

Recognizing the Stateless: A Dual-Narrative Reflection on Access to Higher Education through RPL for Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Stateless People in South Africa

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Abstract

This paper integrates a dual-narrative reflection and scoping review to explore how Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) can be reconceptualised as a vehicle for equitable access to higher education for refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons in South Africa. Drawing on national, African, and global perspectives, the study critically examines the limitations of current inclusive RPL policy and practice. Although South Africa's RPL framework is progressive in principle, its implementation excludes many displaced learners, particularly those with undocumented and informally acquired ecological knowledge and skills. Grounded in Fraser's model of social justice, Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, environmental justice theory, decolonial ecopedagogy, and ethics of care, the paper identifies key systemic barriers and opportunities for reform. Using Arksey and O'Malley's scoping review methodology alongside anonymised voices from displaced learners, the study proposes the RAPID-RPL model—Refugee Access Pathway through Inclusive, Decolonial RPL Design. This transformative framework integrates community ecological knowledge mapping, oral testimony, trauma-informed assessor training, multi-modal assessment, and policy coordination, aiming to dismantle exclusionary practices and foster epistemic justice. The proposed Green RPL Framework further aligns recognition with South Africa's National Development Plan and Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Quality Education, advancing more inclusive, responsive, and sustainable pathways for displaced learners.

Keywords: RPL, refugees, SDG 4, RAPID RPL, RPL policy, access, higher education

Introduction

In 2024, the United Nations Refugee Agency reported that forced displacement had reached unprecedented levels, with more than 123.2 people displaced worldwide as a result of war, persecution, climate change, and political instability (Sandhya, 2024). The United Nations' Global Compact on Refugees calls for inclusive, quality education at all levels, yet less than 6% of refugee youth access higher education globally. Among displaced populations—refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless individuals—many arrive with extensive life experience, multilingual competencies, and ecological and vocational skills, yet remain structurally excluded from higher education systems

(Sandhya, 2024). Access to academic pathways is not simply a matter of institutional policy; it is a litmus test for a society's commitment to equity, justice, and sustainability.

In South Africa, where constitutional commitments to human rights and redress are foundational, the RPL policy and framework was designed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) a statutory public entity that oversees South Africa's National Qualifications Framework (NQF) to widen access to education by valuing experiential and informal learning (Bolton et al., 2017). However, RPL remains underutilised and misaligned when it comes to displaced individuals—particularly those who lack formal documentation or whose knowledge systems fall outside conventional academic paradigms (Eliasson et al., 2020). Despite policy advances such as the SAQA RPL Implementation Policy (2019), there is a persistent absence of targeted guidelines, assessor training, or institutional readiness to support these learners meaningfully (Bolton & Staitai, 2025).

This paper responds to that gap by adopting a dual-narrative and scoping review approach to ensure both the depth of lived experience and the breadth of policy and practice mapping. A dual-narrative methodology refers to an approach that brings together two distinct but complementary perspectives—in this case, the reflexive voice of the practitioner and the anonymised voices of displaced learners. By combining practitioner autoethnography with learner narratives, dual-narrative inquiry creates a layered account that both humanises policy discourse and highlights systemic barriers. It allows lived experience and critical analysis to work side by side, generating a richer and more inclusive understanding of RPL in refugee contexts. Dual-narrative methodologies, especially those grounded in narrative inquiry and autoethnography, are increasingly recognized for their ability to foreground marginalised voices and challenge institutional silences (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). By weaving together practitioner reflection with anonymised narratives of displaced learners, the paper humanises the bureaucratic and policy-heavy discourse on RPL.

Simultaneously, the use of a scoping review—following Arksey and O'Malley's (2005) framework—enables a structured synthesis of emerging and established RPL practices across South Africa, Africa, and globally (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). Scoping reviews are especially well-suited to exploratory research areas with fragmented or evolving literature (Levac et al., 2010). This dual strategy allows the paper to present a grounded, real-time snapshot of the status quo while identifying under-researched areas and opportunities for systemic reform. Similar combined methodologies have been used in RPL and refugee education research, including (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021) on displaced learners in European higher education, and (Quin, 2012) on reflexivity in RPL policy implementation. This integrated method is therefore not only epistemologically appropriate but also necessary for illuminating the multifaceted and under-documented experiences of refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless people attempting to access higher education through RPL in the Global South. It weaves together reflexive practitioner accounts and anonymised voices from refugee, asylum seeker, and stateless learners, with a comprehensive review of national and international RPL literature and policy innovations. Drawing on theories of social justice (Fraser, 2008), ethics of care (Noddings, 2005; Tronto, 2013) environmental and epistemic justice—defined as fairness in recognizing whose knowledge counts and how it is valued

(Schlosberg, 2007), and decolonial ecopedagogy— which emphasises valuing Indigenous and community-based ecological knowledge while challenging Eurocentric educational models (Tuck & Yang, 2012), this work foregrounds inclusive access as both a moral imperative and a missed developmental opportunity.

The notion of Green RPL that is, *RPL that explicitly values ecological knowledge, environmental skills, and sustainability practices* are introduced in this context as a transformative framework for displaced learners (Jean, 2015). Such green skills ranging from water harvesting and urban farming to traditional ecological knowledge are highly relevant in the context of climate resilience and green economy transitions. Yet, these forms of knowledge are frequently overlooked by conventional RPL systems that privilege formal, credentialed learning. By proposing Green RPL as a justice-driven, environmentally aligned approach, this study extends the possibilities of RPL beyond redress, toward sustainability and inclusive development.

South African universities pride themselves on values of equity, Ubuntu —an African philosophy that emphasises shared humanity, interconnectedness, and collective responsibility, and public good (Ndaba, 2022). However, the absence of refugee-, asylum seeker-, and stateless-inclusive RPL practices reveals an institutional contradiction. If we are serious about social justice, our mechanisms—admissions, assessment, and articulation—must evolve to recognise not only the previously disadvantaged, but the currently displaced.

Framing Questions

- I. What are the lived and systemic experiences of facilitating RPL for refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless individuals in South Africa?
- II. How do institutional, regulatory, and pedagogical frameworks enable or hinder access?
- III. How can RPL be reconceptualised to integrate ecological knowledge and justice-based approaches?

By bringing together practitioner reflection, displaced learner narratives, and a Green RPL framework for systemic transformation, the paper aims to contribute toward inclusive, sustainable, and justice-oriented higher education practice and policy—locally and globally.

Conceptual Framework

This study draws on an interdisciplinary conceptual framework that integrates ethics, justice, and critical policy analysis to interrogate how RPL functions—or fails—for displaced populations in South Africa.

Ethics of Care (Noddings, 2013; Tronto, 2020; Tronto, 2013) provides a relational lens through which to view institutional responsibility and attentiveness. In the context of RPL, this ethical orientation compels higher education institutions to move beyond bureaucratic compliance and actively consider the lived experiences and vulnerabilities of displaced learners. As (Zembylas, 2024) argues, an ethics of care in education must be politically situated, demanding systemic change rather than interpersonal empathy alone. Care becomes a form of institutional accountability, particularly in contexts where learners face trauma, displacement, and marginalisation.

Decolonial and Social Justice Perspectives, as articulated by (Tuck & Yang, 2012) and (Fraser, 2008), problematise whose knowledge is valued in education and how access is mediated. Fraser's theory of social justice—centred on recognition, redistribution, and representation—enables a critical examination of the ways in which displaced learners are structurally excluded. Meanwhile, decolonial scholarship challenges the Eurocentric foundations of knowledge validation and calls for a revaluation of Indigenous, experiential, and informal knowledges. Within the RPL context, these perspectives highlight the epistemic ferocity of demanding Western forms of proof from learners whose knowledge systems are often oral, ecological, or embedded in survival. Environmental and Epistemic Justice frameworks (Schlosberg, 2007) extend this critique by foregrounding the ecological knowledge that many displaced learners possess. Environmental justice is not only about resource distribution but also about recognizing the knowledge and agency of marginalised communities in responding to environmental challenges. In parallel, epistemic justice demands that we interrogate who has the right to be a knower and under what conditions (Fricker, 2007). The notion of Green RPL emerges from these frameworks, positioning ecological and survival-based knowledge as legitimate and urgently relevant to both education and climate resilience.

Finally, Critical Policy Analysis (Ball, 2005) is employed to interrogate the disjuncture between policy rhetoric and practice. While the SAQA RPL Implementation Policy (2019) speaks of flexibility and redress, its silence on refugee, asylum seeker, and stateless learners reveals policy blind spots (SAQA, 2019). Critical policy studies examine how power operates through texts, institutions, and omissions. They highlight how well-intentioned policies can be undermined by rigid implementation, lack of political will, or institutional inertia (Shay, 2020). Together, these four lenses offer a multi-dimensional approach that interrogates not only institutional mechanisms but also the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning RPL in South Africa.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative hybrid methodological design that integrates reflective autoethnography, narrative inquiry, and scoping review methods to explore how RPL functions for displaced learners in South Africa. This integrated approach was selected to ensure that both personal-practitioner insight and broader empirical data could inform the analysis.

The first component, reflective autoethnography, draws on the lead author's experiences over a seven-year period working within a university-based RPL unit. Through structured reflexive writing, journal entries, and practitioner memos, insights were generated into the emotional, bureaucratic, and ethical challenges of facilitating RPL for displaced learners. Autoethnographic methods were chosen for their ability to bridge the personal and the political, especially in contexts where institutional silence and emotional labour are significant (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Narrative inquiry was used to capture two narratives representing real encounters with refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless learners. These narratives were constructed from anonymised records, field notes, and reflective discussions, carefully edited to preserve the integrity and complexity of each learner's experience. Narrative inquiry allowed for the centering of

learner voices, which are often excluded from policy and institutional discourses on access and equity (Ball, 2005).

To complement these experiential and narrative strands, a structured scoping review was conducted using the methodological framework developed by (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) later refined by (Levac et al., 2010). The review process involved identifying, selecting, and synthesising 56 sources, including academic literature, national policy documents, and grey that is, non-peer-reviewed reports, policy briefs, and practitioner documents—from SAQA and NGOs such as the Scalabrini Centre and SIHMA. Inclusion criteria were sources that explicitly addressed RPL, refugee education, displaced learner inclusion, or ecological/green skills; exclusion criteria were sources focused narrowly on technical accreditation without access implications. This triangulated methodology—combining introspective, experiential, and empirical sources—enabled a robust and multidimensional understanding of the state of RPL for displaced persons in South Africa and provided a foundation for developing the Green RPL and RAPID-RPL frameworks.

Results

The findings of this study are presented in four interrelated strands: the narratives of lived experience, the scoping review of national and international literature, the critical policy analysis of the SAQA RPL Implementation Policy (2019) (SAQA, 2019), and the conceptualisation of the RAPID-RPL model as a way forward. Each strand offers a distinct perspective on how RPL intersects with the educational trajectories and challenges of displaced learners in South Africa. This paper includes two anonymised narratives drawn from real encounters with refugee applicants through professional RPL practice in a South African Higher Education Institute. These narratives were purposively selected to reflect diversity in geography, gender, and forms of knowledge, and to illustrate different types of systemic barriers encountered in RPL processes. They have been selected and crafted to preserve authenticity while upholding ethical standards. These narratives represent diverse geographies, gender identities, and knowledge systems, reflecting the complex intersection of displacement, prior learning, and access.

Narrative 1: An RPL practitioner's journey

As a teaching and learning specialist and RPL practitioner within a university whose core ethos claims to be rooted in community, humanism, social justice, and inclusion, I continue to grapple with the absence of meaningful mechanisms to support access to higher education for displaced individuals seeking refuge in South Africa. This discomfort crystallised when I encountered a call for papers on RPL and refugee access. Reflecting on my institutional context, I realised how profoundly absent the discourse on refugees truly is within our RPL operations. In my role, I've worked with multiple foreign nationals—some refugees, some undocumented—all hoping to access higher education and rebuild their lives. They arrive hopeful but often leave disillusioned. Most lack formal documentation. Many are linguistically marginalised. They struggle to demonstrate their learning in ways the institution recognises. Even when they possess strong epistemic resources—experiential, linguistic, technical—these are

often dismissed or untranslatable within institutional logics. Universities are competitive, bureaucratised systems. With thousands of South African citizens also turned away each year, advocating for refugees becomes an uphill battle. I've witnessed how colleagues, though not always hostile, avoid engaging with such cases—citing unclear policies, funding risks, or administrative constraints. This is the contradiction I live with: working in a space that claims to honor social justice, while watching the door quietly close on the stateless.

Narrative 2: A Refugee Learner's Pathway

I came here after fleeing violence. I have worked as a lab assistant, as a teacher, and as a translator. I speak four languages. I have no papers. But I have knowledge. I want to study nursing — to give back. They told me I needed to go back and get a school certificate. I cannot. I am not safe there.

This narrative is drawn from the anonymised real voices of two refugee learners who engaged with the RPL Unit in recent years. Their lived experiences, while unique, shared common themes: a desire to contribute, histories of unrecognized learning, and systemic exclusion. The narratives reflect their words, experiences, and challenges, shaped into a coherent account that preserves their voices while ensuring confidentiality.

Narrative 3:

I Have Lived, Not Learned" "I never went to school. I worked on farms, in kitchens, and raised six children. I learned how to compost, how to grow vegetables in dry soil, how to make soap and medicine from herbs. When I came here, I was told that I have no skills. But I have lived, not learned, they said. And I wonder—what do they think learning is?

This narrative, drawn from a refugee woman encountered in the RPL higher education practice, highlights how ecological and care knowledge is marginalised within traditional academic frames. Her experiential knowledge in sustainability, agriculture, and healing practices exemplifies the need for a Green RPL model that values knowledge beyond formal schooling. The narratives in this study revealed deep structural inequalities, institutional inertia, and epistemic exclusion. The first narrative, written from the practitioner's perspective, highlighted the dissonance between institutional commitments to equity and the lived realities of those attempting to navigate RPL processes. The refugee learner narratives highlighted challenges related to documentation, linguistic marginalisation, and the dismissal of informal knowledge, particularly in ecological and caregiving domains. These stories were not isolated but reflective of broader systemic issues. The systemic patterns of exclusion and epistemic marginalisation revealed in these narratives are not anecdotal but reflective of broader structural trends, as evidenced in the scoping review conducted for this study. The review affirms that institutional rigidity, documentation demands, and narrow epistemological recognition continue to obstruct equitable access for displaced learners (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005; SAQA, 2019; Zembylas, 2024).

The scoping review of 56 documents reinforced experiential insights, revealing that only a handful explicitly reference refugee or asylum-seeking populations within RPL

contexts. While a few South African higher education institutions have made general strides in implementing RPL, their systems remain rigid and ill-equipped to accommodate undocumented or stateless applicants. This inflexibility reflects a gap between the progressive intent of the SAQA RPL Implementation Policy (2019)—which promotes access and recognition of informal and non-formal learning—and its exclusionary practice, as the policy notably omits key displaced populations, failing to mention terms like “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” or “stateless person,” and relies heavily on formal documentation. In contrast, global models such as Canada’s WES Gateway Program (World Education Services Gateway) recognises prior learning for refugees who have partial or missing documentation, using alternative evidence such as oral histories. Germany’s IQ Netzwerk (Integration through Qualification Network) validates refugee and migrant skills through competency-based assessments and workplace integration. Uganda’s UNESCO Qualifications Passport exemplify more flexible, trauma-informed, and inclusive approaches to recognizing prior learning for displaced populations, offering valuable insights for South African adaptation (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021). Locally, initiatives like the Scalabrini Centre’s UpLearn demonstrate promising practice, though they remain peripheral to mainstream RPL frameworks and disconnected from national policy (Ashfield, 2021; Manirageni & Ballard, 2015).

Several international models offer valuable insights into inclusive RPL practices for displaced learners. Uganda’s implementation of the UNESCO Qualifications Passport adopts structured interviews and qualitative assessments to accommodate undocumented individuals, prioritising potential over certification and expanding access to vocational and tertiary education (UNESCO, 2022). In Canada, the WES Gateway Program recognises partial documentation and integrates oral histories into formal evaluation processes, facilitating smoother academic and professional transitions for refugees, particularly from Syria and Afghanistan (Manks et al., 2022). Germany’s IQ Netzwerk advances a competency-based model that emphasises practical demonstrations and workplace integration, reducing reliance on documentary evidence and supporting skills verification for refugees and migrants (BAMF, 2021). In contrast, while NGOs in Kenya and Ethiopia—such as Windle International and Jesuit Refugee Service—provide valuable informal education, their efforts remain largely detached from national qualification systems, thereby limiting pathways into formal education and employment (Bassetto, 2022).

Together, the international cases reviewed illustrate a spectrum of innovative RPL practices, each reflecting varied levels of institutionalization and responsiveness to the realities of displacement. Models from Uganda, Canada, Germany, Kenya, and Ethiopia provide instructive examples of how flexible, trauma-informed, and inclusive approaches—such as structured interviews, partial documentation recognition, and oral histories—can expand educational and professional access for refugees. These cases offer practical lessons and policy pathways for reimagining RPL in the South African context. In contrast, an interrogation of the SAQA RPL Implementation Policy (2019) reveals both progressive intent and critical limitations. While the policy articulates commitments to access, redress, and the recognition of informal and non-formal learning, it remains silent on the specific needs of displaced populations. The absence of terms such as “refugee,” “asylum seeker,” or “stateless person” renders these groups

invisible within the national RPL framework. Moreover, implementation remains overly reliant on formal documentation, thereby excluding those whose competencies are embodied, experiential, and uncertificated (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021).

In response to these systemic exclusions, this paper proposes the RAPID-RPL model—Refugee Access Pathway through Inclusive, Decolonial RPL Design—as a transformative and contextually grounded alternative. Rooted in the principles of flexibility, ecological justice, and care-based pedagogy, the model reframes RPL as both an ethical imperative and an epistemological intervention. It operationalises this vision through key mechanisms: *community knowledge mapping*, which validates informal and collective learning; *oral testimony* as credible evidence of competence; *trauma-informed assessor training* which equips assessors to recognise and respond sensitively to the psychological, emotional, and social effects of displacement on learners, ensuring culturally and emotionally responsive evaluation; and intersectoral policy coordination across SAQA, higher education institutions, and immigration authorities. to ensure culturally and emotionally responsive evaluation; and *intersectoral policy coordination* across SAQA, higher education institutions, and immigration authorities. Rather than offering a parallel or exceptional pathway, RAPID-RPL positions itself as a paradigmatic shift in how RPL is conceptualised and implemented in contexts of forced displacement challenging dominant narratives of validation and fostering systemic inclusion.

Thematic Analysis

I. Documentation and SAQA Equivalence

A significant and persistent barrier impeding refugee access to RPL in South Africa is the stringent requirement for formal documentation to facilitate South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) equivalence evaluations. Refugees frequently arrive without complete academic records, often due to the destruction, loss, or inaccessibility of documentation resulting from displacement, conflict, and forced migration (Bajwa et al., 2017; Bridges & Walls, 2018; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). The persistent reliance on formal credentials within national qualification recognition processes can operate as a structural gatekeeping mechanism, inadvertently excluding displaced individuals from accessing higher education and labour markets (Cele, 2021). Globally, similar challenges have prompted the adoption of alternative recognition strategies—such as oral histories, partial evidence, and community-based validations—to accommodate undocumented or informally acquired learning (Eliasson et al., 2020; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). While such practices have gained traction in several international contexts, the South African RPL ecosystem remains predominantly tied to conventional evidence standards. This entrenched procedural rigidity continues to marginalise refugee learners, thereby reinforcing systemic exclusion rather than enabling inclusive educational access (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021).

II. Lack of Trained Assessors

The effective implementation of RPL for refugees depends significantly on assessors who are skilled not only in technical assessment but also in trauma-informed and culturally responsive methodologies. Current RPL assessors in South Africa predominantly have limited formal training in trauma-aware assessment practices or

the evaluation of informal and non-formal knowledge forms, particularly those shaped by displacement experiences (Ashfield, 2021; Sandhya, 2024). This deficiency results in assessments that may inadvertently re-traumatize candidates or fail to appreciate the epistemic diversity of displaced learners. Pillay (2019) highlights the risk that expanding access without true epistemic inclusion can lead to institutional practices—including assessment regimes—that inadvertently harm displaced or marginalized learners by failing to validate their ways of knowing and lived experiences (Pillay, 2019). Globally, the scholars emphasize the need for assessor training frameworks that are multi-layered and integrate social-emotional intelligence, cultural competence, and trauma sensitivity as core competencies to enable access through RPL (Carr, 2025; De Paor, 2024). The absence of such capacity-building mechanisms in South Africa limits RPL's transformative potential for refugees, reinforcing systemic barriers (Ashfield, 2021).

Institutional Rigidity

South African higher education institutions often adhere to bureaucratic RPL protocols that emphasize linear, uninterrupted academic trajectories, which are inaccessible to many refugees whose educational journeys have been forcibly interrupted (Ashfield, 2021; Bajwa et al., 2017; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). This institutional rigidity manifests as inflexible policies and procedures that fail to accommodate the unique, non-linear pathways of displaced learners (Tywabi, 2020). Such rigidity contrasts with emerging international best practices advocating for adaptive, learner-centred RPL models that recognize the complexity of refugee learners' educational histories and lived experiences (Oshodi, 2023). Without institutional reform that embraces flexibility and inclusivity, refugee candidates are often excluded from meaningful participation in post-secondary education (Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021).

III. Emotional Toll

The emotional and psychological burden of navigating RPL processes in the context of displacement is significant for both refugee learners and facilitators (Sandhya, 2024). Studies indicate that refugees often face feelings of hopelessness, alienation, and emotional precarity due to repeated systemic exclusion and the precariousness of their status (Pillay, 2019; Sandhya, 2024). Simultaneously, facilitators and assessors who work closely with refugee populations experience secondary trauma, burnout, and emotional fatigue as they attempt to bridge institutional gaps without adequate support or resources (De Paor, 2024; Pillay, 2019). The affective labour involved in these interactions calls for an ethics of care framework within RPL practice to address and mitigate emotional tolls (Tronto, 2020). Ignoring this dimension risks compromising the sustainability and efficacy of refugee-focused RPL initiatives.

IV. Policy Misalignment

South Africa's fragmented policy environment creates significant challenges for effective RPL access for refugees. The lack of coordination and alignment between immigration policies, higher education frameworks, and RPL regulations results in gaps that exclude or marginalize displaced learners (Ashfield, 2021; Bajwa et al., 2017). For example, immigration policies often impose documentation and residency requirements incongruent with RPL guidelines, while higher education institutions operate under regulatory frameworks that do not account for refugee realities (Bassetto, 2022; Bridges

& Walls, 2018). This disjuncture undermines policy coherence and implementation fidelity, reducing the transformative potential of RPL as a tool for social justice and inclusion (Bassetto, 2022; Bridges & Walls, 2018). Comparative studies show that countries with integrated inter-agency frameworks achieve better refugee education outcomes by harmonizing policy and practice (Eliasson et al., 2020; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022).

Policy Analysis: Gaps in Refugee and Stateless Person Consideration in South African RPL Policy

Despite South Africa's constitutional and policy commitments to human rights and educational access—as articulated in the National Qualifications Framework Amendment Act No. 12 of 2019 (SAQA, 2019) and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013)—current RPL policies fall short in addressing the specific needs of refugees and stateless individuals (Ashfield, 2021). These policies continue to presume the availability of formal documentation and overlook the disrupted educational trajectories and socio-political marginalisation experienced by displaced populations (DHET, 2019). The fragmented governance across SAQA, higher education institutions, the Department of Home Affairs, and the Department of Basic Education results in jurisdictional ambiguities and policy silos that undermine coherent responses (Ashfield, 2021; Bajwa et al., 2017; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022). For instance, SAQA's documentation-dependent recognition processes are misaligned with restrictive immigration policies that constrain refugees' access to credentials and mobility (SAHRC, 2017 (Paulin et al., 2024). Moreover, the policy environment lacks explicit guidelines for trauma-informed assessments and community-based validation mechanisms—elements critical for equity in refugee education (Bassetto, 2022; Branson & Whitelaw, 2025; Fourie, 2018; Gándara & Jones, 2020; Van Schalkwyk et al., 2022). This disjuncture reflects a broader failure to align with international frameworks such as the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications (UNESCO, 2019), which advocates for flexible and inclusive recognition practices. In sum, the current RPL policy architecture does not operationalise a contextually responsive, equity-oriented framework, leaving the transformative potential of RPL for displaced learners largely unrealised (Bouhlal & Wells, 2019).

Transition to the RAPID-RPL Model

Thematic and policy analyses reveal deeply entrenched systemic barriers within South Africa's current RPL landscape that hinder equitable access for refugees and stateless individuals. These include documentation requirements, limited assessor capacity, institutional inflexibility, and the emotional vulnerabilities of displaced learners—factors that underscore the urgent need for a transformative, not incremental, shift in RPL design and practice (De Paor, 2024). Traditional credential-based and bureaucratic models lack the flexibility and cultural responsiveness required to accommodate displaced learners' lived realities (Pillay, 2019). Furthermore, the emotional toll on both learners and facilitators highlights the necessity of embedding an ethics of care in assessment processes to ensure validity, dignity, and empowerment (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021; Sandhya, 2024). In response, this paper proposes the RAPID-RPL model—Refugee Access Pathway through Inclusive, Decolonial RPL Design—a framework grounded in inclusivity, flexibility, and justice. The acronym *RAPID* reflects the model's

key principles and structural innovations, designed to dismantle systemic exclusion and enable meaningful participation for displaced learners in post-school education.

R- Refugee centered

A- Accessible pathways

P- Participatory and Authentic Assessment

I - Inclusive design

D- Decolonial/ Developmental praxis

The RAPID-RPL framework is conceived not as a supplementary pathway, but as a holistic reconceptualization of Recognition of Prior Learning—one that centres inclusivity, ecological justice, and trauma-informed pedagogy. It seeks to dismantle exclusionary legacies embedded in current systems through mechanisms such as community knowledge mapping, oral testimonies, trauma-aware assessor training, and coordinated policy engagement among SAQA, higher education institutions, and immigration authorities. Aligned with global calls for decolonial and intersectional recognition practices, the model challenges Eurocentric epistemologies and foregrounds the lived experiences and knowledge systems of marginalised learners (Dastile, 2013; Walter D. Mignolo & Walsh, 2021; Zembylas, 2024). In doing so, RAPID-RPL advances both access and epistemic justice, positioning transformative education as a vehicle for social inclusion and sustainable development.

The RAPID-RPL Model: Refugee Access Pathway through Inclusive, Decolonial RPL Design

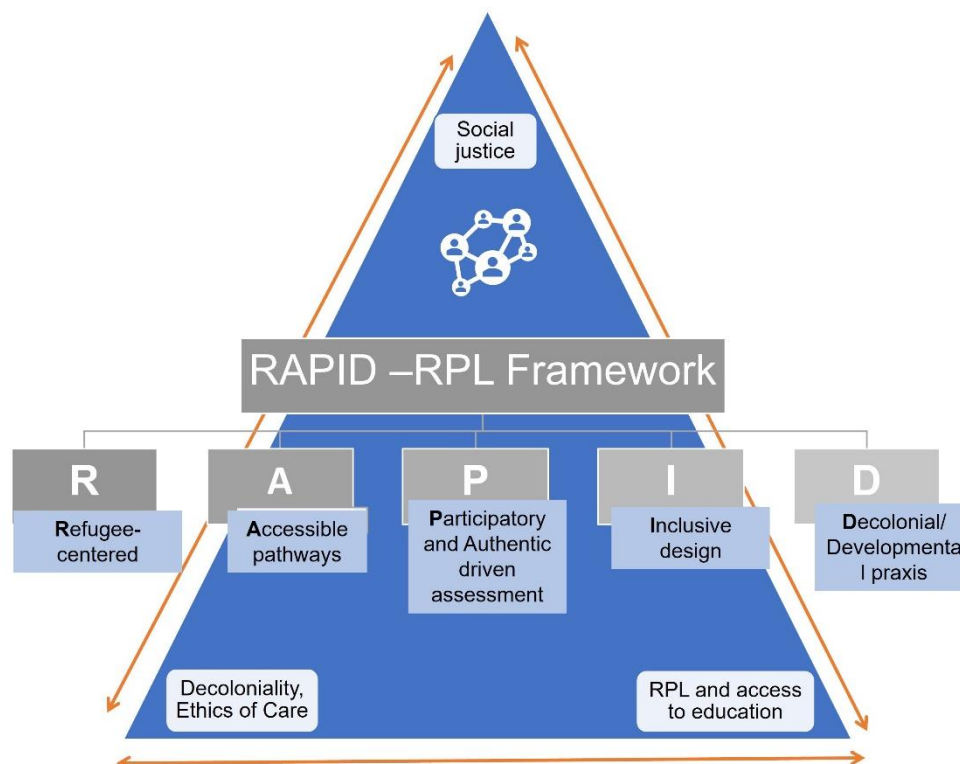


Figure 1. RAPID-RPL model for refugees and displaced learners

The RAPID-RPL model is proposed as a comprehensive, justice-oriented framework that addresses the structural, pedagogical, and policy barriers impeding refugee access to RPL in South Africa. Grounded in the principles of *inclusivity*, *ecological justice*, and *care ethics*, the model repositions RPL as a transformative, equity-driven process that recognises displaced learners' diverse knowledge systems and lived experiences. It aims to foster institutional responsiveness, policy coherence, and the dismantling of exclusionary legacies embedded in conventional RPL systems.

At the heart of the RAPID-RPL model are three interrelated principles: *flexibility and inclusivity*, *ecological justice*, and *care-based pedagogy*. It challenges rigid, credential-centric paradigms by incorporating diverse forms of evidence—such as oral testimony, community-validated knowledge, and informal learning—as legitimate demonstrations of competence (Ashfield, 2021; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021). This approach expands the epistemological scope of recognition practices, validating non-Western ways of knowing often marginalised in higher education (Pherali & Abu Moghli, 2021). Ecological justice underpins the model's sensitivity to the entangled socio-political, economic, and environmental conditions shaping refugee learners' trajectories. Rather than framing displaced learners through deficit lenses, RAPID-RPL affirms their resilience, agency, and contextual knowledge (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2017; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). Complementing this, a care-based pedagogical orientation acknowledges the emotional and psychological toll of displacement, embedding trauma-informed and ethically grounded practices to create safe and dignified learning spaces (Sandhya, 2024).

These core principles are operationalised through five interconnected mechanisms:

- I. **Community Knowledge Mapping:** Utilising participatory and culturally rooted methodologies to document prior learning through collective memory and oral history
- II. **Oral Testimony as Evidence:** Formalising oral narratives as valid, rigorous forms of assessment, supported by structured protocols to ensure fairness
- III. **Trauma-Informed Assessor Training:** Providing assessors with training in trauma sensitivity, ethical care, and cultural responsiveness
- IV. **Policy Coordination and Intersectoral Collaboration:** Advocating alignment between SAQA, higher education institutions, and immigration authorities to streamline refugee access and clarify documentation pathways
- V. **Iterative Reflective Practice:** Embedding continuous feedback loops from learners and assessors to ensure adaptability and ongoing improvement

Implementing the RAPID-RPL model necessitates deep institutional commitment to policy reform, capacity development, and resource allocation. Higher education institutions must revise admission and assessment policies to incorporate flexible, context-sensitive, and trauma-informed practices. SAQA must develop enabling guidelines that accommodate alternative evidence and facilitate inter-agency collaboration. Furthermore, assessor training programs must be institutionalized and

sustainably supported to ensure quality, consistency, and care. In the context of RPL, this involves recognizing and validating learning acquired through informal, non-formal, and community-based experiences; adapting assessment methods to accommodate oral testimonies, portfolios, and other alternative evidence; and embedding trauma-informed, culturally responsive practices that account for the complex lived experiences of displaced learners. Beyond procedural reform, RAPID-RPL signifies a broader epistemological and ethical realignment. By positioning displaced learners as knowledge holders rather than passive recipients, the model advances decolonial and socially just education systems. It aligns with South Africa's constitutional values and its commitments under international frameworks such as the UNESCO Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications (Ashfield, 2021; Martin & Stulgaitis, 2022; Paulin et al., 2024). To consolidate the model's conceptual architecture and demonstrate how ecological and justice-based approaches to RPL can be implemented, the following table presents the Green RPL + RAPID-RPL Framework. This synthesis highlights actionable mechanisms for addressing the structural, epistemic, and affective barriers limiting refugee access to higher education (Jean, 2015).

Component/ actionable mechanism	Description
Community Knowledge Mapping	Identify green skills and local ecological knowledge rooted in displaced learners' lived experiences.
Micro-Credentials	Formal, short learning programmes recognized by higher education institutions or professional bodies that may contribute to a qualification; in some South African contexts, these can be structured as stackable credentials, but they are not synonymous with digital badges. For example, a micro-credential in permaculture or water harvesting can be assessed flexibly and formally recognized, whereas badges typically denote informal or digital recognition.
Multi-Modal Assessment	Incorporates skill demonstrations, digital storytelling, and peer verification to validate diverse forms of prior learning.
Trauma-Informed Assessor Training	Prepares assessors to engage ethically with learners affected by trauma, displacement, and systemic exclusion.
Policy Coordination	Advocates alignment between SAQA, DHET, higher education institutions, and immigration authorities for coherent and inclusive implementation.

The RAPID-RPL model marks a significant step toward redressing entrenched inequities within South Africa's Recognition of Prior Learning system for refugees and stateless persons. Centred on flexibility, ecological justice, and care-based pedagogy, it addresses key exclusionary barriers—ranging from rigid documentation requirements and narrow assessment practices to institutional inertia, emotional precarity, and fragmented policy regimes. Crucially, the model reframes RPL as a socially just, inclusive, and epistemically responsive process that validates knowledge shaped through displacement and marginalization.

If implemented effectively, RAPID-RPL holds the potential to transform institutional cultures and policy frameworks, enabling more equitable access to higher education for displaced learners. By establishing recognition pathways that are both credible and humane, the model advances epistemic justice and supports South Africa's broader commitments to social inclusion, sustainable development, and human rights (Paulin et al., 2024). It also offers a scalable framework for other national contexts, positioning South Africa as a frontrunner in decolonial and innovative RPL design.

Discussion

This study's findings affirm the utility of a conceptual framework that integrates ethics of care, decolonial theory, and critical policy analysis to interrogate RPL for displaced learners in South Africa. Thematic insights reveal the profound emotional toll experienced by both refugees and facilitators navigating exclusionary, bureaucratic systems. Drawing on (Tronto, 2020; Tronto, 2013) and (Noddings, 2005, 2013) it becomes clear that institutional processes rooted in technocratic neutrality fail to address the relational and affective dimensions of displaced learners' experiences. This echoes the argument that care must be institutionalised as a collective political ethic rather than an individualised gesture (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2023).

From a decolonial and epistemic justice standpoint, the exclusion of ecological and survival-based knowledges—such as farming, composting, and herbal healing—constitutes symbolic erasure (Tuck & Yang, 2012; Fraser, 2008). These community-rooted forms of knowledge, integral to many refugee populations, are sidelined by RPL systems that prioritise written transcripts, linear trajectories, and formal certification. This exclusion reinforces Eurocentric epistemologies and calls attention to the need, as argued by (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2023; Tywabi, 2020) for plural knowledge recognition within RPL. This oversight is particularly troubling given the alignment between displaced learners' ecological expertise and South Africa's green economy goals and Sustainable Development Commitments. As (Akindolani, 2023; Barrientos, 2023; Bolton & Staitai, 2025; Jean, 2015) contend, environmental and epistemic justice are interconnected, and valuing ecological knowledge within RPL not only affirms learner dignity but also advances national sustainability imperatives. Policy analysis, guided by (Ball, 2005) policy cycle and (Cerna, 2013) implementation theory, further demonstrates that despite SAQA's RPL Implementation Policy (2019) presenting progressive language, it remains disconnected from refugee realities. The policy's silence on refugee and stateless learners, reliance on rigid documentation, and lack of alignment with immigration frameworks perpetuate systemic exclusion. A critique of institutional inertia is particularly resonant here: technocratic rigidity undermines policy potential and sustains access barriers (Cruickshank & Abbinnett, 2019).

Emerging from these intersecting challenges is the RAPID-RPL model—Refugee Access Pathway through Inclusive, Decolonial RPL Design—a transformative framework that centres displaced learners as legitimate knowledge holders. It incorporates trauma-informed assessor training, oral testimonies, community knowledge mapping, and policy coordination across sectors. Grounded in care ethics and ecological justice, RAPID-RPL offers both a practical intervention and an ideological shift to reposition RPL as a mechanism of justice and inclusion in South African higher education.

Limitations and Future Work

This study's reliance on narratives of two refugees and a single RPL practitioner, while ethically appropriate, deeper engagement with refugee voices from a broader perspective is warranted. Future research should adopt participatory and co-researcher methodologies to center displaced learners' lived experiences. The scoping review also revealed a dearth of refugee-focused RPL research in South Africa, marking a critical gap for future empirical inquiry. Building on this foundation, subsequent studies should pilot and evaluate the RAPID-RPL model within institutional contexts, assessing feasibility, outcomes, and scalability. Research into micro-credentialing and digital portfolios for undocumented learners could further support flexible recognition mechanisms. Additionally, the impact of trauma-informed assessor training on pedagogical practice and learner outcomes merits in-depth investigation to strengthen ethical RPL delivery.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that South Africa's current RPL frameworks are ill-equipped to support the equitable inclusion of refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless individuals in higher education. Despite progressive policy rhetoric, implementation remains bureaucratically rigid and insufficiently attuned to the lived realities of displaced learners. Using a hybrid methodology combining narrative synthesis, policy critique, and scoping review, the study identifies entrenched structural, pedagogical, and epistemological barriers that sustain exclusion. In response, the Green RPL and RAPID-RPL models are proposed as holistic, justice-oriented alternatives. These frameworks emphasise flexibility, affective recognition, and epistemic inclusion, reframing displaced learners as contributors to ecological and educational futures. Realising South Africa's constitutional and global commitments under the SDGs and UNESCO conventions requires radically reimagining RPL as a transformative mechanism for empowerment, equity, and dignity. Achieving this vision demands collective effort across policymakers, higher education institutions, RPL practitioners, and displaced communities. Only through such collaboration, rooted in decolonial and care-based principles, can RPL fulfil its potential as a truly inclusive and sustainable vehicle for higher education transformation—both in South Africa and globally.

Declarations

Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.

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Data availability

The data collected and analysed in this study are available from the author.

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