



**National Policy and Criteria for the  
Implementation of  
Recognition of Prior Learning  
(Amended in March 2019)**

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## Foreword

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act 67 of 2008 mandates the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) to develop, after consultation with the Quality Councils, National Policy for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

SAQA gazetted its *National Policy for the Implementation of RPL* in 2014 and has been, and continues to be, engaged with extensive RPL-related initiatives dating as far back as 2002. However, large scale implementation of RPL in South Africa is hampered by a number of barriers relating to the delivery, quality assurance and resourcing of RPL. To address some of the challenges with RPL implementation, and especially, to establish a National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL, the Minister of Higher Education and Training published in 2016 a national *RPL Coordination Policy*. As an essential next step, SAQA needed to align its *National Policy for the Implementation of RPL*, with the *RPL Coordination Policy*.

The purpose of the amended *National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of RPL* is to embed further the RPL in the national education and training agenda, and ensure clarity and consistency regarding the contexts, roles and responsibilities of all RPL role-players in the country. As an important mechanism to guide RPL in South Africa, the key intention of the amended *Policy and Criteria* is to facilitate change in the lives of RPL candidates, including workers and learners of all ages (both employed and unemployed), and other marginalised groups.

This *National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of RPL (Amended in 2019)*, comes into effect on the date of its publication in the Government Gazette.



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Chief Executive Officer

## List of Acronyms and Names

CAT	Credit Accumulation and Transfer
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
GFETQSF	General and Further Education and Training Qualifications Sub-Framework
HEQSF	Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework
MHET	Minister of Higher Education and Training
NLRD	National Learners' Records Database
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
OQSF	Occupational Qualifications Sub-Framework
QCTO	Quality Council for Trades and Occupations
QC	Quality Council
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
Umalusi	Quality Council for General and Further Education and Training

## Glossary of terms

“Access” means the opportunity to pursue education and training, including relevant qualifications and part-qualifications; professional designations; opportunities in the workplace, and career progression.

“Advanced standing” means a status/ exemption granted to a learner for admission to studies at a higher level than the learner’s prior formal studies would have allowed. Granting advanced standing does not entitle the learner to claim achievement of the exempted qualification/ credits. However, the candidate can choose the option of being assessed for credit.

“Assessment” means the process used to identify, gather and interpret information and evidence against the required competences in a qualification, part-qualification, or professional designation in order to make a judgement about a learner’s knowledge and skills. Assessment can be formal, non-formal or informal; assessment can be of learning already done (summative), or towards learning to inform and shape teaching and learning still to be done (formative).

“Assessment criteria” means the standards used to guide the recognition of learning and assess learner achievement and/or evaluate and certify competence.

“Certification” means the formal recognition of a registered national qualification or part-qualification awarded to a successful learner.

“Competence” means the ability to demonstrate knowledge, skills and values successfully against a set of criteria.

“Credit” means the volume of learning required for a qualification or part-qualification, quantified as the number of notional study hours required for achieving the learning outcomes specified for the qualification or part-qualification. One credit is equated to ten (10) notional hours of learning.

“Credit accumulation” means the totalling of credits towards a qualification or a part-qualification.

“Credit transfer” means the vertical, horizontal or diagonal relocation of credits towards a qualification or part-qualification registered on the same or different NQF Sub-Framework.

“Credit accumulation and transfer (CAT)” means an arrangement whereby the diverse features of both credit accumulation and credit transfer are combined to facilitate lifelong learning and access to the workplace.

“Formal learning” means learning that occurs in an organised and structured education and training environment, and that is explicitly designated as such.

“Formative assessment in RPL” means a range of continuous assessment procedures used to recognise the competence of a learner towards learning and teaching still to be done. The results of formative assessments can prepare a candidate for a summative assessment.

“Informal learning” means learning that results from daily activities related to paid or unpaid work, family or community life, or leisure.

“Learning outcomes” mean the contextually demonstrated end-products of specific learning processes, or the recognition of learning, which includes knowledge, skills and values.

“Learning pathway” means the sequencing of qualifications that allows learners to move vertically, diagonally, and in some cases horizontally, through NQF levels, giving learners recognition for full or partially completed qualifications or part-qualifications. Learning pathways can also lead to professional designations, when learning pathways include periods of structured work experience over and above qualifications.

“Level Descriptor” means the statement describing learning achievement at a particular level of the NQF that provides a broad indication of the types of learning outcomes and assessment criteria that are appropriate for a qualification at that level.

“Lifelong learning” means learning that takes place in all contexts in life – formally, non-formally and informally. It includes learning behaviours and obtaining knowledge, skills,

understanding, attitudes, values and competences for personal growth, social and economic well-being, democratic citizenship, cultural identity and employability.

“Moderation” in RPL assessment means internal and external verification that an RPL assessment system is credible and reliable, and that assessors and learners/candidates behave in an ethical way; and that the RPL assessments are credible, fair, valid, reliable and practicable.

“Non-formal learning” means planned learning activities not explicitly designated as learning towards the achievement of a qualification or part-qualification; it is often associated with learning that results in improved workplace practice.

“Part-qualification” means an assessed unit of learning with a clearly defined purpose that is, or will be, registered as part of a full qualification on the NQF.

“Professional body” means any body of expert practitioners that is constituted as such, in an occupational field, and includes an occupational body and statutory council.

“Professional designation” means a title or status conferred by a professional body in recognition of a person’s expertise and/or right to practise in an occupational field.

“Provider” means a legally established institution (public or private). Public entities are established by an Act of Parliament and must meet the accreditation criteria of the relevant Quality Council. Private entities offering registered qualifications and part-qualifications must be accredited by a Quality Council and registered by the Department of Higher Education and Training.

“Qualification” means a registered national qualification.

“Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)” means the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated, and assessed for the purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development.

“RPL candidate” means the person seeking Recognition of Prior Learning.

“RPL practitioner” means a person that functions in one or more aspects of RPL provision, including policy development, advising, portfolio course design and facilitation, assessment, moderation, administration, monitoring and evaluation, research and development.

“Stakeholder” in the NQF context means any entity responsible for the implementation of the NQF.

“Summative assessment” means the final assessment of knowledge, skills, and values, which is used to evaluate a candidate’s competences against a set of assessment criteria.

# National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (Amended in 2019)

## Purpose

1. This *National Policy and Criteria for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)* (Amended in 2019) (hereafter referred to as the *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*) amends the *National Policy for the Implementation of RPL* published in the Government Gazette in 2014. This *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria* provides for the implementation of RPL within the context of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) Act 67 of 2008 (and any subsequent amendments of the NQF Act), and positions RPL in relation to the overarching principles and priorities of the NQF in South Africa.
2. The Ministerial *RPL Coordination Policy* (hereafter referred to as the *Ministerial RPL Policy*) elaborates and holds SAQA and the Quality Councils (QCs) accountable to perform their roles in relation to RPL as stated in the NQF Act.

## Preamble

## Background

3. The concept of RPL is, and has always been, aligned to the main elements of South African national policy discussion since 1994.
4. The NQF in South Africa is a comprehensive system approved by the Minister of Higher Education and Training (MHET) for the classification, registration, publication and articulation of quality-assured national qualifications and part-qualifications. The NQF was established under the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act, 58 of 1995. It continues under the NQF Act, 67 of 2008, which came into effect on 1 June 2009.
5. SAQA is mandated to oversee the further development and implementation of the NQF, including RPL. In this regard, SAQA oversees the implementation of RPL on a national basis in accordance with this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*.
6. RPL can include any type of prior learning (non-formal, informal and formal) across all ten levels of the NQF.
7. There are two main forms of RPL, that reflect the different purposes and processes within which RPL takes place:

- a. RPL for access: To provide an alternative access route into a programme of learning, professional designation, employment and career progression; and
  - b. RPL for credit: To provide for the awarding of credits for, or towards, a qualification or part-qualification registered on the NQF.
8. RPL in South Africa is undertaken and awarded in a holistic way, where a holistic approach includes the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed, and requires the involvement of the full range of stakeholders within the scope of this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*.

## Context

9. The *Ministerial RPL Policy* is a strategic national policy that is designed to:
- a. Provide for the co-ordination and funding of RPL;
  - b. Strengthen enabling policy environment for the implementation of RPL across the entire system for education, training, development and work;
  - c. Clarify roles of key stakeholders; and
  - d. Provide a high-level framework for RPL implementation.
10. This *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria* must be read in conjunction with the following national policies:
- a. *RPL Coordination Policy (Ministry of Higher Education and Training, 2016)*;
  - b. *Level Descriptors for the South African National Qualifications Framework (SAQA, 2012)* (and any subsequent amendments);
  - c. *Policy and Criteria for Recognising a Professional Body and Registering a Professional Designation for the Purposes of the National Qualifications Framework Act (as amended in 2018)* (and any subsequent amendments);
  - d. *Policy and Criteria for the Registration of Qualifications and Part-Qualifications on the National Qualifications Framework (SAQA, 2013)* (and any subsequent amendments);
  - e. *Policy for Credit Accumulation and Transfer within the National Qualifications Framework (SAQA, 2014)* (and any subsequent amendments);
  - f. *National Policy and Criteria for Designing and Implementing Assessment for NQF Qualifications and Part-Qualifications and Professional Designations in South Africa (SAQA, 2014)* (and any subsequent amendments); and
  - f. Further policies published by SAQA.
11. The RPL policies of the three NQF Sub-Frameworks must be aligned with this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*.

## Assumptions

12. It is noted that:
  - a. the *Ministerial RPL Policy* is the overarching national RPL Policy for the co-ordination, funding and clarification of roles and responsibilities of key RPL stakeholders;
  - b. the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is responsible for the funding and resourcing of RPL;
  - c. SAQA's *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*, which is aligned to the *Ministerial RPL Policy*, focuses on RPL implementation; and
  - d. Both the *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria* and *Ministerial RPL Policy* will set the standard for the alignment of all other RPL policies in South Africa, and their implementation in the country.

## Objectives

13. The objectives of this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria* are to:
  - a. ensure that the objectives of the NQF Act are met, especially to:
    - i. facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within education and training and career paths, (section 5 (1) (b) of the NQF Act); and
    - ii. accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities (section 5 (1) (d) of the NQF Act);
  - b. ensure that the Sub-Frameworks and policies of the Quality Councils (QCs) comply with this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*;
  - c. enable SAQA to:
    - i. support the MHET and the DHET to provide firm policy principles for the further development and implementation of RPL;
    - ii. advise, guide, and support the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL;
    - iii. conduct research into a sustainable model for the quality assurance of RPL;
    - iv. receive RPL-related data uploads for the National Learners' Records Database (NLRD); and
  - d. ensure that achievements via RPL are certificated, and that there is no distinction, other than for data analysis, between qualifications/ part-qualifications/ professional designations awarded via conventional and RPL routes respectively;

## Scope

14. This *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria* applies to:
  - a. DHET and other Government Departments, SAQA, the QCs, all registered and accredited education and training providers (public and private), SAQA-recognised professional bodies, RPL practitioners and all other entities that implement the NQF and RPL in the country;
  - b. RPL candidates; and

- c. All qualifications, part-qualifications and professional designations registered by SAQA.

## Principles

15. The following principles are important elements of a holistic approach to RPL:

- a. The RPL process is multi-dimensional. It is a process through which non-formal, informal and formal learning can be measured and mediated against learning outcomes for recognition within and across different contexts;
- b. Qualifications, part-qualifications and professional designations registered on the NQF may be awarded in whole or in part through RPL. The processes followed must be credible, quality-assured and consistent with accepted and approved principles and criteria of SAQA and the relevant QC/ professional body/ institution concerned;
- c. RPL offers an alternative access route into a programme of learning, professional designation or recognition in the workplace to those who do not meet the specified qualification entry requirements. In this regard, qualifications, part-qualifications and professional designations registered on the NQF must provide alternative entry requirements so that candidates can be admitted to the qualification, part-qualification, or professional designation, through RPL;
- d. The RPL process is multi-contextual and differs across contexts. It may be developed and implemented differently for the purposes of recognition in the context of the three NQF Sub-Frameworks, professional designations, and recognition in the workplace. Furthermore, it is conducted using a variety of specialised learning interventions and/or assessment approaches through which the knowledge, skills and values of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed. The purposes and contexts of RPL determine the practices and outcomes of the RPL process in each case;
- e. The focus is on what has been learned, and not on the status of the institution or place where the learning was obtained;
- f. Assessment is an integral feature of all forms of RPL, and exists in combination with a range of other strategies that allow for different sources of knowledge and forms of learning to be compared and judged. RPL includes diagnostic, formative or summative assessments, to create opportunities for, or towards, access and/or credit;
- g. Where credit is awarded, it must be based on the assessed evidence of the knowledge and skills acquired informally and non-formally;
- h. There must be no distinction, other than that required for data analysis, between records of learner achievements for qualifications, part-qualifications or professional designations awarded as a result of RPL processes and those obtained via conventional means;
- i. The QCs must ensure that all RPL that is awarded for access and/ or credit in their Sub-Framework contexts is reported to SAQA. This is required for the purposes of

monitoring access and redress indicators over time. All RPL recognition data are published as aggregated data and do not divulge how the learner received recognition. These data must be maintained under strict conditions of confidentiality, and shared only with individuals directly involved in the recording of the data; and

- j. The quality assurance of RPL must be undertaken with the explicit intention to protect the integrity of the processes and outcomes concerned.

## **Roles and Responsibilities for the Implementation of RPL**

16. The implementation of RPL requires the involvement of the key stakeholders with clear roles and responsibilities.

17. DHET and the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL are accountable for all the responsibilities outlined in the *Ministerial RPL Policy*.

18. SAQA is responsible for:

- a. Aligning its 2014 *National Policy for the Implementation of RPL* to the *Ministerial RPL Policy*, and implementing its policy;
- b. Providing over-arching leadership to the QCs for implementing their aligned RPL policies;
- c. Recognising professional bodies and registering professional designations that meet requirements in the *Policy and Criteria for the Recognition of Professional Bodies and the Registration of Professional Designations*, including an RPL route for the awarding of designations;
- d. Providing advice, guidance and support to the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL for its further development and sustainability;
- e. Supporting the communication and advocacy initiatives of the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL as required;
- f. Conducting a sector-wide study towards a feasible, sustainable model for the quality assurance of RPL across education and training institutions;
- g. Receiving relevant data on RPL, including learning achievements via RPL, for uploading onto the NLRD; and
- h. Ensuring that the QCs and professional bodies develop certification policies that include achievements via RPL in the same way as other learning achievements, so that there is no differentiation on the basis of how the learning was achieved.

19. The QCs are responsible for:

- a. Aligning their Sub-Framework RPL policies to the *Ministerial RPL Policy* and SAQA's 2019 *Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*;
- b. Working with their accredited providers to ensure the development and implementation of RPL policies that are aligned to the RPL policies of the NQF Sub-Frameworks within which they operate;

- c. Monitoring and evaluating the implementation of RPL within their NQF Sub-Framework contexts, including:
  - i. Developing and implementing standardised approaches within the sub-sectors of the Sub-Framework, where possible;
  - ii. Supporting the training and monitoring of RPL practitioners including RPL advisors, facilitators, assessors, moderators, and administrators;
  - iii. Ensuring consistency across RPL providers/practitioners in similar contexts;
  - iv. Supporting the co-ordinated development of RPL toolkits and instruments relevant for particular contexts, as appropriate;
  - v. Monitoring the RPL admission and achievement rates for institutions of learning, RPL Centres, and RPL providers, while maintaining the strictest confidentiality regarding individual RPL candidates and institutions; and
  - vi. Ensuring that achievements via RPL are certificated, and that there is no distinction, other than for data analysis, between qualifications/part-qualifications awarded via conventional and RPL routes respectively;
- d. Advocating RPL as a means for access and/or credit;
- e. Fostering close working relationships with professional bodies in and across the NQF Sub-Frameworks as appropriate, to facilitate the implementation of RPL;
- f. Developing and maintaining information management systems that are compatible with the NLRD and other relevant government information management systems, and submitting the data to SAQA;
- g. Conducting and overseeing RPL-related research in the relevant NQF Sub-Frameworks, in collaboration with SAQA; and
- h. Reporting to SAQA on RPL implementation across the relevant accredited provider base, on a quarterly basis, for inclusion in the documentation to the NQF Chief Executive Officers' Committee.

20. Education and training institutions and skills development providers are responsible for:
- a. Seeking accreditation with the relevant QC(s). Private providers that offer qualifications and part-qualifications located in one or more of the three NQF Sub-Frameworks must register with either the DHET or a provincial department of education as required;
  - b. Establishing articulation policies which clearly make possible learning and work pathways, RPL, and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT);
  - c. Progressively developing and enhancing capacity to implement RPL in accordance with the *Ministerial RPL Policy*; SAQA's *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*; and the RPL, CAT and assessment policies of the QC concerned;
  - d. Developing an RPL information management system that meets the requirements of the relevant QC, the NLRD, and other relevant Government information management systems;

- e. Collaborating with the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL, SAQA and the QCs to mitigate barriers to RPL implementation and to advance the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of RPL;
  - f. Considering the establishment of an institutional forum of RPL practitioners which will participate in the RPL Professionalisation Forum of the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL; and
  - g. Providing quarterly reports on student achievements via RPL in the format required by the NLRD, to the QC which oversees the NQF Sub-Framework of the qualification or part-qualification concerned.
20. Professional bodies are responsible for:
- a. Complying with the *Policy and Criteria for the Recognition of Professional Bodies and the Registration of Professional Designations*;
  - b. Including an RPL route as an integral requirement for the attainment of professional designations under the jurisdiction of the Professional Body as stipulated in the national *Policy and Criteria for the Recognition of Professional Bodies and the Registration of Professional Designations*;
  - c. Collaborating with SAQA, the QCs, the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL and relevant providers to incentivise and advance the provision of quality RPL in its context;
  - d. Providing, to SAQA, quarterly reports on the number of designations awarded through RPL in the format required by the NLRD; and
  - e. Progressively developing and enhancing the capacity to initiate and support RPL provision in accordance with this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*.
21. Employers may:
- a. Develop and implement organisational RPL policies and improve human resource support for RPL;
  - b. Encourage staff to engage in RPL for recognition in the workplace; and
  - c. Ensure that RPL practitioners who conduct the RPL in the workplace are accredited.
22. RPL practitioners are responsible for:
- a. Adhering to the requirements set out in this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria* and as determined by the relevant bodies and governance structures, which may include SAQA, a QC, workplace, professional body, and the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL;
  - b. Registering with a professional forum for RPL practitioners which meets the requirements of the National Co-ordinating Mechanism for RPL; and
  - c. Undertaking Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for individual RPL practitioners, and meeting the professional requirements.

23. RPL candidates are responsible for:
- a. Identifying, gathering and interpreting information according to the set of criteria outlined by the entity undertaking the RPL assessment;
  - b. Accepting co-responsibility and fair treatment as an equal partner in the RPL process; and
  - c. Respecting and adhering to the procedures of the entities involved.

### **Minimum criteria**

24. The following minimum criteria should apply to RPL implementation:
- a. The RPL stakeholders covered by the scope of this *2019 Amended RPL Policy and Criteria*, should specify the roles and responsibilities for provisioning of RPL;
  - b. Each entity advocating RPL as a mechanism for obtaining access and/or credit should:
    - i. Develop and publish clear criteria and guidelines against which applications for RPL for access and/ or credit will be evaluated, with standardisation in sub-sectors where possible;
    - ii. Develop and publish policies for appeals against RPL decisions;
    - iii. Ensure that RPL information (including institutional RPL policies, criteria, guidelines, codes of conduct, ethics, assessment, moderation, RPL fees, as well as appeals policies) is clearly visible on their respective websites;
  - c. Fees for RPL, where present, should be equitable;
  - d. RPL processes should be mediated: Knowledge and skills obtained non-formally, informally and formally, and the types and levels of knowledge and skill required for recognition must be mediated by RPL practitioners to enable this recognition;
  - e. RPL assessments should:
    - i. adhere to fair, valid and reliable practices;
    - ii. acknowledge different sources of assessing knowledge and skills demonstrated in real-time within a contextualised environment;
    - iii. apply the assessment principles as outlined in the *National Policy and Criteria for Designing and Implementing Assessment for NQF Qualifications and Part-Qualifications and Professional Designations in South Africa*;
    - iv. be moderated;
  - f. RPL candidates should identify, prepare evidence and interpret information. In this regard they should be:
    - i. advised regarding potential RPL routes and be guided and supported to prepare evidence of relevant prior learning;
    - ii. assisted with their preparation for assessment;
    - iii. provided with feedback after assessment; and
    - iv. advised, guided and supported to fill gaps where the RPL assessment shows gaps in candidates' knowledge and skills;

- g. Certificates should be issued for qualifications, part-qualifications and professional designations awarded through RPL; these certificates must not specify that the achievement was obtained through RPL.