RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

IN

THE MAURITIAN CONTEXT

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Seminar on: Recognition of Prior Learning: Prospects for Development in African Countries

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Appendix I
Appendix II
1. **Introduction**

In 1998, when the decision to set up the Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA) was taken, it was already agreed that to combat structural unemployment, skills gaps and mismatches as well as predominant social exclusion, education and training policies would have to place the individual at the centre of attention.

Today, Mauritius is facing challenges within its economy at the local and international level. In such a context, the MQA acknowledges that more people stay in education and training longer, but the gap is widening between those who are sufficiently qualified to keep afloat in the labour market and those who are falling irrevocably by the wayside.¹

The MQA has nevertheless, identified recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a powerful tool which can bring people back into the training system and/or upgrade and sustain their skills already acquired through previous working and/or life experience. RPL is to be seen as a key pillar underpinning the process of maintaining and enhancing a competitive and skilled workforce for Mauritius.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the initiative of the MQA with respect to the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning in the Mauritian Context and today I am presenting the paper before the event that is *ex ante*. By adopting this approach, the MQA is endeavouring to establish

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a dynamic communication with all relevant stakeholders external to the project.

2. Economic Background

Sugar has been associated with Mauritius for 367 years and has shaped the history and culture of the island. Covering more than 40 percent of the surface area of the island, this industry has made the island state what it is today. For many years, the island has benefited from a high price for sugar under the preferential trade arrangements with Europe. The price for sugar was three times higher than the price on the world market. The revenue has been used to diversify the Mauritian economy into the tourism and textile industries.²

Today, the government has made it clear to Mauritian Sugar producers that, internationally, the sugar market is no longer a seller's market but a buyer’s market since Mauritius is no longer benefiting from trade preferences. This means that buyers dictate the prices and hence explains the slow and gradual decline in what has been one of our major economic pillar, leaving thousands of people in dilemma. Some six thousand sugar industry workers would be without a proper job once the remaining sugar industries would be closing down, allowing only three to process sugar cane for sugar production.

On the other side, in just 30 years, the textile and apparel industry of Mauritius had become the world’s second largest fully fashioned knitwear

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² MAURITIUS-ECONOMY: Helping the Sugar Industry Regain its Sweetness , Nasseem Ackbarally
producer, the third largest exporter of pure new wool products and Europe’s fourth largest supplier of T-shirts.

In the EU, which had been taking almost two-thirds of exports, Mauritian textile and apparel producers have enjoyed duty- and quota-free access for 37 years under the Lomé Convention and later the Cotonou Agreement. In 2001 Mauritian textiles and apparel companies started to enjoy similar access to the US market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). However, these benefits depend on the use of materials made in Sub-Saharan Africa or in the USA.

Mauritius now faces growing competition from lower cost suppliers elsewhere in the region and from Asian producers. Furthermore, the country’s quota-free access to the main markets has ceased to be a competitive weapon since 2004 when all quotas restricting trade between World Trade Organisation members had to be removed. The firms are already responding by moving their operations offshore, including to nearby Madagascar.\(^3\) Hence, many people from the textile industry have to face sudden unemployment situations which provoke in its midst social predicament.

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\(^3\) Prospects for the Textile and Clothing Industry in Mauritius accessed at http://www.researchandmarkets.com/reports/38738
3. Mauritian Perspective of RPL

Compared to agriculture and textile sectors, the tourism industry has emerged as the fastest growing productive sector with a growth of 3.7% in 2006, albeit lower than the 5.5% growth in 2005. It thus positioned itself as the main pillar of the Mauritian economy, accounting for about 8.5% of gross domestic product in 2006, higher than the share of the Export Processing Zone (7.5%) and the sugar sector (2.7%).

The growth of the tourism industry heads towards a new peak, Mauritius must ensure that people involved in that industry have the right skills and competences to provide the services. The arrival of more tourists entails the construction of new hotels with more people being recruited in the hospitality industry.

Retrenched workers of the Sugar industry and the textile sector will be retrained under the Empowerment Programme whereby they will be provided with necessary skills which would allow them to reintegrate the world of work, specially the Tourism industry. As part of its New Economic Agenda, Mauritian Government is implementing the Empowerment Programme. An Empowerment Fund has been launched to further the objects of same. One of the key strategies of the

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Empowerment Programme is the training and reskilling of the unemployed unskilled.

But the retrenched workers with few or no formal qualifications would be most vulnerable in securing an employment in the Tourism Industry. The MQA considers that prior learning and experience of the retrenched workers of the sugar and textile industry can be assessed and validated enabling them to obtain credentials that would help them to enter the Tourism and Hospitality industry.

By formally recognizing their skills, RPL can be a means to create a level playing field in order to allow them to gain opportunities for further employment possibilities and to improve their career prospects. Recognition of skills can also contribute much to those retrenched workers’ self-esteem.

In recent years, RPL has known a renewed interest and has been seen as one of the key elements of the HRD practice, such that in June 2004, there was the International adoption of the ILO Recommendation (No. 195) on Human Resources Development: Education, Training and Lifelong Learning where the importance of recognizing skills, including prior learning and previous experience, irrespective of the countries where they were acquired and whether acquired formally or informally was formally spelled out.

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5 Recognition of prior learning Policy and practice for skills learned at work, Chloe Dyson
Jack Keating University of Melbourne, 2005
De Ferranti et al. argue that in the context of increased demand for workplace skills in both developed and developing countries and the agenda of lifelong learning there is a need for workers to gain recognition of their skills as a basis for further education and training, and of course to assist them in their employment and occupational mobility.  

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4. RPL and the NQF

A degree of confusion exists internationally with respect to terminology used to define RPL which is partly due to the context and sector where it is applied and it is understood differently in a range of contexts. Several existing terminologies for recognising prior/experiential learning are listed here which are not limitative but non-exhaustive.

**Prior Learning Assessment (PLA)- Canada**

Prior learning assessment (PLA) is a process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning acquired through formal and informal study. This may include work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteering, travel, hobbies and family experiences. The recognition of prior learning can be used toward the requirements of an academic or training program, occupational/professional certification or for employment/labour market entry purposes."

**Accreditation of prior learning –United States**

APL is the generic term used for the award of credit on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred at some time in the past. This learning may have come about as the result of a course, or self-directed study, or as the result of experience either at work or in leisure pursuits. The latter is usually referred to as Prior Experiential Learning

**Accreditation Of Prior And Experiential Learning- UK**

Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning (APEL) is a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds and attitudes to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge they already possess
The MQA has nonetheless defined RPL as follows:

“The acknowledgement through evaluation of a person’s skills and knowledge acquired through previous training, work or life experience, which may be used to grant credit in a subject or module.”

Regardless of the terminology used, RPL is a form or purpose of assessment. The candidate for RPL in Mauritius would thus be assessed against the endorsed MQA Unit Standards and Qualifications. These are developed and generated in collaboration with the Industry Training Advisory Committee (ITAC) and are pitched on the National Qualifications Framework. So far 480 unit standards have been generated by the MQA and the ITAC set up within seven predominant economic sectors. (Appendix I)

The National Qualifications Framework is used in Mauritius to promote lifelong learning and encourage specific education and training goals, with the aim of enhancing the linkages between learning and employment, in particular to improve opportunities for people to use their informal learning to gain recognised qualifications.  

Recognition of prior learning thus builds on the basic notion that the individual should not learn the same thing twice but should have the opportunity to use and build on his or her competences, irrespective of where and how they were acquired.

RPL is thus seen as a critical aspect of the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

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7 Michael Young, National qualifications frameworks: Their feasibility for effective implementation in developing countries, 2005. INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE, GENEVA
5. MQA proposed RPL approach

One of the functions of the Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA) as per the MQA Act 2001 is “to recognise and validate competencies for the purpose of certification obtained outside the formal education and training systems”. Learning occurs in many contexts that include work, involvement in social and community activities, or learning through life experience generally. Much of this non-formal or informal learning is relevant to the competency outcomes of unit standards as developed by the MQA and pitched on the National Qualifications Framework (Mauritian)

Recognising Prior Learning, informal and non-formal learning is an important objective of the MQA because RPL opens possibilities for people by helping them to embark on learning pathways. Moreover enterprises benefit through including RPL as a key strategy for increasing overall skill levels in enterprises, tailoring training appropriately, and as a mechanism for staff selection and recruitment.

In Mauritius our approach has been to focus on the process of RPL. The MQA has adequately considered the support candidate to RPL will need, to effectively participate in, and use RPL. Our proposed approach to RPL assumes that there is a no straightforward process of ‘translation’ between the candidate’s prior learning and the learning outcomes or unit standards against which they are being assessed.

We believe that it is essential that before candidates are assessed they must be aware of what they know and the extent to which they know, and be able to articulate what they know and can do. Tacit learning has become

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8 Refer to annex MQA RPLApproach
internalised and intuitive, and it is very difficult for people to identify what they know, because they just ‘do it’.

Some people can more easily articulate what they know than others and this is often associated with more access to education in the past. They also have to cope with, and not be intimidated by, the bureaucratic processes invariably use to ensure rigour and quality in the RPL process.

5.1 The RPL Process

The RPL process requires people, and these are the facilitator or the advisor, the RPL panel and the assessor. Each role is clearly defined and situated in the Mauritian context. (Appendix II)

Applicant will apply for Recognition of Prior Learning at the Mauritius Qualifications Authority and s/he will submit a portfolio which will be screened by the facilitator. The portfolio will be sent to the RPL Team. An assessor will measure the learned experience against the requirements of the units for which the applicant is seeking recognition. If the applicant does not have the required knowledge and skills then s/he may have to undertake these parts of the qualifications. Upon successful completion of the process, the applicant will be issued a record of learning by the MQA.

5.1.1 The Facilitator/Advisor

The facilitator is important since s/he will be able to make the process of translation between the language or discourse of the candidates’ everyday or

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work environments into the discourse of training. For example, a candidate seeking **RPL for a TVT qualification** (regardless of the sector it is offered in) is often required to know the language of competency-based training, competency standards, elements of competency, range of variables, performance criteria and evidence. The candidates need to know this so they can ‘match’ their learning against the competencies, and so they know what kind of evidence they need and how much is sufficient.\(^{10}\)

The facilitator will be registered and appointed by the MQA and s/he will communicate to the learner the different options that can be offered to him/her after conducting a screening of the applicants’ portfolio. The registered facilitator will provide assistance to learners in presenting evidence in a coherent and systematic manner and in preparing for assessment.

### 5.1.2 The RPL Panel

The RPL panel will review the portfolio of the applicant and compare the evidence provided by the applicant with the performance criteria. A judgement will be made about whether the applicant wholly or partially meets the requirements. The panel will check that the evidence submitted conforms to the following RPL principles:

- **Validity** (is the evidence relevant?)
- **Sufficiency** (is there enough evidence?)
- **Authenticity** (is the evidence a true reflection of the candidate?)
- **Currency** (is the evidence provided reliable within the context?)

\(^{10}\) A Discussion Paper proposing AQF National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in post-compulsory education and training in Australia, 2002
The RPL panel may need to meet to discuss issues with the applicant during the assessment process. The meeting could take the form of an interview.

5.1.3 The RPL Assessor

RPL Assessor is a subject specialist who will not normally be involved in the preparation of the candidate’s RPL claim. He or she will assess the candidate whether this is through written work, practical or oral presentation. The MQA will ascertain that the assessor is duly registered in the field and sector in which s/he will assess the candidate. Registered Training institutions can be an examination centre depending on its ability to accommodate learners for assessment purposes and whether it has the proper infrastructure for the conduct of the practical assessment. The Hotel School and private training providers will thus be used.

5.1.4 Collaboration

Collaboration between facilitators, assessors, registered training providers and employers will be encouraged in order to meet the needs of the learner more effectively and to promote the RPL process in the Mauritian context. It is essential to note that the Association of Hotel and Restaurants in Mauritius is already using unit standards to train unemployed people in the north west of Mauritius under Empowerment Program. The Mauritius Qualifications Authority is represented on the Implementation Working Group of the Empowerment Program owing to the fact that unit standards and qualifications generated by the MQA are being used in same..
6. **Benefits of RPL**

In Mauritius, the RPL process will be beneficial to a multitude of people, however the focus is largely on what the individual as such will obtain from such a claim. RPL caters for Lifelong learning which puts the focus on the individual. At every stage of an individual’s life-span, there should be education and learning opportunities based on the needs of individuals, their background and competence. In Mauritius, it is believed that the RPL process would only be a means to enable promotion of the employee when in fact, the benefits are various for different stakeholders:

### 6.1 Benefits for a person

The benefits of RPL to a **person** may be:

- Formal recognition of current skills and knowledge gained outside of the classroom; formal education system.
- Encouragement towards starting a qualification.
- The learning that is recognised could be transferable and not just context-specific;
- Credit awarded as a result of RPL is of the same value as credit gained through formal learning.

### 6.2 Benefits for the Employer

RPL can support training and staff development strategies of employers and by:

- Increasing motivation and interest in workplace practice on the part of the employee/learner.
- Reducing the amount of time needed to complete a qualification and therefore requiring less time away from the workplace.
• Improve employee retention and reduce recruitment and training costs.\textsuperscript{11}
• Allowing workplace skills planning process

\textbf{6.3 Benefits for the country}

The benefits for the country will be amongst others:

• Certified Skilled workforce (qualify for better informed policy making)
• Empowered population/mobile people/multi-skilled people
• Attract investors to position Mauritius in the global village
• Reduction on cost of training of people
• Optimisation on the use of human capital
• Reduce mismatch of skills requirements (e.g. problem in call centre)

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework Guidelines for the Recognition of Prior Informal Learning (RPL) July 2005}
7. The Pilot Project
Prior to the Pilot Project, a two day workshop was conducted in Mauritius with international experts in Recognising Prior Learning. Those experts shared their knowledge and expertise with respect to international best practices which could enable the Mauritius Qualifications Authority to look forward to the implementation and application of RPL in our Mauritius.

A pilot project would be run in the Hospitality and Tourism Industry in August this year. The pilot study would allow the MQA to design and implement an assessment instrument for employees of the Tourism Industry. Sugar workers and textile workers would be assessed for their relevant years of experience in the sector. Mauritius Employers Federation (MEF), the Association of Hotel and Restaurants in Mauritius (AHRIM) and Mauritius Sugar Producers Association (MSPA) are being encouraged to support this project together with the Ministry of Labour. This RPL activity would allow the MQA and the industry to identify and document the skills and knowledge of the persons involved in the process.

7.1 The Tourism Industry

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
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<td>Number of licensed hotels</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>98</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of rooms</td>
<td>8,657</td>
<td>10,497</td>
<td>10,666</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bed occupancy rate (%)</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tourist arrivals ('000)</td>
<td>656.5</td>
<td>761.1</td>
<td>788.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Number of hotels and rooms available
The number of employees in the tourism industry is increasing every year, however the educational background of the employees in the sector varies considerably. According to a census, around 30% of the workforce in the tourism has studied up to Certificate of Primary Education while 68% have secondary educational background. Only 1% of the workforce is university graduates.\textsuperscript{12}

It is thus recognised that the tourism industry provides a large number of jobs for low qualified, unskilled workers, it also offer opportunities for people to work part time or seasonally. These features of tourism employment give it an important role in supporting the “social insertion” of many people who would otherwise remain outside the workforce.\textsuperscript{13}

Thus the initiative of the MQA to run a pilot project for RPL in the Tourism and Hospitality Industry whereby the previously acquired experience, skills and knowledge of the person would be assessed is an important step towards the implementation of our proposed approach. The pilot project essentially aims at enabling the MQA to understand where the difficulties might lie in the RPL process once it is launched.

An RPL policy is thus being developed which will clearly set out the RPL process which would be applied, including setting out the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the process, what evidence could be submitted by applicants, assessment methodology and validation of the prior

\textsuperscript{12} National Human Resource Development Plan, Ministry of Education and Human Resources, January 2007
\textsuperscript{13} Greg Richards, Mobility in the European tourism sector, the role of transparency and recognition of vocational qualifications, CEDEFOP 2001
experience acquired. Quality Assurance procedures would be built into the RPL process put in place by the MQA.
8. Conclusion

This paper has offered a contribution to the discussion on the implementation of RPL, it has also highlighted the route which MQA intends to take in order to use RPL as a mechanism for social inclusion and reintegration of unemployed people into the labour force. We have discussed the rational behind the implementation of the RPL policy and contextualize it within international best practices and recommendations.
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### List of Unit standards developed

#### 1. Tourism

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<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
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<th>Number of Unit standards</th>
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<td>National Certificate in Restaurant &amp; Bar Services</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Certificate in Food Production</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Certificate in Front Office</td>
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<td>National Certificate in Housekeeping</td>
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# MAURITIUS QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY

## List of Unit Standards developed

### 2. ICT

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<td>National Certificate in contact Centre Operations</td>
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### 3. Printing

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<td>National Certificate in prepress</td>
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<td>National Certificate in print finishing</td>
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### 4. Jewellery

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As @ 02 May07

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<th>Total Number of Qualifications developed</th>
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<td>Total Number of Standards developed</td>
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MQA RPL PROCESS

Applicant seeking RPL

MQA facilitates the portfolio development

RPL panel considers Application

Accepted

Applicant assessed against Unit Standards

Credit granted by the MQA through record of learning

Progression lifelong learning

Not Complete

Rejected

Does not meet Unit Standards

Applicant informed