

# CHAPTER 5

## *FINDINGS*

### *QUALITY OF THE INPUTS USED TO DESIGN THE RPL SYSTEM*

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#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I am presenting the findings for research question 1:

**“What is the quality in the inputs used for designing the RPL system that is in place in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria?”**

There are quality indicators developed for the purpose of this study, mainly from the national and international requirements for putting in place a quality system of assessing prior learning (SAQA 2002:18; Nyatanga *et al* 1998:30-55; Fiddler *et al* 2006:13-24; Colvin 2006:45-51) as indicated in Chapter 3, section 3.3.1. The elements required to implement a credible and sustainable RPL system researched by Heyns (2004:186) and the institutional variables indicated by Osman (2004:1) were considered. A synthesis of all these various views and options on the formation of a quality RPL system resulted in ten pre-coded categories (areas of practice) in which I was looking for compliance with these national and international specifications/requirements.

I have described each of the areas of evaluation in details in Chapter 3, section 3.3. The main questions addressed in these areas are on what basis did the RPL programme implementers decide to offer RPL services? What is required of RPL assessors, advisors, and administrators in order to deliver the RPL product or service? What is the type and extent of training received by RPL programme implementers? How do RPL candidates come into the programme? What is required of RPL candidates when and after entering the programme? How do RPL programme implementers select the services provided to the RPL candidates/learners?

In this study, quality means conformance to specification (perfection) or meeting customer requirements, stated or implied (Green 1993:12-17). A high priority is placed on identifying customer's needs as crucial factors in the design of the product or service. What is being said here is that the producer (institution) must establish a system (RPL product and related services), which is capable of fulfilling the requirements of the customer (internal and external), and better still, 'delight' him (Greenwood and Gaunt 1994:27). In every organisation, there are suppliers who provide inputs of materials and services. If the designed system is not capable of delivering on expected outcomes, changes need to be effected in either the design or the programme itself.

As indicated in the research methodology for this research question in Chapter 4, section 4.8.1.1, a semi-structured interview schedule administered to senior administrators/managers of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria elicited information on the design of the RPL programme. The process involved analysis of all the relevant institutional documents on RPL and quality assurance. Finally, an interview with the representative of the Quality Assurance Unit of the University of Pretoria was conducted to determine if there is synergy between what the unit promotes and the actual application of quality assurance measures by RPL implementers at the level of service delivery (micro). A reflection on what the quality statement precedes the research findings in each area of evaluation.

The University of Pretoria, inter alia, Faculty of Education is exemplary in a number of ways, as indicated by the researcher's impressions of the institution in Chapter 1, section 1.7.1. This is in terms of having very good quality assurance arrangements, a fact acknowledged by the team of evaluators from the HEQC during the pilot audits conducted in 2003. The development of procedures and processes for implementing RPL despite the fact that there is a general delay in most of the HEIs is a sign of top management's commitment to offering the service. There is an assertion from RPL programme implementers that the current practice meets national requirements for quality assurance. The use of this motto is indicative to this fact: "*maintaining standards of excellence in RPL provisioning*". There is a culture of quality promoted by senior managers of the institution. This means, an assumption made at the beginning of the investigation was that the RPL practice in the Faculty is one of the best in the world.

The following section contains findings of the study in relation to the ten areas of practice mentioned in Chapter 1, section 1.3.

## **5.2 QUALITY OF THE INPUTS USED TO DESIGN THE RPL SYSTEM**

### **5.2.1 The institutional policy and environment**

This area of practice highlights the fact that an enabling policy environment demonstrating commitment to RPL is essential (SAQA 2002:18). There should be a shared commitment on the part of ETQAs, accredited constituent providers and workplaces to provide a suitable environment for learning and assessment of RPL (inclusive of close co-operation between administration, learning facilitators, evidence facilitators, advisors, assessors, moderators, professional organisations, trade unions and communities, where appropriate). SAQA stated in the national RPL policy document that “unless proper policies, structures and resources are allocated to a credible assessment process, and RPL provisioning can easily become an area of contestation and conflict” (*ibid.*).

SAQA (2002:26) maintains that policies and procedures give legitimacy and structure to a process. However, policies in essence should not be rigid, but should encourage implementers of RPL to be very clear on the intended purpose and outcomes of the initiative. Urban Whitaker (1989:9-10) says: “policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available”. As a national requirement, SAQA (2002:27) wants RPL implementers to align their policies with the national RPL policy, and that such policies should incorporate all the activities surrounding RPL. As indicated in Chapter 1, section 1.2.2, RPL implementation is a national directive, happening within a particular framework. Further, on, the message in institutional policies should be ‘there is an institutional will to open up access to learners coming from diverse backgrounds, displaying diverse needs and capabilities’.

In order to obtain a holistic picture of the policy and the general environment prevalent in the Faculty, the starting point was to analyse what the current vision and mission statement of the university says to make informed judgement as to whether there is a

written intent and commitment to implement RPL from top management level. To determine institutional priorities and to find out how the institution has geared itself for implementation (specific actions) of RPL, the university's current strategic plan was scrutinised. In establishing whether there is an institutional and Faculty-specific RPL policy, the intent was to analyse what the Faculty of Education says about RPL (definition and purpose) and how it intends to provide for this service.

I also evaluated rules and regulations regarding postgraduate studies<sup>31</sup> in the Faculty of Education from the admission's policy in the university to determine if there was compliance with the Ministry of Education's minimum requirements for entry into higher education and the proposals on the enrolment planning in this sector, that is, with specific reference to RPL admissions. There are certain regulations and statutory requirements that impact negatively on the implementation of RPL, i.e. matriculation endorsement as a prerequisite for entry into higher education and award of qualifications; the 50% residency clause and the lack of a clear subsidy structure for RPL for public institutions. In these specific cases, focus was on how the institution addresses such obstacles. Finally, I did establish whether there any regional collaborations and agreements between ETQAs, providers and workplace to ensure effective validation, articulation and recognition of assessment results.

#### **5.2.1.1 Vision and mission statement of the University of Pretoria**

The vision and mission statement of an institution gives an indication of the direction the particular institution needs to take in order to achieve its stated outcomes, i.e. what the institution wants to achieve in a certain period. Such organisational statements represent the predominant values, purpose and key desires in terms of key activities and strategies (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:44). A careful interpretation of what the institution wants to do is an essential factor in ensuring that such intents are translated into operational terms in all levels of the organisational structure. The research findings in this area are:

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<sup>31</sup> There is an emphasis on the use of postgraduate studies because RPL is being done at this level only in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria.

The vision and mission statement of the University of Pretoria express an explicit commitment to the principles of equity, redress, and inclusion. This university is clear in terms of what it wants to be. It wants to be a leader in higher education, internationally recognised for academic excellence and a focus on quality. The institution also makes an effort towards international competitiveness and local relevance through continuous innovation, amongst other ideals. It also sees itself as a university with an inclusive and enabling, value-driven organisational culture, providing an intellectual home for the rich diversity of South African academic talent. What is even more profound is its acknowledgement of its role in Africa, as a symbol of national aspiration and hope, reconciliation and pride, and its commitment to discharging its social responsibilities (University of Pretoria 2002-2005:1).

In terms of what it must do, the institution committed itself to creating flexible, life-long learning opportunities and an intellectually stimulating and culturally vibrant, pleasant and a safe environment where its students and staff can flourish. In particular, in this institution, development of lifelong learning opportunities is via modular-based programmes of education, within which RPL emerges as an important yet inevitable supporting mechanism, ensuring that learning is appropriate, avoids duplication and is economical for the individual and institution.

One of the hallmarks of a successful higher education institution is its ability to know and respond to its customer needs. The provision of an RPL facility can enhance an institution's attractiveness to local employers seeking either an individual employee or group contract based on continuing educational opportunities. However, the Faculty has not exploited this avenue fully, in terms of RPL admissions *per se* since RPL is not commercialised as in other countries, nor is it used as a strategy for economic stability of the institution. By attracting adult learners into higher education, the institution could generate additional fees and subsidies (income). In cases where employers are paying their employees fees for studying purposes, by accessing the Skills Development Funds (SDF), RPL could, in cases where there is award of credits, reduce the cost of learning. RPL candidates are likely to complete their programmes of study, thus reducing costs incurred through having to repeat the course/programme.

The university places a high premium on local relevance, which manifests itself through its contributions to the prosperity, competitiveness and quality of life in South Africa. In order to do this, sensitivity to the national needs and societal contexts of the country as well as the demands of the time will play a major role. Local relevance manifests itself in the university's commitment to and promotion of equity, access, equal opportunities, redress, transformation and diversity, as well as its active and constructive involvement in community development and service (University of Pretoria 2002-2005:2).

It is evident that the development of the vision and mission statement of this institution was a direct response to national goals regarding the transformation of the higher education sector in general; espoused by the South African Ministry of Education. These national ideals include amongst others, the need for considering alternative ways (RPL) of increasing the participation rate of non-traditional students (mature learners; the disabled and those from the SADC region).

Although there is recognition that the University of Pretoria has a role to play in enhancing equal opportunities and access to population groups that traditionally have lower uptake opportunities, at a practical level, mechanisms for ensuring this are not effective enough. The numbers of RPL admissions in the institution since 2000 generally is very low. The other reality is that RPL is attracting mainly practising academics in various fields of specialisation in the education and training sector, who are not necessarily 'historically disadvantaged individuals' in the communities.

The concept historically disadvantaged individuals as used in this Thesis means black students who could not complete their schooling due to political reasons (participation in the struggle for democracy and exposure to inferior education) and skilled workers without paper qualifications, coloureds and Indians, in this order. There is also no indication that there are mechanisms or recruitment drives to deal with this specified group of people. In addition, four respondents during the interviews made statements indicating that not all senior managers in the Faculty of Education are enthusiastic about developing mechanisms for RPL. One of the statements was:

“The RPL mechanism should not be seen as an easy way out for people who do not meet the original entrance requirements to find a kitchen door to slip into the university structures”.

The other senior members of the Faculty saw RPL as “*a burden to the institution and an administrative hassle*”. They mentioned that a lot of work goes into taking just one RPL candidate through the assessment process. A duty which they have to do in addition to their normal responsibilities, that is, teaching, learning and assessment, research, community engagement and engagement in professional development activities. The issue of lecturer’s workloads featured prominently on the responses given by senior managers on the challenges encountered with developing RPL.

#### **5.2.1.2 Institutional strategic plan: evidence of planning for RPL provisioning**

The South African Qualifications Authority (2002:12-13) advocates for a developmental and incremental approach to the implementation of RPL. This means that institutions should use existing infrastructure and resources. This approach, in SAQAs opinion allows providers of the RPL service the space to explore and experiment with the implementation of the policy, and retain their autonomy to develop implementation plans within the constraints of their institutions, while meeting the agreed requirements of the framework indicated in the policy. The developmental and incremental approach enables institutions the liberty to make use of different strategies for implementation, linked to the target group for which the system is developed. In other words, the RPL implementation would not be a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. The evidence sought after, to indicate planning for RPL implementation was at two levels: the institutional and Faculty (departmental) levels.

There is direct reference to RPL provisioning in the University of Pretoria’s strategic plan: “*Inspiring the Innovation Generation 2002-2005*” pages 53 and 54, more especially in relation to creation of opportunities for life long learning and what the institution calls ‘prior learning assessment of academic potential’. The institution committed itself to “developing and deploying instruments to assess the academic potential and performance of learners with a view to admission to the university” (University of Pretoria 2002-2005:54). There is no resource plan or an action plan (implementation plan) for the entire institution indicating when, who and how the

process of RPL provisioning should unfold over a certain period. However, in 2002, the institution released an institution-wide RPL policy entitled: “***Policy on Assessment and Accreditation of Prior Learning***”, detailing the procedures and processes for RPL provisioning (reference code: S4482/02). To develop and implement the RPL policy at Faculty level, individual Deans of the nine faculties are responsible for driving the process.

The growth strategy that is in place in the University of Pretoria, meant to attract students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, has implications for RPL admissions. The proposals on enrolment planning from the Ministry of Education for the higher education sector, encouraged institutions to use strategies that safeguard the intake of students in relation to available funding resources and the institutional physical and personnel resources. A report released by the HSRC on *Student Choice Behaviour Project: Phase One* in 2002 indicated that the University of Pretoria is the University of Choice preferred by prospective first year students. The indication from heads of various departments who deal directly with student applications is that, the institution has been able to attract students who have the necessary minimum entrance requirements for their targeted programmes in undergraduate studies. One of the respondents said:

“We get students from neighbouring schools, with excellent matriculation (grade 12) results, some of them with five or six distinctions”.

In terms of postgraduate programmes, the picture painted by most of the respondents is that some of the practising educators who apply for admission at this institution have “***tremendous potential and excellent academic records coupled with extensive work-related experiences***”, positioning themselves as potential RPL candidates. This situation creates challenges for full-scale RPL provisioning, limiting it to where the need for RPL is, within programmes offered across the different faculties of the institution. The reason being, the institution has made it very clear that “*although it is committed to promoting national goals such as equity, redress, access and equal opportunities, it will not allow the numbers of students to increase beyond its capacity to accommodate them*”. A senior manager in the Faculty when asked about the



implications of the Minister of Education's sentiments on consideration of RPL admissions said:

“With 44 000 contact students and 10 500 distance learning students, there is simply no way in which other students can be RPLed”.

Most Faculty academics prefer to identify suitable RPL candidates (offer RPL on demand) rather than publicise RPL activities widely to avoid large numbers of people coming to the institution requesting assessment for prior learning.

Although there may be policies and procedures for RPL provisioning, there are no guarantees for RPL provisioning being a common practice in the Faculty of Education. At the time of this study, the Department of Educational Psychology had not admitted students into their programmes through RPL since its formal introduction in the Faculty. The last RPL admissions into the MEd programme (Assessment and Quality Assurance) took place in 2003, which involved only three candidates. The numbers in the Departments of Curriculum Studies and Educational Management, Law and Policy Studies for RPL admissions have become less over the last three years. I also found out that sustainability of the RPL programme in the Faculty depends upon a number of factors, such as continued interest in the process by those who are involved in implementing the programme. Most of the senior administrators interviewed, indicated that:

‘Even if we wanted to continue with the RPL assessment process, when we consider our current workloads, we would rather concentrate on mainstream students, to get them through their academic programmes’.

One of the participants even suggested that for RPL to go on, the Faculty needs to consider the *‘use of RPL coaches/instructors or mentors’ since it is ‘just too much work’* for individual lecturers. The emerging situation suggests that RPL is a marginalised activity in this Faculty, what one respondent referred to as a “non-issue”.

An important drive to embed RPL within an institution's central and strategic mechanisms, rather than to leave it as an individual initiative, is the ever-increasing attention to the refinement of quality assurance and audit systems pertaining to all

aspects of an institution's activities. There is a growing trend by governments to try to attach financial gains to demonstrable quality standards and achievements. Thus, quality in this sense would publicly attest to the underlying validity of the RPL process.

### 5.2.1.3 Rules and regulations for admissions

The admission's requirements from the Ministry of Education for higher certificates, diplomas and bachelor degrees, requiring a National Senior Certificate state it clearly that institutional admission's policies must allow for alternative routes (RPL) of entry that are equivalent to higher education learning. The real situation in the Faculty of Education is that admissions into Honours, Masters and Doctoral studies are still governed by Rule VI G.62, as contained in the document on "General Information and Regulations", with RPL not being clearly spelled out. The Faculty committed itself to admitting students: who passed examinations at other institutions (either in the Republic or elsewhere) which the Senate deems **equivalent to**, or higher than the examinations prescribed for a degree at the University, which are set as a prerequisite for admission to a particular postgraduate study programme, or for the admission of such a person as a research student; or in another manner has reached a **standard of competence** the Senate considers adequate for the purposes of postgraduate study or research at the University, as student for a postgraduate degree, diploma or certificate. There is no attempt from the Faculty in changing its terminology in line with the political and educational changes that took place in South Africa over a decade ago. This is with special reference to the use of the term 'Republic' in its official documents, suggesting adherence to the previous educational practices.

Regarding academic programmes, the brochure released by the Faculty of Education to indicate all the programmes offered in the School of Educational Studies for 2007, presents only one programme targeted for RPL admissions, which is the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE), with the code 99227050. The requirements for admissions in this programme clearly indicate that if the prospective student's application does not comply with the admission requirements, he or she may follow the RPL route by submitting a portfolio containing a record of their work-related experience. In the other programmes such as the BEd (Hons); MEd and PhD studies, the institution uses phrases such as 'another academic qualification considered

equivalent by the Dean for admission’ as indicated in Rule VI G.62, or ‘having reached a standard of competence considered adequate for purposes of postgraduate study by the Senate’. The same information is widely publicised by the Faculty of Education in the document entitled: “Regulations and Syllabi” for 2006.

There is a strong perception among senior managers in the Faculty that there has always been a form of RPL prior to the restructuring and transformation of the higher education sector. I noted no radical changes between procedures for RPL admissions and the way the Senate of the University of Pretoria used to admit students into various programmes without the minimum entrance requirements. The ‘previous procedures’ were successful completion of an oral/written entrance examination; evaluation of such an application by one or more external examiners; a written motivation on behalf of the student made by the relevant Head of Department; and a submission to Senate, where a final decision is made. The only difference in RPL assessments is the use of portfolio of evidence.

The 50% residency clause is still in place in the Faculty, which means a learner granted credits through an RPL process in terms of recognised qualifications, must still complete at least 50% of the Learning Programme with the institution regardless of whether the credits exceed 50% of the requirements, or even fulfil all the requirements of the qualification. Another obstacle regarding implementing RPL is that according to the Matriculation Board (MB), successful completion of a matriculation certificate is still a pre-requisite for the awarding of the post-matriculation qualifications.

For RPL, this means that an adult learner with an incomplete matric, who may have met all the requirements of post-matriculation qualification, is required to complete secondary schooling prior to the award of the qualification. Since there are no agreements between the University of Pretoria and other institutions to facilitate portability and transferability of ‘RPL credits’, the outcomes of the assessment of prior learning can only be used in the Faculty of Education for the programme applied for. The process of granting higher education institutions self-accreditation status for RPL purposes, by the CHE/HEQC has not been completed. This situation creates another hurdle in ensuring that there is dialogue between institutions on ‘RPL credits’ and ‘RPL admissions’ in general, or brokering of such agreements.

#### 5.2.1.4 Institutional RPL policies and procedures

There is an institutional RPL policy<sup>32</sup> formulated and approved by the Senate of the University of Pretoria in 2002. This policy covers critical aspects to RPL provisioning, such as, what RPL is, what is the purpose for RPL, guiding principles for the implementation process, the legislative framework, the RPL assessment process, standards used for the assessment process, RPL assessment methods, roles, rights and responsibilities of those involved, and what the institution would do to overcome implementation challenges. Regarding the latter, an audit of current practice assumed to have taken place, covers a wide range of issues such as how to prepare for RPL; human resource issues; staffing issues with regard to assessment; appointment of mentors and advisors; financial and budgetary issues; and establishment of quality management systems. The SAQAs generic template for an RPL policy (2004:30) and the exemplar from the Victoria University of Technology (Melbourne, Australia) (Fleet 1997:36-39 in Harris 2000:150-153) indicate that it addressed all the essential aspects of a policy moreover; it reflects alignment with the national RPL policy and the directives from the CHE/HEQC.

The Faculty of Education developed its own RPL policy, finally approved by the Senate of the University of Pretoria in 2003. The opening statement in the policy document refers to general rules and regulations with regard to postgraduate student cases, which have been in use in the institution since 1996, and not to the institutional RPL policy per se (University of Pretoria 2003:1). This is with specific reference to Regulation VI G.62, on 'Granting of Graduate Status with a view to Postgraduate Study' (University of Pretoria 2007:25) of the general information and regulations document in the University of Pretoria). The situation means that there is an adherence to 'old institutional rules' and the RPL policy is not given prominence, nor is it promoted in official institutional documents.

The Faculty uses RPL for offering students ease of access into selected postgraduate academic programmes and qualifications offered in the School of Educational Studies. In this sense, it allows students an opportunity of progressing with higher education

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<sup>32</sup> The RPL policy of the University of Pretoria is available on request.

learning and increases their opportunities for viable career options/pathways. There are no certificates issued or actual ‘RPL credits’ granted. RPL means just a formal recognition (acknowledgement) from the institution that says the candidate’s prior learning based on work-related experience and academic qualifications is equivalent to the entry-level criteria for the desired module, programme or qualification. The majority of RPL admissions (successful RPL applications) took place in the ACE, PGCE, PGCHE and the MEd programmes in various fields of specialisation, with no admissions into the BEd (Hons) and the PhD programmes via RPL in any of the fields of specialisation.

A relatively few students received RPL in the Faculty, despite the institution’s principle that “*RPL should be available to all*” (University of Pretoria 2002:4). This situation is similar to the one depicted in the report on RPL policy and practice in Australia, released in 2003. Australians found that RPL largely, has not acted as a mechanism for social inclusion for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Instead, those who benefited from the system had excellent academic records<sup>33</sup>, and lots of experience in post-secondary education and training. The report indicated that they did not come from socially disadvantaged groups necessarily. One of the reasons for this situation is that in the Faculty, there are two conditions for offering RPL. Firstly, it is for candidates, who lack the formal entry requirements, where they could undertake a module or a number of modules in addition to the recognised prior learning. Secondly the Faculty would recognise the exceptional achievements of senior academics and trainers who have distinguished themselves in the fields of curriculum development, teaching and learning, management and educational psychology’. The latter acted as a pipeline for the few who accessed higher education learning in this Faculty via RPL.

The institution’s view and application of the concept historically disadvantaged is highly debatable (contested). One of the respondents said:

“We present to Senate at the beginning of every year a long list of students from disadvantaged communities, which include a lot of white students”.

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<sup>33</sup> Applicants with an excellent academic record were identified as potential RPL candidates for a higher programme they originally applied for.

The other senior manager who motivated for the admission of the three white students into one of the MEd programme offered, without the usual BEd Honours degree as a prerequisite, said:

“These candidates were not admitted on the basis of the traditional version of being disadvantaged, but were identified as candidates with tremendous potential, and who deserved to be RPLed”.

None of those interviewed provided meaningful responses on this question: “How will the Faculty deal with the disparities of the past unjust educational system” or open up doors of learning to those who were excluded from participation in higher education learning because of educational policies enforced by the previous government?

### **5.2.2 RESOURCES (physical, financial and human) ALLOCATED FOR RPL SERVICES**

Many aspects of RPL demand a resource commitment in terms of actual financial allocation, dedication of staff time (both academic and non-academic<sup>34</sup>) and the use of the institution’s premises/equipment (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:52). On the other hand, Challis (1993:134-135) maintains that “once established RPL can operate at least as cost-effectively as the traditional course-led pattern of provision”. It is essential for institutions to plan the systematic development and operation of RPL. This could be on a selected or institution-wide basis. Some of the strategies she suggests, which might be used to minimise costs in implementing RPL are to top-slice, the budget to create a development fund for which faculties and departments can bid in order to pilot RPL; establish a separate budget for central services such as admissions and initial guidance and assessment, and ask faculties, departments and course coordinators to make staff available to fulfil these centralised functions; and get target RPL candidate figures for Faculty or department to allocate an amount of staff time to RPL activities based on anticipated demands. She also suggests a number of ways in which flexible use of staff can be used in order to keep the costs of implementation to a minimum, such as using support staff for some of the initial screening of RPL candidates; switching monies between those who manage budgets in order to pump-prime the system; timetabling

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<sup>34</sup> The non-academic staff is also referred to as the supporting staff.

tutors into RPL workshops where teaching and assessment takes place; and extending the institution's year so that more consistent and frequent use is made of staff and space.

The Faculty of Education's RPL policy on administrative and organisational requirements, points out that "the Head of Student Administration, Faculty of Education is responsible for putting into place the necessary mechanisms to administer and manage the RPL applications. Such an office serves all administrative, managerial and organisational issues related to the RPL applications". This situation in the Faculty of Education is in line with what SAQA recommends in that 'as far as possible, the approach to implementing RPL should be to make use of existing infrastructure and resources". Harris (2000:130) promotes this approach, where she suggests that institutional administrative systems need to incorporate RPL tasks and procedures in a seamlessly integrated manner. This means that it is the responsibility of the 'Faculty Office' to process fees and credits, to notify candidates of assessment outcomes, to ensure that assessment results go into the mainstream administrative system, and to issue transcripts in the normal way. One of the senior academics articulated very strong opinions on the issue of the RPL centre: He said, *'There is no need for an organised infrastructure since there are very small numbers of candidates wanting to be RPLed'*.

In terms of financial resources to kick-start, as well, as sustain the RPL assessment process, there is no evidence of availability of a separate fund (ring-fenced funds) for these purposes from the university, government or any other source(s). The Faculty of Education taps into its usual annual budget to undertake the minimal activities related to RPL, which includes amongst others: preparation of documentation; communication with RPL candidates; assessment of the portfolio; external examiners services; and arrangements of meetings and other logistical matters. One of the senior academics in the Faculty indicated that since RPL is a non-issue in the Faculty, there is no need to try other avenues for funding. He added, ***"We would rather get all the money for RPL activities from the university"***. One of the senior managers involved in the assessment of RPL candidates for their prior learning confirmed the general approach used in that:

***"If RPL is done on a small scale, it is manageable within the department's budget, but if one intends to offer it on a large scale, then, a different process is needed"***

All the staff members participating in the RPL assessment process do so as part of their daily academic duties, and it has been highlighted by the senior members of the Faculty of Education that this is an add-on to lecturer's teaching workload, which is not taken positively by may. To affirm this, most of the respondents (83%) view RPL as *“a time-consuming process that distracts academics from their main tasks”*. Very few lecturers have been part of the RPL process since its inception in the Faculty of Education in 2003. The people who are involved in this process in terms of their positions are the HODs of various departments, programme coordinators under which the RPL application falls, members of the RPL committee; and the executive committee of the Senate established to deal directly with RPL related matters. The other observation made is that in relation to practical and hands on experience in assessing prior learning, there are very few lecturers in the Faculty of Education with such expertise on the adult education theory and associated assessment practices.

To facilitate wide-scale implementation of RPL, international trends point out towards establishment of 'a national RPL centre' that will serve the diverse needs of candidates from disadvantaged communities and promotion of regional collaborations. In the Netherlands, Erkennen van elders of informeel Verworven Competenties (EVC) the Knowledge Centre APL established in 2001, with funding, for a period of four years., served various purposes, such as the development of expertise and dissemination of information on APL; research and development of best practices; networking; and supporting the new vocational qualifications framework (SAQA 2002:48). In Canada, Halifax, Nova Scotia, the PLA Centre offers RPL services to individuals and organisations that have a range of development needs, from education and training; to those facing unemployment or retrenchment; to career advancement.

This centre is a joint project involving five Halifax universities, the provincial community college system, and representatives from community groups, voluntary organisations, labour, the private sector and government, with a very small-dedicated staff. RPL provisioning in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria happens at a minimal scale, with few resources allotted to the process, and there is no intention of widening the scope of RPL services, by way of having a RPL centre where an appointed RPL staff can conduct all the RPL related activities. There is only one institution in higher education with a separate centre (office) dedicated for RPL



assessment activities, that is, the Office for Experiential Learning at the University of South Africa. This office has been in operation since 2002, which has benefited those seeking for prior learning assessment.

### **5.2.3 TRAINING AND REGISTRATION OF RPL ASSESSORS AND KEY PERSONNEL**

The training and orientation of assessors and other staff involved in assessment is a critical component for the success of implementing the principles and objectives of the NQF (SAQA 2002:22). We need to consider the fact that the role of the assessor in the Outcomes-Based Education and Training (OBET) system has changed significantly and assessment of prior learning requires specialised expertise, if candidates are to be given a fair chance of demonstrating what they know and can do. CTP (2001:16) argues that this role has evolved from assessors being gatekeepers who exclude non-traditional candidates from learning to being a supportive guide to assist the non-traditional candidate to gain access to higher education. It is essential therefore, for all those involved in the RPL assessment process to receive formal training, be it in-house assessment training or specialised training offered by outside agencies, to be able to provide information on the requirements of modules, programmes and qualifications; support and guide the candidate in the collection of the evidence; help the candidate plan for the assessment; inform the candidate about the timing of the assessment; and conduct the assessment and provide feedback.

In RPL terms, the assessment process involves: evidence facilitators, assessors, verifiers, moderators, advisors and RPL administrators<sup>35</sup>, and it is recommended by SAQA (2002:22) that each task be performed by different people to avoid potential conflict of interest and bias, wherever and whenever possible. RPL candidates need to be treated with extra sensitivity, as some of them come from unstructured learning environments, which might open them up for further prejudice, if those involved in the process have not dealt with their own biases. Whilst the critical areas of bias in South Africa focus on issues of race, language, religion, gender, class, there are numerous other biases too, including the bias against experiential and non-formal forms of

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<sup>35</sup> The roles of evidence facilitators, assessors, verifiers, moderators and advisors will be further clarified in Chapter 5 that deals with the RPL assessment process per se.

learning (SAQA 2002:22). Therefore, training would enable all these people involved in the RPL assessment process to provide a holistic, learner-centred service that is in keeping with the objectives of the NQF and related policies. A few lecturers (less than five) in the Faculty of Education went through a weeklong training on RPL offered by an outside agency, the City and Guilds International, offered in 2002, for a week, in preparation for involvement in RPL assessments.

In the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria, the roles of those involved in the assessment process are differentiated in terms of the positions they hold at the university. For example, it is the Head of Department and Programme Manager, who are subject specialists in the programme the RPL application falls under, who become involved in the initial RPL processes. Then, the RPL committee members assume an active role in assessing and reviewing the portfolio developed by the RPL candidate, in the presence of an external examiner(s) and the same group is responsible for the interview conducted with the candidate. In essence, there is no use of the terms evidence facilitator and advisor. However, it is obvious that the Programme Manager plays the role of the evidence facilitator, advisor and verifier, whilst the Head of Department and RPL committee members are assessors. Internal moderation of RPL results is at various levels, that is, at departmental, Faculty, and finally the Senate of the university.

All those involved in this process have received the in-house general assessor training and development course (programme), but most have not registered as assessors with the relevant ETQA, i.e. the ETDPSSETA. In order for the registration process to be facilitated, there needs to be a memorandum of understanding between the CHE/HEQC, which is responsible for the monitoring of the implementation of the RPL policy in this sector and the ETDPSSETA, and currently this process has not been completed. The reality is that there are well-trained and capable assessors in the higher education sector, who are not in the SAQA database necessarily, but are well positioned to assess learning in general, however, they still need to be familiarised with the RPL assessment processes and standards. I did not find any evidence of mentoring relationships between staff with and those without assessment expertise.

#### **5.2.4 FUNDING FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RPL PROCESS**

Like all other activities, the establishment of the RPL assessment process must be funded. There is no evidence that there is a separate budget for RPL activities given to the Faculty of Education from the university's centralised budget. There is also no indication that from the government subsidy that the institution enjoys, there is an amount of money earmarked (ring-fenced) for start up processes of the implementation of RPL. It became evident during the interviews that the Faculty of Education does not have any other source of income for RPL services, such as from partnerships with NGOs or the employment sector.

RPL candidates do not pay anything towards the assessment process, except the usual registration fees paid to the institution by all applicants. In instances where there is payment, it is when the candidate has to enrol for the Professional Development Module (PDM) offered as one of the programmes in the Faculty, designed to assist with the construction and development of the credit-bearing portfolio amongst the other learning outcomes. The fee charged for this module is less than the cost of taking the module on a full-time basis. The Faculty of Education has a flexible payment option, which reflects the individual needs of the learner. However, one cannot say that the RPL mechanism generates a substantial amount of money for the Faculty of Education, because there are very few RPL learners who go through the system on a yearly basis. If anything, the sustainability of this process is questionable, under these circumstances.

Fees for the delivery and administration of assessment and RPL services do not create barriers for candidates. RPL services and assessment in the Faculty of Education do not cost more than a full-time face-to-face programme, mainly because such services are integrated into the existing infrastructure. Although actual figures were not given, I was informed that the amount paid by candidates to go through the Professional Development Module offered in the Faculty is reasonable and affordable. This module is credit bearing as a result there is an amount of government subsidy that is given to the university. Most of the candidates who are admitted through this route, are employed, and are able to pay for themselves or their employers take the responsibility for their fees through accessing the skills development funds.

I also found out that the initial start-up costs were not high for the Faculty of Education, since there were very few RPL candidates assessed generally, and the figures indicated are approximately three assessments in individual departments per year. The main activity that is costly is the one-on-one contact sessions with the candidates, which assessors prefer to do. The rationale used for this approach is that one candidate needs to be assessed properly to get the maximum benefit from the process. The sessions are costly on both sides in the sense that the candidates have to travel to the institution. The Faculty incurs costs related to communication with the candidate in between the sessions. There is no research that has been done at the University of Pretoria to investigate cost and cost effectiveness of the RPL system.

### **5.2.5 SUPPORT SERVICES TO RPL CANDIDATES**

In this instance, through properly conducted evidence facilitation, advice and other support services, including assistance in dealing with personal, social and technical barriers to assessment and preparation of evidence, candidates are able to see how to use the process of RPL to achieve their personal, educational and career goals (SAQA 2002:21). Services and support to RPL candidates/learners form part of the pre-assessment advice and counselling, which includes preparation for the assessment itself, educational planning and post-assessment support. SAQA argues that this service should not be differentiated from the usual services rendered by the suitably trained career guidance counsellors or other advisors who are part of the 'student services' offered by the university.

Research findings indicate that during the initial assessment processes, the Programme Manager (advisor/coach/mentor) who meets with the RPL candidate provides advice on how the candidate can make effective choices about the learning programmes, career and work-related opportunities. RPL candidates are assisted to make sense of the experience acquired in formally and non-formally learning situations and to link this to career path and opportunities for promotion. Through the help of the programme coordinator, one is able to present evidence for the claim made for prior learning in a coherent and systematic manner. Much of the support that the Faculty of Education documented as being available to RPL candidates is to avail the necessary infrastructure. It has been said in a generic manner, without specifics.

At a practical level, the following are comments from senior managers in the Faculty indicating the nature and extent of support given to RPL candidates:

‘When you allow them to programmes, you normally ask them to identify their needs in terms of research capacity...we tell them to do a research module of honours level so as to improve their theoretical underpinning...we make sure that they are linked to good supervisors to give them good guidance more especially during their first year of study...assistance for candidates who are not fluent in English is available...they are identified during the interview and we recommend that they do a module on academic English’

“We track them down to see if they are coping...the programme coordinator usually looks at their marks to see how you can assist them...they ask, are there any problems? Is there anything we can do to assist? The moment you RPL, the support is forever”

### **5.2.6 MONITORING, EVALUATION AND VERIFICATION OF THE RPL PROCESS**

According to CTP (2001:52) monitoring, evaluation and verification are important elements in the ongoing development of the RPL process in relation to the quality of assessment and the level of service provided to the adult learner. The evaluation of the RPL process should include all those having a stake in the RPL process, including representatives from the learner community. The evaluation process should be both formative and summative. It should be used to inform the ongoing refinement, and development of the RPL policy, procedures, programmes and services at all levels to reflect changes in demographics and assessment practices.

There are structures responsible for the monitoring, evaluation and verification of the RPL process in the University of Pretoria. These structures stretch as far back into the various departments in the Faculty of Education, and at Faculty level and Senate level. The RPL committee for the Faculty plays a major role in this process. The fact that RPL applications are discussed at the Faculty Board Meeting, where all academics can inform the process is one other quality element built into this process.

If we also consider the fact that the executive committee of the Senate of the University of Pretoria feeds into this assessment process by making decisions on all the RPL applications, there should be vital information fed into this process from the many activities that take place from the beginning to the end of the assessment process. Much

of the information from these structures is about the assessment report and outcomes of the assessment itself. There is no evidence of an internal report on the RPL practice. There is also no indication of the progress made by the University of Pretoria in offering RPL services in the light of the recommendations the institution received from the external evaluation conducted by the HEQC in 2003. The other missing element is the evaluation done by the RPL candidates themselves and RPL assessors on the assessment process. There is no instrument from the Faculty to get constructive feedback from candidates and lecturers who participate in the RPL assessment process.

### **5.2.7 METHODS AND PROCESSES OF RPL ASSESSMENT**

Assessment is a structured process for gathering evidence and making judgements about a candidate's performance in relation to registered national standards and qualifications. This process involves the candidate and the assessor within a particular context in a transparent and collaborative manner (SAQA 2002:25). Assessment plans indicate that various assessment tools are available to validate diverse types of learning, and this should include self-assessments. The indication is that the RPL learner is given an opportunity to be an active participant in all aspects of the assessment process, such as identifying and collecting evidence, determining location and time of assessment, providing additional evidence if necessary. What is critical in the assessment of prior learning is that proper principles of assessment are adhered to, which constitute the heart of good practice in the assessment and accreditation of prior learning (Nyatanga *et al* 1988; Fiddler *et al* 2006; Cohen 2006). In addition, the quality of the evidence collected is essential, and this relates mainly to reliability, validity, authenticity, sufficiency and currency.

#### **5.2.7.1 Methods of RPL assessment in the Faculty of Education**

There are two main forms of RPL assessment applicable in the Faculty of Education, namely, the development of a portfolio to meet the outcomes of the programme applied for, which is assessed with the involvement of the external examiner and 1 hour session interviews conducted with the candidate to determine whether he/she meets the entry level requirements of the programme earmarked. In lesser instances, candidates may be given an essay (1500) words to determine his/her writing and analytic skills of a section

of topic assumed to have been dealt with. The evidence required includes letters of recommendation from various people, diploma and degree certificates, testimonials, transcripts of academic records, publications and any other evidence that the candidate wishes to table before the RPLCF<sup>36</sup> meeting.

### **5.2.7.2 Procedures and processes of RPL assessment**

In terms of the procedure and process of RPL assessment, the Programme Manager<sup>37</sup> compiles a set of criteria to be used by the RPLCF when the portfolio of a candidate has to be reviewed. These criteria usually are based on the outcomes of the programme or degree on which prior learning assessment will be based. Applications for RPL have to be submitted to the RPLCF in the first semester of the year preceding registration with the University of Pretoria. This allows for the processing of the applications and for the submission of the applications to the last Faculty Board Meeting (FBM) of the preceding year. The outcomes of the FBM have to be submitted to the Executive of Senate dealing with the application at the last Senate Meeting of the year preceding the registration. The Programme Manager, subject specialist and Head of Department prescribe the evidence required to be reviewed by the RPLCF. The documentation is then reviewed by the RPLCF two months before the scheduled interview with the candidates.

Additional requirements are that, the PM and HOD could also expect the candidate to be fully prepared in terms of the content of a reading list compiled to be defended at the RPL interview. The candidate will be assessed on his/her understanding and interpretation of the information contained in the recommended readings. The RPLCF will interview the candidate on the criteria set by the PM and HOD in terms of the outcomes expected to be achieved by the candidate in the expected qualification. For an example, if a candidate wishes to be exempted from the BEd (Hons) qualification, then the interview will be based on the candidate's knowledge and understanding of the outcomes to be achieved at NQF level 7. The HOD, in liaison with the PM, will compile a report based on the outcomes of the RPLCF and table the report at the first FBM or as soon as time allows. Such a report usually contains the applicant's formal

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<sup>36</sup> RPLCF stands for the RPL Committee of the Faculty of Education.

<sup>37</sup>The Programme Manager/Coordinator plays the role of the evidence facilitator, RPL administrator and verifier.

application; copies of the academic qualifications; transcripts of the candidate's academic records; recommendations by the HOD, PM and external subject specialist as well as a global percentage mark or score reflecting the candidate's command of the field of specialisation; and copies of testimonials, additional recommendations or supplementary evidence.

The School Chair designate and the Dean of the Faculty of Education will defend the decision of the RPLCF and FBM at the executive meeting of Senate convened for such purposes. The decision of the RPLCF and the executive of Senate dealing with such matters is final. It still remains the prerogative of Programme Managers to recommend the completion of any module that might supplement the prior learning experiences of a candidate should this be required. Faculty administration will be informed on the outcomes of the decision of Senate and inform the candidate accordingly, usually in writing. Lastly, no students are expected to register into a programme while the outcomes of the RPL applications are pending or whilst the executive of Senate responsible for the assessment of the applications has not come to a decision. These are clear and simple procedures to follow.

The following is an exposé of an assessment process of one of the candidates assessed in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria. This is being done to indicate the procedures and processes followed at a practical level:

### **5.2.7.3 RPL assessment case: Mr Richard Zeeman<sup>38</sup>**

The candidate (a white male and educator by profession) was not in possession of the required BEd (Hons) degree to be admitted into the MEd (CIDD) programme. He has a BA degree from the University of Pretoria, received in 1994, and a Higher Education Diploma from UNISA, obtained in 1999. Apart from having attempted the MPhil qualification, he also has numerous attendance and completion qualifications for short learning programmes such as Project Management, Supervision and Management Skills and Leadership Training. Richard appeared before the RPL committee on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April 2006 where he was subjected to an oral examination (interview) that lasted for an

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<sup>38</sup> I used a pseudo-name to protect the real identity of this candidate.



hour. There were three RPL committee members involved in this particular assessment process: Head of Department (Curriculum Studies); Programme Coordinator (Curriculum Studies) and the external consultant and specialist in the field of Technology Education.

The interview focused on a thorough discussion to determine why he would like to be granted exemption from doing the BEd (Hons); his subject knowledge regarding his field of specialisation in general and the education of learners within these fields of specialisation; his general understanding of educational research as methodology; and the foci and procedures he has in mind with his proposed research at Masters Level.

The RPL committee also assessed the portfolio submitted by Richard as well as his commitment and expertise in the field of computer-integrated education. His portfolio indicated that he has worked in the field of computer-integrated education for many years and has established himself as a very prominent figure in computer-integrated education in general. He was found to have a profound understanding of the field of educational research. The proposal he tabled indicated a good intellectual clarity and understanding of the problems he has encountered in practice. The committee also assessed his research knowledge and CIE ability very thoroughly and concluded that he met the basic knowledge to commence with the master's degree in computer-integrated education.

In essence, the committee found out that Richard demonstrated the requirements that commensurate with the exit level outcomes of NQF level 7, which are a demonstration of a sound knowledge base and critical understanding of education in general and of his area (computer-integrated education) in particular; the ability to critically analyse and evaluate knowledge in computer-integrated education and contributes to the systematic and disciplined thinking about educational matters and issues with reference to computer-integrated education and to act as an academic leader and expert in the field of education, training and development. Richard was to complete one of the BEd (Hons) research modules in qualitative research. The Head of Department, Curriculum Studies presented him to the FBM, with no objections from participants of this forum in terms of taking this process further. The executive committee of the Senate of the University of Pretoria endorsed the decision to admit him into the MEd (CIDD)

programme in that same year. This example indicates that there is strict adherence to procedures as laid down by the Faculty to assess prior learning.

### **5.2.8 LEARNER RECORDS AND THE REPORTING SYSTEM TO THE RELEVANT ETQA**

As a national requirement, the reporting and record keeping related to RPL should be designed to meet NQF principles, which include portability and transferability of RPL credits and indicate learner mobility. Information on RPL outcomes for all candidates, including unsuccessful and successful applications needs to be provided. To eliminate subjectivity against RPL results, they should be recorded in the normal transcription mode of the institution. Reports of the progress of RPL candidates post RPL assessment should be availed. The reports to ETQAs, the CHE/HEQC in this case, and the NLRD at SAQA needs to have a section on RPL

There are records in all the departments where there were candidates assessed for their prior learning, which include names and contact details, procedure and process followed for assessing each candidate, documents submitted by the candidate before and during the assessment, outcomes of the RPL assessment at various levels (Departmental; Faculty and Senate), and minutes of the meetings held by the RPL committee with the candidate.

However, there is no evidence that information on RPL has ever been submitted to the NLRD at SAQA through the CHE/HEQC at any given stage. This information is essential to SAQA for monitoring purposes and ensuring the quality of qualifications offered by various other institutions. The reason forwarded by one of the senior academics interviewed was that *“all the candidates assessed are still busy with the programmes they are admitted into, and there is no throughput rate yet, as a result, it is not worth it to send the information as is”*. However, statistical evidence is there should it be required. Most of the respondents also pointed out that *“a detailed study needs to be conducted to determine the progress made by the candidates admitted from 2003 to date”*. Such information is not available, and people felt that it would strengthen the motivation for continuation of the RPL service if the present cohort of RPL learners were coping with higher education learning.

### **5.2.9 RPL AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT**

An analysis of the designed curriculum for postgraduate studies offered in the Faculty of Education indicated that it was thoroughly researched to assist learners to meet their learning goals. Multiple methods of instruction and delivery including experiential and problem-based methods are reflected in these curricula, in order to meet the diverse cultural, ethnic, linguistic and educational needs of learners. It is evident that curriculum developers in the Faculty did engage in research (dialogue and discussion) on the assessment of prior learning, that is to determine what is essential to know, what knowledge is regarded as valuable and worth recognising, and how learning generated in situations outside of the specified range or context in which assessment is being done will be recognised. Reformation of all programmes offered in the Faculty of Education is in line with the requirements of the NQF, that is, a shift from an inputs-based system to an outcomes-based system. In addition, the matching of the candidate's prior learning is being done against the outcomes of the programme identified. For example, all candidates exempted from the BEd (Hons) for admission into the MEd programme were interviewed to determine their knowledge and understanding of the outcomes expected to be achieved at NQF level 7. In this sense, the curriculum allows for flexible entry points.

However, as mentioned previously, there is only one programme in the Faculty of Education offered for RPL admissions specifically, and that is the PGCHE (code 09227050). There are not many Learning Programmes in the Faculty's curricula reflect the diversity of needs and goals of the learner population. Where candidates demonstrate knowledge that does not fit existing Unit Standards or exit level outcomes, there will be very few credit equivalencies established for RPL learners in the existing curriculum.

### **5.2.10 APPROACH TO QUALITY AND QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Firstly, in the mission and vision statements of the University of Pretoria, there is an indication that the institution strives for the attainment of quality in everything it does, for an example, service quality; academic quality; quality of governance, management and administration and quality of people. Quality is seen as the university's key

strategic drivers. The university has adopted an integrated approach to Quality Assurance (QA), which interfaces with other national processes, mainly at the CHE/HEQC, SAQA and the National Department of Education. The quality assurance mechanisms promoted by the institution are based on self-evaluation by the university and the operational units in order to: demonstrate accountability to external and internal stakeholders by giving an account of the situation as is; identification of strengths and weaknesses in quality assurance arrangements and planning on how to build on existing strengths and take remedial action on areas of weaknesses; an external peer assessment to validate the internal self-evaluation processes; internal accreditation processes; and ongoing monitoring.

In addition, the university's approach to QA, promotes self-reflection and external reference. This means that the QA is managed through 'quality cycles' that promote continuous planning and review of performance through the ADRI cycles. The cycle works in the following way:

- There must be a plan of action (procedures and processes) to determine how things are going to be done (**approach**). In the case of quality assurance in the area of RPL, the Faculty of Education has an RPL policy and procedures that indicate clearly how RPL is offered.
- This step is then followed by the implementation of the plan (**deployment**).
- The progress made against the plan needs to be determined and changes should be effected when necessary (**review of the plan**).
- The feedback received of the evaluation process needs to generate an **improvement plan** related to the RPL practice.

As indicated above, the missing elements in the actual practice are the review of the RPL practice as there is no evidence that the RPL practice was ever evaluated internally.

The university's approach to QA is also based on the following principles: fitness of purpose; fitness for purpose; value for money and transformation. For fitness for purpose, it is operationalised in this manner: what are we trying to do? Why and how

are we trying to do it? Who is doing it? How do the system and the people involved improve? I found out that there was a well-thought of mission for implementing RPL, implementers did look into the issue of structures and processes, and responsibilities and lines of accountability were clarified beforehand. However, it is not very clear how the Faculty intends to get feedback from RPL candidates and the process itself on its effectiveness.

Although the university works within this framework emphasising self-evaluation and external peer assessment as the main tool for continual quality improvement, it learns and borrows ideas for some of its operations from other quality management systems that have proved effective in other contexts, such as the Business Excellence Model, the SA Excellence model and the ISO 9000 family of standards. Some of the participants in the interviews indicated that the TQM (Total Quality Management) philosophy is applicable to the implementation of the RPL policy, in addition to these other views.

#### **5.2.10.1 The Quality Cycle for the improvement of the process of implementing the RPL programme**

According to the approach promoted by the Quality Assurance of the University of Pretoria, the implementation of the RPL policy in the Faculty of Education needs to go through the following cycle: The Faculty should have self-evaluation exercises of the RPL practice as a starting point. Staff members involved in the RPL assessment process need to go through workshops to have an understanding of what the self-evaluation activities will be about. The RPL policy and procedures in place need to be discussed and reviewed during those meetings.

The strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities (swot analysis) posed by the current RPL practice need to be identified. This should be done in relation to the HEQCs Audit criterion on RPL to see if the Faculty does meet the minimum requirements for quality assurance measures in the area of RPL. Another element is that the Faculty needs to develop its own benchmarks. Based on the information gathered during the preceding stages, an improvement plan needs to be generated. What the Faculty is doing in relation to implementation of the RPL policy should also be guided by the institution's strategic plan.

Apart from the institutional pilot audits conducted (external evaluation) by the HEQC in 2003, which touched on the RPL practice for the entire institution, there is no evidence of an internal evaluation report from the Faculty of Education, or an external evaluation done in the area of RPL by any other external agency such as a Professional Body or consultant appointed by the Faculty of Education. The recommendation done by the HEQC (2003), which I regard as still being applicable to the Faculty of Education, is that *“there should be ways and means of expanding the policy and practice on the recognition of prior learning at postgraduate and undergraduate levels”*. However, there is no evidence that there is an improvement in this area since this audit three years ago.

Currently, much of the few RPL assessments done in the Faculty of Education were for postgraduate studies. Since there is no evidence of the Faculty ever having tried to determine the strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities of the current RPL system, there is no formalised improvement plan. One of the respondents mentioned that:

“Such discussions would be welcome in the Faculty of Education; however, there is no platform to voice how academics feel about the RPL system”.

The University of Pretoria is not a self-accrediting institution, although it does enjoy autonomy within certain confines (public accountability) and academic freedom. In order for it to accredit RPL results, this responsibility must be delegated to it by the CHE/HEQC on condition that there are sound quality assurance arrangements in place in the area of RPL. The process is still underway; as a result, the assessment of prior learning is done for the purpose of ease of access into higher education programmes and qualifications only. As a result, there is no formal system of awarding actual RPL credits.

### **5.3 MACRO AND MICRO QUALITY OF THE RPL SYSTEM IN THE FACULTY OF EDUCATION**

The findings in this section are based on the observational checklist used during the research process to determine the micro and macro quality issues at both the academic

and administrative levels. The findings with this instrument give an overview and summary of quality during the unfolding of the process, offering an added perspective to the data obtained through interviews.

### **5.3.1 Macro (administrative) quality**

#### **The institution has an RPL policy, which is translated into operational structures**

An institutional RPL policy is available and was approved by the Senate of the University of Pretoria in 2002. There are also very broad and generic rules and regulations pertaining to the admission of students into university programmes and qualifications, developed in 1996, which are still being used in the Faculty of Education. In line with principles of policy formulation, the Faculty of Education has developed its own RPL policy. As indicated in the preceding paragraphs, the RPL policy formulated by the Faculty of Education in 2003 is based on Rule VI G. 62 of the University of Pretoria contained in the yearbooks. The opening phrase used in the Faculty RPL policy gives reference to this in that: “This policy has to be read in conjunction with Regulation VI.G.62 on granting of graduate status with a view to postgraduate study”. This situation gives an impression that the institutional RPL policy was not used when the Faculty specific one was formulated. The RPL policy in the Faculty has been tested and tried on a few candidates, in 2 out of 3 of the Faculty’s departments.

#### **There is a marketing strategy on RPL**

RPL provisioning in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria has not been publicised widely. There is no intention from the Faculty of Education to make RPL services available to many people due to constraints in relation to availability of resources; academic’s workloads (RPL being a labour intensive process/activity); and the fact that the institution does not have a problem with student shortages as it attracts many students (undergraduates and postgraduates) with excellent academic results and the necessary work related experiences, in certain cases. In the absence of a marketing strategy, it is difficult to say that the Faculty is aware of the nature and level of demand in their immediate community. If marketing should be seen as more than just the

production and distribution of publicity material, it should have key aspects such as marketing strategy; marketing communications; physical distribution and personal selling. A senior member of the Faculty confirmed this finding by saying:

“A study to determine how many people out there would like to be RPLed was never done...this would be an interesting exercise to see how many people would find their way into the system by means of such a qualification”

### **There is a publicity strategy on RPL activities**

Again, the participants I interacted with indicated that there is no intention from the Faculty of Education to publicise its RPL activities widely, mainly for reason cited above (see section 5.2.1). However, if there are interested students or academics that wish to be assessed, a very good system of assessment is in place. In addition, the information on RPL would be availed on request. Therefore, the RPL activities in the Faculty of Education are not advertised in any form and there are no “Open Days” held for members of the public to inform them on how they could be assessed for their prior learning. The brochures and materials, which have some reference to RPL, are the usual rules and regulation pertaining to admissions into the university, which are freely available to all students and lecturers.

### **The institution develops its staff to be able to handle the RPL assessment process**

Staff members in the Faculty of Education who are involved in the RPL assessment process, have received the in-house Assessor Training and RPL advisor programmes to equip them with innovative ways of assessing students, including how to assess people’s prior learning. The University of Pretoria uses an integrated assessment strategy, to reduce the lecturer’s workload and speed up the process of taking the RPL candidate through the process. As indicated above, very few lecturers involved in the RPL assessment process received training relevant for assessing prior learning, conducted by an outside agency, the City and Guilds International, offered in 2002, for a duration of a week. It is not known how many of the trained personnel were able to submit their portfolios to complete the training process to be granted assessor-training certificates, in the event where they are found to have met the minimum requirements for being assessors.



The institution has made a commitment that “*all personnel involved in assessing and accrediting prior learning will undergo training and this will include personnel from the Registrar’s Office to understand the new regulations and procedures, academic and career development personnel to understand the RPL process and principles and advisors to understand the processes, portfolio compilation and general career guidance*” (University of Pretoria 2002:10). The university stated categorically that it would provide the necessary training or the opportunity for training; however, only a few academics involved in the initial process have undergone training specifically on RPL assessment. There is no evidence that suggests that trained personnel transferred their skills to newcomers in prior learning assessment by way of mentoring them.

### **An RPL committee oversees RPL activities on behalf of the institution**

In the RPL policy for the Faculty of Education, there is an outline of the structure of such a committee. I gathered that different staff members of the Faculty of Education are requested to sit in the committee based on their academic expertise and the nature of the RPL application to be processed. In generic terms, such a committee should be made up of the Dean (ex officio); the presiding School Chair; Programme Manager in whose interest the RPL application lies and who also serves as subject specialist; Head of Department concerned or his or her representative; Head of Student Administration or his or her representative; and one senior external subject specialist acquainted with the field of specialisation to which the RPL application applies and a subject specialist from the Faculty. Due to other commitments, it is not always possible to get all the members of this committee to sit through the assessment process of one candidate. For example, in the case of Mr Richard Zeeman mentioned above, the assessment panel was made up of only three people: the Head of Department, Curriculum Studies, the Programme Coordinator and subject specialist in the area of Integrated Computer Studies and the external examiner from the University of South Africa, who is a subject specialist in the field of Technology Education.

### **There is co-ordination between the RPL centre and the Faculty of Education**

There is no centralised office for the whole institution where RPL activities are conducted, but in terms of administrative and organisational requirements, ‘the head of

student administration’, in the Faculty of Education is the one responsible for putting in place the necessary mechanisms to administer and manage the RPL applications. This office has been identified as the one in which all administrative, managerial and organisational issues related to the RPL applications will be done, in addition to the other administrative duties.

### **There are communication channels for staff that are publicised on RPL**

During the departmental meetings, issues related to RPL admissions and applications are usually dealt with. The Faculty Board Meeting (FBM) is another platform for the all the lecturers to engage publicly on RPL matters since it is at this level where RPL cases are presented to all by HODs who did receive RPL applications. The yearbooks and brochures on programmes offered in the Faculty of Education serves as another way of communicating information to all. However, this is not a guarantee that employed staff in the Faculty of Education are acquainted with all the procedures and processes for RPL assessment.

### **The Faculty of Education assists the RPL candidates/learners to understand responsibilities within the RPL process**

Candidate’s expectations are clarified from the outset and the concept RPL is explained to them by the Programme Managers and the Head of Department who identified them from the pool of applications received. The policy makes it very clear that it is still the prerogative of the Programme Coordinator to recommend to the candidate that he/she should do additional modules. The Faculty makes students aware of the protocol for registration. Those who are waiting for the outcomes of their assessment know that they cannot register until Senate has made the final decision. In terms of the nature of support the Faculty of Education has indicated as being available to RPL candidates, the policy is clear in that the necessary infrastructure would be availed. One of the senior academics mentioned that in addition to this kind of support, during the interview with the candidates, if the assessment panel picks it up that the RPL learner has language problems, *“a recommendation would be made to register for a relevant module to address this deficiency”*. Additionally, RPL candidates are usually requested to identify their needs and wherever possible the necessary support is given.

### **The administration officer has the RPL application forms**

There are no RPL application forms issued by the Faculty of Education. Prospective RPL candidates as indicated in the preceding paragraphs are identified from a pool of applications received for that specific year. However, as mentioned earlier, the identified candidates have been those with tremendous potential who in my opinion, exceeded the minimum entrance requirements for the original programme applied for. As stated above, these candidates may not have applied for RPL per se in the BED Honours programme, but could easily, meet the minimum requirements for the MED programme. There is also indication that a very few of these candidates may have approached certain academics (taken personal initiatives) within the institution for information on RPL and how to be assessed.

### **The administration office has a RPL ‘evaluation and monitoring form’**

In the absence of an evaluation and monitoring form administered to the RPL learners, the Faculty of Education does not have information on the effectiveness of this system. There is also very little feedback (not formalised or documented) from the lecturers on their opinions and feelings on the manner in which RPL is implemented.

### **The institution’s annual report include an evaluative section on RPL experiences**

RPL is a fairly marginalised activity in the Faculty of Education; as such, there is very little evidence to suggest that an evaluative section on RPL experiences could be a priority in the institution’s annual report. The institution does have numbers of RPL candidates and outcomes of the assessment largely. To date, there is no research that has been done to determine how RPL learners cope with higher education learning, or their performance in academic programmes.

### **The institution has an annual report, with an action plan on RPL for the future**

In the institution’s strategic plan, assessment of prior learning is highlighted as essential. However, there is no action plan or resource plan drawn to indicate institutional plans with RPL provisioning. The information obtained from participants

points out that if the university's growth strategy is taken into account, there will not be a need for offering RPL services in the near future.

### **5.3.2 Micro (academic) Quality**

**The institution ensures that programmes/modules have learning outcomes/competencies that staff can base their RPL assessment on**

All the programmes offered in the Faculty of Education have been designed in accordance with the principles of the NQF. There are learning outcomes for each programme; and RPL candidates can use this information to base their applications on. The source of such information could be the level descriptors for each programme and the programme and module outcomes.

**Programme Leaders are conversant with principles for RPL assessment**

All programme coordinators (leaders) are capable of handling assessments in general. They also have practical experience in assessing prior learning. They play a major role in terms of developing criteria used by the RPL committee to review the candidate's portfolio as well as to evaluate if the candidate's prior learning is equivalent to the learning outcomes of the module or programme applied for.

**Admission tutors are conversant with principles for RPL assessment**

The indication from the interviews conducted with members of the student administration is that, not all of them are at the same level of understanding of what RPL is. The Head, Student Administration who sits in the RPL committee for the Faculty will in doubt have the necessary knowledge on procedures and processes of RPL assessment. The others get to know about RPL as part of their personal initiatives or by hearing about it during staff related meetings. Due to the minimal RPL activities taking place in the Faculty of Education, very few staff members are involved; as a result, a number of those who handle the applications may not even be involved in the identification of possible RPL candidates.

**Within the institution, each Faculty has an RPL coordinator to enhance subject-specific debate and feedback**

The Dean of the Faculty of Education has identified a senior member of staff who handles all RPL related cases, and who is responsible for engaging other staff members on issues related to RPL. However, there are few opportunities for staff members to come together and to discuss issues on RPL. Formalised feedback mechanisms from staff members on RPL are not in place (need to be strengthened).

**The RPL centre gives support to RPL candidates**

Although the University of Pretoria does not have a centralised office where RPL activities are conducted, in the Faculty of Education, those who have gone through the assessment process have received sufficient support in the form of advice, counselling, career guidance and the use of the university's infrastructure. The Office in the administration that deals with student registrations gives RPL candidates advice on what to do, as well as communicate the outcomes of the RPL assessment timeously. A lot of support that RPL candidates/learners do receive in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria is mainly from the lecturers (Faculty assessors) who meet the learners.

**The RPL centre identifies strengths and weaknesses of the RPL provision through (a) self-evaluation (b) institutional audit (c) student's feedback (d) external views and feedback**

No evidence for self-evaluation exercises. External evaluations for the entire institution were conducted as part of the HEQCs pilot audits, and RPL was also looked into. There is no system in place for getting RPL student feedback.

**The RPL centre disseminates good practice in the assessment of prior learning**

With a very few areas of concern, the manner in which prior learning is assessed in the Faculty of Education meets the necessary national and international requirements for

quality assurance. It is done from a formalised system of clear procedures and processes.

#### 5.4 SUMMARY

My findings in relation to whether there is quality in the inputs used to design the RPL system that is in place in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria, when one takes into account the ten elements responsible for a RPL credible system of assessing prior learning, are that:

- The policy environment in the Faculty is conducive for offering RPL services;
- There are minimal resources allocated for RPL services, since RPL is taking place at a minimal level. The Faculty adopted an integrated and incremental approach to RPL implementation where there was use of existing resources.
- All those involved in the RPL assessment process, although not registered with the ETDPSETA as assessors, they are adequately trained (internally) to handle the RPL assessment process;
- Since there is no separate funding for RPL services and no fees being charged from the candidates, this situation poses a challenge for the implementation of the institution-wide RPL system;
- Those who went through the RPL assessment process did receive support which is attributable to their current academic and career development;
- The evaluation and monitoring of the RPL practice has been identified as an area of weakness, since there are no internal reports on the effectiveness of the current RPL practice in the Faculty;
- The methods and process of RPL assessment although good, could be improved;
- The University of Pretoria has a good model of quality assurance promoted by the Quality Assurance Unit, which has been applied in the implementation of the RPL policy in the Faculty;
- There are very few academic programmes earmarked for RPL consideration, actually just the PGCHE one;

## Chapter 5

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- The relational problems between the CHE/HEQC, SAQA, and other ETQAs make it impossible for information from higher education institutions on RPL to be fed into the National Learner Record Database (NLRD).