

# Chapter 5:

## Review and evaluation: Quality management processes

### Introduction

Chapter 5 of the guideline document will particularly address the key criteria for quality assurance that are to be built into the system. These key criteria are reflected in a number of other SAQA policy and guideline documents and, as such, are in line with the principle of quality management as a critical mechanism to ensure quality improvement.

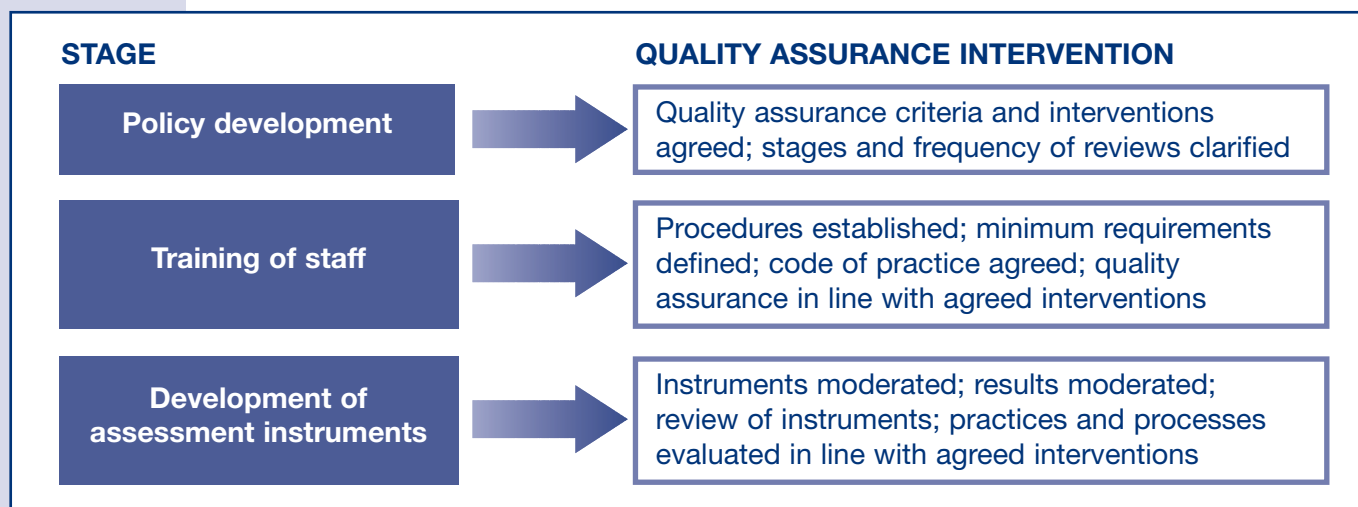
In all the official SAQA documents the point is made that quality management should not be seen as an add-on to be conceptualised at the end of a process. Throughout this guideline document, reference is made to the need for review and quality assurance processes, including the moderation of the overall RPL process. In addition, this guideline also points out that not only assessments are moderated and reviewed, but also the tools and instruments and the staff who perform RPL functions. This is to ensure that quality management is built-in and that the criteria against which the initiative will be evaluated are identified and incorporated from the outset.

#### Purpose of this chapter

This chapter intends to highlight the importance of quality assurance mechanisms and processes needed for the successful implementation of a credible and accountable RPL system. Such quality assurance processes are critical for the protection of the integrity of education and training and constitute a key principle of the NQF in terms of the quality improvement imperative.

### 5.1 Quality management of RPL processes

Quality assurance, moderation and review are embedded in each of the aspects discussed in this guideline document. In Chapter 2, the need for pre-agreed quality assurance mechanisms as part of the organisational policy and procedures, was highlighted. These are reflected in the moderation system which is described in the policy. In Chapter 3 the need for quality assurance of the assessment methods and the practices of evidence facilitators, assessors and moderators, as well as the assessment process, was described. In Chapter 4 the discussion centred on RPL processes as accountable processes and the decisions relating to what should be assessed and how. Moderation of assessments and assessment results has also been highlighted throughout the document. It should therefore be clear that quality management is not a 'once-off' occurrence, but is intended to promote quality at each stage of the process. This could be reflected as follows:



Internationally, a very high premium is placed on the quality of the RPL process. As Simosko (1996: 179) states:

In many contexts, flexible [RPL] assessment services will be a new idea. It will therefore be important for the providing centre to demonstrate on an on-going basis that it is not offering a 'cheap' or 'easy' route to credit or qualifications.

An accountable system will ensure that the integrity and quality of assessments are protected. This is by no means true for RPL only; increasingly providers/institutions of education and training will be monitored and audited with regard to their assessment policies, procedures and practices. In Britain, as in South Africa, all assessments and assessment processes are under scrutiny: Simosko (1996: 97) adds that "to no small degree, the credibility of the outcome [of RPL assessments] depends almost exclusively on the validity, reliability and fairness of the assessment process". These principles have been adopted in South Africa and, in future, all assessments must adhere to the following principles of good assessment (SAQA, 2001: 15-19):

## **Fairness**

An assessment should not in any way hinder or advantage a learner.

Unfairness in assessment would constitute:

- Inequality of opportunities, resources and appropriate teaching and learning approaches in terms of acquisition of knowledge, understanding and skills
- Bias in respect of ethnicity, gender, age, disability, social class and race in so far as that the assessment approaches, methods, instruments and materials do not take into account these differences
- Lack of clarity in terms of what is being assessed
- Comparison of learners' work with other learners, particularly in terms of diversity of learning styles, home language, values, gender, race, life experiences, etc.

## Validity

Validity in assessment refers to measuring what it says it is measuring, be it knowledge, understanding, subject content, skill, information, behaviours, etc.

Validity in assessment would constitute:

- Assessment procedures, methods, instruments and materials having to match what is being assessed.

In order to achieve validity in the assessment, assessors should:

- state clearly what outcome(s) is/are being assessed;
- use an appropriate type or source of evidence;
- use an appropriate method of assessment; and
- select an appropriate instrument of assessment.

## Reliability

Reliability in assessment is about consistency. Consistency refers to the same judgements being made in the same, or similar, contexts each time a particular assessment for specified stated intentions is administered.

Assessment results should not be perceived to have been influenced by variables such as:

- assessor bias in terms of the learners' gender, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, religion, likes/dislikes, appearance and such like;
- different assessors interpreting unit standards or qualifications inconsistently;
- different assessors applying different standards;
- assessor stress and fatigue;
- insufficient evidence gathered; and
- assessor assumptions about the learner, based on previous (good or bad) performance.

## Practicability

Practicability refers to ensuring that assessments take into account the available financial resources, facilities, equipment and time. Assessment that requires elaborate arrangements for equipment and facilities, as well as being costly, will make the assessment system fail.

## 5.2 International standards

In countries where RPL has been implemented on a large scale, sets of quality standards have been developed to ensure the integrity of their RPL systems. There seems to be agreement on a number of principles. These range from academic principles to administrative procedures and fees. The standards established in each of these contexts are intended to assist and direct quality assurance of RPL.

Consider the USA standards:

1. Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
2. College credit should be awarded only for college-level learning.
3. Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application.
4. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts.
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.
6. Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
7. Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
8. Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
9. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
10. Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment arts.

(Whitaker,1989: 9-10)

Many providers/institutions in South Africa have adopted these standards for the implementation of RPL at their organisations.

In Britain, in addition to the standards mentioned above, ‘malpractices’ in terms of RPL have been identified:

Ten APL [RPL] Malpractices to be avoided:

- Granting credits for ‘time served’ or just for experience.
- Basing assessment fees (Portfolio etc) on the number of credits awarded.
- Failure to focus on specific credits and programmes.
- Failing to separate the role of the APL advisor from that of the assessor.
- Promising an APL service without the regard for resources, staff development and expertise in the area.
- Having no method of checking inconsistencies and APL malpractice: offering uncoordinated and inauthentic service.
- Failing to publicly declare in advance the rules, regulations and criteria used for APL assessment.
- Failing to provide a justified transcription of APL outcomes, including sufficiency of evidence as part of quality assurance.
- Failing to give feedback to intending students.
- Promising credits and/or admission to programmes before assessment takes place (not checking authenticity of claim).

(Nyatanga et al., 1998: 9)

These malpractices have been teased out and made relevant to providers/institutions at an organisational level:

Micro (Academic) quality:

- Ensure programmes or modules have clear learning outcomes or competencies both staff and students can base their APL (RPL) assessments on.
- Ensure programme leaders and admission tutors are conversant with APL principles and their application to assessment.
- Within the institution each school or faculty should have an APL co-ordinator to enhance subject-specific debate and feedback.
- Subject teams should have a nucleus of people capable of either advising on or assessing APL claims.
- Give appropriate support and feedback to students.
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of the APL provision through (a) self-evaluation (critical peer review); (b) institutional audit of artefacts (c) students' feedback; (d) external views and external examiner feedback. External views may include professional bodies, industry, commerce and funding bodies.
- Disseminate good practice in the accreditation of prior learning.

(Nyatanga et al., 1998: 41)

In Canada, possible barriers to the implementation of RPL have been identified and the actions taken are described as follows:

Concerns about quality in PLAR [RPL] have been addressed in several ways in Canada:

- Standards for assessment, policies and procedures have been developed at most practising institutions.
- Educators and trainers have begun to prepare course descriptions using learning outcomes, which are clear statements about what an individual needs to know and be able to do to be successful in a course.
- Institutional faculty and staff have been trained in PLAR so that adequate support services are provided.
- Institutions have enabled faculty assessors to use a range of appropriate methods and tools in their work.
- PLAR candidates are provided with orientation to enable them to make informed decisions about undertaking an assessment.
- Community outreach activities are undertaken to disseminate accurate information on PLAR and promote services to non-traditional markets.
- National organisations have funded the development of standards for PLAR practices, quality audits and conferences promoting best practices.

(Van Kleef, 1998: 7)

## 5.3 Core criteria for quality management systems

The SAQA RPL policy offers an example of a self-audit tool in relation to quality management systems (SAQA, 2002: 27):

<b>Quality Management Systems</b>		
Quality management systems are in place to ensure the continuous improvement of assessment systems. The QMS ensures the critical integrity of assessments and reporting and recording processes inform strategic planning requirements at provider, sectoral and national level.		
	YES	NO
Quality management systems for assessment are designed, documented and implemented in accordance with agreed criteria and specifications.		
Quality management systems ensure the refining of assessment policies, procedures and services at all levels and inform planning for further development aimed at meeting agreed targets.		
Quality management systems provide for input from all key stakeholders, including representatives from the candidate community.		
Quality management systems provide for support in meeting developmental targets, including evaluation and monitoring activities.		
Evaluation and monitoring activities are clearly spelt out in the QMS documentation, including diagnostic, formative and summative activities.		
Evaluation and monitoring activities ensure consistency within a sector.		
Assessment documentation, reports and sources of evidence are maintained in accordance with agreed criteria and specifications.		
RPL results are recorded in accordance with the requirements of the ETQA and SAQA's NLRD.		
Information on RPL outcomes, including unsuccessful and successful applications are maintained.		
The QMS provides for systems to monitor the progress of candidates who enter learning programmes post-RPL.		
The QMS provides for analyses and reporting of services and results.		

The main objectives for the establishment of quality assurance processes are to promote quality throughout the RPL process and to support the developmental targets of a provider/institution's RPL plans. Quality assurance should not be seen as an 'inspection', but rather as an 'intervention' to ensure continual improvement and development. In the SAQA RPL policy (2002: 13) it is noted that:

A developmental and incremental approach gives providers of education and training the space to explore and experiment with implementation of the [RPL] policy. This supports the need for institutions and sectors to retain their autonomy and to develop implementation plans within the constraints of their organisations while meeting the agreed requirements of the framework and criteria indicated in the policy.

## Summary

A key function of a quality management system is to be able to provide information that will inform decisions and actions in the future. The key challenge for the implementation of RPL in South Africa is the sustainability of such a system and, in this regard, the information made available through quality management is critical for continuous quality improvement. In addition, the development and implementation of quality management processes is in keeping with the worldwide trend of a more accountable education and training system.

# Conclusion

**R**ecognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is being introduced in South Africa in a time of intense change. Education and training are being restructured in fundamental ways, both in terms of a more equitable infrastructural spread of resources, but also in the very structure and purpose of qualifications, the curricula, learning programmes, and approaches to assessment.

It is therefore not surprising that providers of education and training see RPL as yet another manifestation of the system being under threat through ongoing innovation. In a time when education and training in this country are under intense scrutiny and the validity and integrity of previous educational approaches and views are being questioned, RPL could easily become a victim (and not an agent) of transformation; i.e. RPL could become the ‘politically correct’ thing to do, which as soon as the ‘socio-political’ imperatives are seen to have been met, is no longer practised.

It is therefore critical that RPL is seen to be a process which not only values different forms of learning and gives formal recognition regardless of how the learning was achieved, but also passes the test of intellectual scrutiny in terms of the integrity and the validity of the process and becomes integral to education and training practice, particularly in the ways we assess (Heyns, 2004:2).

For this reason, it is also important that research is undertaken as a means to encourage intellectual scrutiny and to evaluate our progress against targets for the implementation of RPL. The following is a list of possible topics which, in the short and long term, will help to develop a better understanding of RPL implementation within the context of the South African NQF:

- What are the best assessment methodologies and processes within particular contexts?
- How can non-traditional knowledge systems, such as indigenous knowledge, be incorporated into in curricula and assessment?
- How well is RPL being implemented?
- What are the issues with regard to RPL implementation in specific learning areas, disciplines or professions?
- What kind of curriculum innovation is possible as a consequence of implementing RPL?
- What is the size and nature of the pool of RPL candidates?
- Centralised and decentralised approaches to RPL.
- National and regional approaches to RPL.
- The contribution of RPL to lifelong learning.
- Developing appropriate assessment tools and instruments for RPL assessment.
- Regional collaboration models for providers offering RPL services.
- Equitable and sustainable funding for RPL.

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