CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS

QUALITY OF THE RPL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

6.1   INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I am presenting research findings in relation to research question 2:

"How does the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria assess RPL candidates for their prior learning?

I argue that stringent quality assurance mechanisms need to be in place to safeguard the integrity of the RPL assessment process[39]. The assessment of prior learning should fulfil the requirements, nationally and internationally for a credible assessment process (SAQA 2002:17). In order to assist RPL providers in developing their RPL assessment processes, an exemplar of a generic RPL process is included in the national RPL document (2002:33) that indicates what should happen from the time the RPL application is received to when credits are awarded or denied, with all the intermediary stages and activities.

To evaluate whether the process of RPL assessment is quality assured, in the Faculty of Education , University of Pretoria, I will use the model of RPL assessment developed by Simosko and Cook (1996) for institutions offering RPL in Great Britain, which is similar to the one used in this Faculty (University of Pretoria 2002:5-7). In accordance with this model, I observed the following key activities being undertaken during the various stages of the assessment of RPL candidates, as a non-participant observer mainly. These activities included the pre-entry stage, the candidate profiling, gathering, generating and compiling of the evidence, the actual assessment, and communication of RPL outcomes, certification,

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[39] RPL assessment process means the stages/steps and activities involved from beginning to end.

and record-keeping procedures. In Chapter 3, section 3.3.1 is an explanation of what each stage entails and quality indicators essential in the RPL assessment process.

In relation to the actual RPL assessment model[40], I am going to analyse institutional documentation to determine which model the Faculty of Education uses to assess RPL candidates and whether this model is aligned to tried and tested models used internationally. The rationale is to determine if there is a need to change or modify the model being currently used, as some of the international models are highly recommended in RPL circles in terms of facilitating student efficiency and effectiveness in understanding the RPL concepts and process.

It is also important that in the quest for quality provisioning of RPL, the assessing institution should either adopt or adapt quality standards, principles and procedures developed and used in countries such as the United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and The Netherlands, to maintain high standards in recognising prior learning. The main aspect in this section is to determine if the Faculty assessors adhere to these standards during the process of assessing RPL candidates for their prior learning.

Fiddler, Marienau and Whitaker (2006:8) make a distinction between the three concepts used in this chapter. They state that standards are "things that are set up and established by authority for the measure of quality". Principles are "general or fundamental truths, comprehensive and fundamental laws, or a guide for conduct or procedures". Procedures are "particular steps adopted for doing or accomplishing something". The overall analysis of the data obtained from the observation tool, available documentation and fieldwork notes is to enable one to draw a conclusion as to whether there is a capable process of assessing prior learning in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria or not, that meets the requirements for quality assurance.

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[40] RPL assessment model means the actual process RPL candidates are subjected to in order to demonstrate their prior learning. This process involves the coaching that RPL assessors/evaluators need to do to assist candidates to make sense of the experience(s) they have.

6.1.1 Reporting structure for the research findings

The research findings to address the research question stated in section 6.1 above are based on data gathered from the observation tools, document review, analysis, and the reflective notes gathered during the entire research process, as indicated in Chapter 4 of this study. The research findings will be related to the RPL assessment process (Simosko & Cook 1996); the RPL assessment model (Hoffmann 2006b:14-28); and standards for assessing prior learning (Whitaker 1989:9) depicted in the table below:

Table 6.1: *The reporting structure for the research findings*

Section	Description
Section A	The research findings will be related to the RPL assessment process (Simosko and Cook 1996)
Section B	The research findings will be based on the RPL Assessment model, that is the ABCs of College-Level Learning and Kolb and Bloom Models (Hoffmann 2006b:14-28)
Section C	The research findings will be based on the principles and standards for assessing prior learning (Whitaker 1989:9)

The common thread in the analysis of the three sections is adherence to institutional, national and international requirements on assessment of prior learning; empowerment of RPL candidates throughout the process; whether the assessment model and process in use is fit for purpose; and whether the services offer value for money for the clients.

6.2   QUALITY OF THE RPL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

In the national RPL document entitled: The Recognition of Prior Learning in the South African context (2002:33), there is an exemplar of a generic RPL process to be considered by RPL providers in the education and training sector. The University of Pretoria adopted the approach for RPL assessment process developed by Simosko and Cook (1996) for institutions offering RPL in the United Kingdom, as indicated in the institution-wide RPL policy document (2002:5-7). This basic candidate-centred assessment process contains a number of stages, each having a set of specific outcomes and activities. This approach reflects a shift from an externally controlled assessment process to one that includes the

candidate as an essential and active participant. There are commonalities between the suggested SAQA RPL process and the one in place at the University of Pretoria, with variations being in terms of the terminology used, steps involved and activities that RPL candidates and assessors become engaged in. The research findings are as follows:

6.2.1 STAGE 1: PRE-ENTRY

Information on the RPL policy and procedures at the University of Pretoria in general, is not easily available to or accessible by the public, that means people outside the university structures. Even amongst those within the institution, such as registered students (undergraduate and postgraduate) and employed staff (academic and non-academic) members, the majority of them do not know and are not aware of any activities related to RPL conducted in the Faculty of Education *per se.*

Almost all respondents interviewed on the aspect of knowledge about the institutional and Faculty-specific RPL policies and procedures indicated that they have never seen such policy documents, nor were they ever part of any workshops or information sessions conducted on RPL. Prior to the actual assessment, RPL candidates receive preparation sessions conducted by relevant Faculty assessors who handle their applications.

A senior member of the Faculty of Education indicated that usually information related to the assessment of prior learning is *'only availed to the public on request',* whereas those within the Faculty's structures can access it through various means, such as 'hearing about it during departmental meetings; the Faculty Board Meeting (FBM), reading the report on RPL outcomes from the Senate of the University of Pretoria, or retrieving it themselves electronically from the institution's website'. The documents produced and circulated widely include the Faculty of Education's yearbook, which details regulations and the syllabi as well as a brochure[41](s) of all the programmes offered in the School of

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[41] There are two brochures published by the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria: The first one provides information on all the programmes offered in the School of Educational Studies, from certificates, bachelor degrees, honours degrees, masters degrees and PhD studies. The other one has information on the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) programme.

Educational studies. There is some reference to RPL in these documents, although it is in relation to requirements for admission and not procedures and processes of RPL assessment *per se.*

Where RPL is a common practice, it is expected that anyone who has knowledge of how the RPL programme works can match his or her 'prior learning' with these stated outcomes and request the Faculty to evaluate such learning. However, in this Faculty, such initiatives are not common, as most of the senior academics prefer to identify potential RPL candidates who are initiated into the RPL assessment process.

There are no posters or any other advertisement strategy (purchasing of space in newspapers, television or the local radio) employed by this Faculty to attract and recruit prospective RPL candidates. Even during the Faculty's 'Open Day', information on RPL *per se* is usually not communicated. There is also no marketing strategy or advocacy campaigns in the Faculty of Education to attract or recruit potential RPL candidates. This means that most of the students who aspire to study in this Faculty do not know from the Faculty about the RPL system, i.e. how it operates, or how they could participate in the assessment process.

The above practice is in contradiction with what the university said in its policy, in that *"RPL should be available to all"*. In international circles, the applicant is expected to make the claim for RPL (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:18). It follows that the responsibility rests with the candidate for making a claim and supporting it with appropriate evidence. The reason provided by some of the Faculty assessors indicated that *'it is easier to take candidates who show potential through the assessment processes, as opposed to dealing with those who may initiate the process, by way of approaching the institution'*. There is a greater chance for such candidates to complete the programme, than most of those who may initiate the process. One of the senior members of the Faculty interviewed articulated the following statement to show the concern for availing opportunities for RPL to all:

"The RPL assessment involves a chain of events. To do this for say 3000 students is a huge endeavour. Certain criteria are needed to facilitate the process. I do not know how the Faculty of education could process 3000 applications. This is a very intense process. Unless the process is streamlined, the university may be taking a huge financial risk. If officials from SAQA or UMALUSI were to come to me on mass I would need to come with a different process".

The following is a statement said by another senior Faculty member to indicate the difficulties experienced in taking candidates through the assessment process:

"We have to set up the documentation. We have to set up the filling system. We have to assist the candidate to compile the file. We have to set up the examination…oral examination with the external specialist within the field. We have to interview each of those candidates. We have to write a report".

As observed, prospective RPL candidates are identified from a pool of applications for a particular year. Both formal and informal interviews with members of the administration, points out to the fact that prospective students with an excellent academic record, who according to the documentation submitted for application, which includes their curriculum vitae, qualifications obtained and other supporting documentation, during the screening process, showing that they could easily exceed the minimum entrance requirements for the original programme of study applied for, are put aside and forwarded to the relevant Head of Department for RPL consideration.

If we consider the approximately 15 candidates assessed for prior learning in the Faculty of Education from 2003 to 2006, they are people who were working in the education and training field mainly (principals, heads of department and educators), university employees (lecturers) and students. According to RPL statistics provided, the issue of equitable opportunities for historically disadvantaged groups in higher education learning is highly questionable.

In addition, the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption is still applicable at the University of Pretoria for those who did not pass their Grade 12 with an exemption (endorsement). There are no rules and regulations or mechanisms in place at this university

or in the higher education sector in general, suggesting the possibility of acquiring a matriculation certificate through the RPL route. The implications of this situation are that, a candidate who may have other extensive work related experiences equitable to higher education learning would still be expected to pass matric or obtain a conditional exemption granted by the Senate of the assessing institution.

There is evidence of pre and post assessment support (advice and counselling) given to the identified RPL candidates. In the Faculty of Education's RPL policy, it is stated clearly that these candidates would be provided with the necessary infrastructure to ensure their success in the programmes registered for. Although the issue of career counselling is not stated anywhere in clear terms, RPL has contributed positively to career mobility of most of the learners, if not all of them. Two of the former RPL learners who did not possess a teaching qualification, but had taught for a number of years in the Kindergarten were assessed into the ACE programme through RPL and are currently employed by the Department of Education in the province they live in, as educators. Another RPL learner admitted into the MEd Programme (Assessment and Quality Assurance) without the BEd Honours degree, which is a prerequisite for the programme, is currently on contract work in the Faculty of Education as a lecturer and after completion of the Masters programme has enrolled for the PhD programme.

In relation to collaborative exercises between the University of Pretoria and industry on RPL activities for funding purposes, there is none so far. There is no indication from senior academics in the Faculty of Education to initiate such partnerships. The reason being RPL practice is really being done on an experimental basis, and its continuation depends on a number of issues, such as if there is space in the programmes offered, and availability of experienced supervisors for Masters programmes, where most of the RPL admissions took place. Senior academics indicated that much of the effort would rather be on ensuring that lecturers are able to take the current cohort of mainstream students through their study programmes.

As indicated in Chapter 5, section 3.3, there are no formalised or informal relationships between the university and across its eight faculties or other institutions to ensure portability and transferability of RPL results (credits). The mitigating factors in this regard have been cited as the right for the institution to shape its RPL mechanism (institutional autonomy); the programme mix may be different in the higher education institutions in the country; and admissions requirements may vary.

In the final analysis, in the absence of information on RPL services offered in the Faculty of Education, by the public, there are no RPL applications specifically forwarded to the institution. A few may happen to know about RPL activities in the Faculty of Education and subsequently submit their applications with the hope of being identified as potential RPL candidates during the screening process done by administrative personnel.

6.2.2 STAGE 2: CANDIDATE PROFILE

The term profiling is used differently from portfolio construction to mean the initial interviewing of the candidate by the designated personnel (HOD or Programme Coordinator/Manager) for that specific programme/qualification the RPL candidate is being evaluated for. The key aspect during this stage is to establish the candidate's goals, knowledge of RPL and general expectations. As stated in the previous paragraphs, usually the identified RPL candidates in the Faculty of Education do not know much about RPL. The Head of Department and the Programme Coordinator/Manager in whose programme the RPL application lies in most cases take them through what RPL is, procedures and processes involved and what would be expected of them if they would like to participate in this process. In the section that follows, I have detailed how a particular RPL candidate was profiled.

6.2.2.1 Mrs Elsie van der Waldt's[42] profiling

Mrs van der Waldt submitted her application for a BEd Honours degree, with specialisation in the field of Technology Education. The documents submitted indicated that she worked extensively in technology education and the education of learners with special needs. Elsie had published profoundly and produced two textbooks for primary school learners in her field of specialisation. She was at the time of application involved in the training of BEd (Hons) students at the University of Pretoria. She was **identified** as a suitable RPL candidate for the MEd programme and was called in for her first meeting, which included an explanation from the Programme Coordinator of the intention to assess her prior learning and whether she was willing to participate in such a process.

The Faculty of Education uses the M-score to determine if applicants meet the minimum entrance requirements for a particular programme or not. Usually, those with very high M-scores, like in the case of Elsie, are the ones referred to the relevant Head of Department for initiating the process of RPL assessment. Her qualifications included the following: Higher Education Diploma (NKP): four years (1975); Diploma in School Librarianship (UNISA): one year (1979); Diploma in Pre-primary Education (UNISA): one year (1987); and FDE in Special Needs Education (CESA): two years (1994). She also holds numerous attendance and completion certificates for shorter programmes in Outcomes-Based Education, Co-operative Group Work and Special Needs Education.

She was called in for a meeting with the Programme Coordinator (evidence facilitator/advisor) who explained to her what RPL is and the procedure and process involved (getting the candidate's understanding). The Programme Manager ensured at this stage that the candidate's expectations were in line with what the Faculty can offer. Elsie was roped into the RPL assessment process in this manner and was then thoroughly prepared for the other sessions, which is, what the oral interview would entail and how to construct and present a portfolio of evidence to support her claim for RPL.

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[42] Mrs Elsie Van Der Waldt is not the real name of this RPL candidate, but a pseudo name used to mask the real identity of the candidate.

The observation is that the profiling process is allocated sufficient time in line with the level of preparedness of each candidate, where some may need less time and others may need extra time, in terms of support and assistance to bring them to a level where there is a clear understanding of the RPL assessment process. RPL candidates may enrol for the Professional Development Module (PFO 400), which deals with portfolio development amongst the other topics, offered in the Faculty. The module runs for a period of six months and is being paid for by the candidate him/herself, or their employers.

A clear timeline with a definition of responsibilities for further action is usually given to all the RPL candidates. There is support provided to these candidates in the sense that they would be called upon by the Programme Coordinator to establish how they are coping. The meeting between the Programme Coordinator and the candidate takes place once a month for monitoring the progress made by the candidate. During the interviews with senior managers in the Faculty, in relation to the assistance given to RPL candidates, one of them said:

> "Its not RPL for the sake of RPL, we try to make sure that the student qualifies for the qualification registered for after being given access into the institution".

Programme Coordinators meet with candidates on a regular basis to check on their progress. The support according to most of the Faculty assessors is ongoing. In relation to self-assessment, RPL candidates can evaluate themselves against the stated learning outcomes, but there is no evidence to suggest that it was done or whether it formed part of the overall judgement made on their prior learning by the RPL committee.

In the example given above, it is clear that this candidate was properly profiled (manually) and that the necessary support and guidance was given to her, in the form of pre-assessment advice and counselling. The use of e-portfolios[43] has not been introduced at this institution, where the profiling can be done electronically.

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[43] E-portfolios are used where there is an on-line system for prior learning assessment. E-portfolios mean electronic portfolios.

6.2.3 STAGE 3: GATHERING, GENERATING AND COMPILING EVIDENCE

It is the responsibility of the RPL candidate to generate and gather the necessary evidence to support the claim made for RPL, although this usually takes place with the advice of the Programme Coordinator and the supervision of the staff at CE at UP. The Programme Coordinator and Head of Department informs the candidate of the learning outcomes and competencies against which he/she would be evaluated and provides the necessary guidance in terms of the nature of evidence required to support the claim for having the necessary prior learning. This information is usually compiled in a portfolio of evidence (PoE), which is one of the methods of assessment commonly used in the Faculty of Education, in conjunction with the oral examination (interview). In doing this, the candidate needs to make sure that the evidence collected is sufficient and valid. The standards or learning outcomes (unit standards) serve as a guide during this process. Once gathered, it is the responsibility of the candidate to present the evidence, which needs to be arranged and presented for submission in the form of portfolio.

6.2.3.1   The process of portfolio development in the Faculty of Education

Firstly, the University of Pretoria defines a portfolio as "the process of collecting; substantiating and organising documented evidence to support an applicant's claim for prior learning assessment and credit" (University of Pretoria 2002:11). This definition is in line with the manner in which a portfolio is defined in RPL terminology/circles. The institution prefers the use of portfolio assessment in cases when a direct match between learning and a module or programme's outcomes is unlikely. This usually happens when the candidate may need to prove in other ways that learning equivalent to entry requirements of a particular module or programme is in place. During the portfolio development course, candidates are assisted "to identify, summarise and document university-level learning acquired in other learning contexts; develop analytical skills needed to deconstruct, organise and synthesise the learning acquired in those contexts; and identify the appropriate academic discipline to which each specific 'request for credit' is directed" *(ibid.).*

The University of Pretoria requires RPL candidates to provide evidence in any of the following ways: certificates from previous courses; licences; annotated bibliographies; challenge examinations; standardised tests; written tests and assignments; products of any nature relevant to the courses offered at the University: art portfolios; publications; samples of completed work such as copies of documents or reports; employment-related documents such as resumés, performance appraisals, business books and so on; a statutory declaration outlining previous types of work and experience; references from current and past employers, supervisors and colleagues; testimonials from persons holding relevant qualifications in the area being assessed; photographs of completed work certified by a referee or accompanied by a statutory declaration; and if self-employed in the past, evidence of running a business using the skills and knowledge being claimed.

The institution has stated clearly that the quality of evidence, not the quantity; and the evidence of learning and not merely of experience is required. In the portfolio that I scrutinised (went through) for a candidate admitted into the MEd (CIDD) programme through RPL, she had included all certified copies of her qualifications, letters of reference from her previous and current employment, certificates of attendance of workshops and training sessions she was involved in, photographs of her learners in her classroom, her licence from the SACE (South African Council of Educators) and samples of her work (learning programmes used).

The portfolio and other documents submitted by the candidate are kept for a considerable time in the Faculty of Education in case they might be needed for verification and moderation purposes. The observation made on this particular portfolio is that the evidence brought by the candidate was sufficient. As stated above, there was evidence of letters of recommendations, diplomas, degrees and certificates obtained, testimonials, evidence of Learning Programme design, evidence of understanding Outcomes Based Education (OBE) principles and practices and evidence of application of new assessment practices. The currency of the evidence was verified by the Programme Coordinator and the personnel who assisted the candidate to develop the portfolio at the CE at UP. The evidence was properly arranged in the portfolio. It was also properly presented. The candidate had the

evidence in paper format mainly. There is an indication that this particular candidate was made aware of the other method of assessing prior learning used in the Faculty of Education, mentioned below, i.e. during the preparation sessions.

6.2.3.1.1   The challenge examination

In the institutional RPL policy document (2002:12) the challenge process is identified as another method of RPL assessment. In this instance, subject specialists would develop a testing instrument to measure an individual's learning achievements against course learning outcomes. This is done through various ways, such as the written examination, role-plays or interviews. A challenge examination is linked directly to specific course content and focuses on the stated outcomes of that module, as indicated in the assessment (oral examination) conducted on Mrs Elsie van der Waldt above.

6.2.4 STAGE 4: ASSESSMENT

The following are the *guiding principles* to the RPL assessment process (University of Pretoria 2002:4):

1.   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;
2.   RPL should be available to all;
3.   Participation in the RPL assessment process must be voluntary and each individual must be given the appropriate support to enable him/her to make informed decisions as to whether or not she/he wishes to participate;
4.   There must be no loss of benefits because of RPL (RPL should not be used to affect any individual's work position negatively, i.e. grading or pay; an individual is assessed through RPL based on clearly stated guidelines. If he/she is found to be incompetent in the skills assessed, she/he should receive a recommended course of action to reach the desired level of competence;
5.   RPL must be affirmative and developmental;

6. RPL should include a strong support mechanisms for all involved; the process should be simple, verifiable, credible and just; and

7. 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 and RPL processes fall within the official language policy of the University of Pretoria.

In the section below, is a description of the manner in which these principles were applied:

6.2.4.1   How was Mrs Elsie van der Waldt assessed?

Mrs van der Waldt's position is unique in the sense that she holds no formal degree but managed to meet the requirements for the MEd programme. The oral examination that Elsie went through, conducted by the RPL committee (panel of assessors), which lasted for almost an hour, was based on whether she was able to meet the requirements for the NQF level 7 as set out by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). This stage included a discussion of previous learning (what it was, how did it occur and its relationship to the outcomes of the qualification/programme applied for). Elsie's assessment was not an automatic process, as it required her to be thoroughly prepared for the oral examinations, which focused on her subject knowledge regarding her field of specialisation, her general understanding of educational research as methodology and the focus and procedures she had in mind for her proposed research at Masters Level.

The candidate had to demonstrate an advanced competence in and an understanding of educational theory and the practice of technology, technology education and research in general. She also had to satisfy the committee that she meets the academic requirements set by the university in terms of the exit level outcomes required at BEd (Hons) level. The committee assessed Elsie's portfolio as well as her commitment in the field of technology education and the education of learners with special needs.

6.2.4.2 An extract of the recommendation of the examination panel based on Mrs Elsie van der Waldt's performance in the oral examination

The RPL committee found Elsie to have a profound understanding of the field of technology education. The committee indicated that the proposal she brought to the table illustrated good intellectual clarity and understanding of the problems she has encountered in practice. She also had a very good idea of investigative (research) possibilities. Her indication to be willing to register for one or two additional research modules should this be required was commended by the committee.

The committee assessed her research knowledge and technological ability and came to the conclusion that she meets the basic knowledge to commence with her research. The Department of Curriculum Studies committed itself to supporting her with the necessary infrastructure in pursuit of her objectives. The committee awarded Elsie a pass mark of between 65-68% for the oral examination. The committee concluded that it would benefit her very little to commence with a BEd (Hons) at this stage of her academic career. The recommendation by the committee was that she be allowed to register for the Masters in Education with specialisation in Curriculum and Instructional Design and Development (Technology Education).

My findings in relation to applicability of the above-mentioned principles are that all principles are being adhered to with the exception of principle 1, 2 and 3. There is an indication that most of the RPL candidates did continue with the programme they were being assessed into prior to the outcomes of the results from Senate. The situation could easily give an impression that once a person has gone through the assessment process, he/she is guaranteed a place in the programme earmarked for RPL admission. RPL is currently not available to all. With minimal publicity on RPL activities in the Faculty, there is no guarantee that many people know what to do to be assed for their prior learning. Since RPL candidates are identified and requested to participate, and they do not necessarily initiate the process themselves, the practice can be viewed as 'coercive rather than based on free and voluntary participation'. However, it must be mentioned that during the initial

contact sessions between the Programme Director and the prospective RPL candidate, sufficient information on RPL is given to enable the identified candidates to decide whether they want to continue with the process or not.

6.2.4.3 Roles, rights and responsibilities of stakeholders in the RPL assessment process

There are four main role-players identified in the RPL assessment process: RPL advisor, RPL assessor, RPL learner and the assessing/awarding institution. The role of the advisor (evidence facilitator) played by the Programme Coordinator throughout the process of RPL assessment is that of facilitator. The Programme Coordinators who were involved in the assessment of various RPL candidates are subject specialists. The responsibilities of the RPL advisors as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs included the initial screening or profiling of the candidate. They also ensured that the candidate understand the RPL guiding principles. They provide advice on career pathways open to the candidates, the general portfolio construction process and the nature of evidence required to support the claim made for RPL. They also facilitate the development of self-confidence during the process. When the portfolio is ready for submission, they sign it off to the RPL committee for assessment and review.

The RPL committee members are in actual fact RPL assessors: custodians of the academic/professional standards (learning outcomes) and quality thereof. They are responsible for evaluating the evidence submitted by the candidate against programme learning outcomes and competencies. The RPLCF interviews RPL candidates based on the set of the criteria developed by the Programme Coordinator and Head of Department in terms of the outcomes expected to be achieved by the candidate for the desired qualification. For 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 expected to be achieved at NQF level 7. They also review candidate's portfolios against a set of criteria compiled by the Programme Coordinator. Their assessment reports informs decisions taken on RPL cases at the Faculty Board

Meeting and the executive committee of the Senate of the University of Pretoria, a committee that deals with matters related to RPL.

According to the SAQA regulations, anyone who assesses for the purpose of making judgement about an achievement that will result in credits towards unit standards or qualifications has to be registered with the appropriate ETQA. In the case of Higher Education Institutions in South Africa, this process needs to be facilitated by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and its permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). All the assessors are expected to have gone through the Unit Standards: Plan and Conduct Assessment of Learning Outcomes (NQF Level 5); Moderate Assessment (NQF Level 6); Verify Moderation of Assessment (NQF Level 7); and Design and Develop Assessment (NQF Level 6)

As indicated previously (see Chapter 5, section 5.2.3) there are in-house training sessions offered by the University of Pretoria for its staff members on assessment in general. There is no sufficient evidence to suggest that RPL assessors in the Faculty of Education have registered with the relevant ETQA as assessors and their names have been captured on SAQAs database for assessors. There is also no sufficient evidence to support the claim that specific training on RPL assessment was given to all (only a few) those who participate in the assessment process. I would argue that the necessary expertise may be there, without the certificate to back it up.

In relation to the role of the learner, there is a discrepancy between what is indicated in the institutional RPL policy and the actual practice. Whilst the university acknowledges that it should be the responsibility of the RPL learner to identify his/her learning and to show that it matches the learning outcomes for a particular course that form part of a programme leading to a desired qualification, I have already mentioned that prospective candidates are identified in the Faculty of Education and requested to participate in the process, with the assistance of staff members.

The University of Pretoria stated the following learner rights:

- The right to a fair and transparent process

- Access up-front to the standards and criteria which will be used in the assessment and accreditation processes

- Access up-front to the learning outcomes that are to be met

- The right to be assessed through assessment methods which are flexible and appropriate to the subject

- The right to have prior learning evaluated and assessed for academic credit within a reasonable period of time

- The right to transfer credits gained by means of the RPL process.

Apart from the rest, portability and transferability of RPL credits across institutions in the education and training sector in the country is not possible, since there are no mechanisms in place yet, to facilitate this process.

The institution's responsibility in the RPL assessment process is in the following areas:

- Screening RPL applications and denying further access to RPL assessment if this is deemed inappropriate

- Structure the assessment panel as it deems fit

- Ensure verification of claims put forward by the candidate

- Request to see original documentation

- Request contactable references

- Levy costs based on the number of direct expenses related to the process.

If we consider the actual assessment of prior learning as observed in the Faculty of Education for a candidate I would call Zoë Olivier:

She was subjected to a 1-hour interview conducted by three members of the RPL committee, viz. the Head of Department, the Programme Coordinator, and the external examiner from UNISA, who is an expert in the technology education field. The assessor did ascertain whether the evidence received is valid and authentic. The assessor indicated

that there was no need to verify any of the information submitted, as it seemed acceptable. Zoë was able to provide the required information; as a result, it was not necessary for her to submit additional information. A panel of assessors did Zoë's assessment. This candidate was made aware that it is the Senate of the University of Pretoria that makes final decisions regarding such applications and as a matter of rule; she cannot register for the desired programme until the outcomes of her application are known. At the beginning of the assessment process, Zoë was given the assessment criteria and standards against which she was going to be assessed. There is no evidence of self-evaluation exercises, and no appeal was lodged.

Zoë's snapshot

She has a BSc (Natural Sciences) obtained in 1970 and a Higher Education Diploma (Postgraduate) awarded with distinction. She teaches in the PGCE programme as temporary part-time lecturer at the University of Pretoria. She was also involved as technology education facilitator in a number of workshops hosted by the University of South Africa (UNISA). Her publications include a large number of workshop manuals in technology education and contribution towards a chapter in a published textbook on technology education. The committee said she accounted herself very well to all questions posed during the interview and it was evident that her knowledge and expertise stretched beyond the levels expected at BEd (Hons) level, as far as technology education is concerned. In addition, based on this assessment she was admitted into the MEd (Curriculum and Instructional Design and Development) programme, without a BEd (Hons) qualification.

6.2.5 STAGE 5: ACCREDITATION

RPL assessment results are verified by relevant decision makers at different levels prior to credit being granted or denied. The RPLCF's assessment report for specified RPL candidates is communicated at the Departmental meeting by the Head of Department. A motivation to grant the candidate(s) RPL credits is then written by the Head of Department

and Programme Manager, to be tabled at the Faculty Board Meeting (FBM), where it could be endorsed or denied by participants. The Dean of the Faculty of Education and the designated School Chair take the process further by presenting RPL cases at the meeting of the executive committee of the Senate of the University of Pretoria that deals with RPL related matters. This committee makes final decisions on whether the candidate can or cannot register for the desired programme. It must be noted that the term 'RPL credits' as used in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria is with reference to access.

6.2.6 STAGE 6: INFORMING THE CANDIDATE

The candidate is usually notified in writing by the Office of Student Affair on the outcomes of his/her application, immediately after the decision from the Senate of the University of Pretoria has been received. The Programme Coordinator may communicate such results telephonically depending on the urgency of the situation for the student to come and register with the university. Post-assessment support is given to RPL learners in the form of advice. The progress made by RPL candidates in their field of study is monitored in the various departments they are associated with. In instances where there are problems, the candidate will be called in for a one-on-one session with the Programme Coordinator to find ways of assisting him/her.

The candidate's portfolio of evidence is given back to the candidate after the entire process of assessment has been completed, i.e. once the decision by the Senate of the University has been received.

6.2.7 CERTIFICATION AND RECORD KEEPING

Information on RPL cases assessed from 2003 to 2006 was availed. Such information is usually with a particular department that conducted RPL assessments. I have compiled a summary of the data on RPL cases under the following categories:

- Year in which the candidate was assessed

- Entry-level qualifications

- Who participated in the RPL assessment process

- Methods of RPL assessment used

- The outcomes of the RPL assessment

- The candidate's current academic status

Table 6.2 below provides statistical evidence on RPL cases in the Faculty of Education for the period 2003-2006. The labels Case 1, 2, 3 etc are used to mask the actual identities of the candidates involved in the RPL assessment process. All the contact details of the candidates are available, as well as the report of the RPL committee on each of the candidates assessed.

Table 6.2: *Statistical evidence on RPL cases*

RPL case	Year	Entry level learning	Who assessed?	Methods of assessment	RPL outcomes	Current status
Case 1	2005	A teacher by profession	CE at UP	Portfolio assessment integrating all five modules[44] offered at CE at UP.	Awarded a mark of 68% for the first semester modules. Allowed to enrol for the second semester PGCHE modules in order to complete the PGCHE.	Unknown
Case 2	2005	A teacher by profession	CE at UP	Portfolio assessment integrating all five modules offered at CE at UP.	Awarded a mark of 69% for the first semester modules. Allowed to enrol for the second semester PGCHE modules in order to complete the PGCHE.	Unknown
Case 3	2005	A teacher by profession	CE at UP	Portfolio assessment integrating all five modules offered at CE at UP.	Awarded a mark of 67% for the first semester modules. Allowed to enrol for the second semester PGCHE modules in order to complete the PGCHE.	Unknown
Case 4	2003	National certificate (1985); Education Innovation course (2002). A teacher by profession	CE at UP	Portfolio assessment based on a short course programme offered at the Centurion College.	Awarded a mark of 70% for the first semester modules. Allowed to enrol for the second semester PGCHE modules in order to complete the PGCHE.	

[44] The five modules offered at CE at UP are: Professional Development (PFO 400); Mediating Learning (LMD 400); Curriculum Development (KRO 410); Assessment Practice (ASK 410) and Education Technology (OWT 410).

Case 5	2005	Higher education diploma (1980). Educator and principal for a total of 23 years.	RPL Committee of the Faculty of Education	Portfolio assessment	A mark of 65% was awarded by the external examiner. The candidate was admitted into the MEd (Curriculum Studies) programme.	Still studying at the University of Pretoria.
Case 6	2006	HED Unisa (1999); BA University of Pretoria (1994); MPhil (not completed); Project Management; Supervision and Management Skills and Leadership Training certificates. A teacher by profession.	RPL Committee of the Faculty of Education	Oral examination (interview) and portfolio assessment	A pass mark of between 60–65% for the oral examination was given. The candidate was admitted into the MED (CIDD) programme focusing on Computer-integrated education.	
Case 7	2005	HED (1975); Diploma in School Librarianship (Unisa) (1979); Diploma in Pre-primary education (Unisa) (1987); FDE in Special Needs Education (1994) and other certificates. A teacher by profession.	RPL Committee of the Faculty of Education	Oral examination (interview) and portfolio	Awarded a pass mark of between 65–68% for the oral examination. Recommended to be admitted into the Med (CIDD) programme focusing on technology education.	Still studying at the University of Pretoria.
Case 8	2005	BSc (1970) and HED. A teacher by profession.	RPL Committee of the Faculty of Education	Oral examination (interview) and portfolio	Awarded a pass mark of between 68–70% for the oral examination. Recommended to register for the MED (CIDD) programme.	Still studying at the University of Pretoria.

Case 9	2005	HED (1993); Damelin Diploma in PC Engineering (1999); Diploma MS Access 2000 (2000); Diploma in Visual Basic (2000) and Diploma in E-Commerce (2000). A teacher by profession.	RPL Committee of the Faculty of Education	Oral examination (interview) and portfolio	Awarded a pass mark of 65–70% for the oral examination. Recommended to register for the MEd (CIE) programme.	Still studying at the University of Pretoria.
Case 10	2005	BSc (UCT) (1987); HED (UCT) (1988) and FDE (Unisa) (1994). A teacher by profession.	RPL committee of the Faculty of Education	Oral examination (interview) and portfolio	Awarded a pass mark of 65–70% for the oral examination. Recommended to register for the MEd (CIE) programme.	Still studying at the University of Pretoria.
Case 11	2005	BA (NW); FDE. A teacher by profession (principal). No BEd (Hons)	RPL committee of the Faculty of Education	Oral examination (interview) and portfolio	Awarded a pass mark of 65–70% for the oral examination. Recommended to register for the MEd (Educational Leadership) programme	Currently studying at the University of Pretoria.
Case 12	2004	THOD (1981) (Potchefstroom Teachers College); No any other degree, only the four-year teacher's diploma. A primary school principal for ten years.	RPL committee of the Faculty of Education	Oral examination (interview) and portfolio	Awarded a mark of 70% for the interview and portfolio and recommended for enrolment into the MEd (Educational Leadership) programme.	Currently studying at the University of Pretoria.

In the final analysis, the RPL assessment process in place in the University of Pretoria is a capable one, however, not many people are aware of it as a result are unable to take advantage thereof. Procedures and processes for RPL assessment are applied uniformly and consistently in all the different departments of the Faculty of Education and to all the candidates assessed to date.

6.3   THE RPL MODEL OF ASSESSMENT

There is no evidence that in the Faculty of Education, RPL assessors make use of a specified model of assessment. At an international level, models such as the ABCs of College Level Learning (CLL) and the combination of the Kolbs Learning Styles and Bloom's Taxonomy (The K-B model) are being used, as described in Chapter 2. In the Faculty, RPL candidates got a pass mark, usually in percentages; however, computation of these marks is not very clear. In all the assessment reports of the candidates assessed, the recommendation of the RPL committee stated: *"a mark of between 60-65% is given to candidate X for the oral examination and portfolio"*. It was difficult therefore to attempt aligning the model of assessment used in the Faculty with those used in other countries.

6.4   STANDARDS FOR RPL ASSESSMENT

The RPL assessment process at the University of Pretoria is based on the ***Learner-Centred Assessment Model*** developed in the United Kingdom (Simosko and Cook: 1996). I used the same model to determine if there is quality in the process of RPL assessment in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. Various quality indicators in all the stages (steps) involved in accordance with this model were developed and were used in the evaluation (assessment) process. The University of Pretoria adopted and uses ***internationally accepted benchmarks*** for RPL assessment as recorded in Whitaker (1989). A thorough explanation of these standards was done in Chapter 2. I used the same standards (academic and administrative) to determine whether they were used and being applied during the assessment process. My findings are as follows:

6.4.1 Academic standards

The credit or recognition given to RPL candidates for their prior learning is awarded only for the demonstrated learning outcomes, which have occurred, and not for experience alone. In line with what Whitaker (1989:11) says: RPL assessors consider experience as an "excellent potential source of learning", and not as an appropriate and only yardstick for learning. All the candidates assessed in the Faculty of Education, had vast experiences in their fields of specialisation, but they were still expected to demonstrate and prove that they have learnt in various learning contexts and that such learning is on par with entry requirements of the programme they wanted to be enrolled in.

A classical example of this is Candidate A who only had a four year diploma qualification and no degree, but having worked as an educator and principal for a period of over 15 years, demonstrated beyond doubt that he had sufficient knowledge on educational leadership that would enable him to progress well at M-level. The RPL committee when assessing Candidate A cited above said: "*he had a profound theoretical knowledge regarding educational management equal or even better than many students with an official honours degree in the same field*". Although this candidate never studied for a university degree, he was found to be having sufficient knowledge on research and he articulated the research process very well, with a clear understanding of concepts and principles related to doing research. Much of his learning was acquired on site and was found to be on the level of most of the modules offered in the department of educational management, law and policy studies such as OWT 730; LVO 730; MBE 730 and LBO 880 offered in the BEd (Hons) programme. He also had writing skills as result of having produced a lot of written material at his school, which the committee said would enable him to succeed at the MEd level. It was obvious during the assessment that this candidate displayed a balance between theory and application as his learning was based on practical engagement with the concept of educational management/leadership as a school principal.

All the RPL credits awarded to candidates were for the purpose of enrolment into the university's programmes and qualifications. As stated earlier, the prior learning assessed was acquired after secondary school and was found to be equivalent to the modules and programmes offered in the Faculty of Education. Credit is awarded (recognition is given) only for learning that displays a balance, appropriate to the subject, between theory and practical application. Appropriate subject matter learnt and academic experts with assessment experience determine levels of competence and credits. Credits are appropriate to the academic contexts in which they are accepted. I have used the term 'credit' here to mean 'recognition'.

6.4.2 Administrative standards

Staff in the department of student affairs and examinations monitors credit awards and their transcripts to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning. Policies and procedures applied to assessment have been developed, although I would argue that they are not fully disclosed and prominently available. It is a question of, if you want to know about RPL services, ask, and the information will be provided. This applies mainly to the public, as those within the Faculty's structures can access such information. Fees charged for assessment are based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the number of credits awarded. Going through the RPL assessment process offers 'value for money'.

The RPL assessment process is a very simple one, and not very costly. One of the senior members of the Faculty interviewed mentioned that costs for duplication of material during the process comes from his/her budget. All personnel involved in the assessment of prior learning received training for their function and there is provision for their professional development in this area of specialisation. There is little evidence to suggest that assessment programmes are monitored, reviewed and evaluated regularly, to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of assessment arts.

6.4.3 Guiding principles for good practice in RPL provisioning

In the Faculty of Education, as indicated earlier, the candidate/learner is not the one that makes the claim for RPL; he/she is identified during the screening of applications as a potential RPL candidate. Again, RPL is not available for all, despite the institution having stated this as a principle in their policy. Therefore, this specific area of practice is not acceptable, mainly at an international level.

RPL is about learning outcomes and not just experience, as demonstrated in all the candidates assessed during the period 2003-2006. The identification of prior learning comes through a systematic reflection on experience, and this usually takes place prior to the assessment itself.

Assessment of prior learning is done by academic staff that have expertise in the programme and qualification that the candidate wishes to be enrolled in. There is an emphasis on the quality, sufficiency, authenticity and currency of evidence submitted by the candidates.

It is clear that staff responsible for assisting the candidate with the preparation of the evidence is separated from the one on assessing. There is also evidence that proper quality assurance measures are built into the assessment process. The process of assessment is governed by policies, procedures and processes that are applied consistently in the different departments of the Faculty.

6.5   SUMMARY

The process of RPL assessment in the University of Pretoria is a well-developed (capable) one. RPL assessors and identified candidates know exactly what should be done from beginning to end, and there is an attempt in all the departments of the Faculty to adhere to the laid down procedures and processes. The use of Bloom's Taxonomy to assess prior learning is acceptable, however, there are other RPL models of assessment the institution

could use, as they were proven to bring much success in prior learning assessment and could contribute greatly towards adult learner retention.

The institution is in violation of Principle 1 in the accreditation of prior learning, which states that 'the RPL candidate should make the claim for RPL'. As indicated in the above section, at the University of Pretoria, Faculty assessors prefer to identify potential RPL candidates, as opposed to candidates approaching the institution requesting their prior learning to being assessed. In this instance, the Faculty does what is referred to as: *"RPL on offer"* and not *"RPL on demand"*. Principle 2 is also being violated in the sense that currently RPL is not available to all. Only a select few get to know about the system and have benefited from it. Principle 3 is also being violated, where the manner in which RPL assessments were carried out could easily create an impression that once a person is taken through the process, he/she is guaranteed a place in the programme identified for RPL admissions. There is little evidence to suggest that assessment programmes are monitored, reviewed and evaluated regularly, to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of assessment arts.