

CHAPTER 3

THE DESIGN OF THE RPL SYSTEM

Inputs, process and outputs

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the investigation conducted on the research and knowledge base that describes how to design a quality RPL programme, in relation to the inputs, process and outputs. Quality Indicators (QIs) as synthesised from the national and international literature for each process are in essence the standards (criteria) for evaluating the quality and quality assurance measures in RPL provisioning in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. The chapter concludes with a detailed discussion of the conceptual framework for this study.

3.2 THE DESIGN OF THE RPL SYSTEM

A 'quality system' means a systematic mechanism for collecting, collating and interpreting data of all kind, in order to deliver a quality product and service to all customers, internal and external (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:132). Quality of design means that the product or service must be formed in such a way as to do the job required of it in the best way possible. Above all else, it must do what the customer wants it to do, i.e. offer client satisfaction.

There are certain factors that influence the design process, that is, availability of resources, dictates of the national policy, needs of the higher education and employers, amongst others. Greenwood and Gaunt (1994:78-79) point out that this process involves the transformation of a set of inputs, which may include materials, actions, methods, people and operations, into desired outputs, in the form of a product, information, activities, events, services that reach people and users, and skills or generally results. Outputs lead to outcomes, i.e. the results or changes for individuals, groups, agencies, communities and/or systems. A quality system should apply to and interact with all activities of the organisation. It should begin with the identification of the requirements and end with the satisfaction, at every transaction interface (Oakland 1993:103-104).

Chapter 3

The activities undertaken during the design phase, as depicted in Figure 3.1 are in the form of slats or a rotating drum, indicating how a quality system should function. The driving force of the drum is the centralised quality system and the drum will not operate until the system or programme is in place and working. The first step in getting the drum rolling is to prepare the necessary documentation, i.e. procedures and processes.

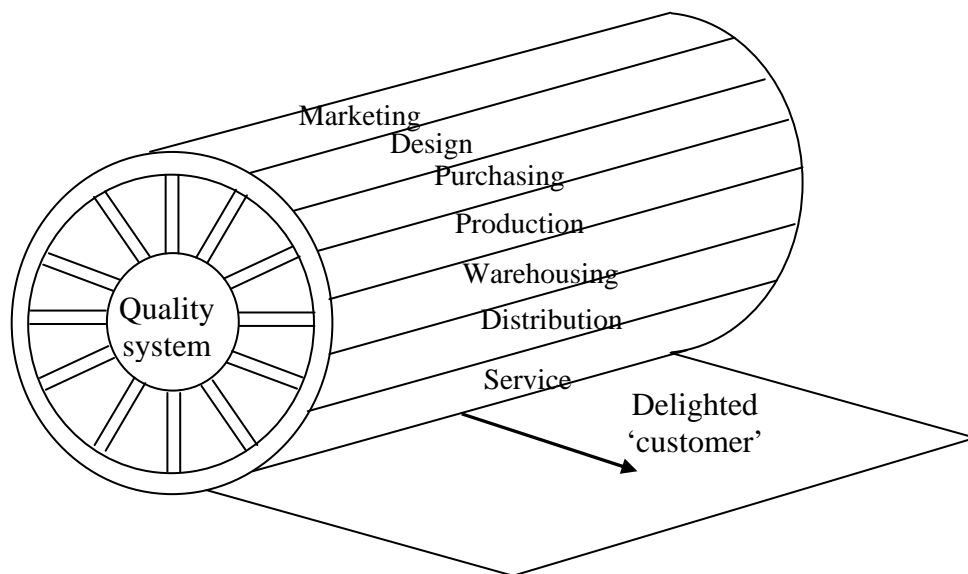


Figure 3.1: The quality system

Deming's cycle of continuous improvement is appropriate for use to 'check' that the system is functioning according to plan, and to review possible system improvement, using audit results (Fox 1993:205). Any process can be analysed by an examination of the inputs used, process in place and outputs produced, and this will determine the action necessary to improve quality. In this study, the argument is that the quality of inputs used in the design of the RPL system and the value added to the process by programme implementers, determines the quality of the product produced and services offered, and consequently, whether clients would be satisfied with the general results. Figure 3.2 depicts how any institution can use the Deming's cycle of continuous improvement (Plan-Do-Check-Act) to improve the quality of the designed system (Oakland 1993:104-105).

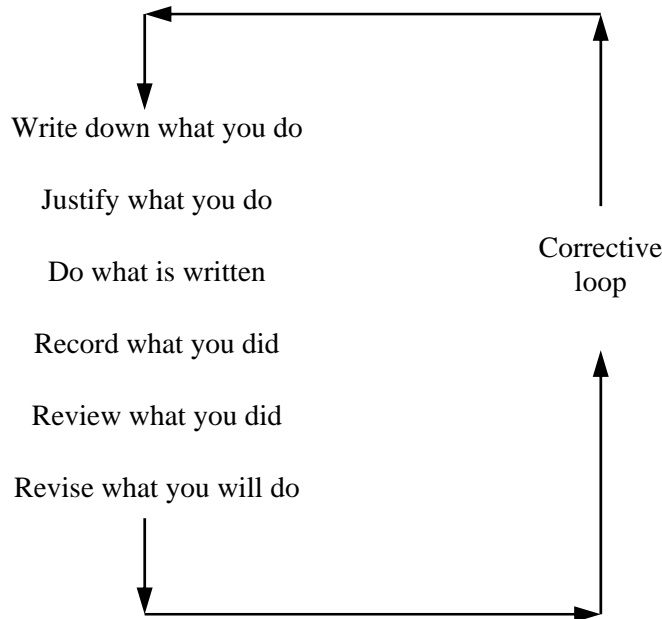


Figure 3.2: The quality system and never ending improvement

The ISO 9001 International Standards on the requirements for quality management systems promotes a process-based approach (SABS 2000) in conjunction with Deming’s quality improvement cycle, in which the process of implementation converts inputs to outputs. During this process, products are designed and produced (realised). This family of standards is primarily concerned with ‘quality management’ i.e. what the institution does to meet customer requirements; meet applicable regulatory requirements; enhance customer satisfaction; and achieve continual improvement.

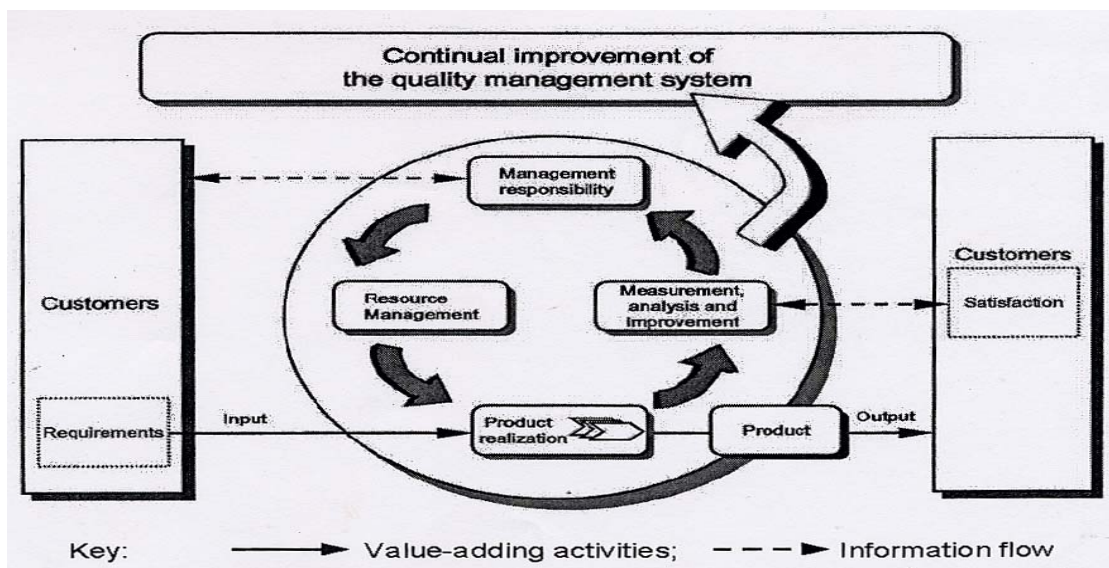


Figure 3.3: ISO 9001 model of a process-based quality management system (SABS 2000 cited by Fresen 2005)

3.3 THE INPUTS FOR DESIGNING THE RPL SYSTEM

In this section, I provide a detailed description of various forms of inputs grouped into areas of practice, needed to design a quality RPL system, briefly introduced in Chapter 1, section 1.4. These inputs are institutional policy and environment; resources (physical, financial, and human) allocated for RPL services; training and registration of assessors and other key staff; funding for the establishment of the RPL process; support services to RPL candidates/learners; monitoring, evaluation and verification processes of RPL implementation; design of methods and processes of RPL assessment; establishment of learner records and the reporting system to the relevant ETQA; RPL and curriculum design, qualifications and academic standards; and institutional approach to quality and quality assurance

There is a general agreement amongst various authors on how to design a quality RPL programme (SAQA 2002; SAQA 2004; Harris 2000; Heyns 2004; Osman 2004; Nyatanga *et al* 1998; Challis 1993; Field 1993; Wood 1995; Hoffmann 2006a & Hoffmann 2006b). The starting point with the design of the RPL system would be to analyse the **institutional context** in which RPL provisioning takes place, i.e. a fully-fledged institutional needs analysis or an audit of current practice should be undertaken. It is at this stage where answers to the following questions crafted by Challis (1993:87) will prove helpful to the institution considering implementing RPL:

- Why are we considering introducing RPL?
- In how much of our provision do we want to offer RPL?
- Who are the students we wish to attract through RPL?
- Which staff do we need to involve within the institution?
- Whom do we need to work with outside the institution?
- How do we resource the service?
- What groundwork do we need to do before we start offering RPL?

In addition, each higher education institution needs to define its mission and vision in harmony with its overall goals, then translate this into observable indicators and allocate the resources required (CTP 2001c:14). It must be evident from the mission

statement that the institution intends to offer RPL and specifics with regards to how it intends to attain this should be reflected in its strategic plan, or there must be an action plan at one or all levels of management (institutional; Faculty and departmental) to effect the process. Field (1993:62-66) proposes the use of the Ashridge Model to describe the institution's mission. The model contains four elements: purpose, values, strategy and behaviour. This model is useful in the sense that it enables the institution to clarify its position, that is, whether to be service-centred or business-centred. In essence, the institution would be able to clarify why it exists; what it believes in; what policies and behaviour does it use to guide its operation; and how it sets about achieving its purpose.

The Committee for Technikon Principals (2001c:15) in their policy documentation on RPL cautions that institutional policies and procedures often serve as barriers, rather than enabling mechanisms for implementation. An important step would be to formulate an institutional RPL policy, where it would be clear how an institution defines RPL, what the purpose of RPL would be, and its target market²¹ and target area(s) and to describe in full how it envisages quality provisioning of RPL. SAQA (2004:2) says, "Unless proper policies, structures and resources are allocated to a credible assessment process, implementation of RPL can easily become an area of contestation and conflict". It will also be helpful to undertake some internal marketing prior to advertising the facility externally. This will ensure institution-wide awareness of RPL, thus a series of leaflets, brochures, in-house seminars and team meetings to describe the process and develop plans for implementation will prove as valuable for marketing internally as for attracting learners (Field 1993:100). Another fundamental prerequisite of implementing RPL is a clarification on the entry points to the institution and the admissions requirements.

Failure to render RPL services may be due to a lack of **resources (physical, financial and human)**, availability of trained staff, and expertise in the area of RPL assessment. Where RPL programmes are successful, such institutions have a RPL centre, or office or unit to deal specifically with RPL related matters. The recommendation for having this centre is mainly for institutions that intend to offer

institution-wide RPL. For example at the University of South Africa (UNISA), prospective RPL candidates become exposed to the required assistance at the Office of Experiential Learning (OEL) at the Main Campus in Pretoria (UNISA 2004:13). In these centres, there are trained assessors (evidence facilitators and advisors) and moderators and knowledgeable administrators who give RPL candidates accurate information on what to do to go through the process of assessment. It is at this centre/office/unit where there is dissemination of essential information to prospective RPL candidates and interested parties, i.e. RPL information made readily available to all. Challis (1993:92) is of this opinion; ‘wholesale reorganisation of the institution is not necessary more especially if there are no long-term plans for RPL provisioning’.

Funding can be a limiting factor to effective RPL provisioning if an institution does not work out mechanisms for implementation and sustainability of the RPL programme. It is critical that an institution finds answers to the following questions before attempting to implement the RPL programme: who bears the cost of RPL? Is it learners, the institution or government? What is the cost of RPL or portfolio development? Who should pay the cost for developing RPL at the institution? (CTP 2001c:18).

SAQA (2004:15) identified the following sources of RPL funding: direct funding derived from the National Skills Fund (NSF), specifically for unemployed candidates, by employers; private or business initiatives; and the Sector Education and Training Authority (SETA) funding. The SERVICES SETA has established six career centres where prior learning assessments are done. Formal mainstream programmes (this should include programmes RPL learners are registered for) in public institutions are subsidised. Learners are therefore not required to pay the actual amount it costs the government to educate them. However, at the time of this study, there were no clear RPL subsidy structures from government.

The **cost recovery fee structure** for RPL services seem to be the most appropriate at this stage to help sustain the RPL programme, albeit with caution and sensitivity to candidate’s needs. Cohen, Flowers, McDonald and Schaafsma (1994) in Harris

²¹ Target market refers to those candidates that the institution wishes to attract. It is determined through various ways, i.e.:

2000:131 suggest three options for charging fees for RPL: a fee based on time spent, a common fee irrespective of time spent or amount of credit awarded or a fee based on the amount of credit applied for or awarded. This area is not free of challenges: there are risks involved regarding the establishment of a fee structure for RPL services. If an institution cannot fill the places on courses, which it has exempted candidates on Harris (2000:132) says “RPL can unwittingly support a retrenchment of the academy, especially if the fiscal climate is tight”.

With recent developments and new insights on RPL assessment, a distinction is made between ‘fee-for-credit’ and ‘fee-for-assessment’, so as to avoid trivialising the assessment process and giving candidates ideas that ‘RPL credits’ can be bought. Fiddler, Marieneau and Whitaker (2006) argue that the basis of any fees should be the assessment itself as well as associated administrative costs, not the tuition cost of the credit hours that are awarded. As a principle, in poorer communities, fees charged for RPL services should not create a barrier for candidates: the service should be affordable.

It is clear that RPL provisioning is a labour intensive activity, at least at the beginning. Assessing candidates for their prior learning **needs high levels of expertise** in adult education theory and practice. Over and above this, there is a need for non-judgemental mentorship and guidance skills. Assessors need to demonstrate the ability to engage learners in critical dialogue and informed perspectives on the politics of knowledge and curriculum development. Training opportunities for assessors and moderators need to be availed, for example, training in, diagnostic, summative, and formative strategies. Faculty assessors need to distinguish in a non-sentimental and non-exaggerated way between what knowledge is present and what is not, and be open to assessing knowledge that they themselves have not imparted (Harris 2000:130). This poses challenges to most academics that may have to deal with new communities of learners.

In South Africa, ‘bias’ is particularly associated with issues of race, language, religion, gender and class, but numerous other forms of bias may have an impact on

in terms of a ‘redress’ approach or a ‘critical shortage of learners in a particular programme’ approach.

the assessment of candidates in terms of their prior learning (SAQA 2004:44). The bias against experiential and non-formal forms of learning, for example, may inhibit the assessor from finding alternative forms of evidence for applied knowledge and skills, particularly if such evidence is not presented in the 'traditional' format. Anti-bias and sensitivity training, specifically as it relates to the fears and doubts of adult learners should be an integral part of assessor training.

The issue of **support to RPL candidates/learners** is vital to the success of this practice. Assessors, mentors (advisors), often lecturers, are usually given the role of offering this service to candidates, i.e. taking candidates to a level where they have a better understanding of their ways of knowing and to develop a critical stance on their learning (Benton & Benton 1997:12). International experience shows that these mentors and advisors play a role as bridge builders between different forms of knowledge. They often undertake provisional and informal assessments and have the responsibility for negotiating and motivating around the whole range of RPL issues such as the amount of credit to be awarded (Harris 2000:127).

According to SAQA (2002:20), the support services in place at any institution should consciously address the invisible barriers to successful assessment. This may include a re-alignment of existing academic development programmes to suit the needs of adult learners, advising programmes, assistance with identifying equivalences and preparation for assessment. It may also include dealing with anxieties, traumas and non-technical barriers that arise when adult learners enter the RPL arena. Therefore, the inclusion of advising and counselling services to complement evidence facilitation and assessment should be an important principle in the provisioning of RPL services. Wood (1995:51-57) identified one major issue: language and literacy, for non-native speakers of English. Some of the strategies he recommends for lowering cross-cultural barriers are psychometric testing; use of bilingualism; presentation of 'direct' evidence; use of role-play or simulation; use of video recordings; use of a viewing and reviewing process; use of computer software and quality assurance standards for language.

If we uphold the premise that learning occurs throughout life, then such learning needs to be quantified and assessed with a view to awarding academic credit or

professional recognition. Therefore, certain rules for assessing this form of learning need to be followed, and clear **methods of assessment** need to be established. Fiddler, Marieunau and Whitaker (2006:8) identified three requirements for assessing this form of learning. To ensure the quality of learning assessment, some rules for describing acceptable outcomes need to be identified; some basic practices that will lead to the sound measurement and evaluation of those outcomes need to be created; and some guidance needs to be provided for developing local procedures to implement effective practices.

Prior learning assessment means that it is the primary responsibility of the candidate to bring acceptable evidence to assessors. The methods used to assess a candidate's prior learning can take any of the following three forms (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:10). The candidate can submit relevant certificate(s) demonstrating previous learning (credit transfer); undertake and pass the assessment, which they would have undertaken for the credit for which they are applying; and submit a variety of evidence, matched to the details of the programme outcomes and competence criteria for which they are requesting credit. This submission usually takes the form of a portfolio of evidence.

Portfolio assessment has proven to be the most commonly used method of assessment used, as it is easily managed, is the most flexible and accurate (Sansregret 1984a:1). However, this is not an indication that it is better than the other assessment methods. Other methods include testing, either by the assessor or by standardised tests, and interviews. Lamdin (1992) in Nyatanga, Foreman and Fox (1998:10) describes a portfolio as a formal written communication, presented to an institution or awarding body by the candidate requesting recognition and/or credits for previous learning. The portfolio, Lamdin suggests, must clearly articulate the 'learning' rather than the 'experience' and must provide tangible evidence so that assessors can use it alone or in conjunction with other evidence for awarding credits.

Nyatanga, Foreman and Fox (1998:13-15) in describing the nature of evidence to substantiate the claim for RPL, indicate the importance of distinguishing between sources of evidence. They consider forms of evidence in terms of direct and indirect evidence. Direct evidence (primary evidence) is the evidence that reflects the candidate's or applicant's own work as previous reports, publications, and so on.

These can take the form of: monthly or annual written reports; written internal correspondence; spreadsheets of financial data; videos of presentation; schematic diagrams; graphs indicating analysed data; staffing schedules; audio recordings of meetings; copies of published articles; and computerised software data. Indirect evidence in contrast to that is that which is collected from others about the candidate. The most common of these found in a portfolio are: minutes of meetings; witness testimonies; appraisals of you undertaken by others; newspaper cuttings about you; references given about you; photographs of you undertaking a role; and simulations of the role. When thinking of using any direct or indirect evidence, careful consideration needs to be given to ensure that it is matched to the learning outcomes or assessment criteria against which it is to be assessed.

To address issues related to **RPL and the curriculum**, Harris (2000:111-115), identified technical areas to look into. Firstly, at pre-entry and entry points of the programme, learners can be offered the time and space to review their prior learning in relation to the overall curriculum, to decide which aspects of it they might need credit from, based on their individualised learning needs. Secondly, during the main programme, learners should be able to customise aspects of the programme to suit their own interests and needs. Thirdly, throughout a learning programme, there should be space for learners to consolidate the coherence of their prior and new learning, to plan, and to make critical links between prior learning and the curriculum.

SAQA (2001) gave guidelines on **principles of good assessment** in designing and implementing all assessment methods and procedures. In addition, the quality of evidence relates to reliability, validity, authenticity, sufficiency and currency. Particularly in RPL assessment, sufficiency and currency are important. How current certain knowledge, skills and competencies are is essential since at times candidates may have learnt skills and acquired knowledge a long time ago which may have no relevance to the learning outcomes of the programme they want to be enrolled in or the job they might be targeting.

In terms of the assessment process, it is important to note that all assessments, regardless of the subject matter and the context, follow the same basic procedure, i.e. planning the assessment with the candidate; conducting the assessment, and feedback

of the results to the candidate. This means that before the assessment can take place, the assessor has to plan, design and prepare assessments. This includes making decisions about the method of assessment, the instruments to be used and the extent to which integrated assessment (covering more than one learning outcome) can be achieved. The important point here is that ‘fit for purpose’ assessments must be designed and decided upon before an assessment can take place.

In developing a quality assured system of RPL provisioning, an institution needs to demonstrate on an ongoing basis that it is not offering a ‘cheap’ or ‘easy’ route to credits or qualifications. In relation to the internal monitoring and evaluation systems, Recognition of Prior learning should be an integrated feature of assessment policies. This includes **moderation, management and reporting procedures** that constitute the Quality Management Systems of ETQAs and the respective institution (provider). Institutions may need to show evidence of their secure production, storage and distribution of records, reports and other data relevant to assessment of prior learning. The work of each individual assessor needs monitoring to make sure that interpretation of standards for assessing prior learning is uniform, and that evidence is being used consistently.

An important aspect of any quality management system for RPL provisioning is having information available to those who will monitor and/or evaluate the practice (Simosko & Cook 1996:179). The requirements for providing information to the **NLRD (National Learner Record Database)** specifies clearly the type and form of information required from ETQAs and providers, which includes names and contact details of the candidates assessed; process and procedure followed for assessing each candidate; documentation submitted by the candidate before and during the assessment; outcomes of the assessment: ‘RPL results’; and minutes of the meeting held by the RPL committee with the candidate. Additional information required is so that a research base that examines the cost effectiveness of the system and its efficacy is developed. In the final form, credits achieved through RPL, need to be recorded in the same manner as conventional assessment outcomes. This is to prevent the stigmatisation of RPL credits as being inferior to the conventional method of achieving credits and/or qualifications.

3.3.1 Quality indicators: inputs used to design the RPL system

A synthesis of the above views resulted in the development of a comprehensive list of quality indicators (49 items) by the researcher in ten areas of RPL practice or inputs used for the design of the RPL programme. These QIs are in essence criteria for evaluating quality in this area. I discussed and availed them to the RPL Programme Manager in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria. I have used various strategies of data collection (interviews, document analysis, observational checklists, and notes from my reflective journal) to determine whether there is quality in the manner in which the RPL programme in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria was designed.

Table 3.1: *Quality indicators: inputs used to design the RPL system*

Area of practice (inputs)	Quality indicators
Institutional policy and environment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The mission and vision statement of the institution expresses an explicit commitment to the principles of equity, redress and inclusion. 2. The strategic plan of the institution reflects planning for RPL implementation, in accordance with relevant legislation and policy. 3. Information about RPL assessment opportunities and services are widely available and actively promoted. 4. Admission procedures and systems are accessible and inclusive of learners with diverse needs and backgrounds. 5. Equal access to opportunities to advice, support, time and resources for all candidates seeking assessment. 6. Organisational structures ensure that evidence facilitators, assessors and moderators and other key personnel, such as advisors, are given sufficient support, resources and recognition for their services. 7. Regional integration and collaboration are encouraged among institutions, professional bodies and workplaces where possible. 8. Formal agreements between ETQAs, providers and workplaces are encouraged to ensure effective validation, articulation and recognition of RPL assessment results, where possible.
Services and support to RPL learners/candidates	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. Advising services and programmes assist prospective RPL learners to make effective choices about Learning Programmes, career and work-related opportunities. 10. Advising services and programmes provide assistance RPL learners/candidates in preparing for assessment. 11. Support services attempt to remove time, place and other barriers to RPL assessment. 12. Evidence facilitators assist RPL candidates in preparing and presenting evidence in a coherent and systematic fashion.

Training and registration of assessors and key personnel

13. Structured short learning programmes or articulation-based programmes are increasingly available where required.
14. The assessment of prior learning to be done by trained and registered assessors in accordance with the relevant principles and standards for assessment and moderation as set out in SAQA and other policy documents.
15. Policies and review mechanisms regarding monitoring and quality assurance of evidence facilitators, assessors, moderators and other key personnel are in place.
16. The function of evidence facilitator, assessor and advisor are clearly defined, and where possible should not be done by the same person.
17. Training and development encourage mentoring relationships between staff with and those without assessment expertise.
18. Quality Assurance (QA) systems are implemented to ensure that they increasingly meet the development objectives as agreed with the ETQA.

Methods and processes of assessment

19. The purpose of the assessment and the expectations of the candidate are clarified.
20. Assessment plans take into account the form, quality and sources of evidence required.
21. The form and quality of support to be provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment are established.
22. The candidate is actively involved in all aspects of the assessment process to ensure that the assessment is fair and transparent. Possible barriers to fair assessments are identified and addressed.
23. Assessment plans indicate a variety of appropriate assessment methods and instruments to validate diverse types of learning.
24. The choice of assessment methods is **fit for purpose** and ensures reliable and valid assessment outcomes.
25. An appeals process is in place and made known to the candidate.
26. Assessment instruments and exemplars are developed and moderated in compliance with the ETQA requirements.
27. Assessment reports indicate the assessment plan, the evidence presented, the assessment outcomes and recommendations for further action, including additional training and/or re-assessment.
28. Moderation and review mechanisms are in place, including policy for verification, evaluation and quality assurance of assessments and assessment systems.

Quality Management Systems (QMS)

29. Quality Management Systems for assessment are designed, documented and implemented in accordance with agreed criteria and specifications.
 30. Quality Management Systems ensure the refining of assessment policies, procedures and services at all levels and inform planning for further development aimed at meeting agreed targets.
 31. Provide input from all key stakeholders, including representation from the candidate community.
 32. Provide for support in making developmental targets, including diagnostic, formal and summative activities.
 33. Evaluation and monitoring activities are clearly spelt out in
-

	QMS documents, including diagnostic, formative and summative activities.
	34. Evaluation and monitoring activities ensure consistency within a sector.
	35. Assessment documentation, reports and sources of evidence are maintained in agreed criteria and specifications.
	36. RPL results are recorded in accordance with the requirements of the ETQA and SAQAs NLRD.
	37. Information on RPL outcomes, including unsuccessful applications is maintained.
	38. The QMS provides for systems to monitor progress of candidates who enter Learning Programmes post-RPL.
	39. The QMS provides for analyses and reporting of services and results.
Fees for RPL services	40. Fees do not create barriers for candidates.
	41. RPL fees to be less than the cost of a full-time module or Learning Programme.
	42. Credits bearing Portfolio Development or other articulation programmes are made increasingly available to assist candidates in their preparation for assessment, and to qualify for available subsidy for selected Skills Programmes and Learnerships.
	43. Flexible payment options, in line with the policies and procedures of the ETQA and constituent providers.
	44. Research and development priorities are identified, including those that investigate cost and cost effectiveness.
RPL and Curriculum Development	45. Learning Programmes increasingly take into account the nature and form of knowledge produced in previously excluded constituencies and locations.
	46. The curriculum increasingly incorporate indigenous and other knowledge forms to reflect the diversity of needs and goals of the learner population.
	47. The design of Learning Programmes indicates how candidate's prior knowledge has been affirmed and taken into account.
	48. The curriculum is sufficiently open-ended to allow flexible entry and exit points to enhance access and the achievement of learning goals.
	49. Emerging trends from assessment and RPL where these have implications for modifications and redesign of Unit Standards and Qualifications are forwarded to the appropriate bodies.
	50. Where candidates demonstrate knowledge that does not fit existing Unit Standards or exit level outcomes, credit equivalencies are established in consultation with subject experts and relevant ETQAs.

3.4 THE PROCESS OF RPL ASSESSMENTS

Morris Keeton noted, “A particular troublesome aspect of the surge of enrolments by adults 25 years and older has been the increase of incompetent or unethical purveyors of ‘credit for life experience programmes and services’ (Fiddler *et al* 2006: vii). While

abuses in the awarding of academic credit still persists, the standards, principles, procedures, and models for RPL assessments have been developed in the United States of America (USA) to ensure that reliability and quality is maintained while real learning is appropriately recognised. The basic candidate-centred assessment model contains a number of stages, each having a set of specific outcomes and activities (Simosko & Cook 1996:21-27) related to the process of prior learning assessment. To determine whether there is a quality assured process of assessment, the evaluation in the Faculty of Education centres on this model i.e. do Faculty assessors adhere to it. This model reflects a shift from an externally controlled assessment process to one that includes the candidate as an essential and active participant (CTP 2001:24-26 & University of Pretoria 2002:5-7). In the following section is a description of what each stage of the assessment entails:

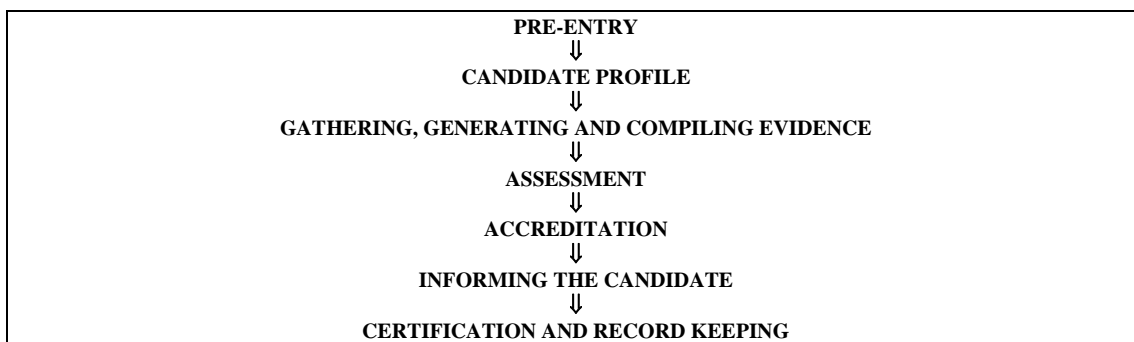


Figure 3.4: The RPL process of assessment

Stage 1: Pre-entry

This stage comprises the dissemination of information, links the services to others on offer, and gives adequate information to candidates to enable them to make an informed decision as to whether or not to undergo the process. It includes distributing brochures, marketing the service, meeting individual and corporate clients and collaborating between training providers and industry. A suitable agent, such as the CHE/HEQC in the South African higher education sector needs to play a leading role in brokering agreements between the private sector and its constituents.

Stage 2: Candidate profile

This stage involves the reflection on one's prior learning and self-assessment activities done by the candidate. It results into the compilation of the candidate's profile of what he/she can or cannot do. During this stage the candidate must clarify his/her expectations in seeking recognition and accreditation of prior learning and needs to measure his/her knowledge, skills and competencies against standards of learning outcomes of a programme or qualification. The University of Pretoria (2002:6) made an assertion that at this stage, RPL advisors will be available to guide candidates.

Stage 3: Gathering, generating and compiling evidence

During this stage, the candidates identify how they can best prove their competence and they collect and/or generate the necessary evidence. The responsibility rests on the candidate to ensure that he/she collects sufficient and valid evidence to prove that he/she knows and can do what they are claiming. The standards of competence or learning outcomes detailed in the programme desired must serve as a guide in this process. Once gathered, the evidence must be arranged and presented for submission. Most often presentation of evidence may take the form of a portfolio, an interview or a challenge examination. Evidence is not necessarily in paper or electronic format: it may also take the form of a demonstration of skills and competencies.

Stage 4: Assessment

Upon receiving the evidence for a portfolio, challenge examination, or demonstration of a skill the assessor needs to decide whether it provides sufficient, valid and authentic proof that the candidate met the standards of competence or learning outcomes. Should it not be sufficient, the assessor must decide on which further route to be taken, i.e. request additional documentation, using a complementary assessment method (portfolio assessment and interviews). An individual assessor or an assessment panel then conducts and completes the assessment process, using one or more different methods of assessment.

The institution needs to keep the candidate fully informed of what to expect in terms of making the assessment criteria available. The candidate should be given the opportunity to evaluate the process and if necessary appeal against the process. The panel/individual assessor makes recommendations regarding whether or not to award credits. In the case where the credit is not be awarded, it is the responsibility of the assessor, in conjunction with the academic staff, to decide on a training intervention; top-up training or method of fast tracking the candidate to enable him/her to present the assessment again.

Stage 5: Accreditation

The relevant decision-maker at different levels in the institution must verify the findings and recommendations of the assessor/s and actually grant the credit. This could be the institution itself if either it is fully or partially autonomous, or it could be a national awarding body.

Step 6: Informing the candidate

The assessor/s must provide written feedback to the candidate. If the candidate should need or request it, he/she should be put in touch with a mentor, tutor or advisor who can provide further post-assessment guidance.

Step 7: Certification and record keeping

Well-documented RPL assessment procedures and well-kept records are imperative to ensure valid processes. Most organisations have to make significant modifications to existing practices to keep clear records of each stage of the assessment. Information must be readily available at each stage of the assessment process; candidate portfolios and other evidence must be tracked throughout the system and sufficient records must be kept for a maximum period.

3.4.1 Quality indicators in the process of RPL assessment

There is a general agreement amongst different authors on what constitutes quality in the RPL assessment process (Nyatanga *et al* 1998; Colvin 2006; Fiddler *et al* 2006; Harris 2000; SAQA 2002 & SAQA 2004). I have used the above model of RPL assessment, as depicted in Figure 3.4, and indicated criteria for evaluation in various activities and events in the process. This model is used mainly in the United Kingdom (UK) for institutions that offer AP(E)L, i.e. Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:7), and has been adopted by the University of Pretoria. Below is a summary of what various authors propose for quality indicators in the RPL assessment process:

Table 3.2: *Quality indicators: the process of RPL assessment*

Stages of the RPL model	Quality Indicators
PRE-ENTRY	<p>Information on RPL</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dissemination of information on RPL (brochures, posters, information sessions, preparation sessions and broad marketing strategy) 2. Individual counselling 3. Meeting co-operate clients, if any 4. Collaboration between training providers and industry <p>Information about course(s) provided</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Career guidance counselling 6. Complete curriculum documentation 7. Key learning outcomes/competencies 8. All learning outcomes/competencies 9. Brief module/subject descriptors 10. Course brochures
CANDIDATE PROFILE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. Candidate's reflection of prior learning 12. Candidate self-assessment 13. Candidate's expectations clarified
GATHERING, GENERATING AND COMPILING EVIDENCE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Candidate identifies how they can best prove their competence 15. Candidate collects and/or generate the necessary evidence 16. Candidate to be responsible for collecting sufficient and valid evidence 17. Programme/course standards or learning outcomes (unit standards) to serve as a guide 18. Candidate to present the evidence 19. Candidate to be able to use other ways to show competence (demonstration of a skill and competencies)
ASSESSMENT	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 20. Assessor to decide whether the evidence is

		sufficient, valid and authentic
	21.	Assessor decides whether standards or learning outcomes have been met
	22.	If evidence is not sufficient, assessor to request for additional information
	23.	Candidate to be fully informed of what to expect
	24.	Assessment criteria and standards against which the candidate is measured to be freely available
	25.	The candidate to be given an opportunity to appeal against the process/results
	26.	The assessor/panel to make recommendations regarding whether or not the credits should be awarded
	27.	If credit is not given, the assessor, to gather with the academic staff, to decide on a training intervention; top-u training or fast-tracking the candidate to enable him/her to be assessed again.
ACCREDITATION	28.	Relevant structures to verify the findings and recommendations of the assessment and grant credit
	29.	If the institution is fully autonomous, to grant credit or let the national awarding body to do so
INFORMING CANDIDATE	THE	30. Assessor(s) to provide written feedback to the candidate
		31. The institution to provide post-assessment guidance and support (mentorship/tutoring or advisory services)
CERTIFICATION RECORD KEEPING	AND	32. Well-documented assessment procedures to be available
		33. Well kept records of RPL assessment to be kept
		34. Candidate's portfolio to be kept for a maximum period of time

3.4.2 Different roles of the advisors and assessors in the RPL process of assessment

For RPL purposes, each task in the assessment process is distinctive and ideally, different people need to perform the different tasks to avoid potential conflict and bias. This is with special reference to the roles of the RPL assessor, advisor and evidence facilitator. The University of Pretoria (2002:13) as in RPL circles makes use of the terminology RPL assessor and RPL advisor. In the section below is a differentiation of such roles (Nyatanga *et al* 998: 16-17). The role of the RPL assessor is to judge evidence provided against the standards or learning outcomes. The RPL advisor's role is to counsel the candidate regarding the RPL process, e.g. suggest a suitable course if he/she is unsure of what training programme to follow and to guide

the candidate on how to prepare for the assessment. In the evaluation of whether, there is quality in the assessment process; the section below gives a description of quality indicators for each role and function.

Table 3:3: *The different roles and functions in the RPL assessment process*

Role	Quality Indicators
Advisor	<p data-bbox="539 524 817 553">Description of the role</p> <ol data-bbox="539 562 1401 725" style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The role of the advisor (evidence facilitator) throughout the process of RPL assessment is that of facilitator. 2. The advisor can be a generalist as opposed to a subject specialist. 3. Current practice tends to suggest that the advisor needs to be a subject specialist. <p data-bbox="539 763 667 792">Functions</p> <ol data-bbox="539 801 1401 1025" style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Initial screening or profiling 5. Ensuring the candidate understands the RPL guiding principles 6. Advise on alternative pathways 7. Advise on general portfolio construction 8. Advise on nature of evidence 9. Facilitate the development of self confidence during the process 10. When portfolio is ready for submission sign submission form.
Assessor(s)	<p data-bbox="539 1066 667 1095">Functions</p> <ol data-bbox="539 1104 1401 1294" style="list-style-type: none"> 11. They are custodians of academic/professional standards (learning outcomes) and quality thereof 12. They have to evaluate the evidence against programme learning outcomes or competence criteria 13. They also mediate between the individual's idiosyncratic language and perceptions of their previous learning <p data-bbox="539 1335 1206 1364">RPL assessor training and development: description</p> <ol data-bbox="539 1373 1401 1664" style="list-style-type: none"> 14. How much training were they allowed? 15. How much time do they have to carry out the assessment? 16. What type of assessment material do they deal with? 17. Does the assessor have sufficient background knowledge of the area to carry out the assessment? 18. Are there mechanisms to cross check whether the assessment has been carried out correctly/consistently/comparable with other assessors? 19. Will an external/verifier check the assessment?

3.4.3 Guiding principles for good practice in the assessment and accreditation of prior learning

Principles are “general or fundamental truths, comprehensive and fundamental laws or a guide for conduct or procedures” (Fiddler *et al* 2006:8). Adherence to the principles for good practice in the assessment of prior learning can ensure a high quality of prior

learning assessment. According to (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:18-20), the following are guiding principles for good practice in the accreditation of RPL.

The following section contains a full description of what each principle mean.

“The candidate/learner should make the claim: The candidate/learner should be the one to make the claim. It follows that the responsibility rests with the candidate for making a claim and supporting it with the appropriate evidence”

“RPL is about learning outcomes, not just experience: The insistence throughout must be that the experience of a candidate is significant only as a source of learning. The intellectual task of moving from a description of experience to an identification of the learning derived from that experience is demanding. However, if it cannot be accomplished there is no learning to assess, however important to the individual that experience may have been”

“Identification of significant learning should come before assessment: There should be a clear separation between the identification of prior learning and organising it into forms fit for presenting for assessment, and the assessment itself. The identification of prior learning comes through systematic reflection on experience and there are four stages within that: systematic reflection on past experiences; identification of significant learning; synthesis of evidence through portfolio; and an evaluation by the assessor”

“Assessment is an academic responsibility: Academic assessment is solely the responsibility of staff approved by the awarding academic institution. Normally, good practice requires that at least two assessors should assess a submitted portfolio. The assessors should not have been actively involved as counsellors or advisors during the portfolio construction phase”

“Evidence must be appropriate: This principle concerns the nature of the evidence submitted for assessment. As with all academic assessment, the evidence needs to be appropriate for what is being assessed. Hence, in conjunction with the portfolio submitted, academic staff may choose to request a variety of further evidence to

support the candidate's claim. As a result, they may decide to probe a candidate's level of knowledge through an interview either in person or by telephone. Assessors may require additional written or assignment work. They may examine artefacts or observe performance. Whatever method of assessment is used, meticulous precision in arriving at the judgement should be a priority"

“Two academic functions (advocate vs. judge) should be separated: As a rule it is wise to separate the two academic functions of helping candidates prepare evidence of learning and assessing that learning. In other words, staff that help candidates prepare evidence should not have any direct role in making the final academic judgements about that evidence”

“Quality should be assured within the RPL assessment process: The institution needs to assure that admission tutor(s), subject assessment teams/boards are satisfied that (1) the portfolio or other evidence has been conclusive, (2) the number and level of credits to be awarded has been identified and agreed and (3) written feedback is given to the applicant within six weeks of submitting a portfolio”

Table 3.4: *Guiding principles for RPL assessments at the University of Pretoria*

-
- Eligibility for credit based on RPL assessment does not guarantee the applicant a place in the course/programme in which such credit may be available
 - RPL should be available to all
 - RPL is a set of educational and social practices and should reflect a holistic and developmental approach
 - Participation in an RPL process must be voluntary and each individual must give the appropriate support to enable him/her to make informed decisions as to whether or not she/he wishes to participate
 - There must be no loss of benefits as a result of RPL
 - To base RPL assessments on clearly stated guidelines. If he/she is found incompetent in the skill assessed, she/he should receive a recommended course of action to reach the desired level of competence
 - RPL must be affirmative and developmental
 - RPL must include a strong support mechanism for all involved
 - The process must be simple, verifiable, credible and just
 - RPL processes exclude training or teaching activities aimed at preparing students to meet RPL criteria or preparing students to meet RPL criteria or university admission criteria
 - RPL processes fall within the official language policy of the university
-

3.4.4 Standards for assessment and accreditation of prior learning

Standards are “things that are set up and established by authority for the measure of quality” (Fiddler *et al* 2006:8). Standards for assessing and accrediting prior learning are divided into two, i.e. academic and administrative standards (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:38 & Fiddler *et al* 2006:13). The question here is does the Faculty adhere to these standards when assessing prior learning? The following table gives a list of these internationally recognised standards of prior learning assessment and accreditation.

Table 3.5: *A list of academic and administrative standards for prior learning assessment*

Academic standards	Administrative standards
1. Credit should be awarded only for learning and not for experience	1. Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning (double counting)
2. College/University credits should be awarded only for higher education learning	2. Policies and procedures applied to the assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available
3. Credits should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject (course/module), between theory and practical application	3. Fees charged should be based on the services performed in the process and not on the amounts of credits awarded
4. The determination of competence levels and of credit awards must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic experts	4. All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform and there should be provision for their continued professional development
5. Credit should be appropriate to the academic context to which it is awarded	5. Assessment programmes should be regularly monitored; reviewed; evaluated; and revised; to reflect changes in the needs being served, and the state of the assessment art.

In determining whether there is quality in the RPL assessment process, the following table gives quality indicators at both academic and administrative levels:

Table 3:6: *Macro and micro quality indicators*

Macro (administrative) quality indicators	Micro (academic) quality indicators
1. The institution should have a clear RPL policy which is translated into operational structures	1. Ensure programme or modules have clear learning outcomes or competencies both staff and learners can base their RPL assessment on
2. Have a marketing and publicity strategy	2. Ensure programme leaders and admission tutors are conversant with RPL principles and their application to assessment
3. Ensure appropriate staff development at macro as well as micro quality level	3. Within the institution each school or Faculty should have an RPL co-ordinator to enhance the subject-specific debate and feedback
4. Ensure there is in place an RPL committee or board that oversees RPL activities on behalf of the institution	4. Give appropriate support and feedback to learners/candidates
5. Ensure proper co-ordination between the centre and the schools or faculties	5. Identify strengths and weaknesses of the RPL provision through (a) self-evaluation (critical peer review); (b) institutional audit of artefacts (c) learner's feedback; (d) external views and external examiner feedback. External views may include professional bodies, industry and commerce and funding bodies
6. Ensure communication channels for staff and candidates are clearly defined and well publicised	6. Disseminate good practice in the accreditation of prior learning
7. The administrative officer or office should have the following forms or their equivalent (1) RPL application form that combines certificated and non-certificated learning	
8. Administrative office should also have an RPL evaluation form and an RPL monitoring log	
9. Ensure programme annual reports include an evaluative section on RPL experiences together with an appropriate action plan for the future	

3.4.5 Misconceptions for poor practices and issues in the assessment and accreditation of prior learning

Below are the eight malpractices uncovered in institutions offering AP(E)L in the United Kingdom following shadow visits conducted in the 1980's by a team of external evaluators appointed by the Learning Experience Trust (LET) (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:39-40). The description below captures what transpired. The team of evaluators gave their comments on the observed practice, commendations and recommendations on applicability of each principle and standards. In evaluating the practice in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria, issues pertaining to the violation of these principles and standards will form part of the evaluation report.

1. There were instances where institutions granted credits for 'time served' or just experience and not learning *per se*. A few assessors found it difficult to separate experience from learning. Some seemed unaware that experience and learning

were two separate issues and that they were to grant credit for the actual learning only as stated in Principle 2, section 3.3.3 above.

- 2 Basing assessment fees on the number of credits awarded. RPL is offered as a service to candidates in order to maximise individual potential for learning. It also recognises equal opportunity of access. Like in most programmes or modules, the fee should be standard and declared in advance in order for a candidate to assess whether or not they can afford it. In being charged fees per credit, candidates are unlikely to know the cost until their portfolio has actually been submitted and assessed. This creates a dilemma in considering the candidate's ability to pay, especially if the application is not successful after a lot of effort has gone into producing a portfolio. This practice goes against administrative standard number 3, mentioned in section 3.3.4 above.
- 3 The evaluators uncovered the reason why institutions fail to separate the roles of the RPL advisor and assessor. It is good practice to separate the two roles as this maximises objectivity. There were institutions that argued against this, on the basis that supervisors of independent studies, for instance, are advisors who also assess the final piece of work. There was a misunderstanding in terms of the interpretation of principle number 6, (see section 3.3.3 above) which intimates that advisors may not always be subject specialists. The ruling made by the evaluators was that it is desirable that they are subject specialists but it is not imperative. To this end, and as reassurance of objective judgement, it is advisable that an advisor is not involved in the direct assessment of the final portfolio.
- 4 Some institutions promised an RPL service without regard for resources, staff development and expertise in the area. This affirmed concerns that institutions perceived RPL as common sense at times, and saw no need for a co-ordinated service and quality assurance. According to administrative standard number 9, mentioned in section 3.3.4 above, all personnel involved in RPL should receive appropriate training. Failure to do this compromises the authenticity and quality assurance of the whole service.
- 5 Other institutions had no method of checking inconsistencies and RPL malpractices internally. Internal evaluations are an important issue central to the provision of an equitable and fair service to the end-users. It therefore follows that if RPL is part of an institutional commitment, it should have the same

- quality assurance mechanisms as other provisions.
- 6 There were instances where institutions failed to declare in advance the rules, regulations and criteria used for RPL assessment. As a rule, if the expectation from candidates to produce portfolios in order to gain credits, then the institution must give them clear criteria. In the United Kingdom, the criteria may include, inter alia, the learning outcomes to be satisfied, the RPL principles and the period in which the RPL process will take place. Both staff and candidates need to know this in advance.
 - 7 Some institutions failed to provide a justified transcription of RPL outcomes including sufficiency of evidence as part of quality assurance. Feedback to candidates and the issuing of transcripts (as appropriate) is an important part of the RPL service. Feedback on the outcomes of the portfolio assessment should normally be part of the standard RPL service. Transcripts, on the other hand, can be issued on request. The institution, however, should have an agreed fee for the issue of a transcript to an individual.
 - 8 The findings indicated that institutions were failing to check the authenticity of the RPL claim in a minority of cases candidates seemed to be promised admission or credits before the portfolio was even submitted for assessment. The evaluation team felt that perhaps this represented the intuitive knowledge some admission tutors claim they still use to determine the candidate's potential to benefit from a programme of study. RPL, however is not about intuitive judgement of suitability, it is about objective and tangible evidence about learning.

3.5 THE OUTPUTS OF THE RPL SYSTEM

Greenwood and Gaunt (1994:31) state that “we must seek to design and create a system or process through which we can transform inputs into outputs in such a way as to totally satisfy all customer requirements. Better still, we must seek to delight our customers by giving them more than they anticipated. Client satisfaction is a perception. It is also a question of degree. It can vary from high satisfaction to low satisfaction. If customers believe that you have met their requirements, they experience high satisfaction. If they believe that you have not met their requirements, they experience low satisfaction. The output of such a quality system is that, “your

process should add value to the inputs you receive so that you can produce a quality output for your customer” (Arcaro 1995:156).

Inputs + Value-Added Process = Quality Outputs

To use the formula appropriately, one needs to view it in terms of the customer/supplier chains (quality chains) advocated for by Fox (1993:262) and Oakland (1993:8). Your supplier gives you the inputs. You (the implementer) add value to the inputs through your work process and by converting and delivering these inputs as outputs to your customer. In this way, you are both customer (of inputs) and supplier (of outputs). Outputs lead to outcomes, usually in the form of changes in behaviour and performance. A quality management system usually consists of many processes ‘glued’ together by means of many input-output relationships. Such input-output relationships turn a loose network of processes into an integrated quality management system.

In this study, the main output of the RPL system is the RPL product, related services rendered, paperwork generated, and the information on RPL (see Chapter 4, section 4.5.3). In general, features of a quality system that meet the requirements of the customers are (Oakland 1993:9): **Availability**, meaning the product, service, materials or information must be there when the customer needs it, and not when the producer is willing to put it on offer. **Delivery mode** meaning the product and service happens at a time and place, which is convenient to the customer. **Reliability** meaning the product, service, and information or materials must live up to the customer’s expectations all the time and must not let him/her down. **The cost of RPL services** meaning the product or service must satisfy the customer’s needs at the lowest possible cost. **Performance** meaning the product, service, and information or materials must do what the customer wants it to do, with specific reference to both external and internal customers.

In the study the argument is that, a quality system (quality inputs, quality process, and quality outputs) will contribute greatly to client satisfaction and vice versa. To determine client satisfaction, Oakland (1993:18) proposes the following methods, customer surveys; quality panel or focus group techniques; in-depth interviews;

brainstorming and discussions; role rehearsals and reversal; and interrogation of trade associations.

3.6 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

For the purpose of this study, a conceptual framework is advanced, which establishes the overall framework to be followed throughout the research process. This conceptual framework is a means to describe, explain and explore provisioning of RPL using the construct of quality and quality assurance. The framework is a three-pronged model drawn from well-established theories/models of quality, quality assurance and quality management, i.e. The Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy, including Deming's cycle of quality improvement (Plan-Do-Check-Act); The Systems Theory and the ISO 9001:2000 series for the requirements of a Quality Management System (QMS). The common thread between these theories is evaluation interpreted in two ways: continuous improvement of processes and procedures (quality assurance) and a formative evaluation of the RPL programme.

3.6.1 TQM Philosophy

Quality has become a discipline in its own right, used extensively in the private or business sector since the 20th century (Bradley 1993:12-13). The phenomenon, Total Quality Management (TQM) is more than just a management system; it is a philosophy, a cultural paradigm, which owes much of its acceptance to the work of social psychologists, statisticians and production managers (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:7).

W. E. Deming, a professor of statistics in America, is one of the greatest pioneers of the TQM paradigm, regarded as the **'Father of the Quality Revolution'**, such that TQM is a 'management theory' (Fox 1993:226-227). His followers believe that Deming has changed the world. His legacy mirrors his work, in that, there are working models that exist currently in Japan and in South East Asia (*ibid*: 227). His theory is regarded as being MACRO in its relevance to economy and society and his long-term strategy for a business (organisation or institution), or and economy centred on the organisation of the human contribution, and the elevation rather the

degradation of the human spirit (Greenwood & Gaunt 1994:8). This theory is truly regarded as 'PROFOUND' by those who believe in it.

Being missionary, TQM has generated a large number of quality gurus. Each has emphasised some particular facet of 'quality'. The best known of these, including Deming (1988) are Juran (1988), Ishikawa (1985), Crosby (1984), Peters and Waterman (1982) and Peters (1988). Juran and Ishikawa emphasise quality control by the individual and through 'inspection'; Peters, responsiveness to customer demand; and Deming, good old-fashioned pride in one's work. All have slightly different philosophical emphases, but common to all is the clear perception that 'quality' is concerned with providing maximum customer satisfaction whilst keeping costs down. Total Quality Management (TQM), therefore, is part of a holistic approach to progress.

Dr. W. Edwards Deming (Arcaro 1995:63-66) developed Fourteen Points that describe what is necessary for a business or institution to develop a quality culture, which are: create a constancy of purpose; adopt a total quality philosophy; reduce the need for testing; award school business in new ways; improve quality and productivity and reduce costs; promote lifelong learning; improve leadership in education; eliminate fear; eliminate the barriers to success; create a quality culture; process improvement; help students succeed; and show commitment and take responsibility. Deming's Fourteen Points outlined above helped to form the 'researcher's impressions' on the kind of institution the University of Pretoria is, where the case (Faculty of Education) for this study is located, with regard to promotion of a quality culture.

I also advocate the use of a **planned and systematic approach to quality**, which promotes self-reflection and external reference. This means that quality assurance measures in RPL provisioning managed through 'quality cycles' ensures promotion of continuous planning and review of performance. The ADRI cycle, used at the University of Pretoria, resonates with Deming's cycle of quality improvement (Oakland 1993:165), discussed in details in section 3.2 above.

Table 3.7: *How to operationalise the ADRI cycle*

PLAN	Development of an action plan, i.e. determine an Approach
ACT	Implementation of the plan, i.e. Deployment
EVALUATE/MONITOR	Determine progress against plan on an ongoing basis and effect changes/modifications when necessary; and i.e. Review plan
IMPROVE	Feedback of evaluation processes in order to generate Improvements

3.6.2 The ISO 9001:2000 Process-Based Quality Management Model of Quality Assurance

The International Standards Organisation (ISO) Standard 9001: 2000 sets out the methods by which a management system, incorporating all the activities associated with quality, can be implemented in an organisation to ensure that all the specified performance requirements and needs of the customer are fully met (Oakland 1993:102). A fully documented quality management system will ensure that two important requirements met are (1) the customer's requirements for confidence in the ability of the institution to deliver the desired product or service consistently; and (2) the institution's requirements: both internally and externally, and at an optimum cost, with efficient utilisation of the resources available (material, human, technological and administrative). See Figure 3.5 for a presentation of the conceptual framework of the study.

3.6.3 The Systems Theory

The systems theory is the body of knowledge that analyses complex systems, their constituent parts and how they interact (Checkland 1999 in Fresen 2005:67). This theory indicates a complex, holistic system made up of constituent parts. This means "a complex solution must recognise the importance of processes, and for adequate checking of quality, we must take a balanced account of inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes (Woodhouse 2000:107 in Fresen 2005:69).

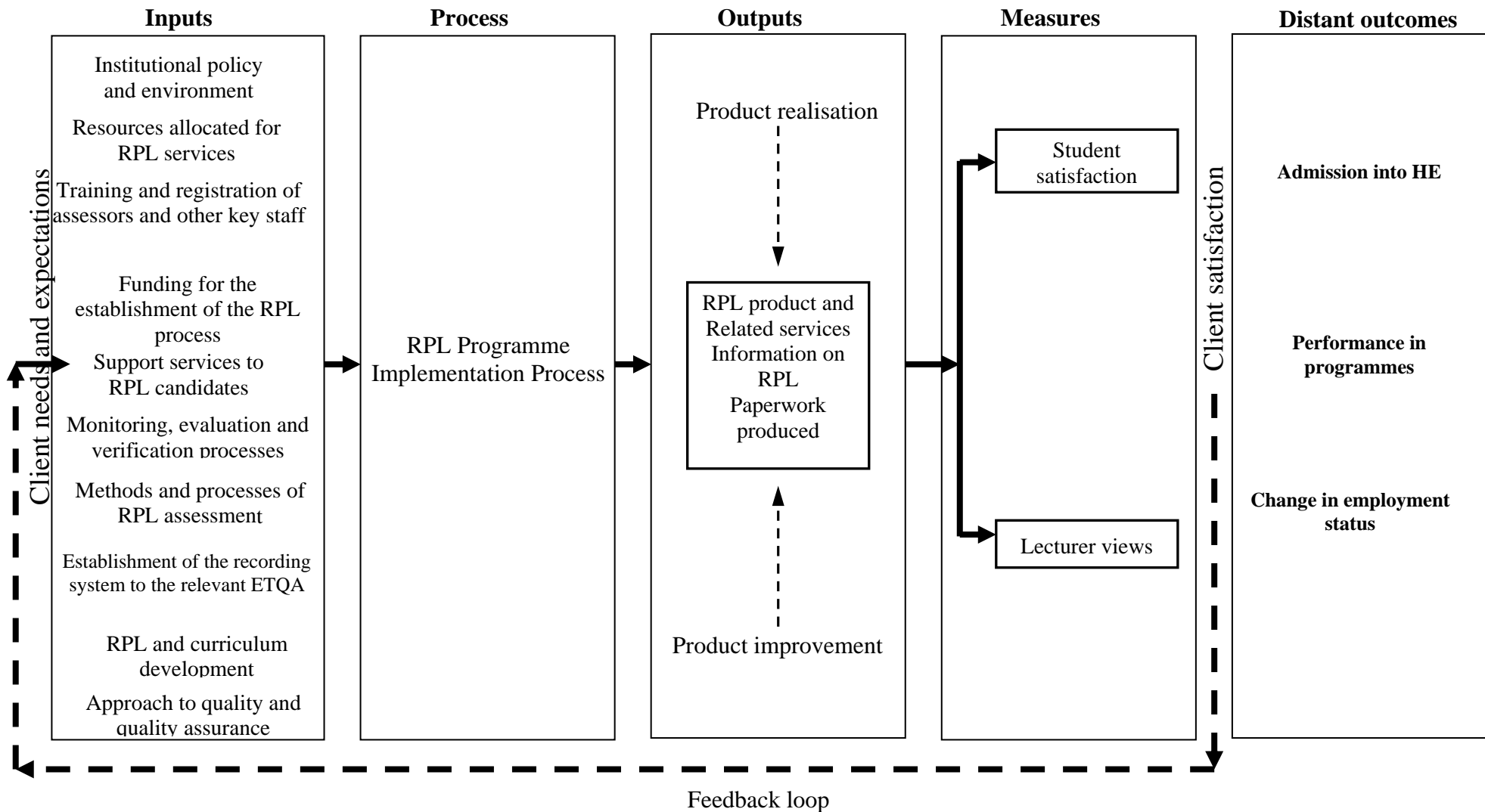


Figure 3.5: The conceptual framework for this study (adapted from Fresen 2005)

The inputs into the process include areas of practice identified from the literature review, which contribute to the quality of the RPL product and services, as discussed in details in section 3.3 above in terms of meaning and expectations. In the context of this study, RPL provisioning is not a major activity at the University of Pretoria, and consequently the Faculty of Education, with no direct funding and minimal allocation of human resources from Top Management. The integrated assessment system ensures that RPL candidates receive expert advice and support services from RPL Faculty assessors and advisors. Hoffmann (2006b:6) accords the success of RPL candidates through the RPL process to factors such as motivation, academic tools, and project management skills.

The target group for which RPL was meant are adult learners (25 years and above), from various backgrounds, and with different learning needs and expectations. RPL should attract unwaged and unemployed adults and young people alike; women who want to return to the bottom of the jobs ladder after a career break; minority ethnic groups with skills that have been unrecognised or undervalued; learners with disabilities or other special needs; and employed people with learning that can be readily identified within a particular vocational area. RPL assessments work well in an environment where there is a culture of quality and commitment of those involved in the process.

In Figure 3.5, the internal QA processes of the institution, aligned to the external Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) processes for Institutional Audits, governs the design of RPL assessment procedures and processes. There are core values and principles that underpin the University's approach to quality assurance:

1. **Customer Focus**, where all university operational units must understand current and future “customer” needs, where the institution defines customers in terms of the services delivered. The units must at all times endeavour to meet customer requirements and strive to exceed customer expectations.
2. **Involvement of People**, meaning people at all levels of the university are the essence of its Quality Strategy and their abilities should be for the university's benefit.
3. **Management by Fact** implying that the units need to know the quality standards of their services from the customer perspective as the first step

towards quality improvement. They must have the facts necessary to effectively manage their operations and share management information with others.

4. **Devolution of accountability** meaning much of the responsibility for quality assurance is located with people who are close to each activity and empowered through continuous improvement processes.

The alignment with national quality assurance arrangements necessitates that the university's approach also embrace notions of quality such as fitness of purpose; fitness for purpose; value for money; excellence; meeting customer requirements; and transformation (see Chapter 1, section 1.6.3.1 a definition of quality).

In Figure 3.5, the solid black arrows represent the feedback loop, an integral part of Deming's cycle of quality improvement. Customer needs and expectations have been categorised in terms of the general customer requirements cited in the literature, which requires the identified inputs to be realised. To improve the programme, two feedback loops are important, that is the 'voice of the customer' (marketing activities) and the 'voice of the process' (measurements activities). The levels of evaluation²² information included participants' reactions and feelings (Level 1); Level 2, dealing with learning (enhanced attitudes; perceptions or knowledge); and Level 3, addressing changes in skills (application of learning to enhance behaviour). In order to measure distant outcomes, archival records will be utilised.

3.7 SUMMARY

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature in terms of the design of a quality RPL system. I investigated the literature in respect of the three research questions in this study: quality in inputs used for designing the RPL system, quality of the RPL assessment process and the quality of the output of the RPL system. The process led to a total of 50-quality indicators in relation to the inputs, developed mainly from the national requirements on designing a quality assured RPL programme, from best practices internationally.

²² http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm retrieved on 15 October 2005.

For the RPL assessment process, there are standards, principles and procedures that Faculty assessors should adhere to in order to ensure credibility and integrity of RPL results. To evaluate the Faculty's RPL assessment process, I will utilise the RPL model (activities and events) of assessment the institution has adopted. There are various quality indicators developed from national and international requirements related to various aspects of the RPL assessment process, such as principles, standards (academic and administrative), and procedures for assessing prior learning.

The quality of the output of the RPL programme determines whether end-users of the programme are satisfied with the general results or not. Quality indicators considered to determine client satisfaction with the RPL product and services, include aspects such as availability of RPL material; the delivery mode of the programme; how reliable the programme is; the cost of the RPL programme; and whether it is performing in accordance with customer's expectations.

The input – output process based Model of Quality Assurance (ISO 9001 family of standards); The systems theory; Deming's model of quality improvement as used in this study; and application of quality principles (TQM philosophy) formed the conceptual framework of this study. The input-process-output model represents a zoom lens that focuses on and enlarges a process to examine it closely against best practices in RPL provisioning in terms of quality assurance measures. Based on the findings and analysis of the results, I will present how the RPL programme functions, identify weaknesses and strengths of the programme, and provide ways of improving the quality of RPL provisioning in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria.