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QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICE IN THE PROVISIONING OF RPL (RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING) IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A Thesis by

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QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICE IN THE PROVISIONING OF RPL (RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING) IN HIGHER EDUCATION

"Quality, like 'freedom' or 'justice', is an elusive concept. We all have an instinctive understanding of what it means but find it difficult to articulate, let alone to measure it"

Diana Green (1994:12)

DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work contained in this Thesis is my own original work and has not been previously in its entirety or part been submitted at any university for a degree.

Signature:_____

Date:_____

ABSTRACT

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), quality, quality audits, quality assurance, quality management system, quality cycles, self-evaluation, internal evaluation, external evaluation, evaluation research, continuous quality improvement, and customer satisfaction.

The policy and practice of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) remains a contested area in the higher education sector. While a growing body of research on RPL has become available, little is known about the quality assurance dimensions of this policy and its current expression in higher education practice. Accordingly, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive and detailed portrait of the manner in which RPL is implemented in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. The central question is does the RPL system that is in place at this institution meet national and international requirements for quality and quality assurance? If not, what are the reasons and how can the faculty improve its RPL practice? The research sub-questions addressed are the following:

- What is the quality of the inputs used to design the RPL that is in place in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria?
- How does the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria assess RPL candidates for their prior learning?
- What is the effect of the output of the RPL system on client satisfaction?

A mixed methods research design was used for this study. A single Faculty (Education) was selected as the data collection site, to reveal the deeper and nuanced impact of the process of implementation of the RPL programme. A semi-structured interview schedule administered to the senior managers of the faculty was to elicit information on how the RPL system was conceptualised and designed. This process included the Dean (Faculty of Education); Head of Department (Curriculum Studies); Head of Department (Educational Management, Law and Policy Studies); Director (Centre for Evaluation and Assessment) and the Director (Centre for Joint Science, Mathematics and Technology Education). To determine whether there is a link

between what the Quality Assurance Unit of the university promotes and application of such principles and procedures at service delivery level, an interview with the Director of the QA Unit was done. Other interviews involved students (undergraduates and postgraduates); the non-academic staff and lecturers within all the departments of the faculty, to determine whether they knew or were aware of RPL related activities in the faculty.

An observation tool was constructed to examine the quality of the assessment process, which involved RPL learners, assessors, evidence facilitators, verifiers, moderators and RPL administrators. A questionnaire was administered to RPL learners involved in the assessment process to determine their satisfaction with the output of the RPL programme. Lecturers who participated in the RPL assessment process were interviewed to determine their experiences. Finally, an observational checklist was used to determine quality indicators at macro (administrative) and micro (academic) levels. The data was analysed using pattern matching, discrepancy, content and interpretational analyses methods. The research findings presented are in the form of a "thick" narrative on the quality of RPL implementation, that is, what the faculty should do to improve or strengthen the current system, and a portrayal of how the RPL programme truly operates.

The findings indicate that a relatively good system of RPL provisioning is in place in the Faculty of Education, with a few areas of concern (weaknesses). The major problem is that this system is not benefiting the majority of people it was intended for. The system is "selective" and "exclusionary" in nature. There are clear procedures and processes for RPL assessment, which are adhered to strictly by faculty assessors. The RPL system that is currently in place is satisfactory to those who were assessed for prior learning during the period 2003-2006 and unsatisfactory at the level of the lecturers who participated in the assessment process. Most of them indicated that RPL is an add-on activity to their workloads, with very little incentives from management. To those who were not part of the assessment process, but were assumed to have received information from the faculty, the findings indicated that they knew very little about RPL and how it is being assessed in the faculty. From the client's perspective, most (eighty four percent) said if they knew how this system operates in the faculty, they would want to be assessed for their prior learning.

An extensive examination of the RPL practice in the Faculty of Education gave useful insights on the quality of RPL provisioning. Future research needs to concentrate on evaluations on how RPL is implemented in the other faculties of the university. Second to this, is to begin to provide answers as to what causes full-scale implementation of RPL problematic in the higher education sector, to provide empirical data to policy makers for decision-making purposes. Thirdly, to provide solutions towards the sustainability of the RPL system in the higher education sector, there is a need to do studies on the cost-effectiveness of RPL implementation.

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"I had a time of my life at the Groenkloof Campus"

Mokabe Julia Motaung
South Africa, 30 April 2007

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KEY WORDS

Assessment

Benchmarking

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

Evaluation

External evaluation

Higher Education (HE)

Institutional Audits

Internal evaluation (self-evaluation)

Measurement

Peer Reviews

Quality

Quality Assurance (QA)

Quality Audits

Quality Control (QC)

Quality Management System (QMS)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Total Quality Management (TQM)

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACE	Advanced Certificate in Education
ACTA	Australian Credit Transfer Agency
AP(E)L	Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
AQFB	Australian Qualifications Framework Board
AVCC	Australian Vice Chancellors Committee
CAEL	Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
CAPLA	Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
CBT	Competency Based Training
CEatUP	Continuing Education at the University of Pretoria
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CIRL	Canadian Institute for Recognition of Learning
CLL	College Level Learning
CLFDB	Canadian Labour Force Development Board
CNAA	Council for National Academic Award
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CTP	Committee of Technikon Principals
ETQA	Education and Training Quality Assurors
FEU	Further Education Unit
FBM	Faculty Board Meeting
HE	Higher Education
HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HDIs	Historically Disadvantaged Institutions
HAIs	Historically Advantaged Institutions
HOD	Head of Department
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
inCCA	Inter Consortia Credit Agreement
JET	Joint Education Trust
MEC	Making Education Count
MEd (CIDD)	Master's in Education (Curriculum Instructional Design and Development)
MEd (CIE)	Master's in Education (Computer Integrated Education)

NFROT	National Framework for the Recognition of Training
NLRD	National Learner Record Database
NPHE	National Plan for Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
NQAF	National Quality Assurance Forum
OBET	Outcomes Based Education and Training
OEL	Office of Experiential Learning
PDC	Portfolio Development Course
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PGCHE	Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education
PHEIs	Private Higher Education Institutions
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment
PLAR	Prior Learning and Accreditation
PM	Programme Manager
PoE	Portfolio of Evidence
QA	Quality Assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
RPLCF	Recognition of Prior Learning Committee for Faculty
SACE	South African Council of Educators
SADC	Southern African Development Communities
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SAUVCA	South African Universities Vice Chancellors Association
SCOTVEC	Scottish Vocational Education Council
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences
TQM	Total Quality Management
TUC	Transvaal University College
UNISA	University of South Africa
UWC	University of the Western Cape
WDD	Workforce Development Division

LIST OF TERMINOLOGY

ASSESSMENT	The process of collecting evidence of learners' work to measure and make judgements about the achievement or non-achievement of specified National Qualifications Framework (NQF) standards and/or qualifications.
BENCHMARKING	The process of identifying, understanding, and adapting outstanding (best) practices from organisations anywhere in the world to help your organisation improve its performance.
CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT	This is a concept that came out of the business industry. Rather than creating a culture of blame if things do not go well, the focus is on a team approach to improvement that rewards the group when things get better. This concept is based on Deming's famous quality cycle: plan, do, check and act.
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING	This type of learning involves direct participation in, or observation of, an event. Learning occurs when participants gain something, such as an understanding, appreciation, ability, or skill. Thus experiential learning involves direct participation or observation plus the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and abilities (Colvin 2006:83). Morris Keeton says: "all learning is experiential" (Hoffmann 2006a:4).
EXTERNAL EVALUATION	The process whereby a specialised agency collects data, information, and evidence about an institution, a particular unit of a given institution,

	or a core activity of an institution, in order to make a statement about its quality. External evaluation is carried out by a team of external experts, peers, or inspectors, and usually requires three distinct operations: analysis of the self-study report; site visit; and the drafting of an evaluation report (Vlãsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea 2004:37-38).
EVALUATION	The process of examining and passing judgement on the appropriateness or level of quality or standards.
INTERNAL EVALUATION	A process of quality review undertaken within an institution for its own ends (with or without the involvement of external peers). It is something an institution does for its own purposes. From an external agency perspective, internal review is seen as the part of the process that an institution undertakes in preparation for an external event, such as peer review or site visits. This process is not the same as self-evaluation.
MONITORING	It is the regular observation and recording of ongoing activities in an institution; project or programme of study. Monitoring provides information that will be useful in: analysing the situation in the institution, project or programme; ensuring all the activities are carried out properly by the right people and in time; identifying problems facing the institution, project or programme; and finding solutions.
QUALITY	Quality is about:

	• Knowing what you want to do and how you want to do it; • Learning from what you do; • Using what you learn to develop your organisation and its services; • Seeking to achieve continuous improvement; and • Satisfying your stakeholders – those different people and groups with an interest in your organisation or enterprise (http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/index.cfm?pg=169).
QUALITY AUDITS	These are activities undertaken to measure the quality of products or services that have already been made or delivered. Where a product or service has a number of components, each component may be subject to an audit. The findings of such an audit could contribute to achieving the desired quality end product or service (SAQA 2001:10).
QUALITY ASSURANCE	Quality assurance refers to the sum of activities that assure the quality of products and services at the time of production and delivery. It includes: • Clarifying and describing accurately and comprehensively what the customer expects and needs. • Ensuring that those who make the product or deliver the service have a clear, comprehensive and accurate understanding of the quality standard. • Ensuring that those who make the product or deliver the service have available resources and systems that can deliver the required

	quality. • Ensuring that those who make the product or deliver the service have the skills, knowledge and motivation to make the products or deliver the service. • Ensuring that those who make the product or deliver the service have the means and skills to monitor the quality of what they make or deliver to modify what they do to better meet the required standard. • Independently auditing and monitoring quality and feeding back this information to those who produce or provide or are otherwise in a position to contribute to enhancing quality (SAQA 2001:10).
QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM	This is the sum of the activities and information an organisation uses to enable it to better and more consistently deliver the products and services that meet and exceed the needs and expectations of its customers and beneficiaries, more cost effectively and cost efficiently, today and in the future (SAQA 2001:9).
RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING	RPL is the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification and the acceptance for the purposes of qualification of that, which meet the requirements.
SELF EVALUATION	This is the systematic collection of administrative data, the questioning of students and graduates, and holding moderated interviews with lecturers and students, resulting in a self-study report. Self-

	evaluation is basically a collective institutional reflection and an opportunity for quality enhancement. The resulting report further serves as a provider of information for the review team in charge of the external evaluation (Vlãsceanu *et al* 2004:38).
VERIFICATION	A procedure whereby the institution checks the information the student submitted, for RPL assessment, for example, by phoning the student's former employers, requesting proof of qualifications, among other things.

LANGUAGE EDITING, DESIGN AND LAYOUT

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that I have conducted the English language editing of this Thesis, as well as the technical editing and design and layout. I am a member of the Professional Editors' Group (PEG).

Signature:_____

Date:_____