Project ACQF-II

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Report on the Visit to Eswatini on Piloting of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

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Maria Rosenstock and Patrick Werquin

1. Introduction

Eswatini has a recently established new Qualifications Authority (EQA, Eswatini Qualification Authority, EQA) and a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) under operationalisation. "*Increased scope for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)*" is one of the key objectives of the Eswatini Qualifications Framework[1] (ESQF), demonstrating the priority given by the decision makers to develop and implement this fundamental pillar of the nation's lifelong learning system.

The ESQF was approved in August 2020 (Cabinet Paper Number – CPN/ MOET/116/2020[2]) and published by the Eswatini Higher Education Council (ESHEC[3]). While the essential legal basis of the ESQF with its core elements is in place, actual implementation has seen a new impetus in 2023 with the start of EQA's operations.

A significant proportion of the population in Eswatini has acquired valuable knowledge and skills through non-formal and informal means, yet lacks formal recognition of the corresponding learning outcomes. This has resulted in limited access to formal education and training pathways and, above all, to employment opportunities for many individuals. The absence of a standardised, nationally accepted RPL system has created barriers for individuals seeking to validate all their learning outcomes, however acquired. This has led to inconsistencies in how prior learning outcomes are recognised across different sectors (for example, in higher levels RPL is used only to facilitate access to training, not to offer credits, partial or full qualifications), limiting the potential for these individuals to contribute fully to the economy and development of Eswatini.

In 2024, ACQF-II supported stakeholders' consultations and the development of an RPL Policy for Eswatini. The document is pending adoption. As a follow up activity, the ACQF-II project will support a small pilot RPL project. The approach to the pilot has been proposed and consulted with EQA and is included in the Annex to this document.

2. Objectives of the Visit and ACQF II staff Involved

The main objective of the visit was, to prepare the RPL pilot.

For the ACQF II team, Maria Rosenstock and Patrick Werquin participated in the visit.

3. Key Activities

The mission consisted of:

- A broad consultation with key stakeholders, on the 28th of May (Hotel George, Manzini), organised by the EQA.
- A comprehensive discussion at the Directorate of Industrial and Professional Training (DIVT, Mbabane) regarding the opportunity that represent the Trade Testing system for piloting RPL in Eswatini.
- A visit at the Royal Eswatini Sugar Corporation (RES, Mhlume), for the assessing the possibility to assess learning outcomes in relation to some of the trades that are operational in the sugar industry.

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[1] https://eqa.co.sz/esqf

[2] https://eshec.org.sz/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ESQF-2022-Aug-Launch.pdf

[3] https://eshec.org.sz/

- A visit at the Vocational and Commercial Training Institute (VOCTIM, Matsapa) for assessing potential assessment facilities (technical platform and related tools).
- Meeting at the European Union Delegation (EUD, Mbabane), to assess possible cooperation.
- Meeting at EQA to discuss the next steps.

These events are now described in greater detail regarding the content of the discussions, and corresponding action points or next steps (Section 8).

4. Consultation with Key Stakeholders

The presentation by the ACQF II aimed to:

- Remind the participants about the key terms and concepts, and the purpose of RPL
- Elaborate about the objectives of RPL in Eswatini (Enhancing access to qualifications for disadvantaged groups, promoting lifelong learning and aligning outcomes with the ESQF and labour market relevance, ensuring fairness, transparency, and accessibility in the RPL process).
- Remind the relevance of RPL in the Eswatini Context (Young population with limited access to formal education/training and qualifications, high rates of informal employment, a large pool of skilled individuals whose competences remain unrecognised).
- Suggest ways of operationalising the RPL Pilot in Eswatini (Legal and institutional framework, target groups and applicants, considering literacy levels, considering partial recognition of learning outcomes, defining which qualifications or sectors are targeted, ensuring alignment with NQF levels and that assessment standards exist or can be adapted, geographic scope, infrastructure for assessing applicants, preparing all the necessary documents including guidelines for individual portfolios).
- Discuss strategies and next steps (funding, sourcing, manuals and training for assessors, guidance officers, and applicants; create awareness campaigns and invest in capacity-building; identify technical platforms for practical assessments, decide on assessment tools and languages, store and manage assessment data for feedback).
- Remind key conditions for scaling up (commitment of all partners, regulatory updates, sustainable processes, infrastructure, institutionalisation of RPL based on pilot learning).
- Stress the usual pitfalls (the success of RPL depends on clarity in roles e.g., regulator's versus operator's roles), realistic assessment conditions, stakeholder involvement, and clear strategies for system-level implementation. Eswatini's pilot offers an opportunity to institutionalise RPL practices tailored to its context, needs, and workforce realities.

5. Visit at the DIVT – The Eswatini Trade Testing System

The DIVT oversees Trade Testing, which is a close sibling of RPL on several levels, especially the idea of recognising all competences, wherever and however acquired. RPL is somewhat broader but there seems to be a consensus that the two system are meant to converge and eventually merge.

The trade testing is carried out against qualification standards for qualifications included in the ESQF.

In the Trade Testing approach, examinations and practical tests are used, not the portfolio of competences. Testing takes place in TVET training institutions. The demand is high but testing can only be carried out during the semester breaks when schools facilities are available.

There is an opportunity with solar energy. More traditional trades benefit from improvement (e.g., new facilities for plumbing, or modernisation of standards for electricity)

Assessment at the workplace is also seen as an option and is actually happening (e.g., in pipefitting and welding). A new European Union project will equip the workshops for the assessment.

Recently, new competences have appeared: e.g., soft skills, numeracy, communication.

In the Trade Testing approach, assessors come from the industry. A qualification is required from the assessors: at least one level above the level subject to assessment; and at least five years of experience in the corresponding industry.

The DIVT display impressive statistics with, for instance, 1,600 people tested in 2024. Most of them were from the working population. Sometimes even the TVET graduates take the assessment.

6. Visit at Royal Eswatini Sugar (RES) Corporation – Employer-led RPL practices at RES Learning and Talent Academy

Overview of RES and training capacity:

- RES is a major employer in Eswatini (second after government), operating sugar mills, an ethanol plant, and diversified activities including packaging and livestock.
- Training Infrastructure:
    . RES Learning and Talent Academy offers technical training, apprenticeships, and leadership development.
    . Recognised by DIVT and accredited by ESHEC, though not yet reflected in the NQF.
    . Offers services to external clients and operates a trade testing centre.

RES and RPL initiatives:

- Approved internal RPL Framework developed in the absence of a national strategy.
- RPL is defined as a process to assess competences, especially for workers without a Form 5 certificate.
- Entry barrier: Many workers lack the academic credentials required for permanent positions or advancement in the company.
- Solution: RPL linked with Sebenta National Institute's adult education system to evaluate and certify literacy and numeracy skills.

RPL process at RES:

- Applications are submitted via the manager to the Learning and Talent Admin team.
- Screening includes certificate verification and eligibility review.
- Assessment is conducted as an interview with supervisors participating.

Challenges and observations:

- Gap in formal recognition: Current system is internal; outcomes are not yet integrated into the national NQF.
- No systematic assessment tools: Evaluation relies on supervisor review and interviews.
- Clear standards needed: To improve credibility and transferability outside RES.

Opportunities and expansion potential:

- Model for industry-driven RPL: RES system could serve as a good practice example in Eswatini and beyond.

- Potential for wider recognition: By aligning Sebenta levels with NQF and defining clear learning outcomes.
- Gap-training: Employees not meeting standards are referred to Sebenta for weekly training sessions.
- Promotion pathway: RPL can lead to career advancement (i.e., T1 to T2 level).

Strategic vision:

- RES expresses commitment to employee growth and social responsibility.
- Considering opening its academy to the public.
- Interest in including RPL in collaborations with other companies and expanding apprenticeships.
- RES could host RPL pilots targeting disadvantaged groups or qualifications not yet available in Eswatini but present in South Africa.

Collaborations and policy considerations:

- RES collaborates with institutions like Stellenbosch University, UCT, and Sebenta.
- MoUs exist for energy training (e.g., Eswatini Investment Promotion Authority, EIPA[1]).
- EU Delegation programme includes RPL components.
- Policy gap: National RPL policy lacks guidance, but RES's internal model could inform broader national or sectoral approaches.

7. Visit at the Vocational and Commercial Training Institute (VOCTIM) in Matsapha

During the visit to VOCTIM, discussions focused on the ongoing cooperation within the EU-funded Cooperation Facility, which aims to develop capacity in the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector. The team oversees a capacity-building project that includes activities such as benchmarking visits to Namibia and South Africa. Eswatini is currently using Namibia as a reference point for comparison and development in TVET.

A possible next step is to further discuss capacity-building initiatives in TVET, and to review and compare tools.

There was also a suggestion to consider developing a new standard in the field of electricity. It is important to anchor the RPL initiative in a well-known, traditional trade to ensure recognition and practicality.

There is a need for a detailed implementation plan, including a clear strategy and policy framework outlining roles and responsibilities. The responsible agency will consult with stakeholders to move this forward.

Attention was also given to the role of Sebenta[2], whose grade 7 examinations are equivalent to national standards. Sebenta works closely with rural education centres (RECs) and plays a key role in non-formal education. However, learners at the lowest levels often do not receive formal credentials. There is a need to examine whether these credentials are formally recognised.

It was proposed that Sebenta and the departments responsible for non-formal education should be included in upcoming discussions. Sebenta is also active in vocational skills training, particularly in entrepreneurship—a vital area given the high rates of youth unemployment.

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[1] https://investeswatini.org.sz
[2] https://sebenta.ac.sz/index.html

Key concerns that are likely to interest the cabinet include clear timelines and budgeting for the policy development and implementation phases. Once the national RPL policy is adopted, a subsequent mission will be planned to initiate pilot activities, including the training of RPL practitioners.

A proposed approach combines traditional training, first, and then RPL in what we call "reverse RPL"; a model that supports the upskilling of people in rural areas by combining recognition of existing competences with targeted top-up courses to build capacity and promote inclusion.

8. Meeting at the European Union delegation (EUD)

A meeting was also held at the Delegation of the European Union (EUD), the division responsible for the skills development portfolio. There is an interest in gathering as much information as possible on global and regional instruments related to skills development. Eswatini's National Indicative Programme (NIP) is focused on TVET, with a particular emphasis on skills for employability.

During the meeting, the EQA's planned work programme, including support for trade testing, which the EUD considers both relevant and necessary. It was noted that the RPL policy is currently under the responsibility of the Public Policy Development Coordination Unit (PPCU).

For future discussions, it is important to include the EUD. Two cooperation facilities are already in place:

- The Technical Cooperation Facility responds to ad hoc requests and could potentially provide additional funding for the RPL pilot.
- The main TVET support programme focuses on youth employability, entrepreneurship, and empowerment, particularly through public formal TVET. It aims to strengthen coordination within the sector, drawing inspiration from Namibia, which already has a functional training authority.

In Eswatini, however, the point was stressed that responsibility for training is shared between the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour. There is also a need to address the issue of training levies through collaboration with Business Eswatini, especially in relation to the funding of RPL.

The key target sectors include green energy, manufacturing (particularly textiles), tourism, agro-processing, and digitalization; all selected for their job creation potential and relevance to tackling youth unemployment. This is the focus of a GIZ-supported project.

Another initiative aims to strengthen the capacities of NGOs involved in informal TVET.

During the discussion, it was clear that although technical resources are available, there is a pressing need for stakeholder engagement to ensure broad support for implementation. While institutions like DIVT make use of existing training centres, the current capacity to deliver RPL is limited. As such, scaling up efforts will be essential to meet growing demand.

9. Action Points/proposed Next Steps

The action points and proposed next steps are the following:

- Revise approach to RPL in each education sub-system, especially beyond access/admission use only (e.g., for awarding a full-fledged qualification).

- Develop more national competence standards (reduce reliance on South African standards); to be addressed in the RPL roadmap.
- Promote broader stakeholder advocacy to support the RPL agenda.
- Promote the RPL policy, as many stakeholders have not yet seen the document.
- Include training and upgrading of assessors, and other RPL practitioners, in the national RPL strategy/roadmap.
- Review and differentiate Trade Testing vs. RPL processes and formulate specific points on their qualitative differences.
- Broaden the RPL offer to include more occupations (e.g., home care workers).
- Upgrade Trade Testing processes, including use of portfolios, to improve pass rates.
- Engage Sebenta to widen access to gap training (e.g., for adult learners without Form 5, discussion at RES).
- Explore funding opportunities in general and for digital platforms in particular to support RPL (e.g., for guidance, monitoring, capacity-building).
- Adapt policies and regulations in TVET and Higher Education to promote RPL for credit and qualifications, for instance, not just for admission.
- Promote procedures for accrediting a wider pool of stakeholders (e.g., industry) to deliver RPL.
- General capacity building on RPL instruments, especially: Application forms, Portfolios of evidence
- Base RPL tools and instruments on SADC practices rather than on European models.
- Include standards development/creation, process upgrades, and assessor/practitioners training in the RPL pilot budget.
- Review and possibly standardise the RES-Sebenta RPL model, with a view to: clarifying learning outcomes, aligning with NQF, sharing the model with other companies, creating a recognised, industry-led RPL pathway.
- Include Sebenta and Non-formal Education departments in the national RPL dialogue.
- Evaluate non-formal credentials from Rural Education Centres for possible inclusion in NQF.
- Plan a follow-up mission after RPL policy adoption, including: pilot implementation, training of practitioners
- Explore "reverse RPL" models that combine upskilling, first (hence the term reverse) with RPL.
- Share the existing documents (policy) with the EUD.
- Involve the EUD in follow-up discussions and coordination efforts.
- Explore possible funding for the pilot.
- Compare proposed/existing RPL tools.
- Coordinate online meetings with relevant stakeholders.

See below the proposed framework for implementation of the Eswatini RPL Policy pending adoption.

Annex. Proposed RPL Implementation Framework for Eswatini (Draft)

Policy Issues	Policy Statement	Strategies	Responsibilities
Limited opportunities for formal recognition of non-formal and informal learning	Assure that all credentials under ESQF provide (full or partial) award opportunities through RPL	Develop national guidelines for RPL covering all ESQF qualifications and all education and training sub-systems to widen the opportunities for RPL.	EQA
Limited coverage of RPL in education sectors	RPL should be offered across all education sectors including HE, TVET and general education.	Review sectoral regulations (e.g., in TVET, in higher Education, adult learning) to include wider use of RPL for access, credit, and full/partial awards.\
Incorporate RPL-related goals and strategies in the education strategic frameworks for each sub-sector.\
Develop sector-specific RPL procedures in line with national RPL guidelines.\
Establish targets for RPL in the strategic plans of each of the education and training sub-sectors.\
Carry out pilot projects expanding the use of RPL in all education and training subsectors.	EQA, Ministry of Education and Training (MoET), Ministry of Labour TVET colleges, higher education institutions
Fragmented institutional framework for RPL delivery	Ensure a coordinated approach across education and training institutions as well as with all Ministries and sectors awarding qualifications	Establish a centralised RPL coordination body.\
Develop Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) for institutional collaboration.\
Foster inter-ministerial and inter-sectoral cooperation.	EQA, all responsible awarding bodies
Monitoring and Evaluation mechanisms	Implement effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms for RPL initiatives	Establish centralised monitoring framework and reporting mechanisms covering all education and training sub-systems.\
Develop data collection approach for RPL incorporating: questionnaires, longitudinal studies, feedback loops and stakeholder evaluations for transparent tracking.	EQA MoET, Statistical Departments of all ministries involved, Create local monitoring units
Insufficient funding and resources for RPL	Secure sufficient funding for RPL operations and capacity building and include it in the education sector strategic plans	Include RPL in national education budgets based on the sectoral targets.\
Develop partnerships with private sector and NGOs for co-funding.\
Explore feasibility of establishing a Training Fund based on levy.\
Explore international funding opportunities.	EQA liaising with: Ministry of Education, Labour Finance, Development Partners,
Inconsistent Quality Assurance in RPL Assessments	Establish consistent quality assurance for RPL assessments in line with RPL guidelines	Develop National RPL Quality Framework, introduce regular audits, and assessor training aligned with ESQF.\
Develop clear guidelines for appeals.\
Establish independent review panels.\
Monitor fairness and transparency.	EQA, TVET Councils, Assessors
Capacity Building for Guidance Officers and Assessors	Build capacity of guidance officers and assessors to maintain high-quality assessments	Develop profiles for RPL practitioners.\
Training workshops, specialised training programmes, certification programmes, and regular evaluations for RPL Practitioners.	EQA MoET, TVET Institutions, universities
Lack of Awareness and Understanding of RPL	Ensure all stakeholders understand the purpose,	Conduct awareness campaigns\
Develop informational materials in	EQA, DIVT, MoET, local

		multiple languages, especially in rural areas. Integrate RPL awareness into community outreach programmes, establish RPL support structures.	administration NGOs, community organisations
Lack of standardised assessment frameworks and tools	Develop and use standardised assessment tools for each sub-sector to assure consistent evaluation across qualifications	Create sector-specific RPL assessment tools. Align assessments with ESQF. Pilot and validate tools before national rollout, during RPL Pilot for the qualifications piloted (i.e., in key industry sectors). Create partnerships with the industry and employers on technical platforms for assessment and assessment in the workplace.	EQA Future Sector Skills Councils when they come to life, ESHEC, representatives of employers
Limited Access to RPL for Marginalised Groups	Increase accessibility of RPL for women, youth, and rural communities in Eswatini	Create mobile assessment units, community-based RPL centres, and gender-sensitive RPL programmes	EQA Ministry of Social Development, Local NGOs, Women's Organisations
Insufficient alignment with labour market needs	Align RPL outcomes with Eswatini's labour market needs and economic development goals	Labour market analysis (surveys), employer engagement in RPL planning and assessment, and assessment approaches aligned with industry sectors' needs. Accelerate development of occupational and qualification standards in the professions that are in-demand.	EQA, DIVT, NLMSP (ESHEC) Ministry of Labour, Employers' Associations, Industry Groups
Digital RPL Systems and E-Assessment Tools	Integrate technology for efficient RPL processes, especially in remote regions	Digital platforms, e-portfolios (with extended use of photos, videos, sounds), and online assessment tools (e.g., for rural access). Train RPL practitioners the use of digital platforms for RPL processes. Ensure data security and digital literacy for participants. Integrate monitoring mechanism in the digital platforms.	EQA Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, RPL providers.
Gender-Specific Pathways in RPL	Create equitable RPL opportunities for women and underrepresented groups	Gender-responsive policies, flexible assessments (e.g., for women with caregiving responsibilities), and support services for female RPL applicants.	EQA Gender Unit of the Deputy Prime Minister's Office, Women's Organisations, Community Councils
Sustainability of RPL Systems	Ensure long-term sustainability of RPL through government, donor support, and broad communication (for creating a regular demand)	Integrate RPL into all relevant national policies, e.g., economic development, infrastructure development, employment, social, migration), sustainable funding models, and community-driven ownership.	EQA MoET, local authorities
Stakeholder	Foster stakeholder	Public-private partnerships, community	EQA

Engagement and Collaboration	engagement for effective RPL implementation at community and national levels	engagement, and advocacy activities for RPL expansion after the Pilot.	MoLSS, Private Sector Associations, Community Leaders
Language Barriers in RPL Access[1]	Ensure language is not a barrier to RPL participation	Provide assessments in multiple languages. Develop RPL materials in accessible formats. Offer interpretation services during assessments.	EQA MoET, Community-Based Organisations
Cultural Sensitivity in RPL Processes	Recognise cultural learning and local knowledge in RPL assessments	Adapt assessment tools to respect local traditions. Involve community leaders in RPL awareness and mobilisation. Train guidance officers and assessors in cultural sensitivity.	EQA community organisations and leaders

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[1] Issues evidenced by Sebenta approach: https://sebenta.ac.sz/docs/SNI%20Bronchure%202023.pdf