of literature review, data analysis and findings, the study makes the following proposals/recommendations to the vision of RPL in the Public Service sector:

5.5.1 Recommendation to DPSA to Remove Institutional Barriers to RPL

The policy intention on RPL practices is that RPL must explicitly address visible and invisible barriers to learning and assessment. It is then incumbent upon all role players to commit to removing all existing barriers to equitable education and build a credible system for lifelong learning. The lack of a full qualification in the Public Service sector is a structural barrier that excludes highly skilled employees with long service due to their lack of recognised full qualification. It is thus recommended that the advertisement of posts in the Public Service sector remove the “minimum bachelor’s degree” requirement and rather emphasise the NQF competency level requirement of a position regardless of the route followed to attain such qualification.

5.5.2 Recommendation to DPSA and DHET for Congruent Institutional Policy Strategies for the Implementation of RPL

The national RPL policy is intended to guide the implementation of RPL across all sectors of education and training. This policy is intended to contribute to the creation of an equitable education and training system in the country. It is therefore recommended that the DPSA as the policy department in the sector ensure the approval of its national RPL Strategy and National RPL Policy for the public sector as a priority. This in order to fast track public service officials’ acquisition of formal qualifications by recognising workplace learning and informal learning which match the requirements of the Public Administration qualification.

5.5.3 Recommendation to Departments to Focus on RPL Learner agency

The study acknowledges that the biographical profiles of the learner play a pivotal role in ascertaining the capabilities and limitations of the learners, and negotiating opportunities and barriers of the evolving national learning system in South Africa (Cooper & Ralphs, 2016, pp.

11–12). In this regard, it is recommended that departments invest in the training of RPL coordinators to equip them to assist RPL candidates to build their confidence and ability to draw on their past learning experiences as a critical resource as part of validating what the candidate knows.

5.6 Conclusion

This research study argued that RPL is a specialised pedagogy by investigating the elements of what is visible in the practice of the public sector. The study attempted to make the following contributions to the RPL knowledge area: Firstly, the research attempted to utilise the data collected to strengthen the understanding of RPL practices in two government departments in South Africa. Secondly, in evaluating the experience of RPL candidates and coordinators, the researcher had the opportunity to understand what is emotionally involved in the process of compiling a portfolio of evidence especially given that some of their day-to-day activities are not easily translated to evidence to add to their portfolio. Finally, the researcher had the opportunity to gain insights on the contextual institutional factors that constrain the implementation of RPL in the Public Service sector.

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Annexures

Investigating the enabling and constraining factors to the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Public Service Sector in South Africa.

Research Tool for RPL Candidates

Introduction and Consent

My name is Siviwe Tywabi, I am a Masters' student at the University of the Witwatersrand in the Faculty of Education. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. It is one of about 5-6 I am conducting with RPL candidates in the Public Service Sector.

My research report is looks at investigating the enabling and constraining factor to the implementation of Recognition off Prior Learning (RPL) in the Public Service Sector. RPL is part of a larger debate as a mechanism for up-skilling and multi-skilling a workforce and is linked to improved access to further education and training and the overall socio economic development agenda of South Africa. South Africa has clearly formulated policies and principles of RPL that form of the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is inter alia designed to open up second chance opportunities for those who were not able to access further education and training.

The interview will last approximately 1 hour. You are free to stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any question. I will leave some time at the end, so that if there are any key issues from your side I have not dealt with, you can comment on those.

You are one of the RPL candidates we have identified hoping that you will be able to provide us with information on your experience during the RPL process and since undergoing the RPL programme in 2012/13.

The information that you will provide in this interview will be treated with strict confidence and will only be used for this current research. Your identity will be kept confidential and your name will not be attributed to any of the comments made in the final report.

You may choose to withdraw your participation at any time since participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate in this study, and this decision will be respected. Nobody will be notified if you choose not to participate.

We are interested to hear about your experiences of the RPL programme, including how you think that this might be improved. Please note there are no incorrect responses.

I hereby request your consent to participate in this short interview. May we proceed? Do you grant consent in this regard?

YES	
NO	

Any questions before we proceed?

……
……
……

Biographic Information

GENDER		RACE				AGE		
M	F	B	C	I	W	Under 35	35-45	46>

Date of interview:	
Interviewee name:	
Interviewer name:	
Interviewee designation	

1. **When did you complete the National Diploma in Public Administration (NQF Level 6) RPL programme that was implemented by the department in 2017?**

   Month……. Year……..

2. **What post-school qualifications do you hold currently?**

Qualification Level	**Study Programme/ Major subjects**	**Institution**
Certificate		
Diploma		
Bachelor's Degree		
Honours Degree/Post-grad Diploma		
Master's Degree		
PhD		
Other (please specify):		

3. **What is your occupation/job title?**

……

……

4. **How long had you been in the same post prior to RPL?**

……

……

5. **Since completing the RPL programme, have you had career progression prospects?**

……

……

6. **Broadly speaking do you think there is sufficient knowledge about RPL in the department?**

……

……

7. **Have staff members in the department been workshopped on RPL and its benefits to the candidate?**

……

……

8. **Is it was easy to access information about how to access RPL as an alternative capacity development intervention?**

……

……

9. **Did the RPL Coordinator conduct a pre-screening upon receipt of your application/nomination for RPL?**

……

……

10. **How did you find the process of applying and/or being identified for RPL as a vehicle for capacity development?**

……

……

11. **Was the RPL Coordinator in the department well informed about the steps to take in accessing the RPL intervention?**

……

……

12. **Was the application process and procedure clearly communicated and easy to follow?**

……

……

13. **Is there a departmental RPL policy that guides candidates through the process of accessing RPL?**

……

……

14. **Did you receive sufficient support in understanding the qualification against which you were RPL and the putting together your Portfolio of Evidence?**

……

……

15. **Were you well informed about the minimum requirements for accessing RPL?**

YES	
NO	

16. **Were you supported in the process of compiling my Portfolio of Evidence?**

……

……

17. **Were you informed about the principles of assessment in RPL?**

……

……

18. **Were you supported and trained in the skills gaps identified towards receiving credits against the qualification registered on the NQF?**

……

……

19. **Were you timeously informed about the exit level outcomes that you had achieved?**

……

……

20. **Were your assessment results of your Portfolio of Evidence communicated in a constructive and developmental manner?**

……

……

21. **For how many months were you in the RPL programme until you were deemed competent in the full qualification?**

Option	**Tick Answer Below**
Less than 1 month	
1 to 6 months	
7 to 12 months	
13 to 24 months	
More than 24 months	

22. **How do you rate the following elements related to the RPL Programme you attended?**

Scale: 1= Very poor 2 = Poor 3= Acceptable 4 = Good 5= Very good

Subject matters (teaching contents) are up to date with regards to practical requirements.	
Practical experiences of facilitator.	
Relationship between theory and practice.	
Acquisition of key competencies.	

23. **Overall, how do you rate the usefulness of the RPL Programme?**

Scale: 1= Not at all useful 2 3 4 5= Very useful

For fulfilling your present professional tasks, if applicable	
For your future professional development/career	

For the development of your personality	

24. Have you started a further or another course of studies after your RPL Programme?

Option	**Tick Answer Below**
Yes, I have completed it successfully	
Yes, I am still studying	
Yes, I have stopped my further course of studies	
No, I have not started a further course of studies	

25. To what extent do the following reasons for further studies apply to you?

Option	**Tick Answer Below**
Wish to achieve a higher academic or professional degree	
Personal interest in particular subject area	
Demanded by my employer	
Wish to improve my promotion prospects	
The training is important for the development of my country	

26. Please share further comments and recommendations about the RPL Programme in general.

……

……

27. What did you like about your RPL Programme?

……

……

28. What did you not like about your RPL Programme?

……

……

Thank you.

Investigating the enabling and constraining factors to the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in the Public Service Sector in South Africa.

Research Tool for RPL Candidates Coordinators

Introduction and Consent

My name is Siviwe Tywabi, I am a Masters' student at the University of the Witwatersrand in the Faculty of Education. Thank you for agreeing to this interview. It is one of about 5-6 I am conducting with RPL candidates in the Public Service Sector.

My research report is looks at investigating the enabling and constraining factor to the implementation of Recognition off Prior Learning (RPL) in the Public Service Sector. RPL is part of a larger debate as a mechanism for up-skilling and multi-skilling a workforce and is linked to improved access to further education and training and the overall socio economic development agenda of South Africa. South Africa has clearly formulated policies and principles of RPL that form of the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is inter alia designed to open up second chance opportunities for those who were not able to access further education and training.

The interview will last approximately 1 hour. You are free to stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any question. I will leave some time at the end, so that if there are any key issues from your side I have not dealt with, you can comment on those.

You are one of the RPL Coordinators we have identified hoping that you will be able to provide us with information on your experience during the implementation of the National Diploma in Public Administration (NQF Level 6) RPL programme that was implemented by the department in 2017.

The information that you will provide in this interview will be treated with strict confidence and will only be used for this current research. Your identity will be kept confidential and your name will not be attributed to any of the comments made in the final report.

You may choose to withdraw your participation at any time since participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate in this study, and this decision will be respected. Nobody will be notified if you choose not to participate.

We are interested to hear about your experiences in coordinating the RPL programme, including how you think that this might be improved. Please note there are no incorrect responses.

I hereby request your consent to participate in this short interview. May we proceed? Do you grant consent in this regard?

YES	
NO	

Any questions before we proceed?

……
……
……

Biographic Information

GENDER		RACE				AGE		
M	F	B	C	I	W	Under 35	35-45	46>

Date of interview:	
Interviewee name:	
Interviewer name:	Siviwe Tywabi
Interviewee designation	

1. **How long have you been coordinating the implementation of RPL in your department?**

   Month……. Year……..

2. **What post-school qualifications do you hold currently?**

Qualification Level	**Study Programme/ Major subjects**	**Institution**
Certificate		
Diploma		
Bachelor's Degree		
Honours Degree/Post-grad Diploma		
Master's Degree		
PhD		
Other (please specify):		

3. **What is your occupation/job title?**

   ……

   …….

4. **Has the DPSA provided an institutional base for a systematic RPL implementation strategy for the public service sector?**

……
…….

5. **Has the DPSA established the central RPL Coordinating and Support Desk?**

……
…….

6. **Does support the DPSA provide and manage queries from and guides departments in the development of RPL Policies?**

……
…….

7. **Has the DPSA conducted advocacy for RPL amongst public service officials as another vehicle for capacity development?**

……
…….

8. **Have RPL Coordinators been appointed and understand their role?**

……
…….

9. **Has the DPSA developed a generic RPL Implementation Toolkit to support departments in implementing RPL?**

……
…….

10. **Has the department developed an internal RPL Policy?**

……
…….

11. **Have members of staff been trained/oriented on the RPL Policy?**

……

……

12. **Does the department have a clear strategy for implementing RPL?**

……

……

13. **Have RPL Coordinators been appointed and understand their role?**

……

……

14. **Does the department maintain a database of RPL candidate enquiries?**

……

……

15. **Does the department maintain a database of those who have undergone RPL?**

YES	
NO	

16. **Does the department have record and reports statistics of the uptake of RPL?**

……

……

17. **Is RPL clearly defined and its goals clearly documented?**

……

……

18. **Have officials been inducted on the implementation of RPL?**

……

……

19. **Are RPL procedures clearly outlined and easy to follow?**

……

……..

20. **Are RPL candidates thoroughly briefed on the RPL process of pre-assessment, assessment, submission of Portfolio of Evidence and the concept of exit level outcomes?**

……

……..

21. **Have the benefits of RPL been clearly communicated with candidates in the department?**

……

……..

22. **Have RPL Coordinators been trained in order to guide candidates and manage RPL enquiries?**

……

……..

23. **Overall, how do you rate the usefulness of the RPL Programme?**

Scale: 1= Not at all useful 2 3 4 5= Very useful

For fulfilling your present professional tasks, if applicable	
For your future professional development/career	
For the development of your personality	

24. **What are the constraints to implementing RPL in your department?**

……

……..

25. **What do think would best enable the department to implement RPL effectively?**

……

……..

26. **Please share further comments and recommendations about the RPL Programme in general.**

……

……

……

……

Thank you.

33 Sador Street

4802 Midstream Ridge Estate

Midstream

Centurion

6 July 2019

The Head of Department

The Department of

Gauteng Provincial Administration

Private Bag X0047

Johannesburg

5605

Attention Mr.

Re: Permission to conduct interviews for Master's research purposes in your department

This research aims to investigate the enabling and constraining factors to the implementation of RPL in the Public Service Sector. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is part of a larger debate as a mechanism for up-skilling and multi-skilling a workforce and is linked to improved access to further education and training and the overall socio economic development agenda of South Africa.

South Africa has clearly formulated policies and principles of RPL that form of the development of a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is inter alia designed to open up second chance opportunities for those who were not able to access further education and training.

In South Africa RPL recognises that learning occurs in all kinds of settings, formally, informally and non-formally. RPL within the South African context is defined as the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed for the purpose of alternative access and admission, recognition and

certification, or further learning and development. Despite policy commitments to use RPL as a vehicle to redress inequalities and promote access to education and training, there appears to be challenges in its implementation, especially in the Public Service Sector due to the lack of congruent strategies for implementing RPL. RPL is implemented globally as a means of honouring and building on mature learners' past experiences. It can thus be construed as policy provision that can contribute to the social inclusion of historically marginalised groups within society.

RPL therefore seeks to introduce a systematic approach which allows for institutional autonomy and contextual practices, and at the same time, an overall agreed-upon approach that protects the integrity of qualifications and the awards of credits.

This research seeks to contribute to education research and literature on RPL in South Africa, with particular focus on the implementation of RPL as a transformation tool in the Public Service Sector.

The research will be of particular interest and useful to the post-school education and training sector and Human Resource Development (HRD) Practitioners in the Public Service Sector.

While your department's involvement in this study is of importance, it is completely voluntary and, your institution and its participants are under no obligation to participate in the research and may at any time during the research process refuse to continue their participation. Should the institution consent to participate in this research, I would require your assistance in purposively selecting officials who have expert knowledge on the RPL pilot project that the DPSA rolled out.

You may recommend and nominate staff that you feel may be best placed to participate based on the objectives of the research.

The selected officials will be requested to partake in one interview of approximately 30 minutes in September/ October 2019, which will be audio-taped and transcribed.

I will travel to your offices or a point convenient for this interview and will cover all my expenses incurred. I do not intend to interrupt nor to interfere with the day-to-day running of the institution.

The information and insights shared in the interview will be regarded as confidential and the data will be presented anonymously. However, I will mention the roles of individuals but not the name of the department they represent.

The data collected will be analysed and documented in a research report and it is envisaged that the research findings be used for academic purposes and possibly publication in a journal,

presented at an academic conference and policy advocacy. All research data will be kept securely in a locked cabinet and will be completely destroyed 5 years after completion of the project.

To assist you in reaching a decision, the following documents have been attached:

(a) A copy of an ethical clearance certificate issued by the University.

(b) A copy of the research instruments which will be used in the research.

Upon completion of the study in 2019, a summary of the research report and findings will be made available to you electronically should you wish to receive them.

Should you require further information throughout the course of the research, please contact me at 1559742@students.wits.ac.za, phone number: 083 570 8738 or Dr Presha Ramsarup presha.ramsarup@wits.ac.za, phone number: 082 906 3170.

Your permission to conduct this study will be greatly appreciated.

Yours sincerely,

Siviwe Tywabi

Master of Education Student

University of the Witwatersrand, School of Education