

# Sustainable - Lifelong Learning in Transit from TVET to the University: A Recognition of Prior Learning Phenomenon

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## Abstract

This study seeks to explore the application of recognition of prior learning (RPL) process on N6 students from Technical and vocational education and training (TVET) at the university of technology (UoT). In the context of this study RPL is seen as a vehicle that promotes lifelong learning for sustainable development among youth. The researcher employs case study design situated in qualitative research approach. The target group of participants are heads of departments (HODs) in the UoT from faculties that render similar studies as those found in the neighbouring TVET college. The HODs are the custodians of admission process. Open-ended question online survey will be developed on Question-pro and emailed to the respective HODs for their response. Content analysis will also be used on documents such as institutional and the department of higher education (DHET) RPL policies. The study revealed that the RPL process is a lengthy and costly exercise, and there are no funds dedicated to the assessment process. Although the institution under study has RPL policy, it is rather inadequate to guide HODs in promotion of lifelong learning for sustainable development of human resources.

*Keywords: Recognition of prior learning, lifelong learning for sustainable development, TVET.*

## 1. Introduction

Lifelong learning could be defined as cartesian plain, where the vertical axis indicates learning through the years of life – from young to old age. While the horizontal axis relates to various contexts of learning such as learning in formal education system and informal learning settings, like institutions of learning and from workplace respectively (Taşçi & Titrek, 2019; Slowey & Schuetze, 2001). Slowey and Schuetze (2012) further outline the conceptual framework for lifelong learning in four phases, life stage, mode of study, type of programme and organization of provision. Firstly, life stage is explained as enrolling to the higher education institution after spending some years in the industry, therefore, being above the average age of new entries at first year level. Secondly, the mode of study refers to the method and platforms of study such as part-time, distance, online or e-learning that accommodate working class. Thirdly, the type of programme is defined as work-related for professional development or non-credit bearing short courses. Lastly, organization of provision is regarded as the institution or centre that offers the courses for continued education. Therefore, this study focuses on the last phase which is the organization of provision.

This study aims at promoting sustainable lifelong learning among youth in South Africa by identifying strategies in place to overcome the hurdles on the way.

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The aim of this paper is to evaluate the current RPL policies from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the institution under study. As well as inquiring from middle management (heads of departments) regarding prevailing RPL processes for TVET graduates with N6 (NQF Level 6) Certificate to access institution of higher learning.

#### RPL International Perspectives

In the year 2000, European countries' initial aim for promoting RPL was to improve employability chances of citizens, social inclusion as well as enhancing knowledge-based competencies among employees (Andersson & Fejes, 2005; Miguel, Omelas & Maroco, 2016). Recognition of prior learning emanated from the concept of lifelong learning, which could be acquired from non-formal and informal educational settings.

Due to this nature of lifelong learning, countries such as Portugal started employing the '*process of Recognition, Validation and Certification of Competencies (RVCC)*' (Miguel, Omelas & Maroco, 2016:180). Which is an assessment strategy to align the acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies with formal education qualification.

## 2. RPL South Africa

In South African context, Recognition for Prior Learning (RPL) concept was founded on emancipatory framework for opposing traditional ways of knowledge protocols – with the purpose to expand opportunities of accessing tertiary education and lifelong learning. PSETA (2017) states that the aim of RPL in South Africa was to redress the social education inequalities of the apartheid error. Furthermore, to improve adults or workforce contribution to knowledge advancement (Alexander et al., 2011; Ministerial Task Team, 2013). In addition, the researcher believes that RPL should also cater for transition of TVET colleges graduates to universities of technology and traditional universities if that is not the case now. Most importantly RPL may look into aligning qualifications at NQF level 5 for consideration of admission of such students at second year level. The universities seem to lack policy guided procedures and protocols to admit students from TVET colleges by recognising the NQF level of their obtained qualifications.

According to the Foundation for Professional Development (FPD, 2013), RPL includes stipulations and special routines that are implemented to acknowledge person's acquired skills and knowledge legible for admission in higher education for progression and certification.

It is therefore important that universities have RPL policies that are progressive towards embracing lifelong learning and work-related knowledge and skills (Kehm, nd), for professional development of employees in various sectors. Foundation for Professional Development (2013) further indicates different ways that may be adopted to enhance RPL. These ways are advanced standing that allows a prospective student to be admitted at a higher level than his/her prior formal education qualifications; and credit transfer which promotes recognition of credits accumulated in post matric education. The abovementioned processes of RPL ought to facilitate institutional access using fair and measurable credit awarding system for informal education (Rius et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2021). Bolton et al. (2017) states that SAQA uses two forms of RPL, which are access to

learning and credit accumulation and recognition. Thus, the RPL in South African context correlates to the socio-economic transformation, lifelong learning and accreditation by comparing previous learning and learner experiences against prescribed outcomes (Blom et al. 2007; Bolton et al., 2017).

Blom et al. (2007) further argue that RPL in South African context needs to advance chances of access from institutions such as TVET colleges and credit transfer to institutions of higher learning (universities). While Makeka and Maphalala (2014) claim there should be a clear connection between RPL and a particular RQV level according to South African Qualification Authority (SAQA) framework of qualifications.

The ANC draft policy (1994) introduced a vision to redress the inequalities of the apartheid system. The aim was to enable those who were disadvantaged in this regard to be afforded the opportunity to progress through lifelong learning principle. The lifelong learning principle encompasses the RPL through work experience.

### 3. Sustainability in education

According to Maruatona (2021), in the 1920s *Lindeman and Yeaxlee* regarded lifelong learning as adult education to mitigate formal education gaps in workplaces. However, the researcher is of the opinion that times have changed, in the millennials work or employment requirements for youth have escalated. Resulting in young graduates settling for temporary internships and learnerships in South Africa. Therefore, not being able to plan for their future. The researcher argues that the lifelong learning concept should now be directed to millennium youth for continuing improvement of their qualifications. As the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 states that lifelong learning opportunities are for all, including youth (Owens, 2017; Vieira, 2019).

Therefore, the pathways of learning in the country should embrace linear (vertical and horizontal) movement or improvement between institutions. This study focuses on educational movement or improvement from technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions to the universities of technology (UoT). Owens (2017) also suggests that there should be a strong and flexible link between these institutions to facilitate lifelong learning for sustainable development of the young generation. Brissett and Mitter (2017), confirm that utilitarian view on education as knowledge commodity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century should be designed as investment for new generations to become part of the global economy. Since SDG4 is a principle that rearranges educational systems to obtain sustainable future for young generations (Owens, 2017), qualification interconnection between various levels of postsecondary institutions (TVET and UoTs) would be a necessary vehicle for sustainable lifelong learning.

Vieira (2019) further states that SDG4 puts emphasis on institutional policy developers to deeply think of implementation process of attaining sustainable lifelong learning. Noguchi, Guevara and Yorozu (2015) argue that education for sustainable development (ESD) emanates from two educational movements, education for all and environmental education. ESD is further defined in terms of technological advancements and their effects on the environment, as well as ecological perspective looking at broader social transformation for sustainable development (Noguchi et al., 2015).

#### 4. Research method

The researcher was granted an ethical clearance certificate by the Faculty of Humanities, and permission by the Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) office to do the study in the Institution with institutional employees.

The study is qualitative in nature, underpinned by interpretivism paradigm, it's a case of a faculty that has similar courses to the ones offered at TVET colleges (Nieuwenhuis, 2010). The researcher seeks to understand the processes applied by HODs (Tracy, 2013) towards recognition of prior learning as an access vehicle for TVET N6 (NQF Level 6) students to the university of technology in facilitation of lifelong learning among youth. The researcher preferred the chosen context as it is most suitable for the study phenomenon as compared to other institutions of higher learning in the region. The case study research design is adopted as the study is only based at a university of technology and focused on the faculty that have similar study directions (qualification categories) as the TVET colleges. A stratified purposive (critical case) sampling has been employed to target the heads of departments and or departmental managers (Nieuwenhuis, 2010) in this faculty because they are the ones that process applications for prospective students for admission in their respective departments.

The researcher employs content analysis on the institutional admission policies on recognition of prior learning for sustainable lifelong learning. The study used a survey with open-ended questions on question-pro to allow participants to elaborate broadly and deeper on the admission processes (Nieuwenhuis, 2010).

##### Participants demographics

There are five departments in the faculty under study, out of which only three Heads of departments responded to the survey. A case study in this regard focuses on the specific faculty and therefore the number of participants is acceptable to reflect a clear picture on the faculty's RPL processes. Furthermore, even an individual can be regarded a case to explore (Mohajan, 2018). Thus, the number of participants is a representative proportion of the target group of practitioners (Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Gust & Namey, 2005).

**Table 1:** Demographics

Category	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
1. Gender	Female	Female	Male
2. Experience	0-2 yrs.	0-2 yrs.	6-10 yrs.
3. Qualification	M	PhD	PhD
4. Department	Hotel School	Business Management	Business Studies
5. Awareness on similarity of Courses offered in the faculty and TVET colleges.	Yes	Yes	Yes

From table 1 above, it is evident that Participant 3 has more experience in the RPL process than Participants 1 and 2. Therefore, he may have come across several applications from

prospective students holding TVET N6 qualifications. Thus, making him more conversant with the institutional RPL policy.

### Open ended questions

*Would you kindly explain how your department apply Recognition of Prior Learning on applicants with N6 TVET qualification during admission process. Please elaborate as much as you can.*

**Table 2:** Open-ended responses RPL

Participant 1	<i>It is evaluated against the current requirements, with syllabus and pre-requisites.</i>
Participant 2	<i>The TVET college subjects, even though similar to the OUR subjects, are not offered on the same level as OURS. The number of hours contact time in each subject is also not similar. The applicant's M score is however calculated taking the TVET College marks into consideration.</i>
Participant 3	<i>Students are required to get the RPL form from the exam department and the form is circulated to all the lecturers involved. The lecturers check if the student meets the criteria or not and sign off on it by either approving or rejecting the application. The form is then signed by the DM and HOD and sent to the Dean and back to the exam department.</i>

## 7. Discussion

The researcher discussed the findings based on themes emanated from the participants responses as displayed in tables 2 and 3.

Pre-requisites/Requirements for admission.

Participants 1 and 2 highlighted the general admission requirements to the university, that are basically focused on matric results (National Senior Certificate (NCS)). Hence the mention of M score with consideration of TVET results. This could be regarded as face-value evaluation of N6 qualification, regarded as supplementary as more focus is assigned to matric results scores and or N3 with two languages (CUT:2023). It could also be understood that the experience of the two participants played a role as they might have not encountered many of such cases. The participants did not allude to TVET students with N6 and work experience or experiential learning considerations. As Conrad (2022) explains that RPL is more focused on informal, non-formal or experiential learning equated to outcomes required for accessing formal higher education than just a comparison of formal qualifications from recognised institutions.

SAQA (2019:4) reports that, “*South Africa has had policy for RPL and Credit Accumulation and Transfer for 17 years – but many (institutions) do not want to implement I and need to implement it.*”

From the above report it could be deduced that institutions of higher education may not implement the RPL policy due to various challenges, including interpretation into university policy and processes thereof. Or perhaps, the institutions find it irrelevant and insignificant to their context. Furthermore, Kehm (n.d.) argues that evaluation and exemption of work experience-based knowledge disrupts the norm of acquiring and creating knowledge, known and accustomed to institutions of higher education.

Level of content covered.

Participant 2 argues that the level of the content at TVET is not the same as the university. It could be assumed that the participant is of the opinion that her institution is at higher

level. This is true to some extent because the university undergraduate degree is at NQF level 7. However, in the first year the curriculum is pitched at NQF level 5, whereas the N6 qualification is at NQF level 6. Slowey and Schuetze (2001) are of the opinion that there are still invisible barriers threads that hinder access to institutions of higher learning through RPL process. However, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) (2020) has established an Occupational Qualification Sub-Framework (OQSF) that will assist in aligning level descriptors of content knowledge and work-based competencies for occupational qualification such as TVET qualification to facilitate access to universities.

Amount of content covered.

From Participant 2 and 3, it could be understood that the amount of content covered in the previous institution play a significant role towards admission and accreditation of modules. Thus, concerned lecturers are engaged to verify the notional hours according to course credits of previous in comparison to current institution (CTL, 2021). This process assists lecturers to decide whether enough content was covered or not for accreditation to another NQF level. However, according to life-long learning for sustainability, learning happens in all spheres of life, whether formally, non-formally or informally for personal and career growth (DHET:2021). Conrad (2022) also argues that RPL is not merely credit transfer or equating the contents addressed in previous to the prospective institution. The institutional RPL policy does not explicitly state how life-long learning for sustainability is enhanced or affected by this policy (CUT:2018).

Policy based process.

Participant 3 elaborates on the process focused on work experience including short courses other than formal qualifications. As RPL for sustainable life-long learning advocates recognition of work-related experience that could be considered for the proposed direction of study by the applicant (DHET, 2021). Furthermore, this process is also used by prospective students who apply for exemption of some modules or courses at the level of proposed study.

*Would you kindly elaborate on your understanding of the concept 'Recognition of Prior Learning for Sustainable Life-long Learning.'*

**Table 3:** Understanding RPL for Lifelong Learning

Participant 1	<i>The evaluation of study material from the anticipated learning institution against a previous learning institution. As it currently stands, OUR academics are to review documents if content is not older than at least 10 years. In my opinion, this standard should be revised due to the rapid change of technology, theories, etc., as norms and standards tend to change very rapidly as well. Therefore, learning material should be upgraded in at least five/ six years.</i>
Participant 2	<i>RPL provides a process through which applicants can gain access into a programme, or to obtain credits for or in a qualification.</i>
Participant 3	<i>No response</i>

Understanding the RPL for sustainable life-long learning

Participant 2 understands RPL for sustainable life-long learning as a process of acquiring entrance to a formal university programme for advancement of one's qualifications. Participant 1 also sees RPL for sustainable life-long learning as equating the curriculum

from the previous institution to the prospective institution. She further indicates that timeframe plays a role on how contemporary and applicable the knowledge an applicant may have. However, the two participants did not allude to prospective students who acquired knowledge, skills and competences from workplaces (DHET:2016). Merikallio (2019) and CTL (2021) further, states that RPL could mean taking into cognisance the acquired learning by the applicant either from formal, informal, or non-formal platforms for accreditation and admission into the proposed learning programme.

Moreover, sustainable life-long learning requires comprehensive administration and assessment that financially implicate applicants. Marock (2011) in Ministerial Task Team (2013:20) “finds evidence that where RPL has been implemented it has proved very costly for candidates, and in some cases more expensive than enrolling on the formal programme. Lack of operating guidelines to accompany the policies that do exist seems to be an additional issue”.

It could be argued that the price tag on thorough implementation of RPL and sustainable life-long learning demotivates the applicants to choose the process for accreditation of acquired experience into knowledge acquisition. Even though DHET (2016) indicates that the department established funding mechanism to mitigate the cost of RPL process, it seems not enough. Furthermore, the report indicates that there are no clear guidelines at institutional level for implementation of RPL, this may include the process of outsourcing of funds from DHET by universities (Ministerial Task Team:2013). This RPL funding needs to be sustainable for universities to access and know it is always available where and when needed.

This study aims at promoting sustainable lifelong learning among youth in South Africa by identifying strategies in place to overcome the hurdles on the way. The inquiry identified a number of governmental policies on RPL in promotion for lifelong learning for sustainable development of the countries workforce. Conrad (2022) and Hlongwane (2019) further content that a specific or specialised department within the institutions should be created to administer RPL processes other than relying on HODs. This way enabling environment for facilitation of RPL would be created. However, there are no sustainable funds for the DHET to administer the RPL processes within the institutions of higher learning. This lack of funds has become a hurdle towards implementation of RPL to enhance lifelong learning for sustainable development of human resources. However, regarding N6 qualifications, it is clear that applicants do not receive accreditation of modules even though they are at NQF level 6 admitted for NQF level 5.

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