

# Barriers to Recognition of Prior Learning for Sector Education and Training Authority-Accredited Providers in Gauteng

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## Abstract

Recognition of Prior Learning is essential in adult education, allowing learners to formalise their experiential knowledge. In South Africa, providers accredited by the Sector Education and Training Authority are required to implement Recognition of Prior Learning within the National Qualifications Framework. However, providers, particularly those in Gauteng province, face significant challenges. This article aimed to examine the barriers faced by accredited adult education providers in Gauteng. The article assesses their impact on Recognition of Prior Learning implementation and suggests strategies to address them. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used, with semi-structured interviews conducted among six accredited providers. This allowed an in-depth exploration of their challenges in implementing Recognition of Prior Learning. Five (5) primary barriers were identified: the complex and technical nature of Recognition of Prior Learning, shortage of skilled practitioners, inadequate internal management, financial limitations, and insufficient awareness, capacity building, and advocacy. The study also found that financial constraints and low engagement among stakeholders were particularly detrimental, restricting the effective integration of Recognition of Prior Learning. The article concludes that systemic changes are needed to enhance Recognition of Prior Learning implementation. Therefore, this article recommends applying adult learning theories, such as Knowles's learning contracts and Kolb's experiential learning model, to better align Recognition of Prior Learning with adult learners' needs. The research further recommends that increased training, management support, and standardised funding are critical to making Recognition of Prior Learning more accessible and effective across South Africa.



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## Background and Introduction

Adults are constantly learning everywhere and throughout their lifetimes (Harris and Wihak 2017); however, learning that occurred outside of the formal education and training system was historically not well documented, understood, or valued (ILO 2018) until the advent of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). RPL has been evolving since the 1980s and has remained a mainstay in adult education within the occupational education and training landscape (PSETA 2017), where its value proposition is most prominent with adults who have accumulated years of experience in their vocations but without any formal occupational qualification(s) (Hlongwane 2018). RPL offers a unique opportunity for prior learning and experience to be recognised and credited as entry or credit accumulation towards a formal occupational qualification (Maurer 2019).

The South African National Skills Development Plan ending in 2030 provides a realisation of the great task that lies ahead (SAQA 2019). This plan acts as a “rendezvous” where strategic partners and agencies such as Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) come to carry out their vital roles in developing skills within economic sectors. This could be achieved by successfully implementing RPL interventions, which could accelerate a solution to skills shortages and improve scarce and critical skills (RSA 2018). In implementing skills development initiatives across South Africa, SETAs are consequently dependent on accredited education and training providers to deliver interventions, including RPL, operatively.

Providers are expected to apply RPL through a balanced combination of appropriately designed RPL tools, assessments, policies, processes, support structures, resources, and practitioners (PSETA 2017). However, blockages or barriers that stand in the way of seamless implementation are becoming increasingly commonplace (DHET 2013). Despite the high expectations of RPL and its alluring multifaceted return (ILO 2018), countries throughout the world within Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Africa continue to grapple with a myriad of challenges in establishing a sustainable national RPL system that is accessible and widely implementable (Aggarwal 2015; ILO 2018). In other words, barriers to the implementation of RPL continue to co-exist on a global and local scale (Rothboeck, Comyn, and Banerjee 2018; Thobejane 2016).

Observation of potential barriers to RPL allows for further investigation within the occupational education and training landscape. A deeper understanding of these barriers is imperative. They need to be understood directly from the provider’s perspective. Justification for this claim is derived from the fact that it is normally credited and tasked with making selection and assessment decisions using the RPL mechanism. It is a vital cog in the wheel of RPL delivery, particularly in the occupational education and training sector. If any barriers to implementing RPL from the provider’s perspective are poorly

understood, the sector could run the risk of unpleasant consequences. These consequences could lead to undesirable ends, such as incapacity to meet sector RPL skills development targets and upholding the underlying principles of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), which are access, mobility, redress, promotion, and development (SAQA 2019).

Despite RPL's potential to mitigate skills shortages and enhance inclusivity within the NQF, recurring barriers impede accredited providers' ability to achieve their educational objectives. Consequently, this study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the specific barriers encountered by providers in Gauteng and proposes strategies informed by adult learning theory to enhance implementation. Presenting this article is crucial to foster dialogue and drive improvements in RPL practices, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and accessible adult education system in South Africa.

## Research Question and Objectives

In order to address the research problem stated in the preceding paragraph, the article attempts to answer the following research question:

- What are the barriers experienced in the implementation of RPL for SETA-accredited adult education providers in Gauteng?

The main research question is divided into three research objectives presented and discussed during the analysis section of this article; the research objectives are stated in the subsequent paragraph.

Research Objective 1: To discover the causes of the barriers to RPL as experienced by SETA-accredited adult education providers in Gauteng.

Research Objective 2: To determine the extent to which the barriers discovered affect the implementation of RPL.

Research Objective 3: To propose appropriate strategies to address barriers.

## Review of the Literature

### Adult Learning Theory

Andragogy has been hailed for providing adult education with its own unique badge of identity (Merriam et al. 2007). Malcolm Shepherd Knowles popularised the Americanised version in the late 1960s (Beeson 2018). Knowles sought to differentiate the field of adult education by designating it as andragogy to set it apart from traditional practices, which are teaching and learning practices tailor-made for children (Knowles 1980). Naturally, these became inadequate as they failed to consider key differences when working with adult learners.

Knowles made a series of assumptions about adult learners, forming the bedrock for andragogy (Tennant 2006). The initial characteristic of interest is embedded in the second andragogical assumption of Knowles, which posits that adults accumulate a wealth of individual experience that serves as a rich resource for learning (Beeson 2018; Knowles 1980). An inherent attribute of adult learning theory is centred on the fact that adults use previous experience to build new learning. Prior experience far outweighs learning gained purely through instruction (Decker et al. 2015). This advent or correlation of experience to learning can be viewed as the building blocks for RPL practice (Aggarwal 2015).

Mothokoa and Maritz (2018) point out that experience may come from a myriad of different life situations. It is within this experience that a breeding ground for recognition through RPL is created. Knowles (1980) acknowledged the importance of “recognising” experience when he stated that heterogeneous life experiences of adults have important implications for adult teaching and learning practice (Knowles 1980). RPL providers need to keep this focus on experience at the heart of all they do during an intervention. To be able to appropriately qualify and map the experience of adults to establish academic outcomes is at the core of RPL (Aggarwal 2015). This embodies much of what Knowles proclaimed when he concluded that experience is a rich resource that the adult education provider must harness and explore (Beeson 2018).

A secondary but no less meaningful characteristic of Knowles’s contribution to this study is found in the learning contract, which was made famous during a publication in the year 1986 (Knowles 1986). The learning contract emanates from Knowles’s first andragogical assumption, which speaks to the inherent self-directedness of the typical adult learner (Knowles 1980). Knowles believed that adults were not just self-directing but rather active lifelong learners who were able to effectively plan, manage, and direct their own learning efforts (Harrop et al. 2018). The learning contract gives life to the above notion and is a tool for administering a learning event by actively partnering with learners throughout the learning event (Knowles 1986). The contract is negotiated between an education provider and learner to collectively diagnose learning needs and to specify goals, objectives, strategies, and resources, along with evaluating teaching and learning efforts (Tennant 2006). The learning contract is thus a methodology that proposes the use of a contract that is concluded between the learner and the provider, aiming to coordinate the learning journey together (Knowles 1986). Partnering, negotiating, and co-navigating with adult learners throughout the teaching and learning journey enhances opportunities for learners to assess their knowledge, reflect on competencies/experiences and link such with specific programme outcomes or curriculum (Kaplan and Renard 2015), all of which typify the practice of RPL.

The learning contract could be modified for use in RPL by allowing the self-directed adult learner to take the lead on their journey in the process. This journey requires a significant amount of reflection, introspection, discovering competencies, and self-assessment (ILO 2018). Knowles’s learning contract theory clearly sets down the

blueprint for intervention ranging from planning, learner profiling, goal setting, individual gap training matrixes, joint assessment development or criteria to mutual evaluation processes (Knowles 1986; Tennant 2006). The application of a learning contract to the RPL process could offer useful benefits towards RPL innate processes such as: improving the overall design of bespoke assessment instruments, enhancing communication, providing a means for holistic learner-profiling, increasing collaboration/support between the practitioner and candidate accompanied by an effort to negate prejudice and/or subjectivity which may surface during the RPL process (Snyman and Van den Berg 2018).

### **Experiential Learning Theory**

Experiential learning has gained widespread attention over the last decade (Marin 2015). The experiential learning process and multilinear model developed by David Allen Kolb in 1984 are of particular interest and relevance to this study. His theories on experiential learning have been framed on the work of renowned contributors such as Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget (Li, Öchsner, and Hall 2019). Kolb's experiential learning cycle remains the most widely influential and cited model, or "clearest expression," of experiential learning theory (Morris 2020). It is within the Kolb model that a significant contribution is made to the practice of RPL and in evaluating or removing associated barriers.

The fundamental aspect to consider in the discussion of Kolb's learning styles is that Kolb acknowledges that each learner or individual has their behaviour, preferences, and learning styles (Ata and Cevik 2018). Among other central beliefs of his theories is that people learn differently from one another, have individual processing capabilities, and requisite learning requirements (Bergil 2017). Making learners aware of their learning styles and how to accommodate them in the learning environment contributes significantly to the achievement of learning outcomes (Gogus and Ertek 2016). This is a particularly important trait when applied to the context of RPL where, to qualify and map their experiences against fixed academic outcomes, learners must be profiled and understood before the beginning of an assessment (Hlongwane 2018).

The contribution of Kolb's experiential learning theory and the corresponding learning styles have important connotations for RPL. At the beginning, it emphasises the role of experience in the adult learner (Kolb and Kolb 2013). In addition, it allows for the formation of a deeper and more holistic understanding of the candidate's profile in the RPL intervention. This is achieved by allowing providers to classify candidates according to defined learning styles and forming an appreciation of the diversity among adult learners who may enter the RPL process. The styles of learners could then be used to inform the design and development of custom RPL assessment tools that satisfy both the learner and the programme criteria. Harris and Wihak (2017) refer to this as actively engaging with knowledge differences and styles amongst RPL learners, rather than glossing over them as if they do not exist. Snyman and Van den Berg (2018) further develop this idea by stressing the underlying importance of profiling candidates before

any RPL intervention. It is against this background that Kolb's learning styles are believed to have the capacity to provide us with that unique opportunity for effective learning classification.

### **Constructivism**

Gravett (2005) provides useful applications for constructivism, namely, the linking of learning to experience, enhanced negotiation, collaboration, information-sharing, active engagement, problem-solving, and an appreciation for situated-knowledge creation. Mattar (2018) locates the applications proposed by Gravett (2005) within the domain of active and experiential learning. An adaptation of the applications of active and experiential learning would encourage RPL providers to reflect on their experience, engage in policy, challenge false assumptions, promote critical thinking, enhance collaboration, share information (discourse), and solve problems for the common benefit (Gravett 2005). Therefore, applying constructivism through active and experiential learning techniques could serve as a valuable tool to address barriers to RPL practice between providers.

### **Barriers to RPL Implementation**

Although RPL has been ingrained in modern-day educational discourse, we continue to grapple with implementation at various levels across the globe (Aggarwal 2015). Barriers are prevalent with recognition efforts at all levels but particularly affect the informal economy, which characterises many developing nations (Srivastava and Jena 2015). Providers themselves are cited as often acting as “gatekeepers” of what they would subjectively consider legitimate knowledge for recognition. Gonzales and Tabarak-ul-Islam (2016) warn that RPL providers may not view experiential learning as fully appropriate or relevant to their discipline or subject areas. This adds to misconception, subjectivity, and stigma around the concept (Thobejane 2016).

It can be argued that the apparent successes South Africa has made in RPL come from the firm establishment of the NQF and its integration into various national policies (ILO 2018). To this end, the three sub frameworks of the NQF—General and Further Education and Training, Higher Education, and Occupational Qualifications—embody and support the idea of RPL for access, articulation, progression, and full development of learners (Aggarwal 2015). Nevertheless, the fundamental question remains: Does the above observation mean that there are no salient, hidden, or unknown barriers to the implementation of RPL in South Africa?

Researchers in this study believe that the following pieces of South African literature on the subject point us towards setting a context for this section and responding to the above question. Harris and Wihak (2017) argue that the implementation of RPL in South Africa has proved challenging for both policymakers and practitioners alike. This view is supported by Rossouw et al. (2016), who collectively indicate that RPL has been more of a contested and complex issue than was initially anticipated by policymakers. These

scholars further allude to the fact that South Africa borrowed ideas from England, Scotland, Australia, and New Zealand during policy development without considering factors that were more unique to the South African context when it came down to actual implementation on the ground

Mantashe and Nkonki (2019) shed light on the issue of policy, where policy can become a constraining factor when not well advocated or understood. In this regard, implementers become overly restricted, bound, and afraid of RPL execution with a fear of working outside of legislation. Thobejane (2016) indicates that barriers to RPL implementation in a study conducted amongst further education and training providers in South Africa need to be looked at from within the providers themselves. She concedes that RPL existed purely in theory with little implementation or understanding amongst participants. She delves more into this issue by asserting that staff awareness, resources, misunderstanding (stigma), dwindling management support, inadequately understood and developed policy along with a lack of training, collectively, fuelled challenges in RPL.

Views such as the ones above have prompted South African authors such as Cooper, Ralphs, and Harris (2017) to persist in begging the question: Why has RPL proved so difficult for providers? Interestingly enough, this is not a misdirected or isolated question. It is a topic that has received attention from the Department of Higher Education and Training, where in 2013, a ministerial task team was launched to investigate RPL issues (DHET 2013). In delivering its 2013 final report, these scholars alluded to the fact that RPL was established in the NQF yet had not begun to realise its early potential or promise. The slogan most associated with RPL—“from floor sweeper to engineer”—was an inspirational quote for some, but it also showed a lack of understanding of the complexities associated with the concept (DHET 2013). RPL is perceived as a national imperative with an inherent ability to fast-track the closure of the country’s skills gap, but it has not yet grown to its potential (Snyman and Van den Berg 2018). According to PSETA (2017), some of the barriers observed in South Africa include the following:

- unclear and misinterpreted principles,
- inconsistent assessment practice,
- lack of provider preparedness,
- deficiencies in policy development and discourse,
- absence of candidate support,
- bureaucratic procedures that are cumbersome or time consuming,
- a mismatch of the experiential knowledge of the candidates with the prescribed academic outcomes (with resultant disparities with assessment tools and learner profiling),
- its labour and paper intensive nature, which is perceived as expensive, and
- the lack of general support.

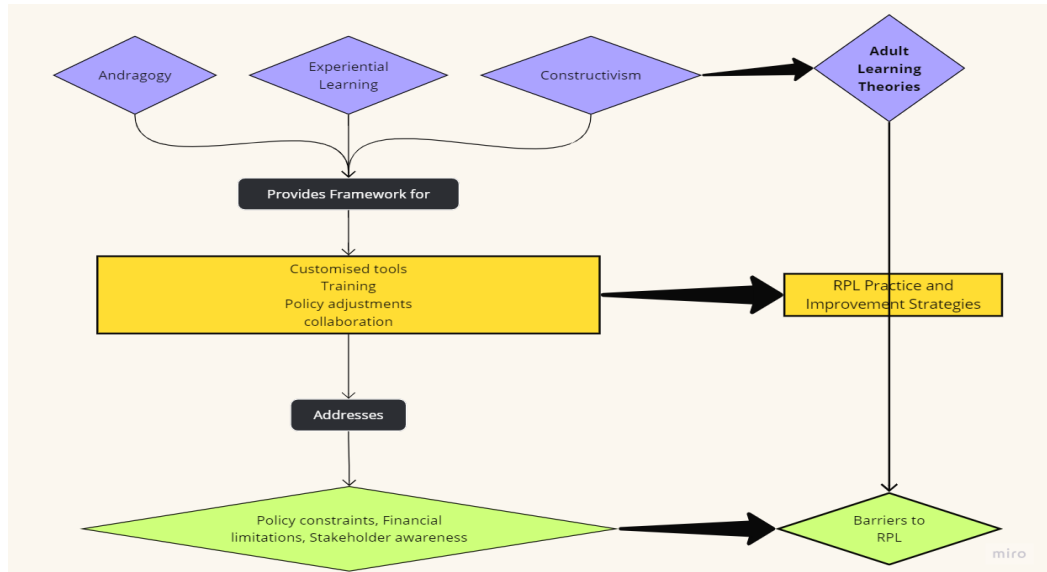
The DHET task team alluded to the above and published an expanded report of barriers to RPL in South Africa. Additional barriers, and in particular those directed to SETA(s), providers, and the occupational education and training sector more generally, are condensed below (DHET 2013:):

- deficiency of coordination and management of RPL among providers, authorities, and employers,
- general lack of advocacy leading to misunderstandings and stigma,
- a dire need for provider support in RPL,
- low or absent provision of RPL practitioner support, career-pathing and development, with a further need to professionalise the space,
- funding model ambiguities,
- debates on the contested relationships between academic/disciplinary/formal/curricular knowledge as contrasted to experiential knowledge,
- numerous laden policies, operating procedures, and compliance, contributing to increased complexity,
- paucity of provider capacity and technical know-how, such as in the development of equivalence matrices, complex mapping, learner profiling, assessment methods, and specialised RPL support materials,
- quality assurance ambiguities due to model disparities amongst quality assurance partners,
- lacklustre monitoring and evaluation, and sluggish continual improvement of practice, and
- sparse research to explore challenges and improve practice.

Indications from both the global and local context confirm that barriers towards RPL are a reality (Aggarwal 2015). Although these barriers are stated outright in some instances, other barriers seem hidden and embedded in the views of certain literature or cases. However, challenges must be closely investigated, monitored, and systematically reduced to ensure parity with the goals envisaged for the concept in South Africa (DHET 2013).



In summary, the literature reveals that implementing RPL requires a nuanced approach, given the unique learning needs of adults and the systemic barriers. Adult learning theories such as andragogy, experiential learning, and constructivism provide a conceptual framework for addressing these challenges by recognising adult learners' prior experiences, facilitating individualised learning contracts, and supporting collaborative, experience-based knowledge construction. These theories emphasise the importance of tailored strategies that align with adult learners' self-directedness, diversity in learning styles, and experiential knowledge. The barriers to RPL implementation in South Africa, such as policy constraints, lack of skilled practitioners, and inadequate funding, highlight the need for targeted interventions. The proposed conceptual framework sets the stage for this study's variable interactions by illustrating how adult learning theories can be operationalised to enhance RPL practices and overcome implementation challenges. The diagram below encapsulates these theoretical constructs and the identified variables, serving as a visual guide for understanding the complex relationship between educational theory and practical barriers in RPL delivery.



**Figure 1:** Adult learning theories

## Research Methodology

There is an assortment of research approaches categorised into quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods. Each approach is further classified under specific design methods (McMillan and Schumacher 2014). Gobo (2018) asserts that qualitative research is an approach that aims at gaining a deep understanding of specific phenomena with a smaller sample, as opposed to a surface-level description for a large sample. In light of its objective of getting a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by participants when implementing RPL in a real-world context, the researchers in this study found that the qualitative approach is the most appropriate. This approach emphasises gathering

data on natural phenomena and expressing such data in the form of words and expressions (Leedy and Ormrod 2013).

Methods under qualitative research approaches are categorised by McMillan and Schumacher (2014) as either focusing on experience of participants or on society and culture. Since this study was intended to obtain a detailed analysis of the barriers that plague participating providers in their daily RPL execution, coupled with the fact that such barriers can be situated in the “lived” working experience and context of the adopted participants, the adopted design was phenomenological. A phenomenological approach is preferred to the rest based on, first, its focus on exploring the “life world” of participants, second, its ability to offer a deep understanding of the “lived” experience with a particular issue in their environment (Umanailo 2019). Vagle (2018) argues that phenomenological designs are useful in helping us see and understand things in novel ways, to reveal things that have become so “normal” that we do not even notice or pay much attention to them.

Context is the setting or surroundings where the research will take place (McMillan and Schumacher 2014). The context of this study was the landscape of occupational education and training (SETA) in Gauteng. The target respondents consisted of SETA-accredited adult education providers who were RPL implementers. A further noteworthy point in context was that although the population of providers considered for the study was geographically located in Gauteng, they would be found to be applying their trade nationally. In other words, these providers implemented RPL programmes across the country, with a diverse range of adult learners under different conditions. It is against this background that their experiences and, to a larger extent, any challenges with implementing RPL can justifiably be referred to as being both nationally and multidimensionally informed. Population refers to the total group of elements or cases within a given context (McMillan and Schumacher 2014). The total target population of the respondents consisted of 64 providers who are primarily accredited by one of the largest SETAs in terms of sector size in the Gauteng province. The provider population was made up of all registered companies differing in size, operational structure, staff complement, and with a range of programmes listed on the NQF. However, all providers were homogeneous in the sense that they were accredited by the same delegated quality assurance functionary (SETA) under delegation from the Quality Council for Trades and Occupations and had a host of formal credit-bearing occupational education and training programmes, of which RPL was an embedded feature.

A prospective sampling method was employed where the researcher painstakingly selected members of the population that matched the purpose of the study (Bhardwaj 2019). Gobo (2018) supports this position by defining purposive sampling as choosing instances of the population that are information-rich in relation to the research question(s). In relation to this study, six providers from the population who had indicated or expressed challenges with RPL were preferentially sought as potential candidates to further explore the phenomenon of interest to the researchers. The

experience of such candidates was key to providing information to address the research question and objectives. Studying information-rich cases in this manner yields greater insight than empirical generalisations (Benoot, Hannes, and Bilsen 2016). Challenges with RPL needed to be gathered from the direct lived working-experiences of providers in their daily execution of the concept. The phenomenological method presented this study with the unique opportunity to get closer to the subsisted experience of providers and, in so doing, discover any challenges that existed (McMillan and Schumacher 2014).

Researchers who employ qualitative, phenomenological-type approaches typically rely on a wide assortment of data collection techniques and instruments such as interviews, focus groups, or document analysis (Palinkas et al. 2015). Relevant to this undertaking, data was collected through a semi-structured interview with participants. A semi-structured phenomenologically designed interview was selected because it generates a rich and comprehensive description of the experiences of the participants with a phenomenon by posing open-ended questions about feelings, perceptions, and understandings (Alirezai and Roudsari 2020). The questions posed by the researcher were open-ended and organised around documented barriers cited in other studies within the literature review. The semi-structured interview questions were sent to participants before the interview slot, which assisted them with preparations and permitted participant reflection on questions. The interview questions were dialogic in nature and remained open enough for the participants to discuss and state other types of unique barriers that may not have been included in the questions posed. Furthermore, all questions were designed around the interpretivist paradigm by constantly prompting participants to reflect on their own direct experiences (Pham 2018; Rehman and Alharthi 2016) as researchers were convinced that this would assist them to gather first-hand information on any barriers to the implementation of RPL.

The entire data collection process was facilitated electronically. Initially, participants received disclosure and permission letters by email. Once consent was obtained, an interview schedule and questions were submitted to all participants prior to the interview date. Virtual interviews occurred per schedule using an online videoconferencing software known as Microsoft Teams. Individual interview slots were set at 1.5 hours, although provision was built in for sessions that exceeded this time allocation by factoring in ample buffer time between individual sessions. The interviewer asked questions from the interview schedule and recorded responses on a paper-based recording tool (transcript) specifically designed to capture responses. Any follow-up questions were also documented with this recording tool.

Microsoft Teams software functionality also allowed for live recording of sessions. The researcher continued to record sessions with the required permission of the participants. This meant that the researcher was able to replay the recordings and compare the audio with the transcript for improved accuracy during the capture of the responses. After the researcher quality-checked the transcript against the audio, it was scanned and emailed

to individual participants for member-checking. Within the email, the participants were alerted to the fact that they could replay their sessions and compare them with the transcript to detect any disparities or incongruences. This could have been reported to the researcher prior to the commencement of data analysis.

The examination of the raw data was facilitated through a phenomenological analysis. A phenomenological analysis is where the true essence of a phenomenon is uncovered by identifying significant themes (Alirezai and Roudsari 2020). The analysis was carried out by identifying and highlighting significant or repetitive phrases from the collective transcripts per individual interview question. Then, these were thematically grouped into significant or repetitive phrases. The themes started to give rise to patterns or trends with the way the participants responded as a collective. The major themes were thereafter classified as either structural or textual, using the Moustakas framework (Moustakas 1994). Subsequently, the following five themes will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

## Analysis of Results

Data analysis reveals that participants' experiences with RPL implementation in the occupational education and training sector were strongly characterised by the presence of obstacles. In addition to that, the findings revealed that such barriers exert a significant influence on the ability of the provider participants to effectively fulfil their roles in the implementation of RPL. Key findings are summarised per research objective in the subsequent sections, informed by the experience-driven exploration with participants.

### **Research Objective 1: To discover the Causes of the Barriers to RPL as Experienced by SETA-Accredited Adult Education Providers in Gauteng**

The data collected from the participants contained a unifying theme that confirmed that barriers to RPL were indeed a reality experienced by providers implementing it in the sector. All barriers were grouped under five major themes, namely, the highly contested, complicated, and technical nature of RPL, the scarcity of skilled RPL practitioners, the ineffective internal management of RPL, the financial constraints in implementing RPL, and the poor awareness, capacity building, and advocacy of RPL among stakeholders. Each of these five major barrier themes is presented and discussed below.

### **Barrier Theme 1: The Highly Contested, Complicated, and Technical Nature of RPL**

The first theme revealed as a barrier was attributable to the sheer complexity and highly debated nature of RPL in the sector. In this context, technicality becomes a major hurdle for the implementation by participant providers and was found to be fuelled by misconceptions due to a lack of understanding. RPL was perceived by respondents as a difficult and often cumbersome educational process. The technical nature of RPL coupled with debates around its implementation made accessing or developing

specialised RPL tools quite difficult for the participants, leaving the majority of participants rather bewildered when it came to implementation.

The complications and confusion with RPL are not anomalous in the literature in the field. Harris, Wihak, and Van Kleef (2014) argue that a lack of systematic implementation at the national level in countries across the globe has led to notable concerns and confusion with RPL. The Department of Higher Education and Training sheds light on the often overlooked yet sheer logistical complexity found in developing and sustaining RPL in the occupational education and training sector, especially when providers have to deal with multiple SETAs, workplaces, and awarding bodies (DHET 2013). This is implicated in the multilayered complexity for RPL amongst providers.

It is well documented that RPL requires careful planning, implementation, and availability of specialised tools (ILO 2018). RPL role-players are commonly cited as feeling lost or bewildered with the concept (Thobejane 2016). Strategies to diagnose and/or quantify learning needs or gaps are thus critical to the endeavour (Dykes 2009). Tools have become increasingly technical because they need to quantify experience for a wide range of candidates (Snyman and Van den Berg 2018). This justifiably leads to the conclusion that the inner workings of RPL as a specialised educational practice require constant attention (Cooper, Ralphs, and Harris 2017).

The complexity in measuring prior learning is becoming an ever-increasing phenomenon (Aarkrog and Wahlgren 2015). This complexity is further exacerbated by negative or incorrect perceptions of RPL among employers or SETAs, leading to the stigma of RPL qualifications (PSETA 2017). Although the majority of stakeholders agree with RPL interventions, others are apprehensive about the quality or worth of RPL qualifications. This presents a challenge when the age-old question of the veracity of RPL is put into the fray (Aggarwal 2015). Rossouw et al. (2016) argue that RPL in South Africa has been a more contested and complex issue than was ever initially anticipated, with many providers still struggling to make sense of implementation (Harris and Wihak 2017).

### **Barrier Theme 2: Scarcity of Skilled RPL Practitioners**

The technical nature of RPL leads to a second theme which is “the scarcity of competent RPL practitioners in the sector.” This barrier placed participants under enormous pressure to implement RPL projects and was quoted as “driving costs up.”

Thobejane (2016) found that much of RPL is not known to practitioners and that their intentions do not always translate into practice. Singh and Ehlers (2019) emphasise that skills must be recognised, no matter where, when, or how they were acquired; all that is required is proficiencies by the practitioners in untraditional, nonformal learning areas. Practitioners must be familiar with not only the content of what is being taught but also with wider trends in the occupation. This is a particular technical requirement in the occupational education and training sector, where the nature of the relationship between

the practitioner and the learner is quite different from the traditional formal education system. Assessors, while maintaining quality and precision in the assessment, must provide clear information about the process as a whole and guide candidates with collecting relevant evidence for recognition purposes (Aggarwal 2015). Thus, RPL is commonly met with insufficient numbers of competent staff available for guidance and support services (ILO 2018). The scarcity of practitioner availability also led to increased costs to perform RPL, which is defined under the final barrier theme.

### **Barrier Theme 3: Ineffective Internal Management of RPL**

The third theme revolves around substandard management of RPL from within provider participant organisations themselves; participants felt that their internal management did not understand the concept, its nuances in operation, and were therefore lacklustre around implementation.

The lack of leadership and management commitment to RPL may have a negative impact on providers; RPL may be influenced by the fact that practitioners are likely to be frustrated by no clear direction and a lack of internal support (Thobejane 2016). The inherent foundation of any educational programme offering is strong governance and management (Palmer 2020). It is against this background that it can be inferred that blockages with management can affect implementation for providers on several fronts, ranging from resource allocation to support deficiencies and complexities in sustaining systems that are meant for RPL development and enhancement (ILO 2018).

### **Barrier Theme 4: Financial Constraints in Implementing RPL**

The fourth theme is about financial constraints. This is a two-pronged theme that is attributable to the increasing costs of RPL combined with ineffective funding models. Expense is commonly cited as a growing concern in RPL, one which is ever-increasing (Singh and Ehlers 2019). Complicated, paper-intensive, and time-consuming processes that providers bring onto themselves, or which are imposed by awarding bodies, continue to plague the implementation of RPL (PSETA 2017). Implementation in the occupational education and training space is thus viewed as cumbersome and far too expensive for practicality (DHET 2013).

Aggarwal (2015) asserts that inadequate or poorly developed funding models add to the blockages in RPL implementation. This educational strategy is costly, and it is a bespoke funding model for related activities and is often cited as a gap (Thobejane 2016). The International Labour Organization (ILO 2018) agrees with this sentiment by stating that rising costs, insufficient funds for supporting RPL, and improper financial models are to blame for much of the plight being faced. The cost of RPL must be harmonised between private providers; similarly, RPL services in the public sector must also be consistently priced and funded (PSETA 2017).

### **Barrier Theme 5: Meagre RPL Awareness, Capacity Building, and Advocacy amongst Stakeholders**

The final theme could be summarised as a lack of awareness and capacity building, as well as general poor advocacy amongst stakeholders in the RPL implementation pipeline. The occupational education and training sector is made up of various stakeholders such as employers, authorities, and providers, each exerting an effect on each other during the RPL process. This barrier entails that confusion and prejudice were cited as framing the experiences of participants in the study. This confusion was not limited to participant providers only, but spread to other stakeholders, such as employers and authorities. Respondents felt inadequate and had little support or awareness. Aggarwal (2015) posits that inconsistencies and a lack of understanding of RPL present the bulk of challenges with the concept. This is further echoed by the International Labour Organization (2018), where the lack of awareness and knowledge of RPL has led to incorrect assumptions, beliefs, and notions about how RPL works and what is considered best practice. This may have had a damaging effect on all stakeholders.

Observation shows that it takes time for most educational concepts to be fully accepted by stakeholders (PSETA 2017). RPL has proved to be no exception. Furthermore, the majority of stakeholders are unaware or misinformed about RPL, its processes, and methodologies (Aggarwal 2015). This adds to the growing calls for increased support, cohesion, and participation at all levels (DHET 2013). Singh and Ehlers (2019) argue that one of the major two barriers to RPL is lack of awareness and understanding of the phenomenon. In this regard, and with the view to ensure that discourse is attained from the ground up, Aggarwal (2015) stresses the importance of ensuring active participation in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of RPL by all stakeholders, especially employers and learners. This scholar further argues that RPL has become ever more complex with myriad acronyms, expectations, and policies. The consensus is that systems for policy discourse and training of providers/practitioners are not adequate (Thobejane 2016). Therefore, higher levels of formalised training and discourse on the topic are vital building blocks for a lucid national RPL system in the occupational education and training sector (DHET 2013).

The five barriers to RPL implementation themes for participating providers seem congruent with the literature in which it is observed that RPL has not reached anywhere close to the true implementation potential (Cooper, Ralphs, and Harris 2017). It is emphasised that RPL has been waning from its early potential and promise (DHET 2013). Despite high expectations for RPL, many countries are experiencing slow implementation and difficulty in upscaling from project-based implementation to establishing a sustainable national system that is widely accessible (Aggarwal 2015). The above themes point to the fact that there is significant work to be done to address the challenges experienced by the participants within the study. The next objective deals with the extent to which barriers are impacting RPL providers.

## **Research Objective 2: Determine the Extent to Which the Barriers Discovered Affect the Implementation of RPL**

Barriers in RPL greatly affected the work of participants and their ability to operate or function effectively. The degree of effect varied from minor challenges through to participants wanting to be completely divorced from the concept altogether. Interestingly, a large proportion of respondents indicated that they preferred not to be involved with RPL and preferred teaching and learning in the traditional way. This paints an uninviting picture and illustrates that barriers are negatively affecting respondents. These results are not anomalous, considering the context in which RPL implementation has been widely criticised as having failed to deliver on its promises in South Africa (DHET 2013; PSETA 2017) where it is severely constrained between service providers (Thobejane 2016). This has created a disjuncture between the intent of RPL and limitations experienced on the ground (Cooper, Ralphs, and Harris 2017).

During interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on barriers cited and to rate their severity on a scale of low, medium, and critical. Barrier themes 1, 4, and 5 (the highly contested, complicated, and technical nature of RPL, financial constraints in implementing RPL and poor awareness of RPL, and capacity building and advocacy among stakeholders, respectively) were rated critical, with the remaining two themes (barrier 2: scarcity of skilled RPL practitioners and barrier 3: ineffective internal management) being ranked as medium effectors. This suggests that most of the five barrier themes cited in the interviews are already perceived to have reached a critical point. Therefore, there need to be urgent interventions to reduce the impact of the challenges experienced (DHET 2013).

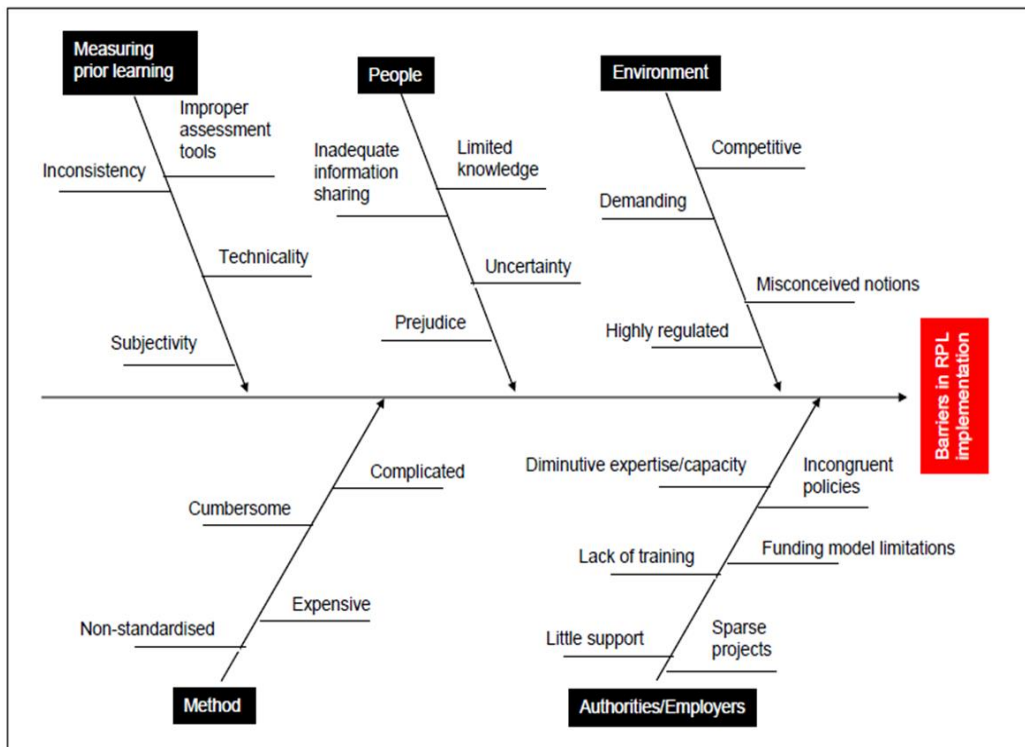
The barriers with the highest criticality represented the issues of misunderstanding, subjectivity, and confusion in the sector. Considering that the sector has several participants (Aggarwal 2015), each must understand RPL and its role in the process for optimal implementation (ILO 2018). In addition, lack of RPL tools or assessment due to increasing technical requirements and lack of policy coherence amongst the different awarding bodies (DHET 2013) along with inefficiencies and non-standardisation in practice gave rise to on-going debates on the quality and effectiveness of RPL. Other issues signalled with high severity are the lack of training and support along with funding and project ambiguities. The implications of the rising cost of RPL also featured prominently.

Medium-rated barriers included poor management of RPL coupled with the widely cited lack of expert practitioners (Singh and Ehlers 2019). The respondents further specified that although competition and saturation of RPL providers are increasing, this remained moderately concerning. Upon analysing the severity of barriers, one can surmise that there is a constant interplay among all barriers; while each barrier can be argued as distinctive, the prevalence of one type of barrier may act to worsen the effects of other types of barriers, making them mutually inclusive. For a more detailed look at the effect and extent to which barriers affected participant providers, an interview question sought



to reveal the root causes of the barriers in the implementation of RPL. An interesting finding is that root cause(s) can be classified as both textual and structural as they have permutations within the providers (internal), as well as being external, that is to say, attributable to the wider operating environment.

The indications from the interview responses enabled the development of a cause-and-effect diagram (Figure 2) to depict how varied the root causes uncovered during the interviews were. Furthermore, root causes were not mutually exclusive and exerted a significant influence on other root causes, ultimately thwarting the efforts of participating provider organisations in their effort to implement RPL in the occupational education and training sector.



**Figure 2:** Cited root causes that give rise to barriers in RPL (Govender 2022, 97)

### Research Objective 3: To Propose Appropriate Strategies to Address Barriers

The final research objective was to propose recommendations that could improve the practice of RPL implementation in the occupational education and training landscape from the perspective of the implementing provider. Participants highlighted strategies that encompassed greater levels of information sharing, unification, and simplification of processes along with realignment and prioritisation of funding in the sector.

Based on the studies that underpin theories and the research findings of this study on the barriers to the implementation of RPL and the effects experienced by providers, the following recommendations are put forward.

- Learners should be profiled at the start of the RPL intervention and throughout the course of the undertaking (Snyman and Van den Berg 2018). This should be achieved using an established experiential learning model such as Kolb's learning styles (Kolb and Kolb 2013). The matching of learners with styles gives greater focus back to the learner (learner-centredness), allows for the custom development of tools and assessments based on the proficiency of the learner, and acts to reduce the effects of subjectivity, prejudice, and technicality as barriers.
- Planning and implementation of RPL interventions should be undertaken using an adaptation of Knowles's learning contract (Knowles 1986). This requires that all RPL tools, resources, and methods must be defined and negotiated between the provider and the learner in advance (Tennant 2006). This contract could then form part of the blueprint for the RPL intervention and will assist in the elimination of challenges found in overcomplexity and uncertainty for all parties involved.
- SETAs and/or quality councils should encourage regular information-sharing sessions among RPL providers. In this sense, providers should be encouraged to participate in a dialogic constructivist paradigm (Gravett 2005), by sharing knowledge, collaborating, challenging assumptions, and constructing new realities through reflection on collective experience. The constitution of such sessions could also be extended to internal SETA staff members, practitioners, employers, and other relevant stakeholders. This could potentially bridge gaps prevalent in misinformation, uncertainty, and can increase expertise in practice.
- SETAs and/or quality councils should offer formalised workshops and/or training dedicated to RPL education. These should target employers, practitioners (to alleviate capacity shortages in the sector), and providers. Workshops/training should be continuous and linked to performance contracts and plans (ILO 2018). The advantages of focused training initiatives will act to alleviate/eliminate several barriers such as lack of awareness, complexity, and internal management failures (Gravett 2005).
- Authorities and/or quality councils should continually simplify and further standardise RPL policy, procedures, practices, and standards across sectors. Providers should not have to adhere to a large number of requirements, some of which could be in contradiction to others. A common and shared understanding and practice are required in the sector to alleviate non-standardisation, confusion, and incongruences with RPL (Aggarwal 2015).

- Processes and methods should be reviewed and updated to alleviate growing concerns about financial and resource constraints. RPL processes should cater for effectiveness and efficiency, thereby removing cumbersome, duplicated, and evidence-laden steps where such could have been avoided or streamlined. Where possible, integrated systems and electronic Recognition of Prior Learning (e-RPL) (Heinonen and Tuomainen 2020) should be explored with a shared and clear understanding/expectation amongst employers, providers, and authorities.
- Authorities should investigate and formalise plans that shift the focus away from “comply or else” mentalities to creating conversations and partnerships with providers. These partnerships should position each stakeholder in the RPL process as equally significant and must exude a joint willingness to proactively identify barriers in the process to eliminate them for the common benefit. It has been argued that RPL requires a strong collaborative approach and constant rapport between all parties to see maximum potential value (Aggarwal 2015). The fear-inducing highly regulated environment and lack of support will be minimised with the reforming of robust partnerships.
- Suitable models for funding of RPL interventions should be developed or revised, where necessary, to accommodate the nuances of RPL. These models must make provision for learner profiling, gap training, tool development, and specialist support required during RPL. Funding models should be products of research, evidence-based, properly trialled, and piloted along with being continuously revised to ensure sustainability, incentivisation, cost-benefit, and fairness.
- SETA(s) and industry boards should be bent on developing RPL committees, advisory structures, and knowledge banks. These will help fill in the gaps cited in RPL advocacy in the sector and quell any misconceptions or misinformation. Committees may also be mandated to investigate other types of barriers in RPL or proposals to improve the practice of RPL within the sector.
- Strengthening of projects targeting RPL should occur in the performance plans and strategic plans of SETA(s)/quality councils, where applicable. These projects should not only be limited to RPL implementation but should pilot new research or recommendations in associated areas such as streamlining processes, assessment tools (ILO 2018), funding models, and building practitioner capacity.

In the main, this article offers a significant contribution to the understanding of RPL implementation among SETA-accredited providers in Gauteng, South Africa, by identifying key barriers and proposing practical strategies to overcome them. It highlights five main obstacles, which are the complex and technical nature of RPL

processes, a shortage of skilled practitioners, inadequate internal management, financial constraints, and limited awareness and advocacy among stakeholders. These five barriers collectively hinder effective RPL integration, often reinforcing each other and resulting in limited engagement or reluctance among providers to adopt RPL practices. The study's innovative application of adult learning theories, including Knowles's andragogy and Kolb's experiential learning cycle, provides a theoretical foundation for RPL by advocating for learner-centred processes that recognise and assess adult learners' experiential knowledge. To address these challenges, the article proposes comprehensive solutions: expanding practitioner training, establishing standardised funding models, improving stakeholder awareness, and simplifying RPL policies and assessments. This research contributes valuable insights for improving the accessibility and functionality of RPL in South Africa's adult education landscape, ultimately aiming to make RPL more inclusive and supportive of experiential learning in professional settings.

## Conclusions

While this study discovered and explored barriers to the implementation of RPL from the direct perspective of the SETA-accredited adult education provider participants, such barriers need not be permanent. The challenges echoed in the study from the views of participants will require a concerted and meaningful effort from everyone involved in the RPL pipeline to systematically reduce and/or eliminate these barriers. Studies such as these shed light on areas often overlooked and give impetus to correcting and improving the practice of RPL in the occupational education and training sector, fuelled by the rich reservoir of working experience of those implementing the concept on the ground.

Adult learning and experiential and constructivism theories enabled us to view the barriers more cohesively by affording the study a situated-constructivist lens for analysis, i.e., viewing the barriers from the experience-driven context of the participant. Furthermore, the underpinning adult learning theories found uses in the proposal of strategies aimed at alleviating discovered barriers through the adoption of experiential learning models, andragogy and applications of constructivism, in a bid to augment practice for these vital RPL implementers.

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