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

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

Diana Green (1994:12)

DECLARATION

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

Signature:_____

Date:_____

ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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6. To my colleagues at the University of Pretoria, Professor Neil Roos and Dr Rinelle Evans, I hope the RPL programme for college-qualified educators, a programme that I strongly believe in, will see the majority of educators from Mpumalanga gaining access into our programmes and qualifications.

7. To my Pastor, Ray McCauley (Rhema) for the spiritual encouragement he gave me. Without his spirit-led teachings, I would have given up pursuing my dream.

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

Mokabe Julia Motaung
South Africa, 30 April 2007

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KEY WORDS

Assessment

Benchmarking

Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

Evaluation

External evaluation

Higher Education (HE)

Institutional Audits

Internal evaluation (self-evaluation)

Measurement

Peer Reviews

Quality

Quality Assurance (QA)

Quality Audits

Quality Control (QC)

Quality Management System (QMS)

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

Total Quality Management (TQM)

LIST OF ACRONYMS

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

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

LIST OF TERMINOLOGY

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

or a core activity of an institution, in order to make a statement about its quality. External evaluation is carried out by a team of external experts, peers, or inspectors, and usually requires three distinct operations: analysis of the self-study report; site visit; and the drafting of an evaluation report (Vlãsceanu, Grünberg & Pârlea 2004:37-38).

EVALUATION	The process of examining and passing judgement on the appropriateness or level of quality or standards.
INTERNAL EVALUATION	A process of quality review undertaken within an institution for its own ends (with or without the involvement of external peers). It is something an institution does for its own purposes. From an external agency perspective, internal review is seen as the part of the process that an institution undertakes in preparation for an external event, such as peer review or site visits. This process is not the same as self-evaluation.
MONITORING	It is the regular observation and recording of ongoing activities in an institution; project or programme of study. Monitoring provides information that will be useful in: analysing the situation in the institution, project or programme; ensuring all the activities are carried out properly by the right people and in time; identifying problems facing the institution, project or programme; and finding solutions.
QUALITY	Quality is about:

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

quality.

- Ensuring that those who make the product or deliver the service have the skills, knowledge and motivation to make the products or deliver the service.

- Ensuring that those who make the product or deliver the service have the means and skills to monitor the quality of what they make or deliver to modify what they do to better meet the required standard.

- Independently auditing and monitoring quality and feeding back this information to those who produce or provide or are otherwise in a position to contribute to enhancing quality (SAQA 2001:10).

QUALITY MANAGEMENT SYSTEM	This is the sum of the activities and information an organisation uses to enable it to better and more consistently deliver the products and services that meet and exceed the needs and expectations of its customers and beneficiaries, more cost effectively and cost efficiently, today and in the future (SAQA 2001:9).
RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING	RPL is the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification and the acceptance for the purposes of qualification of that, which meet the requirements.
SELF EVALUATION	This is the systematic collection of administrative data, the questioning of students and graduates, and holding moderated interviews with lecturers and students, resulting in a self-study report. Self-

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

LANGUAGE EDITING, DESIGN AND LAYOUT

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

Signature:_____

Date:_____

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

1.1   INTRODUCTION

This study is an instrumental case study, addressing descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory research perspectives. It focuses on **quality** provisioning of RPL[1] (Recognition of Prior Learning) in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The central question is does the RPL system that is in place in this Faculty meet national and international requirements for quality and quality assurance in relation to the inputs for its design, the process and procedures for prior learning assessment and the expected outcomes? If not, what are the reasons and what can the Faculty do to improve the quality of its RPL practice. The study therefore seeks to engage with the discourse of theory and practice by examining the delivery of the RPL programme in the Faculty, the quality of its implementation, the assessment of the organisational context, personnel, procedures, activities, and inputs, and the effect of the output on the outcomes of the programme. The overall goal of this evaluation is to provide useful feedback to RPL programme managers, assessors, and administrators in the Faculty, funders, and other relevant stakeholders on the status of the current quality assurance measures in RPL provisioning and to portray accurately to other potential customers and clients how the programme truly operates.

Although Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) enjoy institutional autonomy and academic freedom, they do not have a choice in providing RPL services, as they are still accountable to the state, its main funder and the public. These sentiments were pronounced by Litha Beekman, the then Director of the Office for Experiential Learning (OEL) at the University of South Africa[2], (Beekman 2001:1). RPL is a statutory obligation, promulgated by these acts: The South African Qualifications

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[1] There is a wide range of other terms in use internationally, for example, the Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (APEL or APL) in the United Kingdom, and Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the United States of America. This Thesis uses the generic term Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

[2] The commonly used acronym for the University of South Africa is UNISA. The office for Experiential Learning (OEL) started to operate since 2002 to handle all RPL related matters.

Authority (SAQA[3]) Act (Act 58 of 1995); The Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998); and The Skills Development Act (Act 97 of 1998). RPL was conceptualised by the South African government as a key strategy for achieving the objectives of the NQF, which are access and redress. RPL is also prominent in the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) released in February 2001, with specific reference to outcomes one, three and four in relation to the participation in higher education of adult learners, the disabled, and those who come from other parts of the Southern African region (NDoE[4] 2001:18, 24 & 25). The Ministry of Education in South Africa introduced RPL in the higher education sector as a key strategy for increasing the pool of student recruits, ensuring equitable opportunities to education and training, and promoting the notion of lifelong learning.

In September 2002, SAQA released a national policy document on RPL, entitled: *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF),* to provide direction and support for an evolving system of RPL that should be able to set the required standards to meet the challenges of social, economic, and human development. The other thrust of this policy is to give guidance regarding the establishment of proper quality assurance measures in RPL provisioning, using a set of specialised criteria. The audiences for this policy include ETQAs (Education and Training Quality Assurors) and their constituent providers[5]. In the case of the higher education sector, at a meso level, the policy is meant for the Council on Higher Education (CHE) and its permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), as the accrediting body, and both Public (Universities and Universities of Technology) and Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), at a micro level.

The consultative process of developing these national arrangements led to the release of another policy document by SAQA in June 2004, which deals with *Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning.* The document is

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[3] SAQA is a body of 29 members appointed by the Ministers of Education and Labour to serve a two-fold function: to oversee the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

[4] NDoE stands for National Department of Education.

[5] "Providers" refer to all types of institutions offering education and training, including formal universities, universities of technology, colleges, examination and assessment bodies, and work place based training centres, single purpose, and SMME (small medium and micro enterprises) providers.

open-ended and non-prescriptive, what SAQA terms a 'living document', meant to support the development of systems and processes that would ultimately enhance the implementation of RPL by providing specific guidelines to institutions on how to develop their implementation plans. This document responds and addresses challenges to the systemic approach adopted by the country for RPL provisioning. Additionally, the document outlines six steps needed by RPL implementers for developing institutional implementation plans, which are in essence the core criteria for quality assurance of the RPL practice. These steps may serve as a self-audit tool to measure the progress an institution has made about offering RPL services against agreed-upon implementation targets with its ETQA.

RPL provisioning is a critical area for quality assurance (internal and external evaluations with peer reviews and ongoing monitoring). Nationally and internationally, there is a very high premium placed on the quality of the RPL assessment process. Many RPL implementers with hands on experience (Simosko & Cook 1996; Whitaker 1989; Hoffmann 2006a; Hoffmann 2006b; Evans 1988 & Osman 2004) maintain that RPL provisioning must form part of the overall quality assurance (QA) system of an institution to ensure credibility and integrity of the RPL assessment process, if not, when implemented it must meet the requirements for quality assurance.

Nyatanga, Foreman and Fox (1998:31-32) argue that it is hard to envisage how institutions can guarantee the quality of RPL provisioning without an institutional policy specific to RPL or accessibility; an agreed regulatory framework to guide both staff and students; specific offices charged with the responsibility for the operationalisation of RPL, including the monitoring of quality; specific roles of the institution and its staff to take part in the day-to-day RPL issues; determining how the institution and its programmes will be informed by external views, including those from relevant professional bodies; and the institution seeking and integrating views and experiences of students and others involved in the RPL process. Quality provisioning of RPL calls for application of sound quality principles as advocated for by a number of what we term 'quality gurus', the pioneers of the 'quality revolutionary movement'. Heyns (2004:118) supports these arguments in that 'since RPL is a contested area, it is necessary that stringent quality assurance measures, in defence of the integrity of the process be considered as the norm rather than the exception'.

Craft (1992:9) refers to the 1990s as the 'decade of quality'. This was an era where in industry, in commerce, in government and in higher education the word 'quality' was on everyone's lips: 'quality control'; 'quality circles'; 'Total Quality Management'; 'quality assurance'; and so on. The maintenance and enhancement of quality, and attempts to define and measure quality, were major issues for higher education in many countries. With regard to developments in South Africa, the Higher Education Act (Act 101 of 1997) assigned to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in December 1997 the statutory responsibility for establishing a permanent sub-committee, the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) for quality assurance and quality promotion in the higher education sector. This move signalled the end of all quality initiatives and activities in the higher education sector by any other body that operated prior to the 1994 elections of a new government, an indication of change regarding quality assurance practices in the South African higher education sector.

Prior to the restructuring of the higher education sector, the South African Universities Vice Chancellors Association (SAUVCA[6]) was the voice of the public universities. The Committee of Technikon Principals played a major role in representing the technikon sector. One of the challenges the sector faced during the period of restructuring, was to address fundamental questions (re-conceptualisation), such as, what is quality? Who is responsible for ensuring quality? Is there a place for institutional audits? Participants at the National Quality Assurance Forum (NQAF), held by SAUVCA in April 2002, were of the opinion that 'the pursuit of quality was not new'. Sallis (1993:13) holds the same position in that 'the concern with quality is not new'. These views indicate that there has always been a tradition at the universities of 'trying to do things properly'. However, an acknowledgement made during the SAUVCA meeting was that 'modern QA', i.e. 'post 1994 QA' is a relatively new concept in the higher education sector in South Africa.

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[6] SAUVCA was established as a statutory body for the 21 public universities in South Africa by the Universities Act (Act 61 of 1955). As a statutory body, it made recommendations to the Minister and Director-General of Education on matters referred to it or alternatively on any other issues, which it deemed important for universities. Currently, there is a newly formed body, Higher Education South Africa (HESA) formed on 9 May 2005, as the successor to the SAUVCA and the then Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP). CTP was a national higher education association established in 1967 in terms of the Advanced Technical Education Act (No. 40 of 1967). It comprised of the rectors, principals and Vice-Chancellors of Technikons in South Africa.

Providing a single, precise definition of quality that is appropriate for South African higher education institutions is as contested as the requirement to demonstrate its achievement through quality assurance mechanisms and measures. The fact that there are so many associated terms and connotations used to describe it does not always help. The phenomenon 'quality assurance' as claimed by many 'means to validate or justify an activity yet sometimes, with scant attention paid to what the word might mean' (Green 1994:12-13). 'Quality' just like 'freedom' or 'justice' is an elusive and not an easy term to define. Quality as a value-laden term is subjectively associated with that which is good and worthwhile. We all have an instinctive understanding of what it means but may find it difficult to articulate and even more difficult to assess, measure or evaluate.

Funders and other stakeholders expect higher education institutions to show that 'quality is happening' and that there is a process of monitoring this quality for continuous improvement (SAUVCA 2002:11). To 'assure' is to make certain that something is happening. For example, if quality means fitness for purpose, then quality assurance is about evaluating the level of fitness for purpose. Put more simply, quality assurance is providing guarantees that the institution keeps its promise to its customers, and that the product or service offered lives up to the promotional material.

Within RPL circles, quality assurance is a term used to mean "the degree of confidence that students and partner agencies have in relation to the perceived practice" (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:30). The word 'perceived' as used implies that quality is a social construct, which portrays beliefs and views of worth. For the purpose of this study, quality assurance will embrace aspects of the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy and Quality Management Systems (QMS) or Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI). Quality Assurance (QA), Quality Audit, and Quality Control are all elements of, but not the totality of a Quality Management System.

In this study, TQM means doing the right thing right the first time, on time, always striving for improvement, and customer satisfaction. For RPL 'doing it right' means having in place the infrastructure and processes for the maintenance and continuous improvement of the RPL practice. Quality Assurance on the other hand, rests on the principle of prevention of quality problems during the implementation process, rather

than the detection of these problems as in Quality Control. A Quality Management System (QMS) means a systematic way of guaranteeing that organised activities happen the way they are planned (Bell, McBride & Wilson 1994:3; Lewis & Smith 1993:28; Goddard & Leask 1992:5; Miller 1991:16; Huge 1990:4; Crosby 1979:22).

Therefore, the framework and criteria for quality assurance taking into account ongoing debates include notions of quality such as excellence; conforming to specification (perfection); value for money; customer satisfaction; fitness for purpose; transformation; The ISO 9001:2000 approach to quality management (Harvey & Knight 1996; Harvey & Green 1993; South African Bureau of Standards 1996); the systems theory and Deming's cycle of quality improvement (Gabor 1990). Section 1.6.3.1 provides detailed information on each notion of quality

1.2   THE RATIONALE FOR UNDERTAKING THIS STUDY

The Council on Higher Education (CHE) commissioned a study towards the end of 2003 to determine quality assurance arrangements at institutions of higher learning in a number of areas, RPL included. I was instrumental in the compilation of the final report sent to all the higher education institutions in my capacity as Manager: Accreditation and Coordination at the CHE/HEQC in 2004. The findings from 46 institutions out of an approximately 120 higher education institutions (universities, universities of technology and private institutions) highlighted a number of problems related to the implementation of RPL:

1.   One institution expressed **reservations** about developing RPL because of their primary identity as a postgraduate research institution and their inability to respond to demands for RPL. The impression created here is that granting RPL candidates, access into the institution through the RPL route would lower academic standards and although lack of institutional capacity may be a legitimate reason for not implementing, there was no evidence that the institution had tried all the other possible avenues to tackle this challenge.

2.   Another institution **adopted a position** where they said they could consider granting access to RPL candidates for **undergraduate programmes only.** This position sidelines those other learners who may wish to continue with

postgraduate studies through non-traditional routes. This institution defined RPL as a process of awarding discretionary access to the institution at undergraduate levels. It is common practice that students who do not meet the minimum entrance requirements for admission into undergraduate programmes, which is usually an exemption (endorsement) in Grade 12 (matriculation certificate), can apply for the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption, an old rule that has been in existence in the higher education sector as long as its inception.

3. On **policies and procedures** for quality assurance purposes in RPL what emanated was a **lack of consistent and effective implementation,** irrespective of the availability of a formal institutional RPL policy. This raised the question of, is it formulation of impressive RPL policies lacking the 'implementation factor', what Jansen (2002:1) refers to as 'political symbolism'.

4. On **the extent of implementation** of policies and procedures, there was scant evidence of RPL implementation, except at two institutions. Even these two institutions did not provide information about the numbers of learners affected, or the range of academic programmes across the institution, targeted for RPL. This created an impression that RPL is a marginal activity in these institutions.

5. The University of the Western Cape (UWC) was the only institution that provided **sufficient information** on the extent of implementation of RPL and its quality assurance mechanisms.

I was prompted and motivated to do an **in-depth study** on how the national RPL policy is implemented in higher education. My main interest at the onset was to answer this critical question:

"Why, notwithstanding the fact that a national RPL policy has been introduced for the education and training sector as a way of providing admission to previously disadvantaged learners into formal learning programmes, is there an apparent delay and resistance amongst academics within and across institutions of higher learning in South Africa to implement RPL?"

This question led to a more specific one in that if the RPL policy is subsidiary to other activities at institutions, what guarantees are there that institutions are offering a

quality assured programme of RPL. This led to the study of the case of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, in relation to its quality assurance practice in RPL provisioning.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT IN THE STUDY IN ITS CONTEXT

This study is a direct response to what SAQA (2004:78) and Matentjie (2005: iii) indicate as future research needs. To encourage intellectual scrutiny and to evaluate the progress made in the education and training sector regarding RPL implementation, SAQA identified several research topics, including the one on "How well is RPL implemented?" Matentjie's study on the impact of the NQF at the University of Pretoria with specific reference to access into higher education learning revealed that there was a difference in the manner in which the NQF policy (RPL implied) was applied, i.e. there were some departments that 'blindly complied', those that 'selectively complied', and those that 'strategically avoided' implementation. Her recommendation was for future research to 'zoom in on individual departments within higher education to reveal the deeper and more nuanced impact of the NQF'.

The literature in the public domain raised many questions about RPL provisioning in higher education. An interrogation of some of the publications indicated that the research findings articulated personal positions, stances and views, rather than objective recommendations that take the process of access into higher education learning forward, using RPL as a key strategy. The literature is also silent about practical ways of ensuring that the objectives of the NQF (access and redress) are realised, i.e. the RPL system becomes a sustainable mechanism in institutions where the process has begun.

There is very little information about the extent of RPL implementation either within or across institutions. Heyns (2004:7) in her study cited the survey undertaken by the Joint Education Trust (JET) in 2000 where the findings indicated that, 'a very small number of providers have taken on the challenge of conceptualising RPL, and seemingly, the picture hasn't changed much'. Osman (2004a:1) adds that "while policy in higher education has a vision of opening doors of opportunity conditions on the ground suggest that very little is known about RPL practices either within or across, and less is known

about how institutions are opening those doors of opportunity to adult learners with prior knowledge".

The following question then becomes necessary: How do we justify and verify the quality of RPL provisioning in institutions of higher learning? The University of the Western Cape (UWC) and the University of South Africa (UNISA) at the time of this study were the only two South African higher education institutions, amongst 120 institutions, that adopted an institution-wide RPL practice. At most other HEIs where there is RPL provisioning, it has been used as a pilot project (a minor experimental intervention) within one or two departments (Harris 2000; Luckett 1999; Castle & Castle 2001). Not much is known about the quality of RPL provisioning at UNISA.

There is a great deal of literature on RPL implementation in higher education in South Africa in the form of journal articles (Breier 2001; Castle & Attwood 2001; Castle & Osman 2001; Cretchley & Castle 2001; Hendricks & Volbrecht 2001; Kistan 2002; Moore & van Rooyen 2002; Nair 2003; Underwood 2003; Osman 2004a; Osman 2004b; Osman & Castle 2002; van Rooy 2002). However, the focus in the publications cited is on conceptualising RPL. In particular, there are very few published articles on case studies conducted in the higher education sector in South Africa to determine the **quality** of RPL provisioning. With regard to primary research work, there is very little local research on RPL implementation. In support of this statement, Osman (2004b:1) says: "there is a slender body of local research on RPL". There is no research conducted locally that attempted to show the applicability of quality assurance measures in the provisioning of RPL.

Most of the studies done focused on exploratory issues in the implementation of RPL (conceptualisation of RPL). For example Smith (2003) developed a strategy designed for RPL implementation for institutions that offer distance education; Osman (2003) presented RPL as an emergent field of enquiry in South Africa; Mayet (2001) attempted to show how workplace based education and training (experiential learning) can be articulated in the higher education sector; and Korpel's study (1998) presented RPL as a valid and reliable programme for assessing teller's prior knowledge, however, in a different context, i.e. a financial institution. As mentioned earlier, none of these studies

gives a comprehensive picture of how institutions implement RPL, with a specific focus on the appropriate and relevant quality assurance measures in the provisioning of RPL.

There are fewer reports from relevant research institutions and organisations, such as the Council on Higher Education (CHE), the Joint Education Trust (JET), and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) of the nature and extent of RPL implementation within or across institutions. It is difficult therefore to determine and to gauge the credibility and integrity of the provisioning of RPL, simply because there is not sufficient empirical data for longitudinal and comparative studies. A literature search resulted in two studies only, done at Masters Level, which are close to the research focus of this study, in terms of providing the framework for embarking on such a study:

The study done by Heyns (2004) on the mechanisms needed to ensure that RPL is a valid and sustainable process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The study elucidates on elements required for implementing a sustainable RPL system such as: having clear criteria for assessment of RPL; a suitable policy environment; clear purpose for RPL; having different permutations into learning programmes; determining issues around funding for RPL services and revisiting institutional policies and regulations that govern access and admission into higher education.

The case study done at the University of Pretoria by Matentjie (2005) on the implementation of the NQF justified the need for embarking on a more focused study on the Faculty of Education to determine how the institution deals with issues of access through RPL. The difference between the two studies mentioned above and the one carried out in this Thesis is that (1) Heyn's study explored ways of implementing a sustainable RPL system. The emphasis was on establishment of a conducive policy environment for implementation, and not necessarily about the cost effectiveness of the implementation process. (2) Matentjie's one is about analysis of the implementation of the NQF policy, which included issues related to RPL, whereas this study is about evaluation of the RPL programme, in relation to quality assurance measures. This study hopes to uncover new insights into the implementation of the RPL programme.

1.3.1 Aim of the research

The ultimate aim of this investigation is to determine what the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria needs to do to improve its current RPL practice. This would be by **describing and analysing** the quality in the process of implementing the RPL programme, **explaining** the different views and opinions held by major stakeholders in RPL provisioning, and **attaching personal meaning** (interpretation) to the emerging situation.

1.3.2 Objectives of the research

The overall objective of the study is to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of quality assurance mechanisms put in place for RPL provisioning. This study aims at achieving the following specific objectives, i.e. to **examine and establish** how the RPL programme was conceptualised and designed; **establish and determine** the procedure and process of assessing prior learning; and **determine and explain** how the end-users of the programme feel about the RPL product and related services rendered. In the final analysis, there will be recommendations regarding what the institution can do to strengthen and improve its RPL practice.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The main research question for this study is:

How does the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria implement RPL?

The main research question in the study is operationalised by the following three research sub-questions:

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

The first research question examines the quality of inputs used to conceptualise and design the RPL programme. If we adopt the approach to quality that says, a product needs to conform to specification (meet national and international requirements) in the design, and, we need to get it right the first time. For RPL, this means using quality inputs in the design phase and having in place the infrastructure and processes for the maintenance and continuous improvement of the practice. Since RPL is often closely, related to institutional goals it should be part of the institutional mission and the institutional quality assurance mechanisms that help fulfil that mission.

To answer this research question, pre-developed 'quality indicators' categorised into ten areas of practice, are utilised to evaluate the quality of the inputs used during the conceptualisation and design phase and make judgements (SAQA 2002:16-30; Heyns 2004; & Osman 2004). These inputs, grouped into ten areas of practice, are:

- Institutional policy and environment;
- Resources (physical, financial, and human) allocated for RPL services;
- Training and registration of RPL assessors and other key staff;
- Funding for the establishment of the RPL process;
- Support services to RPL candidates/learners;
- Monitoring, evaluation and verification processes of RPL provisioning;
- Methods and processes of RPL assessment;
- Establishment of learner records and the reporting system to the relevant ETQA;
- RPL and curriculum design, qualifications and academic standards; and
- Approach to quality and quality assurance

The second question analyses the quality of the entire process of RPL provisioning, which, includes standards, principles and procedures that are in place for assessing prior learning. Data obtained need to address how the institution deals with problems and issues experienced during the assessment of RPL candidates. There are well-developed models of RPL assessment in use in other countries such as in the United States of America, including the one suggested by SAQA (2004:32). To evaluate the entire assessment process, there were quality indicators developed based on the principles, standards and model of RPL assessment in place at the University of Pretoria, inter alia

Faculty of Education, and procedures and processes developed in the Faculty of Education for RPL assessment. The rationale is that sound assessments are critical to the development of a credible assessment service. Assessors must adhere to a range of standards, principles, and procedures of good practice in prior learning assessment and accreditation.

The third question investigates the quality of the output of the RPL system. The focal point is whether there is client satisfaction with the RPL product and the services rendered. Usually RPL services include review of documentation, feedback, and transcription of results. In this study, the major clients are students, RPL candidates, lecturers, and the non-academic staff employed by the University of Pretoria for offering services in the Faculty of Education. These are the internal clients (customers). The designed programme must meet customer requirements (respond to client needs in an appropriate manner). Additionally, the RPL programme needs to satisfy the government's intent for legalising RPL. The state in this case is the external customer. This research question explores, from a customer's perspective the aspects of the RPL programme that provide satisfaction, and what needs to be refined and improved.

In the final analysis, I intend to provide an in-depth description of the quality assurance measures in place in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria in the area of RPL. In the event, where the provisioning of RPL does not meet the required national and international standards for quality assurance, and does not satisfy the end-users of the system, an explanation of what causes such a situation will be done mainly from the researcher's perspective. I will also explore ways and means of how to implement a quality assured RPL programme in this Faculty.

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 is a presentation of the findings on the three research questions. In Chapter 8 the overall analysis and conclusion is given.

1.5 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The study has benefits to specific groups and in various ways:

1.   The Council on Higher Education (CHE)/Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) who are responsible for the facilitation of RPL implementation and monitoring of the progress of their constituents towards full implementation, as their band ETQA. It remains the prerogative of its constituencies (public universities, universities of technology, and private institutions) to adapt the recommendations made in this study for their individual contexts.

2.   At Faculty level, the research results would be useful to RPL implementers, that is, those who grapple with the realities and practicalities of RPL provisioning to enable them to improve their practice. In the Faculty of Education such people are Heads of Department (various), Programme Managers (Coordinators) of academic programmes in various fields of specialisation, members of the RPL committee, examination, and administrative personnel, members of the Faculty Board Meeting, RPL administrators, and members of the executive committee of the Senate of the university.

3.   Higher education academics, more especially those dealing with curriculum development matters, as there is a need to integrate provisioning of RPL within the existing curriculum frameworks and designs (designing flexible curricular that allows for multiple entry points at various levels).

4.   In terms of policy development, and monitoring of the implementation of RPL, the National Department of Education (NDoE) and The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) are the main targeted audience for the research findings.

5.   The major research institutes in the country, such as the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), the National Research Foundation (NRF) and the Joint Education Trust (JET) serves as useful platforms for sharing the research results of this study.

6.   To forge collaborative partnerships and ensuring cross-pollination of ideas on RPL provisioning, by maintaining links with the international community is essential as well as taking advantage of opportunities for high-level debates on RPL, at various platforms offered.

1.6   TERMINOLOGY

This section deals with the clarification of main concepts and terms as they apply to the focus of the research. See the 'List of Acronyms' in the front of this Thesis for detailed definitions of the other terms

1.6.1   Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

To define RPL, a multi-level approach adopted (Hoffmann 2006a:8-12), gives the policy-making standpoint (state and federal, associations, agencies, and employers); institutional perspective (community colleges, colleges, universities, and corporate universities); Faculty and assessor viewpoint (course instructor, expert Faculty evaluators, specialists, coaches, and student mentors) and the student side. Each level involved in RPL has a responsibility to ensure academic quality, and their point of view and need may vary. The criteria used to determine the appropriateness of the definition at each level are that at a policy making level, it should be broad and generic. The institution should make use of an operational term. At Faculty level, it needs to be practical and applicable. The bottom-line definition usually reflects people's understanding of the concept, which may depend on a number of issues, such as whether the institution takes the responsibility to explain what the concept is. The diagram below depicts the multi-level approach to defining RPL.

RPL

Policy-making organisation

Institution

Faculty/
Faculty Assessor

RPL Candidate
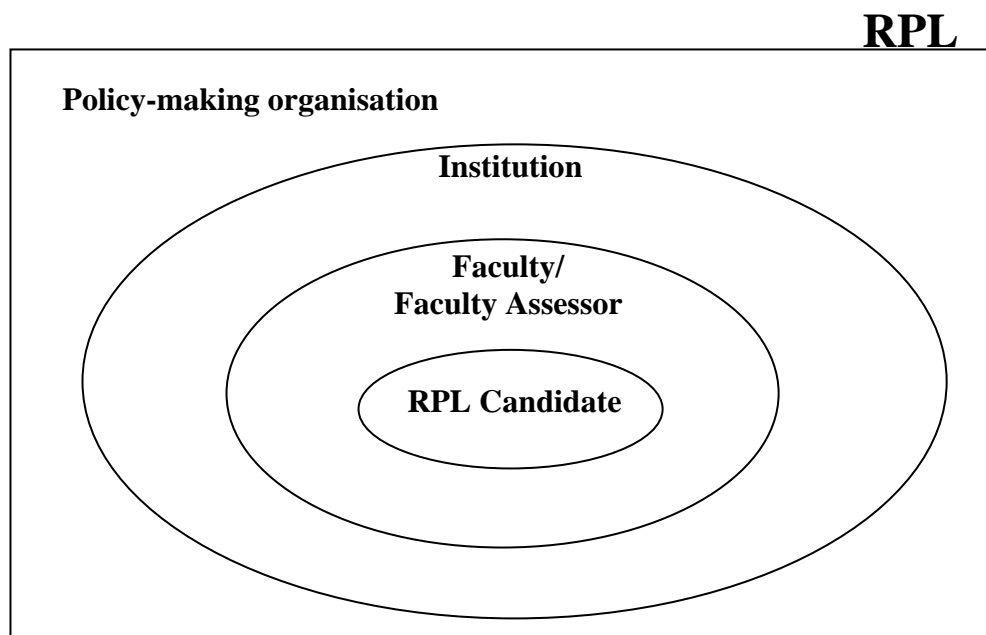
Figure 1.1: Multi-level approach to defining (viewing) RPL

In South Africa, Recognition of Prior Learning is defined in accordance with the National Standard Bodies Regulations (No 18787 of 28 March 1998) issued in terms of the SAQA Act 58 of 1995. RPL is "the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification and the acceptance for the purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements." This definition makes a number of principles clear:

(1)   Learning occurs in all kinds of situations, that is, formally, informally, and non-formally.

(2)   Measurement (assessment) of the learning takes place against specific learning outcomes required for a specific qualification where credits awarded for such learning should meet the requirements of the qualification.

Therefore, the process of recognising prior learning is about: identifying what the candidate knows and can do; matching the candidate's skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification and crediting the candidate for skills, knowledge and experience build up through formal, informal, and non-formal learning that occurred in the past. To ensure quality provisioning of RPL in the education and training sector, there is a national RPL policy, and criteria and guidelines for implementation released by the state (see section 1.2.1).

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) and the University of Pretoria define RPL as "the formal identification, assessment and acknowledgement of the full range of a person's knowledge, skills and capabilities acquired through formal, informal training, on-the-job or life experience" (HEQC 2004:26; University of Pretoria 2002:3). The institution's position on RPL assessment is that it affords whole or partial achievement of qualifications. To ensure quality intake of students, the HEQC has put a cap of not more than 10% of the RPL admissions across the institution, and clear criteria for meeting the requirements for quality assurance in RPL provisioning. At institutional level, there are procedures and processes for assessing prior learning in a credible manner. In the higher education sector, the HEQCs position is for its constituents to use RPL for purposes of access only, i.e. ease of entry into higher education learning as recommended by Castle and Attwood (2001) in their article entitled: "RPL for access or credit: problematic issues".

In the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria, "RPL implies recognition of the work done by prospective students in the field of education or in a field of interest relevant to education, for admitting students into programmes for which they have no formal recognised and required qualification" (Faculty of Education 2003:2). The official position is that "successful RPL applications are based on the evaluation of any informal qualification(s) or formal qualification(s), and work or task-related experiences, or institutional or cooperative training, and are regarded to be at par or equivalent to the conditions or entry requirements of a qualification admitted into" (*ibid.*).

At the level of students, RPL should address the following questions: How do I show the assessor that I have the necessary prior learning? Do I have enough knowledge for a programme of interest? What level is my prior learning?

Higher education perspectives

Harris (2001:1) says, "Recognition of prior learning refers to practices developed within education and training to identify and recognise adult's previous learning. The broad principle is that previous learning acquired informally, non-formally, experientially or formally can and should be recognised and given currency within formal education and training frameworks." Moore and van Rooyen (2002:294) state that, "RPL is a process that enables people of all ages, backgrounds, and attitude to receive formal recognition for the skills and knowledge held because of formal training, work experience, and/or life experience". They assert that RPL is a process which attempts to put a value on all learning, what people know and can do, irrespective of how achieved, for an example through study, community work, on the job training, or other life experiences and which has not been formally recognised through the transfer of credit mechanisms.

Employment sector perspective

A simplified definition, representing the employment sector from Deller (2004:1) states that RPL is "a process whereby adults can be assessed and receive formal acknowledgement for all the skills (competencies) and knowledge that they have gained over the years". She maintains that it is immaterial how employees acquired the

knowledge and the skills: all that is important is that they can show an assessor that they are competent (*ibid*). During the process, candidates need to demonstrate what they can do so that the assessor can collect enough evidence to make a decision about their competence. In this way, RPL implies recognition of current skills and competencies.

RPL definitions at various levels and by individuals indicate a general agreement on the most fundamental principle of RPL, namely, learning occurs in various other contexts (informally and non-formally) other than formally only. In this sense, mature learners become the main beneficiaries of the RPL system. Their learning experiences are valued in that they are credit worthy within higher education academic structures. The most common view is that RPL involves four basic processes, that is: identifying what an individual knows and can do; equating those skills and knowledge with specific programme or qualification requirements; assessing the individual against the requirements (process of assessment); and crediting the learner accordingly.

There is a detailed description of the phenomenon 'Recognition of Prior Learning' in Chapter 2 and a description of good practice guidelines in implementing RPL. These guides serve as benchmarks used to evaluate the practice in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria, alongside the criteria and guidelines (standards) for implementation defined by SAQA and the criteria for institutional audits developed by the HEQC, specifically for the RPL practice and conditions set for RPL admissions.

1.6.2 RPL assessment terminology

In general, assessment in education and training is about collecting evidence of the learner's work to make decisions about learner achievement or non-achievement. SAQA (2001:15-16) views assessment as a structured process for gathering evidence and making judgment about an individual's performance in relation to registered national standards and qualifications, including knowledge, skills and experience acquired outside formal learning contexts.

According to Nyatanga *et al* (1998:7-8), Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) as used in the United Kingdom (UK) covers two aspects of prior learning, namely (a) prior learning intentionally organised for which certification marks successful completion

and (b) organised prior learning such as seminars where there may not be any certification. APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning) on the other hand, has been associated with incidental prior learning, which includes such prior learning as may be gained through leisure pursuits, family experiences, and unstructured work experience. In such learning, there may be no certificates issued, hence the use of the term 'uncertified prior learning'. While both forms of prior learning focus on learning rather than experience, and outcome rather than process, they differ in the manner of assessment.

The term accreditation (usually in the form of certification) as used in other countries is a means of granting formal credit or measured recognition to the learner. For example, a learner who has prepared and submitted a portfolio of evidence, this process involves ratification of the assessor's judgement by an external agency, usually an awarding body (Challis 1993:76-77). Transfer of credit from one institution to the other is often dependent upon accreditation standards. The latter apply to the institution's accreditation status held at the time of assessment.

1.6.3   Quality Terminology

This section explains various terms associated with the quality revolutionary movement. Chapter 3 deals in details with the background to the work of the quality movement and the theories on quality and quality assurance.

1.6.3.1   Quality

Quality has a variety of contradictory meanings. As Naomi Pfeffer and Anna Coote say in Sallis (1993:21-22) 'quality is a slippery concept'. Quality is notoriously elusive of prescription, and no easier even to describe and discuss than deliver in practice (Gibson 1986). It implies different things to different people; indeed the same person may adopt different conceptualisations at different moments. This raises the issue of 'whose quality?' Since quality is a dynamic concept, exact definitions of the concept are not helpful. There is a distinction between quality as an absolute term and quality as a relative concept. As an absolute, "quality is similar to beauty, goodness, and truth, an ideal with which there can be no compromise" (Sallis & Hingley 1991:3). In an

unadulterated form, quality products are things of perfection made with no expenses spared, for example, the reference to Rolls Royce cars as 'quality cars'. Used in the educational context this concept of quality is essentially elitist, exclusive, and discriminatory. By definition, only a few institutions are able to offer such a 'high quality' status to their clients.

The relative definition, views quality not as a trait of a product or service, but as something ascribed to it. There are a variety of 'stakeholders' in higher education including students, employers, teaching and non-teaching staff, government and its funding agencies, accrediting bodies, validators, auditors, and assessors, including professional bodies (Burrows & Harvey 1992). Each has a different perspective on quality. This is not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label. In this sense, quality exists when a service meets the specification laid down for it and if it meets customer requirements. Quality products or services, in this credited form need not be expensive or exclusive, nor do they have to be special. What is important is that they need to do what they claim to do, and do what their customers expect of them. In other words, they must be 'fit for their purpose' and 'perform accordingly'.

Rather than try to define one notion of quality, Harvey and Green (1993:1-7) identified five discrete but interrelated ways of thinking about quality. Harvey (1995) provides the following brief overview of the five categories:

- Quality as **exceptional:** this traditional concept is associated with the idea of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers status on the owner or user. Extremely high standards of production, delivery, and presentation are set. Barnett (1992:59) states that excellence means, "Exceeding by some margin the standard expected". In educational terms quality as exceptional is linked to the notion of excellence, of 'high quality', unattainable by most.

- Quality as **perfection or consistency:** the common zero defects philosophy based on the production line, be it motorcars, computers or other consumer items produced. This view fits well with the output of the industrial production line. It

sees quality as a consistent or flawless outcome. In a sense it 'democratises' the notion of quality that says if consistency can be achieved, then quality can be attained by all.

- Quality as **fitness for purpose** sees quality in terms of fulfilling a customer's requirements, needs or desires. Theoretically, the customer specifies requirements. In education, fitness for purpose is usually based on the ability of an institution to fulfil its mission or a programme of study to fulfil its aims.

- Quality as **value for money** sees quality in terms of return on investment. If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then the 'customer' has a quality product or service. The growing tendency for governments to require accountability from the higher education reflects a value-for-money approach. Increasingly students require value-for-money for the increasing cost to them of higher education.

- Quality as **transformation** is a classical notion of quality that sees it in terms of change from one state to another. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of knew knowledge.

Green (1993:12-17) mentions the other two notions of quality, namely:

- Quality as **effectiveness in achieving institutional goals** meaning a high quality institution is one that clearly states its mission (purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals that it has set itself.

- Quality as **meeting customer's stated or implied needs** highlights that a high priority is placed on identifying customer's needs as crucial factors in the design of the product or service. In Deming's (1986) terms, we should not only meet such requirements, but we need to exceed them as well. We need to give our clients more than their expectations, i.e. delight our customers.

Burrow and Harvey (1992) in reviewing the early literature on quality in higher education had also identified what they called the 'pragmatic definition of quality in higher education'. They argue that it is not possible to talk about quality as a unitary concept, quality must be defined in terms of a range of qualities, with recognition that

an institution may be of high quality in relation to one factor but low quality in relation to another. The best that can be achieved is to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken.

1.6.3.2 Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is about ensuring that "standards are specified and met consistently for a product or service" (Ellis 1993:5).

Quality assurance has to do with the determination of standards, appropriate methods, and quality requirements by an expert body, accompanied by a process of evaluation that examines the extent to which the practice meets these standards (Murgatroyd & Morgan 1993:45). For example, if quality means fitness for purpose, then quality assurance is about assessing or measuring the level of fitness for purpose, or making professional judgement about the level of fitness for purpose, as indicated in section 1.2.3 above.

According to Bell, McBride and Wilson (1994:3) "quality assurance is based on the principle of prevention of quality problems, rather than the detection of these problems as it is in quality control." In this research, quality assurance means an institution needs to demonstrate (show) that 'quality is happening'. SAUVCA[7] (2002:11) cautions that "gone are the days when a university could rest content in the knowledge that it is a first class (top-notch) institution without its academic products and services validated both internally and externally. For RPL, there needs to be procedures and processes consistently applied, and mechanisms for continuous improvement of the practice for purposes of institutional reputation.

Quality Assurance (QA) is the activity of providing evidence needed to establish confidence among all concerned, that quality-related activities are being performed effectively. It includes all those planned or systematic actions necessary to provide adequate confidence that a product or service will satisfy given requirements for

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[7] This view was captured during SAUVCA's National Quality Assurance Forum held in April 2002.

quality. Quality Assurance is a part of quality management providing fact-based external confidence to customers and other stakeholders that a product meet needs, expectations, and other requirements. Quality Assurance assures the existence and effectiveness of procedures that attempt to make sure, in advance that the expected levels of quality will be reached. Quality Assurance covers all activities from design, development, production, installation, servicing to documentation. It includes the regulation of the quality of raw materials, assemblies, products, components, services related to production, money, and evaluation processes.

1.6.3.3   Quality Control/Check

Quality control has to do with the techniques and activities, which sustain quality to specified requirements. It is based on inspection and an important outcome it is an after the fact activity which measures a product that has not been produced to customer satisfaction. In other words, defects detected through postproduction inspection by a quality control system are not prevented (Bell, McBride & Wilson 1994:2). In this study, considering new developments in quality assurance, quality control by way of conducting inspections is not a preferred approach nor the view promoted.

1.6.3.4   A Quality Management System (QMS)

SAQA (2001:9) defines a quality management system as "the sum of the activities and information an organisation uses to enable it to better and more consistently deliver products and services that meet and exceed the needs and expectations of its customers and beneficiaries, more cost effectively and cost efficiently, now and in the future." QMS is a way of ensuring that an organisation is consistently in control of the quality of product and service, which it provides to its customers. It is a formal process since it consists of a system of controlled, documented processes and procedures, which can be audited (Fresen 2005:10).

1.6.3.5   Total Quality Management (TQM)

Total Quality Management (TQM) is a holistic management philosophy, which makes quality everybody's business. It is an approach to improving the competitiveness,

effectiveness, and flexibility of a whole organisation or institution or a system. For an institution to be effective, each part of it must work properly together towards the same goals, recognising that each person and each activity affects and in turn influences others (Oakland 1993:22-23). Institutions need to strive for this ultimate organisational goal. In this study, the argument is that the manner in which an institution implements RPL is a reflection of applicability or non-applicability of the principles of the total quality management philosophy.

1.6.3.6 Standards, Quality Indicators and Benchmarking

A **Standard** is a basis for measurement, or a 'yardstick', a neutral term to describe a required characteristic of a product or service. The specification for a product or service comprises of a number of standards. Therefore, **Quality Indicators** (QIs) as used in this study are in essence the standards (criteria) for judging the quality of the RPL programme. **Benchmarking** is defined as "the formal and structured process of searching for those practices which lead to excellent performance and the observation and exchange of information about these practices" (SAUVCA 2002:30). It provides a structured approach to quality improvement, which brings to play an external (national or international) expertise to quality improvement to internal activities. It is about measuring ones products, service and practices against those of market leaders or perhaps ones closest competitors. It also requires that a critical analysis of internal operations is undertaken, and this exercise itself has great value in assuring quality.

1.6.3.7 Evaluation

Evaluation is the systematic acquisition and assessment of information to provide useful feedback about some object. The object could refer to a programme, policy, technology, person, need, or activity. There are many types of evaluations depending on the object evaluated and the purpose of the evaluation (Wheeler, Haertel & Scriven 1992; Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation 1994). The most important basic distinction in evaluation types is that between formative and summative evaluations. Formative evaluations strengthen or improve the object evaluated, i.e. they help form it by examining the delivery of the programme, the quality of its implementation, and the assessment of the organisational context,

personnel, procedures, inputs, and so on, while it is still being developed. Summative evaluations, in contrast, examine the effects or outcomes of some object. They summarise it by describing what happens subsequent to delivery of the programme, assessing whether the object has caused the outcome, determining the overall impact of the causal factor beyond only the immediate target outcomes, and estimating the relative costs associated with the object (Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation 1994; Joint Committee on Standards for Educational Evaluation 2003).

Process-Based Evaluations are geared to fully understanding how a programme works, i.e. how does it produce the results that it does, and whether the targeted population is being served. These evaluations are useful if (1) the programme is long-standing, (2) employers or customers report a large number of complaints about the programme, and (3) there appear to be large inefficiencies in delivering programme services. A process evaluation helps programme staff identify needed interventions and/or change programme components to improve service delivery. They are also useful for accurately portraying to outside parties how a programme truly operates (http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/intreval.php retrieved on 24 October 2005). Another term used for process-based evaluations is implementation evaluation.

1.7   CONTEXT

This section of the Thesis deals with the context of the study. The unit of analysis for this case study is the quality and quality assurance measures in the provisioning of RPL in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria, South Africa. The rest of this section deals with the international, national, and institutional context in terms of three aspects: what RPL is or is not, quality assurance in RPL provisioning and issues pertinent to the higher education sector. Figure 1.2 below depicts the relationship between the three knowledge domains in this study. The intersection is the hub of the study.
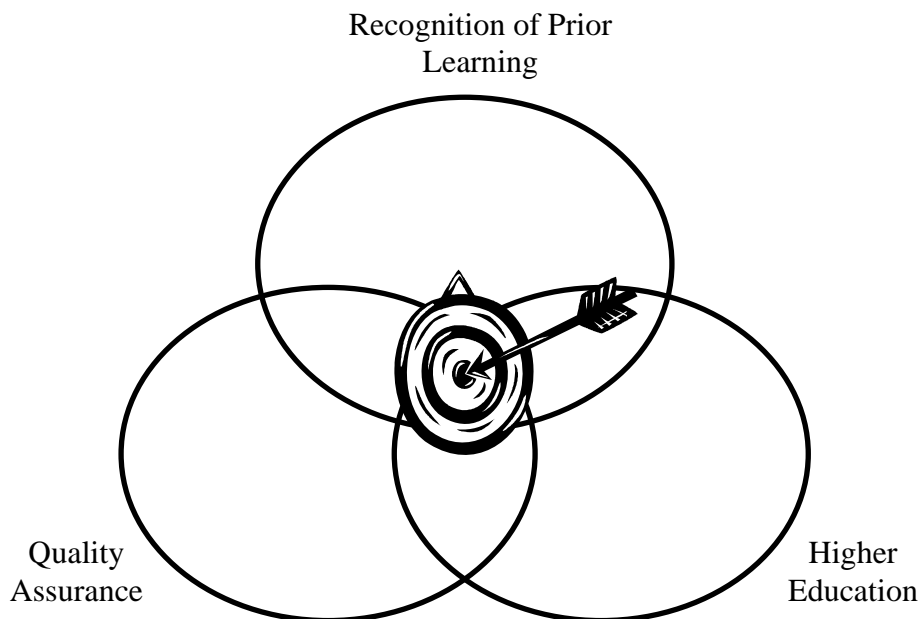
Figure 1.2: The knowledge domains of the study

1.7.1   Institutional context

The University of Pretoria is one of the largest providers of intellectual capital in South Africa, with no acute student shortages in various programmes offered in the Faculty of Education. A study undertaken by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2001, based on surveys among Grade 12 learners in South Africa, indicated that the University of Pretoria is in fact the University of Choice for most Grade 12 learners. Its record with regard to the number of graduates that it has produced is formidable.

Since its inception, more than 160 000 students have graduated from the University. In 2001 alone, 6783 students obtained qualifications through the traditional route from the University. Of these 3672 received bachelors' degrees, 1192 received honours degrees, 906 masters, 134 doctoral degrees conferred, and 920 students received diplomas and certificates, with the Faculty of Education contributing largely to these numbers. Of those that received qualifications, 955 (26%) were black (still a small percentage). Although, there are many students (females in the majority) who apply and study at this institution for various programmes, the institution makes use of the

traditional methods of admissions mainly, i.e. meeting the minimum entrance requirements for entry into any of the academic programmes offered.

Tables 1.1 and 1.2 reflect the student demographics of residential (contact) students in 2002 and related demographics for students enrolled for the University's distance education programme in 2002. In 2002 there were also more than 1500 international students on Campus, representing more than 60 different countries approximately 400 come from the SADC[8] region and 150 from other African Countries. The University teaches its academic offerings in both English and Afrikaans.

Table 1.1: *Numbers and demographics of contact students in 2002*

Undergraduate	Black	6578	29%		
				22869	69%
	White	16291	71%		
Postgraduate	Black	4057	40%		
				10081	31%
	White	6030	60%		
Total				32950	

Table 1.2: *Numbers and demographics of distance education students in 2002*

Black	Female	17054	Male	10784	27838
		61%		39%	96%
White		506		523	1029
		49%		57%	4%
Total	**17560**	**61%**	**11307**	39%	28867

The notion of quality through quality assurance is new to South African Higher Education Institutions. However, the University of Pretoria was successful in implementing the University's Quality Strategy, with principles thereof reflected or should be, in the implementation of the RPL programme in the Faculty of Education. According to the University's Quality Framework, there is a clear indication that the institution uses an integrated approach to Quality Assurance drawn from the TQM philosophy, the Business Excellence Model, the SA Excellence Model and the ISO 9000 family of standards.

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[8] SADC: Southern African Development Communities

One of the recent changes and accomplishments in this university is the establishment of the Quality Assurance Unit in 2004, to promote quality within the institution. The general mandate of the Quality Unit is to ensure a central role in the implementation, coordination and management of the University Quality strategy. At the level of leadership, the Quality Unit advices and supports high-level university decision-making on the development of Quality Assurance and Improvement policy and practice and provide institutional oversight over the devolved university's quality management strategy. At managerial level, the Quality Unit provides, on project basis coordination and integration for the following university-wide activities:

- quality planning processes; operational guidelines for all units in support of the university's Quality Strategy and report on performance against plans; and coordinate ad hoc external/internal requests, including inputs on national and regional planning initiatives.
- advice and support to faculties/schools on the development of quality assurance and improvement policy and practice in academic programmes.
- ensure that advice and support are provided to faculties/schools on the development of Quality Assurance and Improvement policy and practice in research and research training; and
- it leads the process of developing Quality Assurance and Improvement policy and practice in central and Faculty/school based support services.

Although the institution and its academic programmes received and receives accreditation status from the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), delegation[9] of quality assurance responsibilities in RPL provisioning is still underway. In addition, the University participated in a pilot audit conducted by the HEQC in September 2003, and a fully-fledged report on the findings were released in May 2004, with a section on the RPL practice containing commendations and recommendations from the HEQCs auditors.

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[9] Delegation of quality assurance responsibilities means that the HEQC finds the institution's quality assurance arrangements in the area of RPL acceptable; as such, the institution can offer RPL services.

RPL is a new concept in the higher education section but the University of Pretoria has procedures and processes for implementation for use by all the faculties. Much of the RPL provisioning is in the Faculty of Education, mainly for postgraduate studies. Two major initiatives are worth noting, that is, the development and adoption of the institution-wide RPL policy and the Faculty specific one for education. The following table indicates the numbers of RPL admissions in the university, with the Faculty of Education having accounted for more (Matentjie 2005:77)

Table 1.3: *Number of RPL admissions at the University of Pretoria from 2000-2004*

Year	Number of RPL learners
2000	23
2001	10
2002	12
2003	65
2004	32

The institution presented above, fits the description of the one Dr. W. Edwards Deming (Arcaro 1995:63-66) had in mind for what defines an institution committed to the development of a quality culture. There is constancy of purpose in bringing about change, improvement and ensuring that there is progress in all the programmes of the university. The institution has adopted a total quality philosophy. There is promotion of lifelong learning, with special reference to the many short courses offered at CE at UP (Continuing Education at the University of Pretoria).

There is an attempt to eliminate barriers to student and staff success. It is up to individuals employed at this institution to take advantage of the training programmes and activities lined up for academic and professional development. With the establishment of the QA unit, the institution is ensuring that there will be process improvement at all levels of operation. There is also a commitment to delivering quality services at reduced costs. It is evident that systems/mechanisms for quality have been put in place by the management of the institution. The release of the institution-wide RPL policy is an indication of a commitment to offering this service within all the nine faculties of the university.

Table 1.4: *Organisational snapshot of the University of Pretoria*

Founded:	1930
Location:	Main campus in Hatfield and campuses in Groenkloof, Prinshof, Onderstepoort, and the Gordon Institute of Business, several sites, and an academic presence in a number of hospitals in Gauteng, Mpumalanga and the Limpopo provinces
Number of Students:	Almost 33 000 residential students on campus and more than 28 000 additional distance education students
Number of Faculty:	There are NINE faculties
Highest Offering:	Doctoral and postdoctoral programmes
Web Page:	http://www.up.ac.za

1.7.2   National and international context

As indicated above, the South African government took the initiative to ensure that RPL becomes common practice in the education and training sectors. The development and release of the national RPL policy and criteria and guidelines for RPL implementation is indicative of the responsibility taken by the state. However, it was acknowledged by one of the participants at the JET conference (2000:7), representing the higher education sector that 'attempts at opening access through RPL initiatives for adult learners has not been that successful'. Most institutions exploit issues around institutional context; institutional autonomy; and academic freedom to maintain the status quo, i.e. non-compliance with the national RPL policy directives and strategic avoidance to develop RPL mechanisms (Matentjie 2005). The responsibility to evaluate and monitor the implementation of RPL rests with the HEQC, a newly developed body responsible for promotion of quality in this sector. Not much information is availed to the public on the quality of RPL programmes in higher education institutions from this national agency and other relevant research institutes.

RPL implementation is taking place in other countries, such as Canada, England, America, Australia, The Netherlands, Scotland, New Zealand, Greece, and Ireland,

with varying degrees of success. In America, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) formed over thirty years ago plays a major role in the implementation of RPL, or Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), for their college and universities affiliates. All the institutions affiliated to CAEL operate from a common framework in terms of assessing prior learning. There are clear procedures and processes for assessing prior (experiential) learning; tried and tested models of assessment to learn from; and well-developed tools and techniques used in the assessment process. It seems that most of the other countries used the American RPL model of quality assurance to shape their own policies and practices.

1.7.3   Quality assurance in higher education

The debates around quality and quality assurance have been going on for a number of years, with many asking the question: "What the hell is quality in higher education? In the first place, there has been a drive for greater accountability by the government for the way in which higher education spends funds allocated to it. Society is no longer prepared to take on trust that higher education is providing value for money in the products and services offered (Burrows & Harvey 1992:8). Major stakeholders in higher education expect higher education institutions to guarantee that they offer quality products and services. The second important debate that has influenced the quality debate in higher education has been the move away from an elitist system of higher education towards one of mass participation without a corresponding increase in finances.

There is an indication that, due to the work done in this sector to promote understanding of what quality and quality assurance is, such debates have since subsided but not completely stopped. The restructuring of the Higher Education sector in South Africa necessitated the establishment of proper quality assurance mechanisms at institutional level. As part of this requirement from the state, most, if not all of the institutions in this sector have a Quality Assurance (QA) Unit, which works together with the CHE/HEQC to ensure that there is an understanding of what quality through quality assurance is. In essence, RPL provisioning in the sector is or should be under scrutiny from the CHE/HEQC, through institutional audits conducted regularly.

1.7.4   The concept 'RPL'

The RPL policy holds promises for its beneficiaries, in that learning experientially may be as important as learning through theory. Sansregret (1987a:1) argues that adults in everyday life may have acquired skills that belong to three domains: psychomotor, cognitive, and affective. Recognising adult's prior learning would enable them to get a qualification that could bring opportunities for employment, promotion, and further development through proper training and learning. This means that adults would also be in a position to give new directions to their lives. By positioning people where they can maximise their potential, academic institutions make an important economic contribution through making a better use of monies available for education. This view brings into play the role that RPL can play in the *'economics of education'*.

In South Africa, the reality regarding the levels of education and training of citizens aged 20 and older is shocking. Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) released figures of the 2001 census (SAQA 2004:12) that made it clear where the need for RPL implementation is:

- 8,4% have education level above grade 12 (post-secondary education);
- 20,4% have grade 12;
- 30,8% some secondary education;
- 6,4% have completed primary schooling;
- 16,0% have some primary education; and
- 17,9% has no schooling.

What the figures mean is that, many people in the country are most likely to be in non-formal employment or may be unemployed or even employed without the necessary skills needed for being efficient. If we look into the target group for which RPL was meant, most of the people that were previously excluded from participation in higher education due to political and other reasons, through RPL would have a real and personal 'entry permit' to a world that seemed exclusive and elitist. It was argued by one of the participants during the JET conference on challenges of RPL implementation in higher education that 'using RPL, the 70% of workers could achieve a Level 1

qualification on the NQF' (JET 2000:6). The possibility of bringing the following groups of people (Challis 1993:88) into the higher education system renders the process 'a must' in all institutions:

(a) Unwaged women who spent time bringing up children, managing the home or caring for others; or who were recognised and placed in a vocational context, for example, administration, management, caring or other similar occupations;

(b) Minority ethnic groups who can build on skills gained within another cultural context to progress within higher education;

(c) Unemployed or redundant people who can reassess the skills acquired in work, to change careers or regain confidence and present themselves in a positive light.

(d) People with disabilities who can demonstrate skills and abilities needed to progress in higher education and training.

Research over the past 20 years has provided significant evidence of the benefits of RPL to both individuals and organisations (Simosko & Cook 1996:5). The assessment process enables individuals to build on their experiences and not to have to relearn what they already know and can do; shortens the time required to complete formal qualifications; focuses on their own development and training needs; enhances their self-confidence as learners; recognises the value of their accomplishments; and often saves time and money in reaching new goals. RPL appears to serve as a powerful motivator for individuals to seek new learning opportunities and complete recognised qualifications. Evans (1987:4) sums it in this way: "RPL offers a way of converting previous failures into success stories, by searching for what has been learned from previous experiences, whatever they were". It has a positive influence on people's learning, as it ties education with learning from life *(ibid.)*.

In a study done by Osman (2003) on three mature students who managed to complete the portfolio development course and were subsequently admitted to a postgraduate qualification in adult education, she found that RPL assisted to nurture their self-reflective and narrative skills, shaping their academic and professional goals and opening up paths which enabled them to learn further.

The portrayed situation is subject to the proper implementation of the RPL programme that includes candidate's careful preparation, done with the assistance of a trained counsellor, and learner assessments, carried out by experts using suitable assessment methods. In this way, institutions can maintain their role of assessors and guarantee the reliability and validity of assessments. Many publications that exist bear testimony to the fact that prior experiential learning can be successfully assessed (Simosko and Associates 1988; Sansregret 1985 (a); Sansregret 1985 (b); Sansregret 1984; New Zealand Qualifications Authority 1993; Fiddler, Marienau & Whitaker 2006; Corradi, Evans & Valk 2006; Colvin 2006; Lamdin 1992; Simosko 1991; Whitaker 1989; Wolfson 1996; Taylor 1996; White 1995; Snyman 2004).

1.7.5 The higher education sector

The higher education sector in South Africa has experienced a number of changes in recent years. One of the main issues is what is being done to ensure that mature learners participate in higher education. According to Fresen (2005:18), higher education is no longer the preserve of small numbers of students, as it was in past centuries: "Society today demonstrates an increased interest in and demand for higher education qualifications, which leads to ever-increasing numbers of students" (*ibid*.). Further, this phenomenon of lifelong learning is attracting a wider variety of potential and continuing students into higher education (Collis & Moonen 2001 in Fresen 2005:15).

Although adult learners, in particular, can increase diversity of the student body and bring with them rich experiences that can contribute significantly to the intellectual and social life of higher education institutions (JET 2000:7), the question here is about the readiness of the higher education sector to meet these societal demands. RPL is an integral part of a wide range of developments in post secondary education and training. This is a key element for any institution driven by a mission statement underpinned by a desire to achieve equality of opportunity, as well as one driven by the pressures of market forces (Challis 1993:88). In considering introducing RPL in an institution, there must be an understanding that the institution is going to deal with groups of people who previously faced barriers in entering the realm of higher education. As indicated in section 1.3 above, these are non-traditional groups:

unwaged women; minority ethnic groups; low-paid and part-time workers; unemployed and redundant people; and people with disabilities.

The introduction of RPL met with a lot of criticism from higher education academics (Breier 2002; Kistan 2002). Osman and Castle (2004:132) gave various concerns raised by Faculty academics towards the provisioning of RPL. **Firstly,** many institutions of higher learning have established their reputations by educating a handpicked group of matriculated school leavers. Academic staff saw the prospect of admitting large numbers of under-qualified adult students with work-related experience, as a threat to the institution's reputation, or an erosion of academic standards, assumed to be high. Traditionally, academic departments, school and faculties developed admissions criteria that they consider appropriate to their particular disciplines or subject areas. They have been able to screen out students who hold unconventional qualifications. Professional bodies also set and defend admission criteria, often in partnership with academic institutions and departments. Both groups resent the erosion of their power to play a gate-keeping role with respect to admissions and certification *(ibid.).*

Secondly, RPL provisioning becomes easy when curricula are outcomes or competency based, flexible, modular, credit bearing and contain elective components. Many academic staff members have difficulty giving credence to curricula, which, depart from the content-based curricula traditionally used in higher education institutions *(ibid).* **Thirdly,** RPL rests on the assumption that some equivalency between experiential learning and academic learning is possible. However, many academic staff members consider experiential learning inappropriate or irrelevant to their particular disciplines or subject areas. The fact that the assessment of prior learning claims, especially those assembled in a portfolio of learning, is unwieldy and time-consuming for the assessor and the candidate alike, compounds debates on the equivalency. The assessment and validation of experiential learning is also isolated from mainstream assessment procedures. It demands special expertise and experience, which few academic staff and administrators have developed. Gawe (1999:27) states that, "Unless academics and employers work together and agree on the RPL assessment criteria to be used to judge competence and the routes, by which these

competencies are achieved, the assessment process may create more frustrations than solutions".

1.8   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Yin (1989:22) argues that good case studies are very difficult to do, due to the intricacies and the rigour involved. I have identified the following common limitations of the case study:

- I will be the main instrument for the collection and analysis of data. This creates the possibility of researcher bias in the research findings. Researcher bias relates to issues such as ethics, reliability, and lack of rigour and validity concerns. To address this, a variety of strategies, such as using multiple sources of data collection to establish chains of evidence through which triangulation of data could be obtained, taking the data and interpretations back to the interviewees in order to confirm the credibility of the information and the narrative account was employed.

- Case studies provide very little basis for making scientific generalisations and can therefore not be used to make broad generalisations. According to Yin (1994:10), the findings of this study may be generalised to 'theoretical propositions' but not to all higher education institutions, even to the other eight faculties of the University of Pretoria. In line with the research focus of this study, the Faculty of Education is the site of investigation since there is some form of RPL implementation over the last five years.

- In addition, research studies involving qualitative approaches usually result into huge volumes of data that need to be managed and kept safely (having a research database). The loss or omission of information could result in a lack of continuity or in incoherence in the reporting of the results. It was therefore important to create a logical case study database for each set of data collected. The created database is both electronically and manually and was stored in various places for safety purposes.

- I could only use a very small sample for administration of the student questionnaire, as the respondents identified were the only ones who participated

in the RPL assessment process, who could give constructive feedback based on their experiences in the process. Small samples yield low reliability scores generally, which has an impact on the interpretation of the results (Gay & Airasian 2003:135-153). Most authors caution against the use of standardised instruments, which was the case in this study, as they may have inherent flaws, structurally.

1.8.1   Basic assumptions

In order to clarify circumstances related to the collection of data, below is a description of a major assumption and its implication for this study.

- As an external researcher, I did not have sufficient knowledge on organisational and political issues prevalent in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria in relation to RPL provisioning at the beginning of the research.

1.9   OVERVIEW OF THE THESIS

The following section provides a description of the structure and content of this Thesis.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction and Overview

In this chapter, I have given an outline (synopsis) of the entire Thesis. There is an explanation of the rationale for undertaking the study and the general and specific aims of the research. I have introduced the reader to the 'RPL language' used throughout this Thesis. I have explained the measures taken to establish validity and reliability in the research process, with special reference to the limitations of the study in terms of how I dealt with them. The chapter concludes by giving a schematic representation of the research programme.

CHAPTER 2: Quality Assurance in RPL provisioning: Exploring International Best Practices

In this chapter, I will present a critical description of the phenomenon RPL and quality assurance practices from global perspectives. I will also identify best quality assurance

practices in RPL provisioning for benchmarking purposes from various countries that have implemented RPL using the comparative analysis strategy.

CHAPTER 3: The design of the RPL system: inputs, process, and outputs

In this chapter, I will describe the research and literature available on the design of the RPL programme, in relation to inputs, process and expected outputs. The chapter offers insights on what any other institution needs to do to design a quality RPL system and describes the conceptual framework for the study in details.

CHAPTER 4: Research design and methodology

In this chapter, I will describe the research design and methodology chosen to address the three critical research questions in the study. The outcome of this research is to present a comprehensive case study report of the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria on the state of its quality assurance measures in RPL provisioning.

CHAPTER 5: Findings: Quality of the inputs used to design the RPL system

This chapter presents research results (analysis and interpretation) as they relate to the first research problem, i.e. how the RPL system was conceptualised and designed.

CHAPTER 6: Findings: Quality in the RPL assessment process

In this chapter, is a presentation of the research results as they relate to the second research question, i.e. quality in the RPL assessment process.

CHAPTER 7: Findings: Quality of the output of the RPL system

In this chapter, is a presentation of the research results as they relate to the third research question, i.e. quality of the output of the RPL system.

CHAPTER 8: Implications and Recommendations

I will do a final and overall analysis (synthesis) of the research findings, present implications, commendations, and recommendations.

Figure 1.3 presents a graphic overview of the structure of the Thesis.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

↕

CHAPTER 2

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RPL PROVISIONING

Exploring International Best Practices

↕

CHAPTER 3

THE DESIGN OF THE RPL SYSTEM (inputs, process, and output)

↕

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

CHAPTER 5	**CHAPTER 6**	**CHAPTER 7**
FINDINGS	FINDINGS	FINDINGS
Research Question 1	Research Question 2	Research Question 3

↕

CHAPTER 8

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Figure 1.3: Diagrammatic representation of the overview of this Thesis

1.10 SUMMARY

RPL implementation in South African higher education institutions is a new concept introduced formally in 2002 through the release of a national policy, followed by criteria, and guidelines for implementation in 2004. The move by the state to implement RPL, backed by the labour movement sparked a lot criticism from higher education academics. Firstly concerns were raised about the novelty (uniqueness) of learning acquired outside university structures, that is whether this form of learning should be accepted for the purpose of academic advancement, or not. Secondly, it was about the assessment thereof, that is, using equivalence and matching of this form of learning to the requirements for entry into higher education programmes and qualifications, doubted by many.

In addition, directives for RPL implementation took place at the time when major other changes were taking place in the higher education sector, following its restructuring and attempts to bring about transformation as envisaged in the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE). It was at this stage where higher education academics were debating issues around quality and quality assurance in higher education, following the formation of a new body to promote quality in the sector, i.e. the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC). To demonstrate that 'quality was happening', institutions had to establish proper quality assurance mechanisms for the academic product they offer and related services they render to their clientele. In the quest for continuous improvement of quality in RPL provisioning, monitoring and evaluation (internally and externally) of the RPL practice became imperative. There are well-developed mechanisms for quality assurance in RPL provisioning, from best practices internationally, used in this study for benchmarking purposes. The argument is that having documented policies and procedures is not an indication of applicability of such at a practical level, a subject of investigation in this study. The Thesis will conclude with recommendations to either continue or discontinue the RPL programme or present strategies for improving the current RPL practice in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria.

CHAPTER 2

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RPL
PROVISIONING: EXPLORING
INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

2.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter offers a synthesis of what others have written already on quality assurance practices in RPL provisioning, or not written, or wrote in a way that is conceptually or methodologically inadequate or contextually inappropriate (Vithal & Jansen 1997:14-15). The purpose is to show how this particular research would address the 'gap', silence or weaknesses in the existing knowledge base. This critical analysis of information in the public domain provided the framework for establishing the importance of the study and criteria for evaluating the RPL practice in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria against practices in other local institutions and countries (Creswell 2003:30). Valuable lessons learnt from best practices in offering a quality assured RPL service (Flint, Zakos & Frey 1999:1), as applied to the current practice in this Faculty helped to identify areas of weakness and shape recommendations made regarding the improvement of the Faculty's quality assurance practice in RPL provisioning.

There are three knowledge domains related to the context of the study, i.e. the concept RPL, quality assurance practices in RPL provisioning, nationally and internationally and the nature of the higher education sector. The review of literature centred on: (1) the RPL phenomenon: approach to implementation, purpose, and form (section 2.4); (2) RPL and quality assurance in higher education (HE): international best practices (section 2.5); and (3) RPL and quality assurance practices in South African higher education institutions (HEIs) (section 2.6). To address the three specific research questions in this study, I conducted an investigation into what research exists or the knowledge base on designing a quality assured RPL system, in terms of the quality of the **inputs**; the quality of the **process** for prior learning assessment and the quality of the **output** of this system. The central theme was to identify quality indicators, i.e.

standards (criteria) for evaluating and judging quality, as indicated in the national and international literature, in these three main areas. A comparative analysis of the five countries chosen for benchmarking the Faculty's quality assurance practice in RPL provisioning, centred on the strengths, weaknesses and lessons learnt on each countries model of quality assurance in RPL provisioning.

Table 2.1: *A plan for the literature review*

The RPL phenomenon: approach, purpose and form	
RPL and QA in Higher Education: International Best Practices	
RPL and QA in South African HEIs	
The design of the RPL system: inputs	RQ: 1
The process and procedures for RPL assessment	RQ: 2
The output of the RPL system	RQ: 3
Conceptual framework	

The structure of the chapters will be as follows: Chapter 2 deals with reflections on the phenomenon RPL, RPL and Quality Assurance Practices in other countries and in South African Higher Education Institutions. Chapter 3 will deal with the research and literature that exists on how to design a quality assured RPL programme, i.e. in relation to the inputs, procedures and processes that need to be in place for RPL assessments, and the nature of the output of the system that can bring about client satisfaction with the RPL programme. In this chapter will also be a detailed discussion of the conceptual framework for the study.

2.2   LITERATURE SEARCH

An extensive literature search (desktop research) was undertaken, which resulted into reference to a variety of reliable and up-to-date material. The sources include books, paper-based and electronic journals. Relevant databases (UPExplore, ERIC, SABINET: ISAP, SA EPublications and SACat) were consulted. I also visited the websites of international universities and various quality assurance agencies for their conference proceedings on quality assurance in higher education. Specifically, a visit to the website of the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the United States of America, the Canadian Information Centre for International

Credentials (CICIC) and the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA) in Canada, and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in Australia, and several smaller sites in the United Kingdom, was for purposes of keeping abreast with developments in RPL implementation in these countries. As a matter of preference, accredited (peer reviewed) journals were sought after. I have also used both primary and secondary sources of information. The bibliographies of reference materials provided a rich source of further material to be reviewed.

I used the search phrase "Recognition of Prior Learning and Quality Assurance in Higher Education" to search the databases of current and completed research in South Africa (SABINET and NEXUS). Although there are a lot of publications on RPL in Higher Education and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Osman 2004a; Snyman 2004; Hendricks & Volbrecht 2001; Kilfoil 2003; Underwood 2003; Moore & van Rooyen 2002; Osman & Castle 2002; Van Rooy 2002; Kistan 2002; Geyser 2001; Van Rooyen 2001; Osman & Castle 2001; Koch, Foxcroft & Watson 2001; Breier 2001), none of these sources attempted to show the relationship between quality assurance practices at a practical level, i.e. providing evaluation reports of the RPL practice at institutions of higher learning.

I subsequently found the following publications in which certain aspects of the research conducted relate to the focus of this study:

1. A completed MEd Dissertation done by Ronel Heyns in 2004, which identified some of the issues central to this study that is 'elements of a credible RPL system'. I used and incorporated these elements when developing quality indicators regarding the inputs used in designing the RPL system, which were complementary to the ones suggested by SAQA (2004). These three elements identified as crucial in establishing a quality RPL system are (1) having a quality assurance framework, (2) creating an enabling environment for RPL provisioning, and (3) reviewing policies and regulations that govern access (Heyns 2004:117-182).

2. An article written by Ruksana Osman (2004:1) on: "What matters in RPL? Learning from Experience in Higher Education", identified several institutional variables that need to be taken into account if institutions wish to implement RPL

properly (establishing a quality assured RPL system). Van Rooy (2002:1-8) in his article on: "RPL: from principle to practice" articulated similar issues related to RPL implementation at an institutional level, as in the above article. The variables cited addressed the same concerns articulated by SAQA (2004) for establishing systems for quality assurance in RPL provisioning. She maintains that Higher Education Institutions need to: address policy framework and vision matters; have clear aims for implementing RPL; show evidence of support from senior management; address staff development issues; attend to RPL advocacy matters; and restructure their curricula to allow for flexible entry and exit points.

3. An article written by Litha Beekman (2001) on "RPL: an educational correction", based on a practical engagement with issues of RPL provisioning at the University of South Africa (UNISA), highlighted and addressed fundamental issues of interest in this study ranging from: What is RPL? Do higher education institutions have a choice in implementing RPL? Who should be eligible for RPL? What quality assurance measures for the assessment process should be in place? How should the RPL system function within an institution? Which methods of RPL assessment are suitable? What is the position on the award of a degree through RPL? How much should the RPL assessment cost? Which process of RPL assessment is most suitable?

4. The research done (MPhil) by Mohammed Hendricks on the provisioning of RPL at the University of the Western Cape (UWC) in 2001 addressed pertinent issues related to RPL implementation in higher education. The results of the study demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that **"RPL works",** that RPL can be a powerful strategy for enhancing access into higher education learning, especially in instances where an institution might be experiencing shortages in student numbers. The issue of admitting RPL students into university-level learning is a highly contentious one, however, the research results in this study indicate that prior learning can be successfully assessed, and given an opportunity, RPL learners can progress well academically in a higher education environment.

5. The Widening Participation (Access) Project of the Free State Higher Education and Further Education and Trust (FSHEFET) (Snyman 2004:39) is the first to regard regional collaborations as a way of implementing RPL. The assertion is that if implemented correctly, RPL at a regional level could be a powerful means

for higher education institutions to meet the targets of student access more effectively, while maximising the use of scarce resources.

2.2.1 Literature study and review

An extensive literature study and review conducted on RPL implementation globally, involved the following activities:

a) A careful selection of published research work and articles globally on RPL that speak to issues (tackle issues; talk to issues) related to the purpose of this research, namely, quality assurance measures in the provisioning of RPL in higher education.

b) A systematic identification, location and analysis of documents and communiqués containing information related to the main research problem and the specific research questions, from the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria, the Quality Assurance Unit of this institution and the ETQA for the Higher Education Band, i.e. the Council on Higher Education (CHE)/Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC).

c) A study of RPL implementation in other countries – identification of best practices in setting standards for quality management of the provisioning of RPL, with special reference to countries such as the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada, France, and The Netherlands.

d) A review of RPL implementation in South Africa – national requirements for quality assurance of the provisioning of RPL, from SAQA and the criteria for institutional audits from CHE/HEQC on RPL provisioning, so as to determine implications for the higher education sector. Not much is known about the extent of RPL implementation in the higher education sector, either within or across institutions. The review of literature on RPL implementation in higher education was therefore limited to a few institutions involving the University of the Witwatersrand (WITS), the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the University of the Free State.

A synthesis of all these elements, characteristics, variables, and contextual issues cited by various authors resulted into the development of the indicators of a quality assured system of RPL provisioning, in conjunction with other various views and perspectives from national documentation and international trends.

2.3 RPL APPROACHES, PURPOSE AND FORM

2.3.1 Approaches to RPL provisioning

There are different approaches to RPL provisioning, broadly categorised into two, i.e. RPL adapted to the system or RPL changing the status quo (Day 2002:54-71; Butterworth & Mckelvey 1997:153-175; Osman & Castle 2002:64-67; Harris 1999a; Evans 2002:96 – 97). Below is a detailed explanation of each method:

The **developmental approach** is an RPL provisioning in which the RPL training programme is an integral part of the assessment and accreditation processes of an institution. This type of RPL programme offers mentored skills identification, skills documentation and the preparation of evidence (usually a portfolio), which occurs under supervision (Butterworth & McKelvey 1997:157). Assessment methods used in this approach include interviews, reflective writing tasks, portfolio of learning and portfolio development courses or modules (PDCs). RPL candidates are encouraged by their instructors (trainers, mentors, or coaches) to reflect on their experiences and to extract and articulate learning from it by way of writing an autobiographical life learning narrative. The presentation of this learning should be in a format that relates closely (is complementary) to the academic learning in the programme for which access to, or credit in, is sought.

This approach demonstrates quality as transformation, in terms of enhancement and empowerment of RPL learners or the development of new knowledge and skills in prior learning assessment. Mosia (2002:87) says, "The extent and intensity of any training programme that includes learner-participation should bring about a significant change or transformation to the individual who initially entered the programme with little knowledge or none". The expectation is that since this style of assessing prior

learning is interactive and offers a high level of learner participation, candidates would acquire new insights and skills in prior learning assessment.

Butterworth and McKelvey (1997:153-175) and Day (2002:60-71) describe the **credit exchange approach** as one, which enables students to obtain credit at a receiving institution for formal courses (modules) completed at a previous institution. The advantage of this approach is that it does not require candidates to reflect on their prior learning. Candidates simply provide evidence of having achieved the knowledge and skills prescribed for the course, module or programme for which credit is sought (Osman & Castle 2004:128). This approach represents a systematic way to the portability of prior learning credits by evaluating previously earned certificates against the requirements of the academic and training programmes of the receiving institution or standards of practice set by the professional body. The portfolio of evidence demonstrating continuing competence to practice can or not be submitted, for university-level credits, but just to display evidence of lifelong learning as well as academic ability in a specified profession.

It is Day's contention (2002:63) that within this approach, the distinction between the credit exchange and the developmental approaches towards implementing RPL is fading. He says the principles of both approaches ought to be relevant for meeting the needs of the learner (internal customer requirements) and the university's demand for accreditation (external customer's requirements). In using this methodology, institutions need to be consistent in the manner in which they render this service (award credits). Osman and Castle (2002:64) caution that if this process alone is followed, "the implementation process runs the risk of being reductionist and simplistic, possibly coercive and potentially confrontational".

The greatest challenge with this approach in the higher education sector is that, for it to be successful there should be accreditation agreements between institutions, which were non-existent at the time of this study. RPL implementers when using this approach should bear in mind the notion of quality as 'value for money'. Candidates should receive quality RPL services (profiling, advising, actual assessment and communication) at the lowest possible costs. The services rendered should meet

customer requirements, i.e. client satisfaction, more so if it can offer the candidate more than what they expected.

The **transformational approach,** what Harris (1999a:133) calls 'radical RPL', as it recognises informal and experiential learning on their own terms (Osman & Castle in Gravett & Geyser 2004:130), and is closely linked with societal transformation and redress. This approach "holds that what is learnt experientially is not a disembedded skill that can easily be matched with the contents of an academic programme" *(ibid.).* The methodology centres on the learners in that it views learning as a collective process, which is socially constructed. The methods used are various, and include focus group discussions, collages, and other forms of self-expression such as music and dance. The transformational model of RPL has been criticised by Usher, Bryant and Johnston in Gravett and Geyser (2004:130), who argue that the model does not have the capacity to challenge the dominant and hegemonic discourses of the academy.

Smith (2003) introduced another approach, which she referred to as the **summative approach** in which the assessing institution allows its candidates to prepare and submit evidence independently in their own time. Its responsibility is to provide guidelines on the preparation of the portfolio and to offer advice to candidates throughout the preparation of the portfolio, but not present a portfolio development programme as an integral part of the assessment and accreditation processes. She says the use of this approach in the provisioning of RPL does not end with the assessment of the candidate's evidence, but should ideally continue offering candidate support. The assessing institution should help the candidate with the transition from informal, and non-formal learning to formal learning by recommending top-up training where required, such as learner support, academic bridging modules or fast-tracking certain modules or courses. The difference between Smith's approach and the one advocated for by Osman (2003), i.e. the **technical approach,** is that the latter one "values prior learning only to the extent that it matches the skills and knowledge of a curriculum in which access or credit is sought, but student development is not fore grounded".

Each of these approaches has its specific role to play in the provisioning of RPL. The choice of one or a combination of approaches used by the assessing/awarding

institution should accommodate the unique situation of individual RPL candidates. Smith (2003) maintains that it is the responsibility of the assessing institution to initiate target group and market analyses, and then decide on the most suitable approach to include in its implementation strategy.

2.3.2 What is the purpose for RPL?

RPL as a tool for **social justice** will have value for the learners, institutions, workplaces and the country at large. Many adults and out-of-school youths may have been part of non-formal and informal training programmes and acquired a great deal of knowledge and experience in the process. Such expertise (capabilities) if not recognised or certificated often leads to exclusion from certain jobs, promotion on the job, and from further education and training opportunities, for all of which some kind of 'certificate' is usually needed. These skills need to be certified in order to provide access into the labour market, therefore through RPL, the education system could assist in: eliminating unnecessary duplication of learning; encouraging self-assessment; enabling RPL learners to make judgments concerning their own knowledge and skills; reducing the time learners need to spend in training and help to build learner confidence (Challis 1993:14-15).

RPL also has benefits for the employer in that existing worker competence can be easily measured against required standards (employable skill standards). There could be a reduction in costs involved in the identification of further training needs. A better-qualified workforce increases competitiveness and this strategy could aid effective recruitment of workers (Coetzee 2002:155).

A case study done by Korpel (1998: 67-68) with tellers in a financial institution indicated that those who attended the RPL Training Course to determine their prior knowledge and did well in the post assessment were able to deliver quality teller work. What this means is that if assessment of worker's prior learning is in the field they are working in, placement within the organisation in terms of their competencies where they could function effectively could be easy. Opportunities for promotion, which contribute significantly towards improvement of people's socio-economic status avail themselves easily under these circumstances.

At country level, Harris and Saddington (1995:7) state that in terms of the current political, economic and social context in the country, RPL has the capacity to "contribute to redress and equity by opening up more ways for people to attain qualified status (qualifications); enable more people to reach higher levels of qualification and expertise by beginning with an acknowledgement of existing skills and knowledge; contribute to enhancing international economic competitiveness by building on often invisible and unacknowledged workplace skills; and offer the first step in attaining the goal of developing a multi-skilled and flexible workforce by acting as an auditing tool to qualify existing competence".

If we consider the various groups of people who have to benefit from the RPL system, we cannot use a one-size-fit-all approach, for example, access only. The service needs to meet the needs of the individual clients. It follows from these arguments that depending on the context for implementing RPL, any of the following purposes for RPL as indicated by SAQA (2002) can be utilised.

Table 2.2: *A description of the purposes of RPL*

Term	Description
Access	To provide ease of entry to appropriate level of education and training for all prospective learners in a manner which facilitates progression
Placement	To determine the appropriate level for learners wanting to enter education and training through a diagnostic assessment
Advanced status	To grant access to a level of a qualification for which a candidate has registered
Advanced standing	To award credit towards a qualification for which a candidate has registered
Credit	To award formal, transferable credits to the learning that meets the requirements of the part or full qualification
Certification	To certify credits attained for the purposes of a qualification

2.3.3 RPL and experiential learning

Morris Keeton insists that, "all learning is experiential" (Hoffmann 2006a:4). Experiential learning is about: acting and observing; understanding the effects of the action in a specific instance and understanding the general principle and applying it in new circumstances (Whitaker 1989:3). Kelly (2003:2-3) emphasised the value of learning by experience, where he describes experiential learning as "activities in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied". He says, "It is

not about observing the phenomenon only, but also doing something with it, such as testing the action and interaction to learn more about it, or applying the theory to achieve some desired results". Harris (2000:1) emphasises that such learning ought to be given currency within formal education and training frameworks.

David Kolb developed the process that explains how people learn from a particular activity (experience), illustrated in figure 2.2 below. Kolb (1984a:1) sees reflection as the source of learning and development. He defines learning as the process "whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping experience and transforming it". According to Kolb's argument, experience on its own does not promote learning, but reflection on that experience results into learning, hence the term 'experiential learning'.

The four elements of learning Kolb presents are: *concrete experience*, *reflective observation*, *abstract conceptualisation* and *active experimentation* (Kolb 1984b:40-43; Kolb 1999:8). He uses them to describe how this 'reflective learning' takes place, which in principle is what is needed from potential RPL candidates to demonstrate what they have learnt during the assessment process. In the learning process, Kolb (1984a) describes four types of learners: accommodators (action-oriented and intuitive problem-solvers), divergers (people-oriented and ideas driven), assimilators (observers, ideas driven, inductive thinkers and models) and convergers (uses logical analysis and deductive reasoning). Kolb's concept of learning styles has provided strong support for experiential learners who often prefer to begin the learning process by doing.

The following diagram depicts Kolb's model of experiential learning:

Concrete experience

Abstract conceptualisation
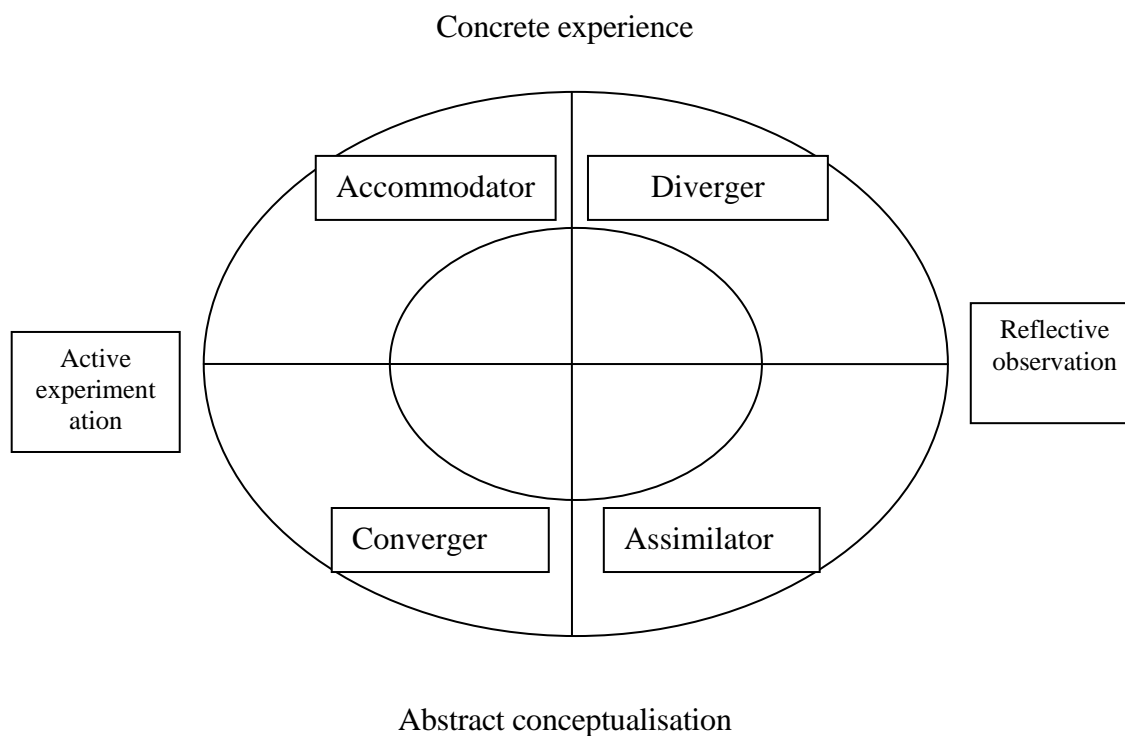
Figure 2.1: Kolb's model of experiential learning

According to Colvin (2006:89-91), by targeting each quadrant, RPL learners can more effectively describe their learning around the cycle:

- Concrete experience involves a description of one's experience, such as, what did you do and what actions did you take? The candidate's life learning narrative should reflect common verbs such as worked, created, prepared, implemented, conducted and produced.

- Reflective observation involves what one noticed and observed about the experience. The candidate's life learning narrative should exhibit common verbs such as observed, watched, noticed, saw, thought and discovered.

- Abstract conceptualisation is about rules, theories and concepts applicable in a particular situation. The candidate's life learning narrative should display common verbs such as concluded, theorised, found, realised, deducted and learned.

- Active experimentation is about how one applied his/her learning in new situations. The candidate's life learning narrative should show the use of common verbs such as used, updated, implemented and changed.

Smith (2003:47-48) contends that the *concrete experience* coupled with *active experimentation* especially where they occur in the workplace, in community involvement or in life experience, can be classified as *informal or non-formal learning*. It is generally accepted that the RPL candidate must employ some form of *reflective observation* in order to be able to identify, formulate and document his/her prior learning *(abstract conceptualisation)* in ways that are acceptable to higher education academic standards. The challenge that remains after determining this form of learning is to assess and accredit the candidate's prior learning against learning outcomes and express it in terms of formal education credits. Kolb (b) (1984:3) argues that there is a link between experience and assessment for college or university credit: "people do learn from their experience, and the results of that learning can be reliably assessed and certified for college or university credit". However, he contends that this area is not free of problems (challenges).

The final step in the RPL candidate's integration into higher education is making the transition between informal and non-formal learning on the one hand, and formal learning on the other. In other words, it is important that the RPL candidate be able to arrive at *abstract conceptualisation*, which is the requirement of formal higher education-level learning. Luckett (1999) and Osman and Castle (2002) established that many non-traditional learners were unable to make this transition of their own accord, due to a number of barriers. Should this be the case, the implication is that the RPL process cannot end once assessment has been carried out, but that the institution should put learner support systems for RPL candidates. In addition, the situation calls for the appointment of the RPL coach (trainer or mentor) to facilitate the correct articulation of the needed learning acquired from other learning situations.

2.4   RPL AND QUALITY ASSURANCE: EXPLORING INTERNATIONAL BEST PRACTICES

Internationally, the countries in which there is a form of RPL implementation are the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Canada and The Netherlands. I have judged them as being exemplary, since they have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that **'quality provisioning of RPL'** exists. All these countries have developed and documented models and processes for quality

assuring the RPL implementation process, with the USA having played a major role in developing standards for RPL quality assurance, described in details in section 2.5.1.3. The sources of **Best Practice Candidates** were comments from RPL experts; online secondary literature databases; site visits; the Internet; country-specific reports; professional organisation meetings; and conference proceedings.

I had an opportunity of attending a workshop and conference hosted by CAEL in 2006, on Learn, Engage and Change: Making a Difference in Lifelong Learning, on the 7-11 November 2006, at Boston, Massachusetts, which afforded me an opportunity of making informed decisions about the inclusion of the USA as a best candidate in quality provisioning of RPL. Many other countries including South Africa have adapted the standards used in this country for quality assurance purposes. In this section is a description of how each country quality assures its RPL assessment process.

I also entered into an intense dialogue with key figures in Australia who participated in a project commissioned by the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB) regarding the status of RPL provisioning in that country. This is with special reference to Leesa Wheelahan, the Principal Researcher, and Diane Newton, the Research Associate. Much of the information below comes from the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) sent on 04 September 2006, and the report documenting the status of RPL provisioning in this country too.

Standards of excellence (criteria for evaluation) for comparing RPL practices in each country included how they define RPL; why they are offering the RPL service; historical and current developments in RPL provisioning; the quality assurance model for RPL provisioning and how they assess candidates for their prior learning. The common thread was to identify strengths and weaknesses in each criterion and show what South African Higher Education Institutions can learn from each country's RPL practice. I utilised the American Productivity and Quality Centre (APQC) framework for developing benchmarks, for the RPL practice, that was fully integrated with the entire research process (planning stage, general data collection phase, data analysis, and adaptation of the best practices learnt) (Zucker, Johnston & Flint 1999:5-7).

2.4.1 PLA IMPLEMENTATION IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

2.4.1.1 PLA: definition and purpose

In the USA, the term College-Level Learning (CLL) is used to imply the necessary prior learning required for admission into a college or university. On the other hand, the term Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) is used to mean the process candidates are taken through to demonstrate the prior learning acquired. A multilevel approach to viewing RPL is used (Hoffmann 2006b:8), as indicated in Chapter 1, section 1.7.1. According to this approach, there are four groups of people, who play a role in defining RPL, i.e. policy makers; individual institutions and organisations; Faculty assessors; and RPL candidates. At policymaking level, the concept is defined in broad and generic terms, with set parameters. Clarity needs to be provided on what broad initiatives are being met by allowing this credit. The definition used at institutional level should be operational. It is at this level where certain questions need to be answered, such as, "How can CLL be demonstrated as equivalent to courses?" What are the criteria that can assure academic quality? Moreover, how does CLL fit into the curriculum?

At Faculty level, practical issues regarding the concept need to be accounted for, i.e. application and relevance of the concept to Faculty needs. The questions that need answers are: Is there CLL in the Life Learning Narrative? Does the student provide adequate documentation to support the learning claimed? Does the portfolio articulate theoretical understanding and applied learning? Is the learning implied or explicit? The bottom line perspective involves RPL candidates themselves and at this level, questions that need to be addressed are: How do I show the assessor that I have the necessary prior learning? Do I have enough knowledge for a course? Moreover, what level is my prior learning?

In the USA, RPL is a term that describes both sponsored and un-sponsored experiential learning. The difference between the two types of experiential learning is that sponsored experiential learning, such as co-operative education, hands-on training, service learning and internships, is usually a mix of teacher directed/supervised and self-directed events, whereas un-sponsored experiential

learning is devoid of external direction. It is often unplanned and cumulative, and its structure is markedly different from a pre-designed and delivered curriculum (Fiddler, Marienau & Whitaker (2006:6-7). The primary implication of differentiating types of experiential learning for prior learning assessment is that it is the outcomes of learning that are the raison d´etre for assessment, not the inputs *(ibid.)*.

Many misunderstandings might arise if there is no clear distinction between what is meant by RPL, and what it is not. In instances where this misrepresentation is allowed, the RPL system can easily be misused and abused by assessing and or awarding institutions and beneficiaries alike. Challis (1993:13-14) makes it succinctly clear that RPL is not: "a means of giving 'credit for living', it is 'credit for learning'; a quick and easy route for the learner to some how get something for nothing, the process is arduous, both emotionally and physically; a cheap process, either for learners or for providers of the service". The users of the service need to pay for the services rendered. He also says, "RPL is not the most appropriate route for every learner". That is why it would be essential to identify the candidate's learning needs so that appropriate guidance may be given, in the event where the original application is not viable for RPL purposes.

The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) provided a list of criteria for College-Level Learning (Hoffmann 2006b:10-12). The Council says, in order for CLL to be credit worthy, a student's learning must be "measurable; at the level of achievement defined by college Faculty as equivalent or consistent with the learning of other students engaged in college studies; and applicable outside the specific job or context in which it was learned". "It must also have a knowledge base; be reasonably current; have a conceptual or theoretical as well as a practical understanding; show some relationship to one's degree goals and/or life-long learning goals; and not repeat learning for which credit has already been awarded" *(ibid.)*.

There are various ways institutions define College-Level Learning and use student's prior learning in a college degree programme. An institution may "allow a student to target specific courses using course objectives and/or syllabi; take course challenge examinations that are institution specific; and create a holistic picture of the learning in an academic area rather than in a specific course framework". "They could also

examine competency-based learning as in ACE (Advanced Certificate in Education) credits and military training; create a degree based on RPL learning; utilise RPL credits earned through standardised testing; participate in oral interviews with Faculty assessors; and read textbooks and add their examples from their experiences to apply to theories" *(ibid.).*

The following are criteria for using college-level learning at Faculty and assessor level, developed by Theresa Hoffmann (2006b:11). She asserts that RPL candidates should: "be grounded in theory, concepts and principles; demonstrate expert level knowledge through how projects were described and the level of sophistication in understanding how things worked and the principles behind them; have the experience necessary to learn what is claimed; identify principles, best practices, concepts, patterns and knowledge that can be applied to new situations; cover material stated in the course objectives; provide models and assumptions that are analytical and critical rather than rote; present a wealth of background and real life scenarios in which theoretical understanding is embedded and permeates it with a sophisticated synthesis; have the quality of repeatability, meaning that because of the level of detail provided, someone else could do what the candidate/learner described; define a sequence from simple to complex; know what is relevant to the field; provide an analysis of problem-solving situations, strategies and results; identify and illustrate patterns and connections; show cause and effect; demonstrate an ability to see alternative uses for the principles learned; be able to place knowledge into a larger context and in another setting; use or approximate jargon of the field, stating ideas in other ways; and approximate or have comparable knowledge contained in traditional course descriptions or syllabi".

At the candidate level, this is where RPL candidates are expected to take advantage of the following to help them identify and articulate their learning from life experiences within the structure of a module or programme: "college catalogues; schedule of classes; syllabi; course objectives; RPL textbooks; RPL workbooks; student mentors; and samples narratives and guidance from their trainer/instructor/coach" *(ibid.).* In the literature, PLA refers to any knowledge building or skills attainment that occurs prior to enrolment or outside of enrolment at a post-secondary institution, assessed for awarding college or university credit (Zucker, Johnson & Flint 1999:3). In relation to the purpose

for prior learning assessment, PLA in this country is mainly for advanced standing rather than access to an institution.

2.4.1.2 PLA implementation: historical and current developments

According to Anderson and Fejes (2005:3) RPL emerged in higher education in the USA in 1974, under the leadership of Morris Keeton. The first type of RPL was regarded as a tool of social justice that made higher education more available to individuals from non-traditional student populations. An experimental research project, 'Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning Project' at the Educational Testing Services in Princeton, New Jersey, showed that it was possible to use different certificates to grant students admission to the university, and PLA has since become a common practice for most colleges and universities across this country. When CAEL was established, it had the following objectives (Nyatanga *et al* 1993:3): "development and dissemination of techniques for evaluating work and life experiences that can be given academic credit; creation and distribution of publications to help those involved with adult and experiential learning; and expanding research-based knowledge about adult learners and good practice in assessment for prior learning".

Currently, in the USA, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in Chicago is a leading advocate of RPL, with over 1700 affiliates (colleges and universities) that offered RPL by the mid 90s (Taylor 2000:3). As part of CAEL's initiatives, there is training and support given to its affiliates and interested parties on the basic 'nuts and bolts' of how to design and implement RPL at colleges and universities. The presentation is in the form of 1½-day workshops referred to as PLA 101. There is an online RPL certificate programme, to learn how to develop a professional assessment system for one's institution, or to strengthen the institution's existing RPL programme, and conferences where those who are involved in PLA programmes at their institutions come together to learn, engage and share experiences with others, so as to bring change to their institutional practices. CAEL in the USA had a profound influence on the development and shape of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) inside the country and elsewhere. The council comes across as a leader in

training adult learning practitioners and preparing institutions to provide quality prior learning assessment programmes.

2.4.1.3 PLA Provisioning: model of quality assurance

The USA has set trends to the rest of the world in terms of conducting prior learning assessments. For quality assurance purposes, there are standards, principles and procedures developed by CAEL, which have greatly informed and influenced PLA practices worldwide (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:38). Any authentic practice requires that there be an agreed code of practice in order to achieve a standard of excellence in the assessment. PLA provisioning is no different. Given the diversity of circumstances and levels of use it requires clear guides on what is to be done. A presentation of each standard (current ones) (Fiddler *et al* 2006:13-27) is given below accompanied by an explanation. They are divided into academic and administrative standards. Academic standards deal mainly with those standards used for the assessment process itself and administrative ones are for quality assurance of the process:

2.4.1.3.1   Quality Assurance: standards, principles and procedures for PLA

Academic standards

Standard 1: Credit or its equivalent should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience. RPL candidates should not be given an impression that they will be granted credits for 'time served' or just experience they have gathered elsewhere other than at formal institutions. In order to give credence to the entire system, credits are awarded for the actual learning that has taken place and not experience alone. Experience is an excellent potential source of learning (input), but experience alone is not an adequate yardstick for learning (Whitaker 1989:11). The assessment of learning should not be based on a simple calculation of inputs (hours or years spent in experience); instead, credit awards should be based on the learning outcomes for a particular programme or qualification (Fiddler *et al* 2006:45).

Standard 2: Prior learning assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public, i.e. listed

in an institution's catalogue. According to Colvin (2006:46-47) the learning must have been acquired after high school to be considered college level. It must be comparable to college-level courses, a distinction that should be made by academic experts. The student's knowledge and skills need to match the level of learning typically taught in a college course. This learning must be transferable to several contexts or settings that a student might encounter. When assigning credit, every college has the freedom to design an evaluation form, which an evaluator or team of evaluators can use to write comments and indicate if the learning is college level as well as determine the number and level of credits earned. The measure for awarding credits for prior learning is generally whether a student learned at a level of competence, which is usually considered a C minus (or 70 percent) or higher grade (Fiddler *et al* 2006:46).

Standard 3: Assessment is to be handled as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of the learning processes. There are two principles entrenched here (Fiddler *et al* 2006:18-19), i.e. "assessment should be a measure, not an audit of learning and how assessment is done is an outgrowth of beliefs and assumptions about learning". This means that assessment is more likely to be experienced as a part of learning if based on criteria that are clearly expressed and known to both the assessor and the learner, and presented in ways that are likely to be read or heard by the learner as constructive and useful for a future learning agenda, if one is desired. In addition, assessment of learning requires that multiple capabilities be represented and it relies on quality feedback. The model of learning, which the institution uses, determines largely how assessment will be done, and can affect how this standard will be met *(ibid.)*. For example, if a model of learning posits that much of what is learnt from experience remains tacit until prompted, the assessment should be constructed to provide relevant or stimulating prompts. This phase may require considerable care and patience to avoid pre-empting the demonstration of the learning outcomes.

Standard 4: The determination of credit awards and competence levels must be made by appropriate subject matter, academic or credentialing experts. Assessment is an academic expertise, a role that needs to be done by Faculty members (Colvin 2006:48-49). There are two kinds of expertise involved in determining creditworthy

learning. That is, content expertise: how much does the learner know, and how well does she/he know it? Moreover, academic or credentialing expertise: how much learning is required in each subject, at what level, and is it with or without the completion of additional learning? The central question to be asked in order to meet this standard is: who can or should assess? Even in instances where an external expert is involved in this type of assessment, the person should be a specialist in the area the candidate is being assessed on or is seeking credit in.

Standard 5: Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted. Experiential learning should be balanced by enough theoretical learning to make it useful for entry into any higher learning programmes. A common way of ascertaining this would be to test if candidates can transfer their knowledge and skills to a different context. According to Whitaker (1989:14), the assessment process is short-changed when it does not represent that balance. He further says the learning is not complete until the learner has some understanding of what both the theory and the practical experience mean.

Administrative standards

Standard 6: If awards are for credit, transcript entries should describe what learning is recognised and monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning. Meeting this standard is a simple administrative matter (task). However, it may require academic judgement in cases where the relationships of the subject matter are complex or where credited learning has not been adequately described or clearly labelled (Fiddler *et al* 2006:21-22). In essence, duplication and overlap of credits should be avoided.

Standard 7: Policies, procedures and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process. Failing to publicly declare in advance the rules, regulations and criteria used for RPL assessment is not acceptable. The principle of fairness and transparency must be adhered to. As a matter of principle, policies regarding prior learning assessment need to be published in the school's catalogue or on the website. Alternatively, anyone needing information on RPL should get the

necessary policy documentation from the RPL office, or prospective candidates could contact the registrar's office for such policies. Fiddler, Marieneau and Whitaker (2006:22) say: "truth in advertising" is a vital component of quality assurance.

Standard 8: Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded. The basis for any fees should be the assessment itself as well as associated administrative costs, not the tuition cost of the credit hours that are awarded. Additional fees may be required to transcript the credit or place the credit officially with the institution's registrar. However, paying the assessment fee is not a guarantee of credit. No one should promise credits and/or admission to programmes before assessment takes place, or even before checking the authenticity and currency of the candidate's claims. It is inconceivable to regard PLA as an intuitive judgement. It is a process based on objectivity and tangible evidence about the learning (Fiddler *et al* 2006:22-23; Colvin 2006:50).

Standard 9: All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions performed. In order to maintain the effectiveness of the entire set of standards rests on both the desire of assessors to assume knowledge-based responsibility for their efforts, and the intention of organisations they represent to provide sustained training along with assessment of the quality of the frontline assessor's work. It has often been noted that college and university professors are better prepared in content than in process (Fiddler *et al* 2006:23; Colvin 2006:50). The argument here is that even for those who have developed appropriate assessment expertise for classroom learning, it is essential that professional development be sought and provided in support of any experiential learning assessment they undertake.

Standard 10: Assessment programmes should be monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed, to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met, and in the state of the assessment arts. It has been noted that assessment practices in the area of RPL have been modified greatly over a number of years. Faculty assessors with hands-on-experience have identified what works and what doesn't, and they continue to do so. It is essential therefore, for any institution

involved in prior learning assessment to align their practices with new developments. Local review and evaluation can take various formal and informal forms, including internal self-study and assessment and involvement of outside advisory panels. Accrediting agencies and professional associations can collaborate with national organisations that offer assistance for monitoring programmes and assuring quality (Fiddler *et al* 2006:24).

2.4.1.4 The PLA process of assessment

A candidate seeking for admission into any of the many institutions in the USA that offer PLA goes through a particular process (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:8; Fiddler *et al* 2006:31):

Table 2.3: *The PLA process of assessment*

STEPS	DESCRIPTION	ACTIONS
Step 1	Identify	Identify college-level learning acquired through life experiences
Step 2	Articulate	Show how and what parts of that learning are related to the degree objectives
Step 3	Document	Verify in order to provide evidence of learning
Step 4	Measure	Determine the extent and character of learning acquired
Step 5	Evaluate	Decide whether the learning meets an acceptable standard and determine its credit equivalence
Step 6	Transcribe	Record the credit or recognition of learning

The steps followed for assessing sponsored experiential and un-sponsored experiential learning may not necessarily be the same, considering the differences between the two types of learning. In using this process, RPL assessors identify which standard(s) of assessment is suitable for each step. In this particular way, an inter-play between the steps of the assessment process and the standards for quality assurance is allowed to take place (Fiddler *et al* 2006:27). The essential aspect with these steps is that the assessment process becomes both dynamic and an important source of new learning and new insights about personal and professional goals. The recommendation in applying the model is to avoid a rigid and mechanistic approach to the process.

2.4.1.4.1 The PLA assessment models

There are two models developed by Theresa Hoffman (2006a:17-43) on behalf of CAEL for use by its affiliates, i.e. colleges and universities offering PLA, and they are: (1) The ABCs of college-level learning and (2) The Kolb's Learning Styles and Bloom's Taxonomy, or the K-B model. There are advantaged for using either of the models. With the ABCs model, the visual picture thereof depicts the overall contents of a portfolio. It gives students an idea of what they need to produce. The model also offers the student to reflect on their learning experiences, as part of demonstrating the necessary learning for award of credits. The model is used in conjunction with well-developed worksheet(s) that candidates have to work through. Identification of College-Level Learning' in this particular way is an extremely rigorous process. The K-B model on the other hand is useful in the sense that most Faculty assessors are familiar with the use of Bloom's Taxonomy in assessment generally, which is being promoted in this model. The use of Kolb's learning cycle only adds depth to this model. It is an easy tool to use to facilitate student's learning from experience. The following is the ABC model of College-Level Learning, adapted from Hoffmann (2006a:17).
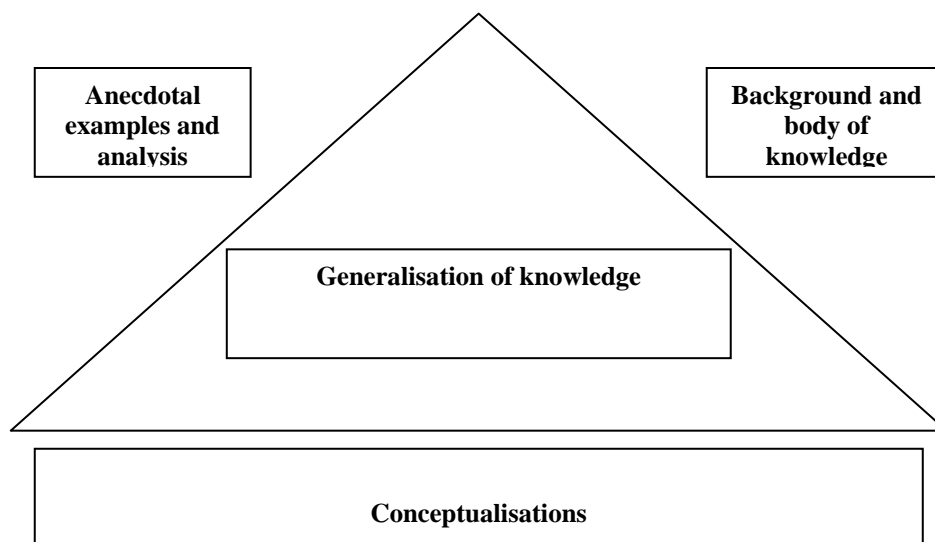
Figure 2.2: The ABCs of College-Level Learning (CLL)

Hoffmann (2006b:16-18) explains elements of the model in the following way:

"Anecdotal situations and analysis of the process means people learn by experiencing problem-solving situations; reasoning behind solutions; troubleshooting experiences; trial and error methods and through real life stories and solutions"

"Relevant background indicates past experiences that led to gaining the expertise stems from childhood lessons; learning on-the-job; life experiences at home, community, hobbies and voluntary work; training; testing; skills and accomplishments"

"Body of knowledge describes learned expertise through problem-solving situations creates a body of knowledge that can be intuitive, such as lists of topics from course descriptions and syllabi that cover expertise; explanation and detailed account of the information and knowledge base learned through experiences and students can have broad areas of knowledge, which they could use in demonstrating learning"

"Conceptualisation means theoretical understanding can be difficult to draw out from experiences since it is usually intuitive. Coaching from the PLA course instructor (mentor) can be helpful at this stage, and throughout the process. An explanation of principles working to cause problems and create solutions; and exploring the reasons why something happened and searching for patterns, connections, correlations, best practices, rationale, theories or hypotheses is essential"

"Generalisation of knowledge indicates awareness of what we know and how to use it, gives us the ability to apply the principles in new situations. Expertise means being able to describe application of the knowledge and lessons learned in a new situation or environment and creating new scenarios using well-tested procedures and knowledge of cause/effect or consequences"

In the Kolb's Learning Styles, Bloom's Taxonomy and the concept of meta-cognition are combined, to demonstrate another way to visualise what college-level learning means. Kolb's learning styles include concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb 1984a), as indicated in

section 2.4.3 above. Bloom's taxonomy includes the psychomotor and affective skills, and the knowledge, comprehension and analysis from the cognitive domain (Bloom 1956; Bloom 1984). The process of meta-cognition involves combining learning from both the conscious and unconscious mind to apply to new situations. To aid in this process of reflection, Faculty assessors should use 'state of the art instruments and techniques' (well-developed worksheets and rubrics).

It is evident from the manner in which RPL is implemented in the United States of America that credibility and integrity in the RPL assessments is inherent in the use of well-developed and crafted principles, standards, models, and procedures for PLA, reviewed on a continual basis to meet the changing needs in quality assurance and assessment practices generally.

2.4.2 PLAR IMPLEMENTATION IN CANADA

2.4.2.1 PLAR: definition and purpose

Malcolm Day (2000:1) in the report of the study conducted on: "Developing Benchmarks for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition" defines RPL as "a systematic process that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of learning i.e. skills, knowledge and values". He says this learning may be acquired through formal and informal study including work and life experience, training, independent study, volunteer work, travel, hobbies and family experiences. In this country, RPL can be used towards the requirements of education and training programmes; occupational and/or professional certification; labour market entry; and organisation and human resource capacity building (Aarts *et al* 1999:83).

The goals of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) include the: identification of learning, wherever it has taken place; selection of that learning which is relevant to a desired outcome career or occupational plan; demonstration of the validity and appropriateness of the learning; matching learning outcomes to those stated within a chosen accreditation or progression framework; assessment of evidence against pre-determined criteria to ensure the validity of the claimed learning;

and accreditation of credits within an appropriate and recognised accreditation framework".

According to the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials[10], PLAR has several benefits: it improves access to education when formal credentials are not well understood; it helps place learners at appropriate levels within education programmes; it eliminates the need for students to study things they already know and it helps learners develop clear educational goals and plans. The research, which the centre conducted, indicates that PLAR also improves learner confidence, self-esteem and motivation to learn. The report concluded that if the institution's course offering are flexible, PLAR can reduce student's programme workloads and costs.

2.4.2.2 PLAR implementation: historical and current developments

In Canada, the development of Prior Learning Accreditation and Recognition (PLAR) began in the college system in the 1980's as a means to meet the needs of mature learners who were returning to college with significant learning, which had occurred from work and life experience, and the professional bodies' immediate need for qualified practitioners (Evans 2000:34). RPL in Canada reflects the following initiatives: (1) much attention to the development of assessment tools, especially regarding challenge exams; a portfolio-development course at the Ontario-based First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI), and (2) joint projects involving a number of universities, community colleges, community groups, voluntary organisations, labour, the private and public sectors.

However, Blower (2000:98-100) points out that PLAR in Canada faced some tough challenges, until recent developments. PLAR started off not as a national policy priority; provision of financial and human resources were a problem; quality assurance in PLAR practice was not provided as well as the development of national standards for purposes of quality assurance. The Canadian Association for Prior

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[10] The information on the Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials (CICIC) in relation to RPL was accessed from the website http:www.cicic.ca/en/page.aspx?sortcode=2.17.19 on 14 January 2007.

Learning Assessment (CAPLA)[11] has been the leading voice for prior learning assessment and recognition for many years, beginning in Belleville, Ontario, CAPLA was nurtured by FNTI and experts from across Canada and abroad has helped shape the look and substance of what RPL in this country has become (http://www.capla.ca.Background.php retrieved on 16 October, 2006).

The recent developments in Canada indicate that, most public colleges recognise prior learning in at least some of their programmes. Some universities also recognise it, often in programmes offered through continuing education. British Columbia, Quebec and Ontario offer RPL to adults at the secondary level. In some parts of Canada, licensing and certification bodies use RPL to evaluate the knowledge and skills of internationally trained applicants wishing to enter their professions. Some organisations also offer RPL to Canadian applicants from different provinces and territories. In the words of Bonnie Kennedy, the Executive Director of CAPLA (CAEL Forum and News: 2006) CAPLA has yearly workshops and has been instrumental in bringing the fields of PLA and formal credential recognition together, in order to support the recognition of prior learning as a holistic enterprise. CAPLA produces regular newsletters, conducts research, and delivers training. One of its additions has been its online community of practice and national repository for PLAR resources and research launched in 2003 (www.recognitionforlearning.ca). The website provides a platform for national and international dialogue amongst PLAR practitioners.

2.4.2.3 PLAR Provisioning: model of quality assurance

2.4.2.3.1   Quality Assurance: principles for PLAR

As part of the developments in improving PLAR practice, the Canadian Institute for Recognition of Learning (CIRL) released a set of principles on January 3, 2006 in Toronto, for use by employers, professional bodies and education and training

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[11] The Canadian Association for Prior Learning (CAPLA) has been identified as a powerful organisation that speaks with authority on RPL matters in Canada. Much of the developments captured in this study are because of the work of this organisation.

practitioners. The Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB) has developed 14 minimum standards for the PLAR process (1997) and the Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology published guidelines in seven PLAR areas (1999). The principles are:

"Accessibility: PLAR should be seen as a tool for facilitating access, i.e. access to education, employment, promotion and occupational licensing/certification. The purpose of PLAR is to improve alternative mechanisms to identify, verify, and recognise knowledge and skills acquired through non-sponsored learning"

"Accountability: organisations should be accountable to the public and to government for their operations. This accountability requires formal policies and practices that frame PLAR activities and ensure evaluation of the process and its outcomes"

"Criterion-referenced: prior learning assessment and recognition is criterion-referenced. That is candidate knowledge and skills must be identified and measured against pre-set standards (standards ensure consistent results even if assessment methods and tools vary)"

"**Efficiency:** pressures created by uncertainties in applicant volume and high cost of assessment require efficient PLAR processes to ensure affordability for candidates and assessing agencies"

"**Equity:** PLAR is intended to treat candidates equally without discrimination based on the source of their learning. To be equitable, the PLAR process should hold candidates to the same standard of competency or qualification as individuals who have not undertaken PLAR. PLAR should not involve assessment processes that are more rigorous than assessment of knowledge and skills through more traditional ones"

"Legality: many organisations engaged in PLAR are responsible for ensuring compliance with legislation. PLAR should fit within the legal frameworks that guide organisational operations"

"**Quality:** the quality of the PLAR process is related to the quality of a candidate's subsequent performance. PLAR should assess the relevance, currency and sufficiency of candidate's prior learning. The qualifications of prior learning assessors should reflect an expertise in PLAR and the subject area of the assessment"

"**Right of appeal:** in democratic societies, the public has a right to be informed about processes and decisions that have an impact on their lives. Details on the PLAR process, its purpose, criteria and steps, and the factors, upon which PLAR decisions are made, should be made available to candidates"

"**Validity and reliability:** measurement experts agree that the assessment tool validity is tied to the purpose for which an assessment is used. Thus, a test might be valid for one purpose but inappropriate for other purposes. The reliability and validity of PLAR methods and tools are critical to its credibility and should be evaluated".

The Canadian Labour Force Development Board (CLFDB 1997) standards for prior learning assessment and recognition are:

- RPL must be accessible and relevant to people as individuals: it must focus on the unique needs and abilities of the individual

- Assessment and recognition must be of learning (knowledge and skills) and not of experience

- The RPL process must be fair and equitable: it must be barrier-free and bias-free

- The process must be effective: it must provide the opportunity for recognition of prior learning, but it must not hold out false promises

- The RPL process must be transparent, the individual must know the criteria and standards used to assess his or her skills and knowledge

- The assessment must be reliable, the criteria and standards must be recognised and respected by all the labour market partners

- The assessment tools and their RPL application must be valid: they must be recognised and accepted by all the labour market partners

- Individuals assessing prior learning must be trained to perform the task

- The assessing institution must provide a number of ways to carry out an assessment: individuals should have the opportunity to choose how their assessment will be done

- Recognition awarded through RPL should be considered equal to recognition awarded in the traditional manner

- Recognition awarded through RPL should be transferable between organisations, provinces and territories

- RPL must be an option or opportunity, not a mandatory process and if a person is not satisfied with the RPL assessment, an appeal procedure must be available

2.4.2.3.2   Quality Assurance: standards for PLAR

2.4.2.4 The PLAR process of assessment

There are three processes in place in Canada that one can use to demonstrate the knowledge and skills already acquired. They are the development of a portfolio to profile your school, life and work experiences; the challenge process for a course credit for university equivalency; and assessment of foreign out of province or foreign credentials. A portfolio is an organised collection of materials developed by an individual who records and verifies learning achievements and relates them to the requirements of labour market entry; human resources capacity building; education and training programmes and occupation and/or professional certification. A challenge process is a method of assessment, other than portfolio, developed and evaluated by subject-expert Faculty, to measure an individual's learning achievement against learning outcomes. It measures demonstrated learning through a variety of written and non-written evaluation methods, for the purpose of awarding course credit without requiring enrolment in that course. Challenge processes include one or more of the following: assessment of educational documents; standardised tests and programme reviews of employer-based training; product evaluation; interviews and oral exams; performance testing and demonstrations; essays; challenge exams; and self-assessment.

For out-of-province credentials, assessment can be done by the local educational institutions or through one of the recognised organisations. If training for a particular

job was done outside of Canada, the documents need to be translated and then assessed. Foreign credit assessment refers to the process of having foreign credentials translated and assessed. The assessment is measured against professional or academic standards. There is a cost for PLAR services and the cost differs from province to province. It also varies depending on the type of service requested, for example: face-to-face individual or group sessions; Internet assistance; translation services; tutoring; career advisement or counselling and assessments. In academic institutions, the costs of RPL assessments are usually less than taking the academic course(s).

2.4.3 RPL IMPLEMENTATION IN AUSTRALIA

2.4.3.1 RPL: definition

In Australia, there is a distinction between the learning achieved through formal education (credit transfer) and learning achieved outside the formal education and training system (RPL). Thus: **RPL** is an assessment process that assesses the individual's non-formal and informal learning to determine the extent to which that individual has achieved the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards for entry to, and/or partial or total completion of, a qualification. **Credit transfer** assesses the initial course that the individual is using to claim access to, or the award of credit in the destination course, to determine the extent to which it is equivalent to the required learning outcomes, competency outcomes, or standards in a qualification. This may include credit transfer based on formal learning that is outside the AQF framework (AQF Advisory Board 2000:1).

The key distinguishing characteristic is that it is the student who is assessed in the case of RPL, and the course, module or programme in the case of credit transfer. That is in credit transfer, the judgement is about the learning programme, outcomes and assessment in the initial course or subject (AQFAB 2002:10), which has to be considered for RPL purposes. Many students will use both RPL and credit transfer simultaneously, as the learning pathways students use, combined with their life and work experience is becoming increasingly complex.

Six examples[12] that illustrate the difference between RPL and Credit Transfer

Scenario 1: Victor is commencing a Bachelor of Arts at a university in Melbourne and seeks advanced standing on the basis of a Diploma of Community Services (Community Development) at a TAFE institute in Perth. The university does not have an articulation or credit transfer agreement with the TAFE institute. Victor is asked to collect information about the competency standards, delivery plan and assessment for the course before a decision can be made about whether or not he will be granted the advanced standing. Outcome: This is an example of *credit transfer.* Reason: the competency standards, delivery plan and assessment for that course are being assessed to determine equivalency to subjects in the Bachelor of Arts. Victor is not being assessed to determine the extent to which he can demonstrate whether or not he has met the required learning outcomes.

Scenario 2: Jackie is enrolled in the Diploma of Arts (Professional Writing and Editing) at a TAFE institute and seeks advanced standing based on her professional experience. Jackie is asked to collect evidence that she has met the competency standards. She prepares an annotated resume, and a portfolio that includes examples of short stories and newspaper articles she has written, examples of desktop publishing she has produced, and testimonials from supervisors about her responsibilities and tasks. Outcome: This is an example of *RPL.* Reason: Jackie is being assessed to determine the extent to which she has demonstrated that she has met the required competency standards.

Scenario 3: Ulla is undertaking the Certificate 4 in Further Education at the local neighbourhood house. She studied political science at tertiary level in her own country, but that was some time ago, and she is participating in the Cert 4 to reintroduce herself to tertiary study, which she wants to do, particularly as English is her second language. Nonetheless, she believes she can demonstrate competency for several of the standards, and wishes to pursue her application for advanced standing.

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[12] The above examples were used in a paper presented to the 11th National VET Research Conference North Point Institute of TAFE, Brisbane, 9-12 July 2002 by Leesa Wheelaham, Peter Miller and Diane Newton. The paper is accessible at: http://www.scu.edu.au/research/rpl/ncver.html

Ulla prepares a portfolio of evidence, which includes a reflective component relating her life experience, particularly her experience of migration to Australia, to demonstrate learning in areas of cross-cultural communication, problem solving, teamwork, knowledge of the Australian political framework. Outcome: This is an example of **RPL.** Reason: Ulla is being assessed to determine whether she has demonstrated that she has met the required standard.

Scenario 4: Aaron is undertaking the Certificate 2 in Retail Operations as part of senior school certificate and is seeking advanced standing for the competencies "interact with others", "work effectively in a retail environment" and "apply sale procedures". He has worked in the local supermarket since he was in the central warehouse. He has attended several in-house short training sessions in the last three years. In applying for RPL, the student attaches certificates of participation as evidence of his involvement in the in-house training. The assessor takes these into account in determining the Aaron's claim, but does not rely on them solely in deciding whether or not to grant RPL. The certificates testified only to participation and not achievement of standards or outcomes, and the outcomes of the sessions were not part of, or related to, endorsed standards or curriculum. The assessor interviews Aaron to discuss his experience further, and asks him to describe what he learnt from participating in the in-house training, and how this related to his capacity to do the job.

The in-house training proved to be very important to Aaron's skill acquisition, understanding and performance, and contributed strongly to his application. Outcome: This is an example of **RPL.** Reason: Aaron is being assessed to determine the extent to which he has demonstrated that he has met the required competency standards. Some of the learning the student has undertaken has been formal, but it is still an RPL application because in-house training is not being assessed to determine equivalence, the student is being assessed. The sessions are un-credentialed learning, outside a quality framework, and not part of a credit transfer agreement. If the sessions were to be classed as credit transfer, then they would need to be assessed to determine equivalence.

Scenario 5: Michael has been awarded a Diploma of Information Technology at a Registered Training Organisation. The diploma was awarded on the basis of recognition of prior learning, as Michael had worked for many years in the warehouse in a medium sized company, and had taken on increasing responsibility for supporting the IT infrastructure of the company as the technology was progressively introduced. The company had paid for him to attend the occasional external training program, as the need and opportunity arose. Outcome: This is an example of *RPL.* Reason: Michael is being assessed to determine the extent to which he has met the competency standards. The training he has undertaken is not being assessed to determine equivalence.

Scenario 6: Michael in example 5 is now enrolled in a degree course in informational technology, and is seeking the award of credit on the basis of the completed VET diploma – the diploma that was awarded on the basis of RPL. There is no articulation agreement between the private RTO and the university, but the degree course co-ordinator meets with the RTO, to discuss delivery plans and assessment approaches, standards and outcomes. The degree course co-coordinator knows the competencies, because they are part of the national training package, and are in used in all IT courses in VET. Outcome: This is an example of *credit transfer.* Reason: The IT diploma and the RTO are being assessed to determine equivalency, not the student, regardless of the fact that the student was awarded the IT diploma on the basis of RPL. The university has to decide whether they have confidence in the assessment of the RTO. The request for the award of credit is based on the completed IT diploma, not the original RPL application.

2.4.3.2 RPL: purpose

According to the AQFAB report (2002:11), one of the key drivers for RPL was its perceived capacity to act as a mechanism for social inclusion for those who have not had the opportunity to participate in, or who have had negative experiences of, post-compulsory education and training, but who nonetheless have much learning that is relevant to qualification outcomes. RPL is seen as one of the main objectives of the AQF. In addition, it is used as a key strategy in facilitating access to higher education qualifications and programmes, and the achievement of nationally recognised

qualifications for Australians. RPL is deemed to have benefits for individuals, education and training institutions, enterprises, unions and governments – benefits that are regarded by many as self-evident and obvious (AQFAB 2002:12).

Table 2.4: *A summary of potential benefits of RPL*

Potential benefits of RPL

A.	People should not be required to repeat, and pay for learning they have already achieved, if it does not add value to the programme or qualification they are undertaking
B.	Governments and taxpayers should not have to pay for learning to be repeated when it has already been achieved
C.	Many individuals have not had the opportunity either to participate in formal post-secondary education and training, particularly people from disadvantaged groups or communities, or when they have participated, they may have had negative experiences of these learning environments
D.	RPL opens possibilities for people to embark on pathways that include informal and non-formal learning, and formal learning
E.	Workers and enterprises benefit through including RPL as a strategy for increasing overall skill levels in enterprise, tailoring training appropriately, and as a mechanism for staff selection and recruitment
F.	Society and knowledge is changing rapidly, that new knowledge and skill are constantly being created, often outside formal research centres such as those in universities. RPL is one way of contributing to the renewal of qualifications and curriculum, by recognising knowledge and skills that have emerged in the workplace and in society, and not inside formal institutional contexts

2.4.3.3 RPL implementation: historical and current developments

In Australia, RPL was formally instituted in 1992 with the signing of the National Framework for the Recognition of Training (NFROT) agreement between states and territories. This agreement was the result of the work that has been done in terms of a competency-based approach in training (CBT)[13] (Heyns 2004:48). CBT refers to an approach to vocational education and training, which focuses on the competencies gained, by an individual rather than on the training process itself. The NFROT ensures that recognition is given for accredited courses based on competency standards, credit transfer between providers, competencies and prior learning.

Universities in Australia are self-accrediting bodies established by state and territory legislation, with the authority to develop, accredit, teach and confer higher education qualifications. They consequently have considerable autonomy in developing

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[13] CBT: Competency Based Approach to Training offers an avenue for recognition of prior learning

institutional policy, including that relating to RPL. Higher education providers that are not self-accrediting institutions submit qualifications for accreditation to the respective state and territory higher education accrediting bodies. These bodies consider the academic quality, and the teaching, financial, infrastructure and resource capacity of the conferring institution in deciding whether to accredit a qualification or not (AQFAB[14] 2002:76), either through the normal route established at these universities or by assessing prospective students for their prior learning. All the bodies authorised to develop and/or issue Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF)[15] qualifications are expected to consider the development of RPL policies as part of their responsibilities under the AQF.

While there is considerable diversity between universities over the extent to which they offer RPL, the Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee (AVCC) has in place RPL guidelines to assist universities in developing their own frameworks (AVCC 2001). The AVCC guidelines (1993:4) indicate that universities should: publicise the availability of RPL services; indicate the sort of experience the university will consider and the purpose for which it will be considered (access to, or credit in, a course); ensure that prior learning is assessed at a level comparable to the content and standard of the subject for which credit is claimed, but that it should not be greater than would otherwise be required if students were undertaking the subject; ensure that staff assessing RPL applications have, in addition to their content knowledge, personal expertise in or access to advice on RPL assessment methods and ensure assessment processes are completed before the beginning of the semester in which credit is sought.

The AVCC established the Australian Credit Transfer Agency (ACTA) in March 1995, the role of which was to, in part; provide RPL assessments for individuals on a fee-for-service basis, as well as brokering between the sectors. There was insufficient demand to continue the RPL service, because students were not guaranteed a place in a

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[14] The AQF Advisory Board (AQFAB) operates as a high-level cross-sectoral forum. Membership of the Board reflects the range of stakeholders with an Independent Chairperson.

[15] AQF: Australian Qualifications Framework. This is a unified system of national qualifications in schools, vocational education and training (TAFEs and private providers) and the higher education sector (mainly universities). The framework links together all these qualifications and is a highly visible; quality assured national system of educational recognition, which promotes lifelong learning and a seamless and diverse education and training system. It was introduced on 1 January 1995 and was phased in over five years, with full implementation by the year 2000.

university on the basis of an RPL assessment, conducted by the ACTA, and nor were they guaranteed credit. With no guarantees, students were reluctant to pay for such a service (AQFAB 2002:77). The ACTA did not continue, however, the work that it did in helping to broker arrangements between the higher education and VET sectors have continued albeit under certain constraints. Firstly, it was difficult and expensive to broker such agreements, and secondly, it was cost effective for universities to work together (either as a sector, or based on groupings within the sector) to develop arrangements with institutions in other sectors to maximise credit transfer and RPL.

2.4.3.4 RPL Provisioning: model of quality assurance

2.4.3.4.1   The National Principles and Guidelines for RPL implementation

The National Principles and Guidelines for RPL (2004)[16] in Australia are explicit with regard to the following aspects: approach and model of implementation; procedures and processes for implementation; RPL assessment process; quality assurance arrangements; support services to RPL students; funding for RPL services and appeal mechanisms during the RPL assessment process. There are different approaches developed for RPL implementation, as indicated in section 2.3.1 above. In Australia there are two approaches followed. These are: the Developmental RPL and Credentialing Processes.

Firstly, RPL is seen as a developmental process whereby the RPL candidate/learner engages in a process of self-actualisation, personal development, and self-knowledge and an understanding of the world and their place in it (Australian Report 2003). RPL provisioning in this way would offer students an opportunity to learn the skill of reflection and self-evaluation, and it is important that this happens if the assessment outcomes are to be related to the course or programmed outcomes. The skill of self-reflection is not always easy to learn, and students would need considerable support to do so. With this approach, assessment processes would include reflective essays, journals, or developmental and reflective portfolios. Therefore, development RPL is

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[16] A copy of the brochure was made available from the AQFAB offices on 4 September 2006. The same information can be accessed on this web address: www.aqf.edu.au. To request for the copy of the brochure this email address should be used: aqfab@aqf.edu.au

or should be an empowering process to the student. Developmental RPL is an example of good practice in RPL provisioning due to a number of positive aspects identified (Learning From Experience Trust 2000).

Secondly, in many cases, the purpose of undertaking RPL is to achieve accreditation of the knowledge one has and skills in which a person is already competent, and has been so for years. Appropriate assessment processes for RPL depend on whether the process is to be student or candidate driven, or teacher, lecturer or assessor driven, with the support of the institution. In the case of the latter, it may not be so important to provide RPL students with a framework to learn about RPL, learning outcomes or competencies, and the nature of evidence. However, this requires the assessor to undertake the mapping of a person's skills or knowledge to the learning outcomes/competencies in a qualification, and to tell the student exactly what sort of evidence and how much, they are required to produce. This sort of process is most easily conducted in the workplace, and where this is so, it is possible to distinguish between RPL and work-based assessment.

2.4.3.5 Quality Assurance: procedures and processes

For quality assurance arrangements in RPL provisioning, RPL policies, procedures, processes and assessment outcomes should be explicitly included in the sectoral or institutional quality assurance mechanisms; and clear and transparent quality assurance mechanisms are essential for ensuring that one sector has confidence in the RPL decisions made by another sector. These arrangements should be included in negotiations between providers within and across sectors about credit transfer, articulation and other qualifications. These should take the form of "information and advice to students about which subjects, modules, competencies, courses and qualifications for which RPL can be used to establish access and exemptions; information for students about how to apply for RPL, who to contact for further information concerning the process, who to contact for support in preparing their application and information about timelines, appeals process, and fees; an outline of the learning or competency outcomes against which students will be assessed; advice to students as to the nature of the RPL assessment process, the kind of evidence that can be used, the forms in which it can be presented, and where appropriate, a guide as to

what is considered sufficient and valid evidence; administrative processes for receiving RPL applications, administering assessment, recording results, advising students of the outcome, and administering appeals processes; designation of responsibilities and accountabilities for undertaking RPL assessments, and a statement of the qualifications and skills RPL assessors are expected to possess; an outline of the different assessment process that may be used; and an outline of the way in which RPL policies, processes, and assessments are quality assured (Australian Report 2003).

2.4.3.5.1   RPL process of implementation

Processes should ensure that, where possible, the student is able to complete the qualification in less time than if registered through the traditional route; include and clearly indicate academic and administrative responsibilities and accountability, and these should be widely publicised in information about RPL; and be timely; and where possible, decisions made prior to the commencement of the course, subject or unit for which the RPL is being claimed (Australian Report 2003).

2.4.3.6 The RPL process of assessment

The **RPL assessment process** should consist of establishing the purpose of the assessment; identifying the evidence required; using appropriate evidence gathering methods; interpreting the evidence and making a judgement on the evidence brought towards the claim for RPL or credit transfer; recording the outcome and reporting to key stakeholders. In addition, assessment methods should accommodate the literacy levels, cultural background and educational background and experiences of students. Assessment methods should provide for a range of ways for students to demonstrate that they have met the required outcomes. Students need sufficient information to enable them to prepare their evidence to the standard required for the RPL assessment process. It is the responsibility of academic or teaching staff with expertise in the subject, content or skills area, as well as knowledge of, and expertise in RPL policies and procedures to undertake the RPL assessments. RPL assessment processes should be comparable to other assessment processes used to assess whether the learning or competency outcome in a subject, module, unit, course or qualification have been met (Australian Report 2003).

Forms of credit

RPL may be for access into a course that is when the specified prerequisites based on completion of a formal course of education have not been undertaken, or where other access mechanisms are not applicable or appropriate. The award of credit in a course as the result of a successful RPL application may include specified credit for designated subjects, modules, units or competencies; unspecified credit, resulting in the student being required to complete fewer subjects, modules or competencies; block credit, resulting in exemptions from the required requirements to undertake a block component of a course; and exemptions or advanced standing. This involves exempting a student from undertaking preparatory subjects, units, modules or competencies in the early stages of the course or qualification, while still requiring them to undertake the same number of subjects, units, modules or competencies, as they would be required to complete if they had not been granted the exemption. This usually involves substituting the exempted subjects, units, modules or competencies with others. Credits based on a combination of credit transfer plus an individual RPL assessment for additional non-formal or informal learning (Australian Report 2003).

Support for RPL learners

RPL should be offered prior to, or at enrolment, and be available to students, where necessary, to learn the skills needed to gain RPL, so either in a formal group, or an informal setting. Student support should ensure they engage in appropriate learning pathways because of their RPL process. In some sectors, this may include advice about 'gaps' training or education that may be necessary to meet the full requirements of the qualification. It may also include advice as to learning pathways that are available to them, and how to access those pathways (Australian Report 2003).

Advice and information to RPL candidates/learners

Institutions and other relevant bodies in each of the sectors, should promote the RPL policies and include information about whether RPL is offered, and the qualifications, courses, modules, subjects, units and competencies in which it is offered. Information should be provided about the processes, timelines, appeal mechanisms, whom to contact

for more information and where to go for support. Information should be availed via institutional, Faculty and school websites, in promotional material and advertising, in handbooks and through the State and Tertiary Admissions Centres. Information should be written in clear, accessible language, and should take into account the literacy skills, cultural background and educational background and experience of students and potential students (Australian Report 2003).

Fees and Funding for RPL services

Policies and procedures implemented by jurisdictions and institutions to improve cost efficiency and remove financial disincentives in the implementation of RPL may include working with groups of students from industries, enterprises or occupational areas to achieve economies of scale. Fees charges should be no higher that students would normally be required to pay if they were undertaking formal study towards the qualification; incorporating RPL duties into workloads for teaching and administrative staff (Australian Report 2003).

Appeal mechanisms during the process of RPL assessment

An effective means of appeal in each institution in relation to RPL decisions and processes should be fair, transparent, accountable, and subject to appeal. Institutions need to avail information about appeal mechanisms at the commencement of RPL procedures and throughout a student's enrolment or qualification.

However, while RPL appears to have been successful as a mechanism for social inclusion for individuals from regional Australia and for those with a disability, it has not been successful as a mechanism of social inclusion for Indigenous Australians, for people from a non-English speaking background, those with low levels of education, those in unskilled jobs and the unemployed. The main beneficiaries have been those from socio-economic backgrounds who have experience in and success in post-compulsory education and training (Buchler & Ralph 2000; Learning from Experience Trust 2000; Ryan & Watson 2001; Bateman & Knight 2002). It is also clear that RPL has not yet delivered the potential benefits on the scale originally envisaged and hoped for in policy documents and reform to qualifications.

The potential of RPL is clearly aspirational (AQFAB 2002:34). The form of RPL introduced in Australia in 1987 was connected to the labour market (Andersson *et al* 2004:3; Evans 2000:122) There is little evidence that RPL in Australia has led to significantly improved access to formal credits for disadvantaged groups or individuals (Evans 2000:151). The expected links between academic knowledge and work-based and experience-based learning have not appeared, especially at universities. The main reasons for fading interest in RPL is given by Flowers and Hawke (2000:155 and 159) as a clash between traditionalists that prior learning cannot be equated to "academic knowledge" especially where theory is concerned and that the process involves more effort than it is worth and government funding has not been forthcoming.

2.4.4 AP(E)L IMPLEMENTATION IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

2.4.4.1 AP(E)L definition and purpose

APL[17] (accreditation of prior learning) is the generic term used for the award of credit based on demonstrated learning that has occurred at some time in the past. This learning may have come about as the result of a course, or self-directed study, or as the result of experience either at work or in leisure pursuits. The latter is usually referred to as Prior Experiential Learning (Nyatanga *et al* 1988:7-8). According to Evans (2006:19), experiential learning is uncertified learning. He says: it is what is in someone's head for which there is no formal evidence that it does exist. It is also worth noting that "while both forms of prior learning focus on learning rather that experience, and outcome rather than process, they can differ in the way candidates may gather and submit evidence to support their claim" (Nyatanga *et al* 1988:7-8).

2.4.4.2 AP(E)L implementation: historical and current developments

According to Evans (2006:23), AP(E)L was introduced in Great Britain in the 1980s, based mainly on the work done by CAEL in America. The emerging agenda for

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[17] APL: Accreditation of Prior Learning, i.e.: learning for which certification has been awarded by an educational institution or another education/training provider. Within APL, there are two main categories: APLCL: The accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (learning which certification has been awarded by an educational institution or another education/training provider. APEL: The accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (uncertificated learning gained from experience. APEL is sometimes referred to as RPEL (The Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning).

Higher Education in the UK promotes lifelong learning, social inclusion, wider participation, employability, partnership working with business, community organisations and among HE providers nationally, and internationally (QAA for HE 2004:4). Consequently, HEIs are increasingly recognising the significant knowledge, skills and understanding which can be developed as a result of learning opportunities found at work, both paid and unpaid, and through individual activities and interests. At the beginning, there was no central APL/APEL system and foundations were laid through research projects mainly. These projects were funded variously by the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the government's Further Education Unit (FEU) and the Wates Foundation. The first project was the Making Experience Count (MEC)[18], a taught course, meant to explore how to do APEL in higher education (Corradi, Evans & Valk 2006:23).

The findings of this project indicated that the MEC course bore useful results as a pre-access course. Learners were able to demonstrate suitable learning for admission into diploma and degree at a university level. They also demonstrated capability of completing their qualifications. The portfolio supported RPL applications for career advancement or for a change of employment. Most learners came out of the course knowing that they do not need to study for the learning they already have. These results became the reference point for testing the validity of AP(E)L as an acceptable practice in higher education.

The next project was the Curriculum Opportunity (CO), a map of experiential learning in entry requirements for higher and further education award bearing courses (1983). That was followed by Access to Higher Education: no-standard entry to CNAA first degree and DipHE courses (Evans 1984). Then came the first substantial piece of development work: The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning report of the CNAA Development project conducted at the Learning from Trust (Evans 1988). The report summed up the a three-year project doing APEL for real, covering all disciplines in ten higher education institutions. All these developments indicate that

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[18] MEC was a ten-week course of three hours per week, meant to persuade people to reflect systematically on their experiences and extract what they could to demonstrate and prove that they had learned from them (Corradi, Evans and Valk 2006:23).

implementation of prior experiential learning in England was preceded by thorough research.

The former Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), some functions of which are now performed by QAA (Quality Assurance Agency), formerly the Higher Education Quality Council (HEQC)[19]. The QAA has published Guidelines on the Quality Assurance of Credit Based Learning in 1995. These guidelines were drawn in collaboration with awarding bodies such as SQA and others representing higher education institutions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The bodies responsible for regional and national credit frameworks also issue guidelines on APL.

The Inter Consortia Credit Agreement (inCCA) project, funded by DfEE, began in 1996. The Consortia Higher Education Credit Initiative Wales (HECIW), Northern Universities Consortia of Credit Accumulation and Transfer (NaCCAT) and Southern England Consortia for Credit Accumulation and Transfer (SEEC) reached an agreement on a set of principles which could form the basis of a common framework for the use of credit in higher education. The principles, together with associated advice, guidance and related issues, were published in the 1998 report: *A Common Framework for Learning.* The UK research evidence indicates that whilst the old polytechnics/new universities have adopted APEL/APL with some enthusiasm, most traditional universities have been cautious in their approach (Trower in Taylor 2000:3).

There is also very little UK based longitudinal research on the effectiveness of RPL in higher education and there seems to be no reporting of research into the long-term value of RPL. Scotland introduced RPL in 1987 when the Scottish Vocational Education Council (SCOTVEC) developed an AP(E)L system within the further education sector. In Scotland, RPL is characterised by collaborative development and networking, links with further education, emphasis on work-based learning, partnerships with employers and professional bodies. It was seen as a key element of HEIs meeting the needs of the communities which they serve (Sharp, Reeve & Whitaker 2000:132) and in candidates' lifelong learning paths.

2.4.4.3 AP(E)L process of assessment

The steps (Challis 1993:35-85) being followed during the assessment process are:

Initial guidance: During this stage, the learner decides upon the appropriateness or otherwise of following the APEL route, either with the aim of seeking an accelerated route to accreditation, or in order to explore unrecognised skills for the purposes of dealing of defining a progression route. The counsellor should help the candidate/learner identify specific needs and provide information on the range of options available. The assessing institution's responsibility is to provide a range of support facilities such as (course and institution prospectus; checklists of learning outcomes of programmes on offer; expert system and other self-assessment materials for use by learners; bilingual counsellors and so forth).

Recognising and identifying skills: The learner using the process of reflection consolidates first thoughts about using APEL towards a qualification or career move. He/she needs to create a list of competences or skills that demonstrate a range of general and occupationally specific abilities. The counsellor should support the learner through providing 'prompting' exercises to stimulate and encourage focused reflection; help the learner formulate statements of achievement and to enable the learner to create a positive self-image. This person may also need to liaise with other agencies on behalf of the learner where further advice and support is needed. It is the responsibility of the assessing institution to ensure availability of appropriately qualified counselling staff and enlist the services of career advisors to support the role of the counsellor. Tutor time and appropriate accommodation for learner support needs to be allocated as well.

Relating skills to criteria: The learner using a checklist of outcomes related to possible qualifications or parts of the qualification needs, to compare that with identified competences. He/she also needs to make decisions as to whether to continue with the next stage of APEL, or to follow a more traditional route to the desired outcome. The counsellor ensures the availability of appropriate checklists that will

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[19] The information on current developments in England regarding APL implementation was retrieved from the website:

help inform the learner of the potential pathways that identified prior learning can open up. The learner should be assisted to have a realistic picture of how far current competence will lead and whether APEL is the most appropriate route to be followed. The assessing/awarding institution needs to avail tutor time accommodate counselling.

Gathering evidence: The learner will take responsibility for identifying and recording learning, gathering and recording evidence of learning, choosing a framework of outcomes for matching learning and competence, reviewing the total evidence collected, and selecting appropriate items as proof of competence. It is their responsibility to compile a portfolio demonstrating competence to the criteria of the target framework for assessment. They should create a cross-referencing index demonstrating the relationship between evidence and the competence to which it relates. The counsellor will assist the learner with portfolio preparation; guide the learner through the process of creating the appropriate type of portfolio and liaise with appropriate assessors to establish precise requirements on types of and quantity of evidence and any additional needs of accrediting or awarding bodies. The institution should create opportunities for group or individual portfolio preparation, make appropriate arrangements with awarding bodies and ensure availability of definitions of desired outcomes within each qualification offered to facilitate matching of evidence to assessment criteria.

Assessment: The learner will present evidence of learning in a form that allows for assessment against a framework of selected criteria and undertake to provide supplementary evidence if required by the assessor. The counsellor should offer support and advice in the final stages of preparation for assessment of the portfolio, act as an advocate, between the candidate and the assessor; advise following the recommendations of the assessor on any further work to be done and prepare the candidate for any supplementary assessment to be carried out. The assessor will make judgement about the match between evidence presented and stated performance criteria; arrange additional supplementary assessment if necessary to complement evidence in the portfolio and give feedback to the learner on the portfolio and any

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http://www.ucas.com/candq/apl/ on 2006/12/06.

additional assessment procedures. The outcomes need to be recorded in a requisite form for the awarding body.

Accreditation: The learner has no role at this stage, other than to wait for the results. The counsellor should help the learner think about and plan next stages in learning. The assessor's responsibility is to transmit the results of the assessment process to the learner; submit the completed records to an appropriate awarding body for accreditation and to liaise with the awarding body verifier or moderator and retain evidence used in assessment for recommendation on the award of credit for perusal, if demanded, by the awarding body representative. For the institution, there must be structures and appropriate accreditation frameworks to meet the needs of the diverse community for which it provides learning and assessment opportunities.

Certification: The learner, counsellor and assessor have no role to play at this stage. The institution should establish mechanisms to receive certificates of achievement from the chosen awarding body, and arrange for these to reach the learner.

Progression: The learner will spend some time considering the next stage to be undertaken in the learning cycle, i.e. to continue to complete a qualification for which partial accreditation has been gained, use the qualification as a springboard into a higher level of education or training. They could also use the portfolio as evidence of vocational competence in job search activities or seek promotion at work. Even at this stage, post-assessment support to the learner is still essential. The counsellor should ensure as far as possible that people who are likely to receive the learner for the next stage in progression will accept the evidence presented for its intended purpose. The institution's responsibility is to ensure that there is a range of available information bases, which can be used by learner and counsellor together in reaching such a decision.

2.4.4.4 AP(E)L Provisioning: model of quality assurance

There are five main areas of practice identified in which stringent quality assurance measures need to be in place. These areas are: policies and procedures; information;

roles and responsibilities; support and monitoring and review. The following are guiding principles and explanatory notes (QAA 2004:7-16):

Policies and procedures

Principle 1: Decisions regarding the accreditation of prior learning are a matter of academic judgement. The decision-making process and outcomes should be transparent and demonstrably rigorous and fair.

Principle 2: Where limits are imposed on the proportion of learning that can be recognised through the accreditation process, these limits should be explicitly stated. The implication for progression, the award of any interim qualification and the classification or grading of a final qualification should be clear and transparent.

Principle 3: Higher education providers responsible for accrediting prior experiential and/or certificated learning should identified it on student's transcripts.

Information

Principle 4: Higher education providers should provide clear and accessible information for applicants, academic staff, examiners and stakeholders about its policies, procedures and practices for the accreditation of prior learning.

Principle 5: The terminology, scope and boundaries used by an HE provider in its policies, procedures and practices for the accreditation of prior learning should be explicitly defined in information and guidance materials.

Principle 6: Information and guidance materials outlining the process (es) for the assessment of claims for the accreditation of prior experiential and/or previously certificated learning should be clear, accurate and easily accessible.

Principle 7: Higher education providers should consider the range and forms of assessment appropriate to consider claim for the recognition of learning.

Principle 8: The criteria to be used in judging a claim for the accreditation of prior learning should be made explicit to applicants, academic staff, stakeholders, assessors and examiners.

Principle 9: Applicants should be fully informed of the nature and range of evidence considered appropriate to support a claim for the accreditation of prior learning.

Principle 10: The assessment of learning derived from experience should be open to internal and external scrutiny and monitoring within institutional quality assessment processes.

Roles and responsibilities

Principle 11: The locus of authority and responsibilities for making and verifying decisions about the accreditation of prior learning should be clearly specified.

Principle 12: All staff associated with the accreditation of prior learning should have their roles clearly and explicitly defined. Full details of all roles and responsibilities should be available to all associated staff and applicants.

Principle 13: Appropriate arrangements should be developed for the training and support of all staff associated with the support, guidance and assessment of claims for the accreditation of prior learning.

Support

Principle 14: Clear guidance should be given to applicants about when a claim for the accreditation of prior learning may be submitted, the timescale for considering the claim and the outcome.

Principle 15: Appropriate arrangements should be in place to support applicants submitting claims for the accreditation of prior learning and to provide feedback on decisions.

Monitoring and review

Principle 16: Arrangements for the regular monitoring and review of policies and procedures for the accreditation of prior learning should be clearly established. These arrangements should be set within established institutional frameworks for quality assurance, management and enhancement.

2.4.5 RPL IN THE NETHERLANDS

RPL is still in an experimental phase in this country. RPL is being applied in this country in order to contribute to the skills shortage by increasing the flexible 'deployment' of individuals by identifying their current competencies and using educational planning to fast track appropriate new learning that is individualised and its implementation success is due largely to 'enthusiastic pioneers'. The Dutch government has set up the Knowledge Centre APL at the beginning of 2001 for a period of four years. The functions of the knowledge centre are: the development of expertise; dissemination of information on APL; research and development of best practices; networking and supporting the new vocational qualifications framework (SAQA 2002: 48).

2.4.6 RPL IN NEW ZEALAND

In New Zealand, reasons for the lack of RPL as a means to advance educational equity are given by Ker, Melrose and Reid (2000:174 – 175) as a lack of funding, a lack of leadership and a failure to put in place co-coordinating mechanisms; a tendency to follow "classroom assessment practices" as well as a tendency to tightly prescribe the learning outcomes of courses thereby ignoring broad learning outcomes. The elements of quality assurance to be included in institutional policy documents are review and update, operational approaches, assessment, applicants and communications contained in principles and operational guidelines for RPL in higher education and training.

2.4.7 RPL IN FRANCE

In France, great emphasis is based on the candidate's professional experience. The approach is deductive: based on evidence submitted by the candidate. The emphasis of assessment falls on the complexity of candidate knowledge and the verification of candidate potential (Feutrie 2000:106 – 108 in Smith 2003:30). University modules are officially awarded without the candidate having passed the required examinations. It is not the formal knowledge of the candidate, which is assessed; it is the ability to prove the achievement of a level of intellectual development corresponding to that required. This situation calls for diverse approaches to assessment and the involvement of the candidate in "the rules of the game"; result in possible intrusion on teachers' prerogatives and a contractual process of identification. It has lead to uneasiness on the part of teachers as a result of trying to match up traditional curriculum with experiential knowledge (Feutrie 2000:110 in Smith 2003:33).

2.4.8   RPL IMPLEMENTATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

2.4.8.1 RPL definition and purpose

There is an attempt in this section to show if there is a general agreement on what RPL is from the main organisations in the country. Definitions in general, be it at policy, institutional, Faculty or individual level, indicate if there is an understanding of the phenomenon in question. In my opinion, if there is proper interpretation of what RPL is, there will be proper understanding, and the likelihood is that there will be sound application of the RPL policy. Issues of delays in implementation, resistance by institutions of higher learning to implement, lack of RPL services at institutional level, will not easily surface.

In **South Africa,** RPL is defined in the National Standard Bodies Regulations (No 18787 of 28 March 1998) issued in terms of the SAQA Act 58 of 1995. This definition makes a number of principles clear: learning occurs in all kinds of situations, formally, informally and non-formally; measurement of the learning takes place against specific learning outcomes required for a specific qualification; and credits are awarded for such learning if it meets the requirements of the qualification. Therefore, the process of

recognising prior learning is about: identifying what the candidate knows and can do; matching the candidate's skills, knowledge and experience to specific standards and the associated criteria of a qualification; and crediting the candidate for the skills, knowledge and experience build up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past.

According to the **Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC),** RPL means "the formal identification, assessment and acknowledgement of the full range of a person's knowledge, skills and capabilities acquired through formal, informal training, on-the-job or life experience" (HEQC: 2004:26). The HEQC is the accrediting body in higher education and plays a major role in promoting quality in the higher education sector. This body is also responsible for the monitoring of the full implementation of RPL in the sector.

The **Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)** in their discussion document (1995:3) defines RPL as a process of "granting credit for a unit on the basis of an assessment of formal and non-formal learning/experience to establish whether the learner possesses the capabilities specified in the outcome statement". The council's position is that a person could gain recognition for prior learning in respect of an entire qualification, provided that such a person is able to demonstrate the full competence associated with the qualification.

The definition used by the **Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU)** is reflected in the discussion document (1997:6) used by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), which says "RPL is a process of giving recognition to people for the skills and knowledge that they already have, but which they have not been given credit for". In order to be promoted or to get a better job with better wages, some form of qualification or certificate is needed. The definition highlights that South African workers in various sectors may have the knowledge, experience and skills without the necessary paper qualifications, and that is what the trade union argues should be corrected.

The **University of Pretoria,** where the study was conducted makes use of the same definition as the HEQC (Policy on Assessment and Accreditation of Prior Learning

2002:3). In the Faculty of Education, a very practical definition of RPL is being used. The Faculty says "RPL implies the recognition of the work done by prospective students in the field of education or in a field of interest relevant to education, for the purpose of admitting such students into programmes for which they have no formal recognised and required qualification" (University of Pretoria 2003:2).

What emerges from the definitions used is that, there seems to be a general acknowledgement of what RPL is, the need for recognising prior learning however, there are variations within these major groups in terms of the focus, emphasis and the purpose for RPL.

2.4.8.2 RPL implementation: historical and current developments

In South Africa, RPL has a very specific agenda, i.e. addressing issues of social justice. It was meant to support the transformation of the education and training system of the country (SAQA 2002:11). According to Osman and Castle (2004:126), RPL was meant to increase the participation rate of historically disadvantaged groups in higher education, and to improve the knowledge and skills base of the workforce in the interest of global competitiveness. In the National Plan for Higher Education (2001:28), outcome 3, RPL is branded as an important avenue for increasing the intake of non-traditional students and adult learners into higher education.

These intentions link RPL to issues of equity, redress and social justice, on the one hand, and to lifelong learning on the other (Osman & Castle 2004:126-127). The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) played a major role in influencing the White Paper on Education and Training (Department of Education: 1995) released by the ANC government. The Trade Union proposed RPL as a strategy through which a large number of experienced workers could be assessed for their prior learning, be granted formal qualifications (certificates) for such experience and then be able to obtain better wages through new opportunities for education (COSATU 2000). From a political perspective, RPL is a tool to narrow the wage and education gap left by the previous apartheid education system (Cooper 1998:143-157).

The HSRC initiated a three-year research and development programme in RPL between 1996 and 1999 in collaboration with the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the then Peninsula Technikon. The research addressed three major questions: What is RPL? Does the concept have applicability in the South African higher education context? If it does have application, what form might it take? The research work has since led to the development of Conceptual and Implementation Guides (Harris 2000). This supports earlier comments in that, well-developed supplements are available, but this is not an indication that there is meaningful progress in implementing RPL at institutional level.

The **Joint Education Trust (JET)**[20], established in 1992 to administer a R500-million contribution, over a period of five years, to education development by the corporate partners. JET has introduced a number of RPL initiatives, in line with their mission, which is to serve the learning needs of the most disadvantaged communities in and out of the workplaces. JET has an RPL Unit which has developed a CD-ROM based RPL and Assessor Training Course for the former Technikon Sector, which they say can be adapted to suit the University sector as well. The CD-ROM RPL course is in line with the HET 02 Unit Standard, which is a core Unit Standard on the Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education and Training (PGCHET). From JET's perspective, for the RPL training to unfold well, fully qualified RPL educators will mentor individuals registering for this course. Trained assessors who have successfully completed the course will gain 20 credits towards the PGCHET qualification.

The Workforce Development Division (WDD) at JET, seeks to train a cohort of RPL practitioners who will assist with the piloting of the RPL implementation process at their institutions, among selected RPL candidates from various fields of learning. The objective is to ensure that RPL becomes more available and accessible to historically disadvantaged individuals and marginalized communities. On the successful completion of the RPL pilot, the WDD plans to set up a fully functioning RPL centre.

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[20] The information on JET's contribution of lifelong learning opportunities for adult learners is obtainable from the website: http//www.jet.org.za/

There has not been much information on the progress of these initiatives since statements of intent and plans were issued by JET in collaboration with the then CTP.

Most of the earlier publications (Osman 2004; Snyman 2004; van Rooy 2002; Beekman 2002; Geyser 2001; Nieman 2001; Gawe 1999; and Harris 1999b) highlighted the need for national arrangements (a national RPL policy and procedures). As indicated in Chapter 1 section 1.1, through a SAQA-led process that included stakeholder participation, public inputs, and expert reviews, a national RPL policy became available in 2002, followed by another policy document on criteria and guidelines for implementation in 2004.

2.4.8.3 RPL Provisioning: model of quality assurance

There are several criteria formulated as a guide for a system of quality assurance in respect of RPL services offered by education and training providers (National policy document 2002:18-30). These criteria represent the overall national approach to the establishment of a credible assessment process, which in real terms include processes, services, and related procedures for RPL. A critique of these criteria done by van Rooyen (2001:1-17) indicates that there is a general agreement with what SAQA proposed, with very few areas of concern. It is unlikely that these concerns will remain contested areas more especially when institutions can start to implement. If the guidelines (make an audit of current practice; develop sector-specific/context-specific plans; capacity building of resources and staff; design assessment and moderation tools; and establish quality assurance mechanisms) in the strategic framework for implementation (SAQA 2004) are followed, there are possibilities that challenges in the actual implementation process can be overcome.

The areas of practice are discussed by a quality statement, followed by a self-audit tool (not included), which could be used by both ETQAs and providers to measure their progress against agreed targets. These areas of practice are:

- *Institutional policy and environment:* This area of practice highlights the fact that an enabling environment demonstrating commitment to RPL is essential.

- *Services and support to learners:* Learner/candidate support structures are a preventative measure, i.e.: a measure to enhance the success rate of candidates. These services and support structures should form part of the pre-assessment advice and counselling, which may include preparation for the assessment itself, educational planning and post-assessment support.

- *Training and registration of assessors and key personnel:* All personnel involved in the assessment of prior learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.

- *Methods and processes of 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.

- *Quality Management Systems:* Internal and external evaluation should form a critical review and quality improvement processes. There must be moderation, effective management, and reporting structures and systems.

- *Fees for RPL services:* Fees for the delivery and administration of assessment and RPL services should not create barriers for candidates.

- *RPL and curriculum development:* Providers should use methods of instruction and delivery to provide curricula that meets the diverse needs of the candidates.

Institutional Audits conducted by the CHE at institutions of higher learning are a form of quality assurance and are associated with quality improvement and enhancement (HEQCs Framework for Institutional Audits 2004:5). In the case where an institution needs to demonstrate a rigorous quality assurance process in the area of RPL, the evaluators would look at the following, into in terms of the policy in place: is it fit for purpose in advancing the institution's mission goals; does it address transformational challenges for the development of individual learners as well as the requirements of social and economic development; and does it provide value for money in relation to the full range of higher education purposes? Further, the HEQCs audits consider the relationship between quality and fitness of purpose, and the manner and extent to

which an institution's mission and academic activities take national priorities and needs into account, as well as respond to regional and international imperatives.

The HEQC has developed a set of criteria, which specifies its requirements for effective institutional quality management in those target areas, which form part of the first cycle of institutional audits from 2004 to 2009. The criteria function as evaluative tools that enable the institution, the audit panel appointed by the HEQC to focus on important institutional signals and indicators of quality as well as quality management. They will also serve as guidelines for institutions when doing their self-evaluation reports for the HEQC audits, together with additional requirements that institutions might set for themselves in order to further strengthen their internal quality arrangements. In the case of determining quality management systems of an institution in the area of RPL, the following Audit Criterion is used (Criteria for Institutional Audits 2004: 14 -15). Audit Criterion 14 on RPL means: The institution has an RPL policy, and effective procedures for recognizing prior learning and assessing current competence. In order to meet this criterion, the following are examples of what would be expected:

a) Institutional policy to support **access,** through RPL measures.
b) Effective procedures stipulated for RPL. This includes the identification, documentation, assessment, evaluation and transcription of prior learning against specified learning outcomes, so that it can articulate with current academic programmes and qualifications.
c) Assessment instruments designed for RPL and implemented in accordance with the institution's policies on fair and transparent assessment *(ibid 2004: 15-16).*

The CHE/HEQCs position on RPL based on the above criterion does not include award of credits or granting certificates through the RPL route, just ease of entry into higher education.

2.4.8.4 The RPL process of assessment

An example of a generic RPL process has been provided in the national RPL policy document from SAQA (2002:33). It has been described as follows:

Table 2.5: *RPL process in South Africa*

STAGE	EXPLANATION(S)
Stage 1: Application	Prospective RPL candidate submits an application to a higher education institution of his/her choice
Stage 2: RPL evidence facilitator meets candidates to conduct pre-screening to ascertain viability of application	If not viable, i.e.: candidate will clearly not meet the minimum requirements in terms of language/numeracy and/or other competencies, the candidate is referred for further advice on alternative pathways.
Stage 3: Pre-assessment	RPL evidence facilitator takes candidate(s) through preparation for assessment. This stage involves portfolio development; one-on-one advising; assessment approaches, tools and mechanisms and guidance on collecting evidence, which candidate undertakes.
Stage 4: The assessor (preferably with facilitator present) and candidate develop an assessment plan	This stage also includes the review of unit standard(s) requirements; determining the type and sources of evidence needed; design of assessment tools to be used in this assessment and identification of dates and times of the assessment.
Stage 5: Assessment	The candidate undergoes practical assessment, and/or sits knowledge test and/or goes through pre- and post interview.
Stage 6: Judgement	The evidence submitted is evaluated and judged by the assessor.
Stage 7: Moderation	
Stage 8: Feedback	If credit is not awarded, appeal process may be initiated.
Stage 9: Post-assessment support, if credit is awarded	

The other essential aspects of this process are that: RPL policies, procedures and system should be in place. Information on RPL is to be readily available, the provider must have developed criteria framework within which pre-screening takes place and these criteria should be readily available to candidates. There must be alternative pathways/options and additional counselling services, and where no facilitators are available, assessors should undertake all functions. The development of these procedures and processes is not an indication that they at institutional level they are being adhered to. As indicated in the preceding sections, there is not sufficient empirical data for purposes of comparison in terms of RPL practices in higher education, or for longitudinal studies. Table 2.6 shows a comparison of RPL implementation in countries utilising best practices.

The models of quality assurance for RPL assessment presented above are suitable for the South African Higher Education sector. These codes of good practice are clear and explicit. They should be easy to apply in assessing RPL candidates for their prior learning. It is worth noting that the University of Pretoria adopted these standards for its RPL practice, as reflected in the institutional RPL policy document released in 2002 (pages 7-11). However, stating them in policy documents does not necessarily mean they are being adhered to, an aspect that is being investigated in this study. Christie (1997:121) in Osman (2004a:1) says, "Policies are best understood in terms of practices on the ground, rather than in terms of idealist statement of intention or blueprints for action".

In summary, it can be stated that regardless of the above problems, issues and challenges, which have been identified worldwide, the practice of recognising prior learning for a variety of purposes has become firmly entrenched in some Developed Countries. This practice has been well documented and there are numerous testimonies by RPL beneficiaries and other stakeholders around the world who attest to its value in terms of considerable savings in time and money in higher education coupled with the benefits of personal development to mature-age learners (Simosko & Cook 1996).

Table 2.6: *A comparison of RPL implementation in countries with best practices*

Areas of comparison/Best practice candidates	RPL definition	RPL purpose	Historical and current developments	RPL model of quality assurance	RPL process of assessment
The United States of America (USA)	A very comprehensive definition of RPL including how it is to be viewed at different levels, i.e. by policy makers, institutions offering the service and related organisations, Faculty assessors, and the RPL candidates.	Social justice	RPL implementation is going strong in this country, with over 1700 colleges and universities affiliated to the most powerful organisation driving this process, i.e. the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL)	There are well-developed principles, standard sand procedures for RPL provisioning, which are being reviewed on a continual basis.	There are well-developed models of RPL assessment advocated for by CAEL for its constituents.
The United Kingdom (UK)	A very comprehensive definition is in place	Social justice	RPL implementation is still going strong in the country, with a number of studies having been done to determine the impact thereof.	Adopted and adapted the principles, standards, and procedures in use in the USA	There are principles that govern the assessment of prior learning
Canada	Adequately defined	Social justice	RPL implementation is still going strong in the country, with a number of studies having been done to determine the impact thereof.	Well-developed RPL model of quality assurance for its constituents	Simple, and clear procedures and processes for RPL assessments
Australia	Adequately defined to show the difference between RPL and credit transfer, which is not done by other countries	Social justice	RPL implementation is still going strong in the country, with a number of studies having been done to determine the impact thereof.	Well-developed RPL model of quality assurance for its constituents	Simple, and clear procedures and processes for RPL assessments
The Netherlands	A very comprehensive definition	Social justice	RPL implementation is still going strong in the country, with a number of studies having been done to determine the impact thereof.	Well-developed RPL model of quality assurance for its constituents	Simple, and clear procedures and processes for RPL assessments

South Africa	A very good country specific definition complemented by those used by major research councils and organisations having a role to play in higher education	Social justice	RPL implementation is still going on in the higher education sector, although at a very minimal scale	Well-developed RPL model of quality assurance for its constituents	Simple, and clear procedures and processes for RPL assessments

2.4.9 Summary/List of terminology used globally

Table 2.7: *A summary of the RPL terminology used globally*

COUNTRY/ACRONYM	DESCRIPTION
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment
CANADA	
PLAR	Prior Learning Accreditation and Recognition
UNITED KINGDOM	
APL	Accreditation of Prior Learning
APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
APL	Assessment of Prior Learning
APA	Assessment of Prior Achievement
APL/A	Assessment of Prior Learning and Assessment
APCL	Assessment of Prior Certified Learning
AAPLA	Assessment of Prior Learning and Achievement
ACC	Accreditation of Current Competence
AUSTRALIA	Recognition of Prior Learning
RPL	
SOUTH AFRICA	
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
ROCC	Recognition of Current Competence

2.5   SUMMARY

Many countries including South Africa have implemented RPL for sometime. What is common in all countries is that there are guidelines on procedures and processes for RPL implementers for quality assurance purposes. However, this does not mean that at the level of practice such standards, principles and procedures are being followed and adhered to. Several key issues addressed in this chapter are: RPL should be considered as a form of learning, which has to be given academic currency. RPL has a role to play in our societies. It has the potential of being an instrument for social justice, addressing issues such as access, equity, redress and lifelong learning. Special care needs to be taken in assessing this type of learning. What this means to providers of the RPL service is that policies and procedures for implementation need to be in place in order to safeguard the integrity of the process. RPL candidates should be assessed based on a well-developed model(s) of assessment, following a carefully thought of process that fits into all the activities in the academic year of the Faculty. I have placed special value on RPL assessment, mainly due to the novelty of this

process. We are dealing here with learning that has taken place in various contexts (formally, non-formally and informally), bearing in mind that "all learning is experiential". Failure to adhere to standards of quality assurance, which should be viewed as a quality assurance mechanism, could easily lead to poor practices (malpractices). I have cited a number of RPL practices, mainly from the international world, where RPL is implemented, for benchmarking the practice in the Faculty of Education, of the University of Pretoria. What has been identified in these practices will be used to determine how best this institution can improve (adapt) the quality of its RPL provisioning.

CHAPTER 3

THE DESIGN OF THE RPL SYSTEM

Inputs, process and outputs

3.1 INTRODUCTION

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

3.2 THE DESIGN OF THE RPL SYSTEM

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

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

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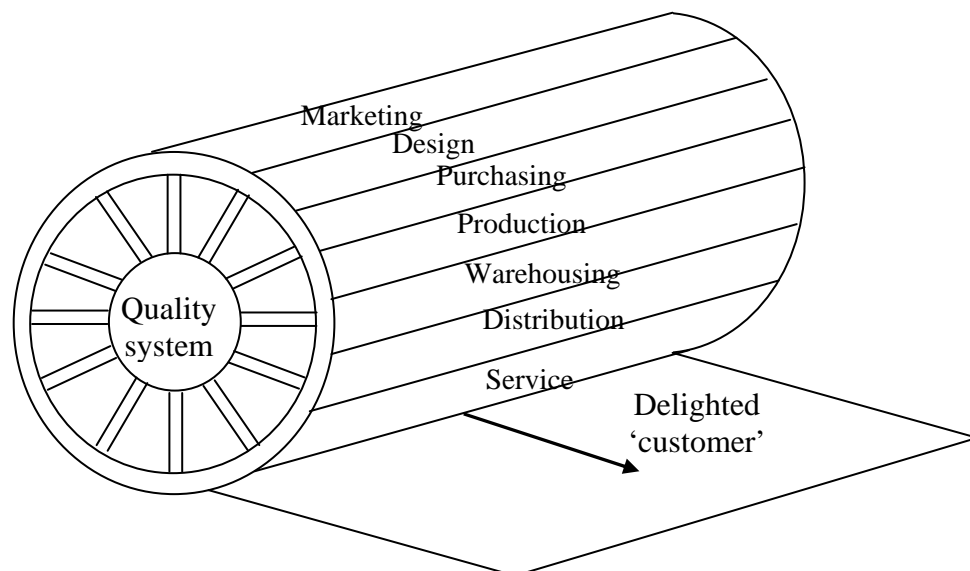
Figure 3.1: The quality system

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

Write down what you do

Justify what you do

Do what is written

Record what you did

Review what you did

Revise what you will do

Corrective
loop
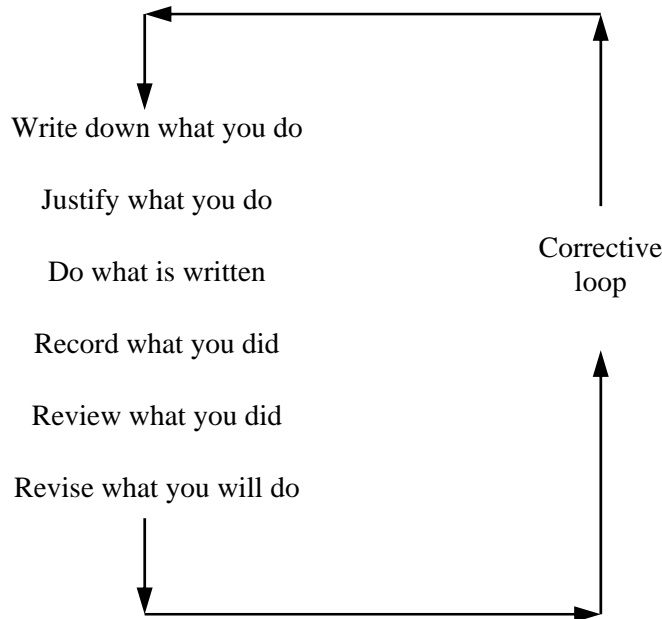
Figure 3.2: The quality system and never ending improvement

The ISO 9001 International Standards on the requirements for quality management systems promotes a process-based approach (SABS 2000) in conjunction with Deming's quality improvement cycle, in which the process of implementation converts inputs to outputs. During this process, products are designed and produced (realised). This family of standards is primarily concerned with 'quality management' i.e. what the institution does to meet customer requirements; meet applicable regulatory requirements; enhance customer satisfaction; and achieve continual improvement.
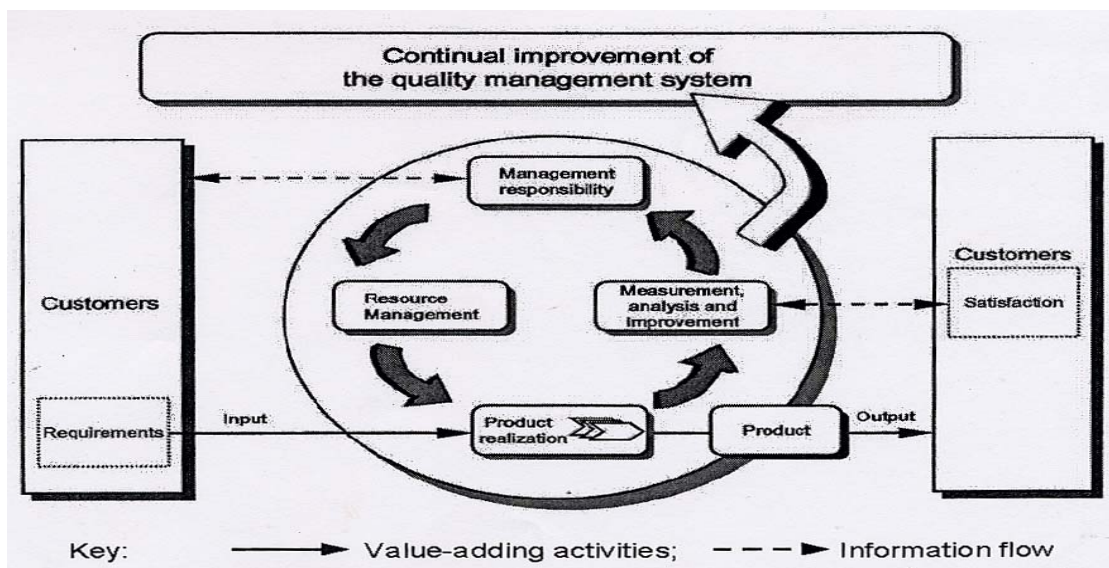
Figure 3.3: ISO 9001 model of a process-based quality management system (SABS 2000 cited by Fresen 2005)

3.3 THE INPUTS FOR DESIGNING THE RPL SYSTEM

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

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

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

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

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

The Committee for Technikon Principals (2001c:15) in their policy documentation on RPL cautions that institutional policies and procedures often serve as barriers, rather than enabling mechanisms for implementation. An important step would be to formulate an institutional RPL policy, where it would be clear how an institution defines RPL, what the purpose of RPL would be, and its target market[21] and target area(s) and to describe in full how it envisages quality provisioning of RPL. SAQA (2004:2) says, "Unless proper policies, structures and resources are allocated to a credible assessment process, implementation of RPL can easily become an area of contestation and conflict". It will also be helpful to undertake some internal marketing prior to advertising the facility externally. This will ensure institution-wide awareness of RPL, thus a series of leaflets, brochures, in-house seminars and team meetings to describe the process and develop plans for implementation will prove as valuable for marketing internally as for attracting learners (Field 1993:100). Another fundamental prerequisite of implementing RPL is a clarification on the entry points to the institution and the admissions requirements.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.3.1 Quality indicators: inputs used to design the RPL system

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

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

Area of practice (inputs)	Quality indicators
Institutional policy and environment	1. The mission and vision statement of the institution expresses an explicit commitment to the principles of equity, redress and inclusion.
	2. The strategic plan of the institution reflects planning for RPL implementation, in accordance with relevant legislation and policy.
	3. Information about RPL assessment opportunities and services are widely available and actively promoted.
	4. Admission procedures and systems are accessible and inclusive of learners with diverse needs and backgrounds.
	5. Equal access to opportunities to advice, support, time and resources for all candidates seeking assessment.
	6. Organisational structures ensure that evidence facilitators, assessors and moderators and other key personnel, such as advisors, are given sufficient support, resources and recognition for their services.
	7. Regional integration and collaboration are encouraged among institutions, professional bodies and workplaces where possible.
	8. Formal agreements between ETQAs, providers and workplaces are encouraged to ensure effective validation, articulation and recognition of RPL assessment results, where possible.
Services and support to RPL learners/candidates	9. Advising services and programmes assist prospective RPL learners to make effective choices about Learning Programmes, career and work-related opportunities.
	10. Advising services and programmes provide assistance RPL learners/candidates in preparing for assessment.
	11. Support services attempt to remove time, place and other barriers to RPL assessment.
	12. Evidence facilitators assist RPL candidates in preparing and presenting evidence in a coherent and systematic fashion.

Training and registration of assessors and key personnel	13. Structured short learning programmes or articulation-based programmes are increasingly available where required.
	14. The assessment of prior learning to be done by trained and registered assessors in accordance with the relevant principles and standards for assessment and moderation as set out in SAQA and other policy documents.
	15. Policies and review mechanisms regarding monitoring and quality assurance of evidence facilitators, assessors, moderators and other key personnel are in place.
	16. The function of evidence facilitator, assessor and advisor are clearly defined, and where possible should not be done by the same person.
	17. Training and development encourage mentoring relationships between staff with and those without assessment expertise.
	18. Quality Assurance (QA) systems are implemented to ensure that they increasingly meet the development objectives as agreed with the ETQA.
Methods and processes of assessment	19. The purpose of the assessment and the expectations of the candidate are clarified.
	20. Assessment plans take into account the form, quality and sources of evidence required.
	21. The form and quality of support to be provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment are established.
	22. The candidate is actively involved in all aspects of the assessment process to ensure that the assessment is fair and transparent. Possible barriers to fair assessments are identified and addressed.
	23. Assessment plans indicate a variety of appropriate assessment methods and instruments to validate diverse types of learning.
	24. The choice of assessment methods is **fit for purpose** and ensures reliable and valid assessment outcomes.
	25. An appeals process is in place and made known to the candidate.
	26. Assessment instruments and exemplars are developed and moderated in compliance with the ETQA requirements.
	27. Assessment reports indicate the assessment plan, the evidence presented, the assessment outcomes and recommendations for further action, including additional training and/or re-assessment.
	28. Moderation and review mechanisms are in place, including policy for verification, evaluation and quality assurance of assessments and assessment systems.
Quality Management Systems (QMS)	29. Quality Management Systems for assessment are designed, documented and implemented in accordance with agreed criteria and specifications.
	30. Quality Management Systems ensure the refining of assessment policies, procedures and services at all levels and inform planning for further development aimed at meeting agreed targets.
	31. Provide input from all key stakeholders, including representation from the candidate community.
	32. Provide for support in making developmental targets, including diagnostic, formal and summative activities.
	33. Evaluation and monitoring activities are clearly spelt out in

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

3.4   THE PROCESS OF RPL ASSESSMENTS

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

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

<div align="center">

PRE-ENTRY
⇓
CANDIDATE PROFILE
⇓
GATHERING, GENERATING AND COMPILING EVIDENCE
⇓
ASSESSMENT
⇓
ACCREDITATION
⇓
INFORMING THE CANDIDATE
⇓
CERTIFICATION AND RECORD KEEPING

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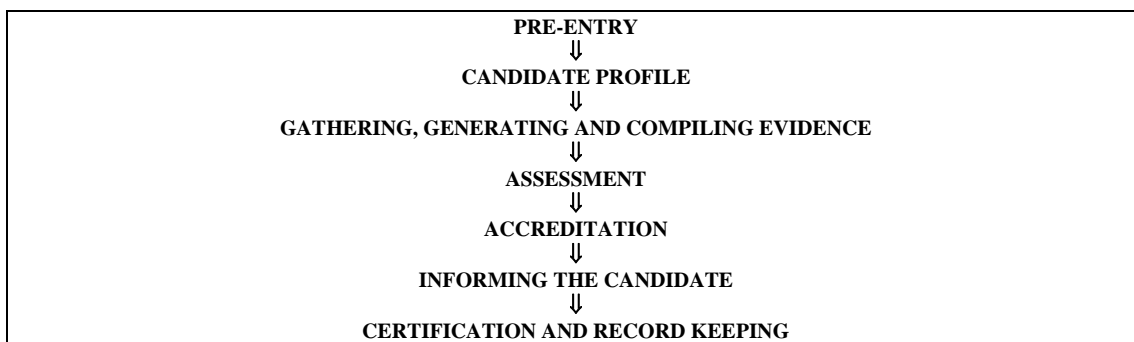
Figure 3.4: The RPL process of assessment

Stage 1: Pre-entry

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

Stage 2: Candidate profile

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

Stage 3: Gathering, generating and compiling evidence

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

Stage 4: Assessment

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

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

Stage 5: Accreditation

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

Step 6: Informing the candidate

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

Step 7: Certification and record keeping

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

3.4.1 Quality indicators in the process of RPL assessment

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

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

Stages of the RPL model	Quality Indicators
PRE-ENTRY	**Information on RPL**
	1. Dissemination of information on RPL (brochures, posters, information sessions, preparation sessions and broad marketing strategy)
	2. Individual counselling
	3. Meeting co-operate clients, if any
	4. Collaboration between training providers and industry
	Information about course(s) provided
	5. Career guidance counselling
	6. Complete curriculum documentation
	7. Key learning outcomes/competencies
	8. All learning outcomes/competencies
	9. Brief module/subject descriptors
	10. Course brochures
CANDIDATE PROFILE	11. Candidate's reflection of prior learning
	12. Candidate self-assessment
	13. Candidate's expectations clarified
GATHERING, GENERATING AND COMPILING EVIDENCE	14. Candidate identifies how they can best prove their competence
	15. Candidate collects and/or generate the necessary evidence
	16. Candidate to be responsible for collecting sufficient and valid evidence
	17. Programme/course standards or learning outcomes (unit standards) to serve as a guide
	18. Candidate to present the evidence
	19. Candidate to be able to use other ways to show competence (demonstration of a skill and competencies)
ASSESSMENT	20. Assessor to decide whether the evidence is

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

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

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

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

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

Role	Quality Indicators
Advisor	**Description of the role** 1. The role of the advisor (evidence facilitator) throughout the process of RPL assessment is that of facilitator. 2. The advisor can be a generalist as opposed to a subject specialist. 3. Current practice tends to suggest that the advisor needs to be a subject specialist. **Functions** 4. Initial screening or profiling 5. Ensuring the candidate understands the RPL guiding principles 6. Advise on alternative pathways 7. Advise on general portfolio construction 8. Advise on nature of evidence 9. Facilitate the development of self confidence during the process 10. When portfolio is ready for submission sign submission form.
Assessor(s)	**Functions** 11. They are custodians of academic/professional standards (learning outcomes) and quality thereof 12. They have to evaluate the evidence against programme learning outcomes or competence criteria 13. They also mediate between the individual's idiosyncratic language and perceptions of their previous learning **RPL assessor training and development: description** 14. How much training were they allowed? 15. How much time do they have to carry out the assessment? 16. What type of assessment material do they deal with? 17. Does the assessor have sufficient background knowledge of the area to carry out the assessment? 18. Are there mechanisms to cross check whether the assessment has been carried out correctly/consistently/comparable with other assessors? 19. Will an external/verifier check the assessment?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4.4 Standards for assessment and accreditation of prior learning

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2   Basing assessment fees on the number of credits awarded. RPL is offered as a service to candidates in order to maximise individual potential for learning. It also recognises equal opportunity of access. Like in most programmes or modules, the fee should be standard and declared in advance in order for a candidate to assess whether or not they can afford it. In being charged fees per credit, candidates are unlikely to know the cost until their portfolio has actually been submitted and assessed. This creates a dilemma in considering the candidate's ability to pay, especially if the application is not successful after a lot of effort has gone into producing a portfolio. This practice goes against administrative standard number 3, mentioned in section 3.3.4 above.

3   The evaluators uncovered the reason why institutions fail to separate the roles of the RPL advisor and assessor. It is good practice to separate the two roles as this maximises objectivity. There were institutions that argued against this, on the basis that supervisors of independent studies, for instance, are advisors who also assess the final piece of work. There was a misunderstanding in terms of the interpretation of principle number 6, (see section 3.3.3 above) which intimates that advisors may not always be subject specialists. The ruling made by the evaluators was that it is desirable that they are subject specialists but it is not imperative. To this end, and as reassurance of objective judgement, it is advisable that an advisor is not involved in the direct assessment of the final portfolio.

4   Some institutions promised an RPL service without regard for resources, staff development and expertise in the area. This affirmed concerns that institutions perceived RPL as common sense at times, and saw no need for a co-ordinated service and quality assurance. According to administrative standard number 9, mentioned in section 3.3.4 above, all personnel involved in RPL should receive appropriate training. Failure to do this compromises the authenticity and quality assurance of the whole service.

5   Other institutions had no method of checking inconsistencies and RPL malpractices internally. Internal evaluations are an important issue central to the provision of an equitable and fair service to the end-users. It therefore follows that if RPL is part of an institutional commitment, it should have the same

quality assurance mechanisms as other provisions.

6   There were instances where institutions failed to declare in advance the rules, regulations and criteria used for RPL assessment. As a rule, if the expectation from candidates to produce portfolios in order to gain credits, then the institution must give them clear criteria. In the United Kingdom, the criteria may include, inter alia, the learning outcomes to be satisfied, the RPL principles and the period in which the RPL process will take place. Both staff and candidates need to know this in advance.

7   Some institutions failed to provide a justified transcription of RPL outcomes including sufficiency of evidence as part of quality assurance. Feedback to candidates and the issuing of transcripts (as appropriate) is an important part of the RPL service. Feedback on the outcomes of the portfolio assessment should normally be part of the standard RPL service. Transcripts, on the other hand, can be issued on request. The institution, however, should have an agreed fee for the issue of a transcript to an individual.

8   The findings indicated that institutions were failing to check the authenticity of the RPL claim in a minority of cases candidates seemed to be promised admission or credits before the portfolio was even submitted for assessment. The evaluation team felt that perhaps this represented the intuitive knowledge some admission tutors claim they still use to determine the candidate's potential to benefit from a programme of study. RPL, however is not about intuitive judgement of suitability, it is about objective and tangible evidence about learning.

3.5   THE OUTPUTS OF THE RPL SYSTEM

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

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

Inputs + Value-Added Process = Quality Outputs

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

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

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

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

3.6   CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

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

3.6.1   TQM Philosophy

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 3.7: *How to operationalise the ADRI cycle*

PLAN	Development of an action plan, i.e. determine an **A**pproach
ACT	Implementation of the plan, i.e. **D**eployment
EVALUATE/MONITOR	Determine progress against plan on an ongoing basis and effect changes/modifications when necessary; and i.e. **R**eview plan
IMPROVE	Feedback of evaluation processes in order to generate **I**mprovements

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

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

3.6.3 The Systems Theory

The systems theory is the body of knowledge that analyses complex systems, their constituent parts and how they interact (Checkland 1999 in Fresen 2005:67). This theory indicates a complex, holistic system made up of constituent parts. This means "a complex solution must recognise the importance of processes, and for adequate checking of quality, we must take a balanced account of inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes (Woodhouse 2000:107 in Fresen 2005:69).
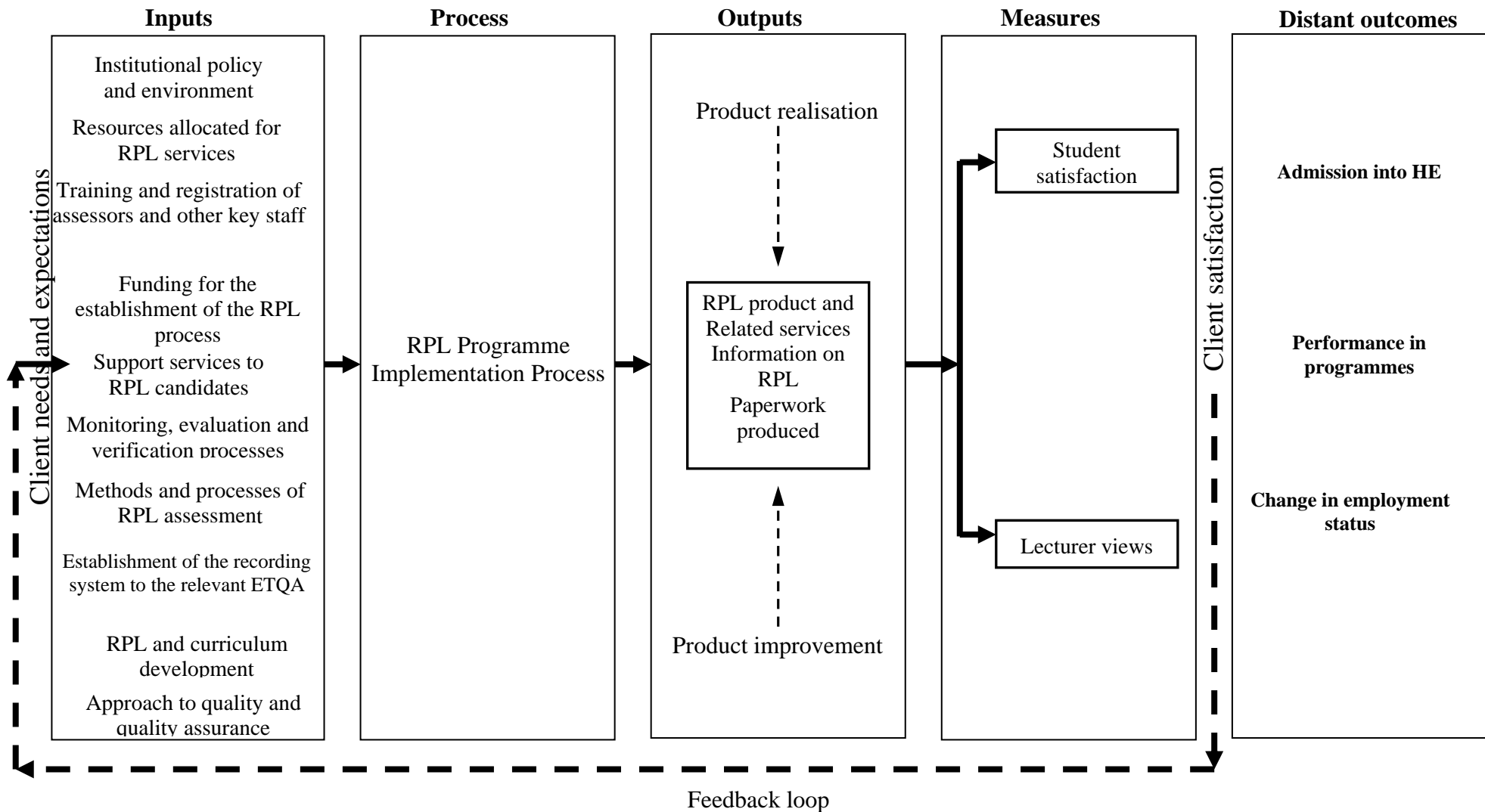
Figure 3.5: The conceptual framework for this study (adapted from Fresen 2005)

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

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

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

1. **Customer Focus,** where all university operational units must understand current and future "customer" needs, where the institution defines customers in terms of the services delivered. The units must at all times endeavour to meet customer requirements and strive to exceed customer expectations.

2. **Involvement of People**, meaning people at all levels of the university are the essence of its Quality Strategy and their abilities should be for the university's benefit.

3. **Management by Fact** implying that the units need to know the quality standards of their services from the customer perspective as the first step

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

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

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

In Figure 3.5, the solid black arrows represent the feedback loop, an integral part of Deming's cycle of quality improvement. Customer needs and expectations have been categorised in terms of the general customer requirements cited in the literature, which requires the identified inputs to be realised. To improve the programme, two feedback loops are important, that is the 'voice of the customer' (marketing activities) and the 'voice of the process' (measurements activities). The levels of evaluation[22] information included participants' reactions and feelings (Level 1); Level 2, dealing with learning (enhanced attitudes; perceptions or knowledge); and Level 3, addressing changes in skills (application of learning to enhance behaviour). In order to measure distant outcomes, archival records will be utilised.

3.7   SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 4

*RESEARCH DESIGN AND
METHODOLOGY*

4.1   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to describe in detail the plan used in addressing the research problem in this study. The research problem put succinctly is *"How does the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria implement the RPL Programme in relation to the international, national and institutional requirements for quality assurance"?* This problem emanated from three major concerns:

1. Are the elements (characteristics) of a credible RPL system (Heyns 2004: 186 & Osman 2004a:1) already researched in South Africa applied when designing the RPL programme?

2. Does the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria assess RPL candidates/learners properly into formal learning programmes in higher education? International and national literature abound with information on good practice guidelines in the assessment, evaluation, and accreditation of prior learning, as reflected in the literature review of this study in Chapter 3.

3. Are the clients (customers), both internally and externally (to some extent) satisfied with the RPL system that is in place at this institution?

In this chapter, I provide a critical discussion of the research philosophy, design, and methodology for the study. The philosophical underpinning of this study is advanced firstly in order to clarify the researcher's epistemological viewpoint and ontological stance. The research design gives a detailed description of the approaches used in this research and their appropriateness in terms of the nature, specific research problems and the overall aim of this study. Furthermore, it emphasises the complementarity of qualitative and quantitative research approaches in addressing the main and specific research questions (McMillan 2000:272).

The research methodology is presented in this study in relation to site selection, sampling and selection of participants; data collection strategies; instruments and techniques; data analysis; then a presentation of the trustworthiness features; the researcher's role in the programme evaluated; and management plan (time lines).

4.2   PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The research philosophy of this study draws from *naturalistic and logical positivist paradigms.* A paradigm represents worldviews or belief systems that guide researchers (Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998:3). In relation to qualitative approaches, the main features of this viewpoint are a consideration of multiple meanings, of individual experiences, meanings socially and historically constructed and the implications those constructions have for their behaviours and for those with whom they interact (Creswell 2003:18; Patton 2002:96). For quantitative methods, the main features are that, there are general principles or laws that govern the social world, which are used to predict human behaviour (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh 2002). With this assumption, the research findings can be generalised to a larger population.

Since this study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the quality and quality assurance mechanisms in the provisioning of RPL, the *interpretivist paradigm* of research is found to be most appropriate. This paradigm postulates that individuals interacting with their social world construct reality. The interpretative framework therefore sees human activity and institutions as 'social construction', created by people, rather than the product of external forces, which mould individuals, and institutions in ways that can be predictable (Vulliamy, Lewin & Stephens 1990:9). There are two essential constructs of interest in this study, namely 'quality' and 'quality assurance'. There was also no intent to manipulate variables by the researcher in relation to the envisaged results to address research question 3 mainly (Merriam 1998:9). The dominant feature of the interpretative research paradigm is that it foregrounds meanings that people assign to their experiences. However, what is central to this approach is that it does not attempt to represent the original 'voice' of those researched or their intentionality, instead it accepts that the researcher will construct his/her meanings from the research that has been undertaken, that the

research will be mediated through the investigator's own viewpoints (Merriam 1998:6).

4.3 RESEARCH DESIGN FOR THE STUDY

Merriam (1998:6) defines a research design as an architectural blueprint, a plan for assembling, organising and integrating information (data), which results into specific research findings. This research design should be seen as the action plan for getting from the starting point to the endpoint whereby the starting point is an initial set of questions and the endpoint is a set of conclusions drawn from the study about the questions being investigated. There are a number of intermediate steps such as data collection, analysis, and reporting. The logical sequence of the research design should assist the researcher to ensure that the evidence gathered addresses the research questions in the study (Yin 1989:27).

The debate over the merits of qualitative research as compared with quantitative has been going on over the years. "Some scientists see the qualitative approach as less rigorous and thus less acceptable as a way of doing research" (Ary *et al* 2002:23). According to Merriam (1998:6), the selection of a particular design is determined largely by how the problem is shaped, by the questions it raises and by the outcomes desired. As Walker (1985:16) in Ary, Jacobs and Razavieh (2002:23) says, "certain questions cannot be answered by quantitative methods, while others cannot be answered by qualitative ones". Some writers no longer view the quantitative-qualitative distinction as useful. There has been a trend over the years towards rapprochement, which manifests itself in research where the same study uses both approaches *(ibid).*

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative approaches (mixed methods) to research contributed to answering the research questions, and enabled the use of triangulation in relation to data collection and provide the opportunity for presenting a greater diversity of divergent views from all the participants (Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998:6). In the section below is a discussion of the different approaches used in this study.

4.3.1 Qualitative approaches in the study

The data were gathered directly from individuals in their natural environment (setting), in a non-manipulative and non-controlling situation. Qualitative inquiry shows concern for context, it assumes that human behaviour is context-bound, that human experience takes its meaning from, and therefore is inseparable from, social, historical, political, and cultural influences. There were no predetermined constraints on the findings (Patton 2002:40), except for loosely constructed set of propositions and assumptions. I collected detailed information using a variety of data collection strategies that respected the humanity of participants, and this was done over a sustained period of time at the site of investigation (Berg 2001:10; Creswell 2003:179-183). These strategies are interviews (formal and informal; face-to-face and telephonic); observations (participant and non-participant); survey questionnaires and interviews; document analysis; observational checklists; literature review; case studies, and reflective notes. In sections 4.7.1.1; 4.7.1.2; and 4.7.1.4 below is a detailed description of each of these strategies.

In line with Lincoln and Guba's (1985:210) advice to researchers, the approach to implementing the conceptualized framework was not fixed and rigid. I allowed for flexibility during the unfolding of the research process, reflected by slight changes and modifications in the final product. I was mindful of the fact that implementation of RPL is a process and careful attention was given to process and situation dynamics. A lot of reflection took place in between the different phases of the research process, and I had to constantly interpret the situation on the ground accurately, to continue getting the data that addresses the research problem in the study, i.e. quality assurance practice in RPL provisioning (Marshall & Rossman 1999:2-3).

4.3.2 Quantitative approaches in the study

I used objective measurement and statistical analysis of numerical data to understand and explain the phenomenon studied, i.e. client satisfaction with the RPL programme. In this part of the study, non-experimental approaches to research were used, in that as a researcher I had no direct influence on what has been selected for the study, either because it had already occurred or because it cannot be changed (McMillan 2000:9).

For example, as the principal evaluator I had no influence on how the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria, which is the Faculty under investigation, conceptualised and designed its RPL programme. Utilising this approach enabled the description of the implementation of the RPL programme at this particular Faculty with objectivity, and helped uncover salient relationships between variables.

Objectivism, derived largely from the social science tradition of **empiricism,** requires that evaluation information be 'scientifically objective' that is, it uses data collection and analysis techniques that yield results reproducible and verifiable by other reasonable and competent persons using the same techniques (Worthen & Sanders 1987:46). This means that the evaluation procedures are 'externalised', existing outside of the evaluator in clearly explicated form that is replicable by others and that will produce similar results from one investigation to the next. A **non-experimental approach** facilitated the simultaneous and effective collection of a wide range of data that describes, compares or correlates relationships in the study (McMillan 2000:9; Gay 1997:10-11).

4.4   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A **Case Study** research methodology was used to examine what needs to be done to improve quality provisioning of RPL in the Faculty of Education (University of Pretoria). Yin (2003:22-23) defines case studies as any empirical inquiry that examines a recent or contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence. A case study is appropriate when the phenomenon's variables cannot be separated from the context in which it operates and it is usually used as a **Research Strategy** in many settings, more especially when the 'how' and 'why' questions are being posed, as well as when the researcher has no control over the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam 1998:9).

Merriam (1998:26) points out that, case studies, "especially qualitative case studies are prevalent throughout education" and are commonly used for investigating implementation of innovative procedures or programmes, or the implementation of a new and untested policy. In each of these instances, the case "is a bounded system" *(ibid:27)* where the boundaries are able to indicate that data collection will not be

infinite and that the number of people to be interviewed will be finite and that there are certain aspects of the area of research that will not form part of the actual study.

A single-case design was followed, where there will be an investigation into all the facets of RPL provisioning in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. The unit of analysis refers to "what" the researcher will investigate, that is, the phenomenon of interest (Yin 1994:21). The unit of analysis is one of the key considerations that a researcher has to bear in mind in case study research (Yin 1994:31). The 'heart' of this particular study is quality and quality assurance measures in the provisioning of RPL in this Faculty.

Given that RPL is emerging in an institutional context undergoing several changes, the case study permits for "interpretation within context" (Merriam 1998:29), and allows for insight obtained from the study to serve as "recommendations" (ibid:29) which may assist future research in RPL and in adding or extending the knowledge base of RPL in higher education in South Africa. Miles and Huberman (1994:28) define case contexts as the physical location (parties involved; history of contacts) and the relevant aspects of the social system in which the actors appear (Faculty; department and positions held).

Berg (2001:231) distinguishes between types of case studies and case study design types, as applied in this study:

The **instrumental case study** was identified as being most appropriate for this study since it allowed the researcher an opportunity of providing insight into the implementation of the national RPL policy in a higher education institution by making special reference to the quality of RPL provisioning offered to its clientele (Berg 2001:229). The arguments, for and against the 'phenomenon RPL', were not of importance in this study. However, to afford the researcher a deeper understanding of the nature of the RPL product designed and the kind of services suitable for render to the end-users of the system, in-depth research on all aspects and activities dealing with its implementation was conducted.

The study also used to address exploratory, explanatory and descriptive research perspectives to afford the researcher an opportunity to make sense of fundamental

aspects related to RPL provisioning at various phases and pertinent aspects of conditions on the ground:

4.4.1   Exploratory research perspectives

With this research perspective, I explored possibilities for the improvement of the provisioning of RPL. I considered the views and opinions of the RPL candidates/learners who were assessed at this particular institution and the experiences of the lecturers that participated in the RPL assessment process. The purpose was to inform the researcher's viewpoint on what needs to be done to strengthen (improve) the quality and quality assurance measures of the RPL system that is in place in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria.

4.4.2   Explanatory research perspectives

In order to be truly explanatory, I analysed various components of the implementation of the national and institutional RPL policies and relationships between them to provide more than a surface understanding. Denzin and Lincoln (2000:388-389) pinpoint the researcher's critical role in a study: continually reassessing and refining issues while conducting fieldwork. I continually made interpretive comments from field notes in my reflective journal framing the key findings in the study, and traced theoretical discussions back to the data, using the pattern-matching technique between what should be and what is actually happening (praxis).

4.4.3   Descriptive research perspectives

By means of these research lenses, I offered a comprehensive and detailed account on how the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria manages quality through quality assurance in providing the RPL product and related services in order to interpret the significance of the impact of the phenomenon's variables.

4.5 SITE SELECTION, SAMPLING AND DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

I utilised a purposive sampling strategy to identify the institution used in the study. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981:276) "sampling is almost never or representative or random but purposive, intended to exploit competing views and fresh perspectives as fully as possible". Typical case sampling and snowball or chain sampling were used in this study to identify participants. According to Huysamen (1994:37), the research population includes the total collection of numbers, cases or elements about which the researcher wishes to draw conclusions. Merriam (1998:61) argues that the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting an information-rich case from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the study. Hence, some prior knowledge of the case is crucial for applying purposive sampling as a strategy to select a case. The three main criteria used in selecting the case were: (a) there must be a process of RPL provisioning going on; (b) willingness of the institution to participate in the study; and (c) ease of access into the institution where there will be minimal financial implications and geographical location of the institution.

Information rich and illuminative participants selected in this study were in a position to offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest. The rationale for sampling was aimed at insight about the phenomenon as well as being able to get empirical data to be used for generalisations from a sample to a population. The intent was to conduct interviews that aim to capture direct quotations about people's institutional and personal perspectives and experiences with the phenomenon and do observations that yield detailed and thick descriptions and for document review, only those that would add depth to these experiences were carefully selected (Patton 2002:40).

A self-selecting sample was used for the administration of the student questionnaire, since these were the participants who had experience with the RPL assessment processes in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria. In line with the overall aim of the study, suitable participants for this research included registered students (undergraduate and postgraduate) in the Faculty of Education of the

University of Pretoria; RPL candidates/learners; lecturers who participate in the RPL assessment process; the non-academic staff and senior managers in the Faculty, such as the dean, various heads of departments and directors of academic centres. Purposeful selection and voluntary participation in the research process were the main criteria used for selecting these participants.

4.6   DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES

The fieldwork took place in two phases:

Phase 1 involved the compilation of the **institutional profile,** advocated for by Flint and associates (1999:9). Institutional profiles give a picture of the nature of the institution under investigation. I hold on very strongly to the opinion that quality is made at the top. The leaders of an institution have a much greater impact on outcomes from a process, and thus the success of a particular activity, than the efforts of willing workers trying hard to do their best. The categories used for presenting information gathered were the historical background of the institution; demographics; approach to quality and quality assurance; changes/restructurings; and unique aspects of the institution related to RPL and quality assurance initiatives. In order to collect data for the above, the process involved an analysis of institutional documents, artefacts, and a visit to the institution's website.

In **Phase 2**, a variety of qualitative data collection strategies were employed to answer the THREE questions of research, such as document and text analysis; interactive fieldwork; notes from the reflective journal; interviews (formal and informal)/one-on-one or telephonic; and observations (participant and non-participant). The interviews used provided enabled the researcher to have a full understanding of participant's impressions and experiences, and to learn more about their answers to questions. The relevance of analysing documentation was in terms of providing a picture of how the RPL programme works without interrupting the programme or the client's routine in the programme. Observations afforded an opportunity of gathering accurate information about how a programme actually operates, particularly about processes.

To collect quantitative data, the sampling technique for administration of the student survey, lecturer survey, and observational checklists can be described as **self-selecting** as participants are all those who participated in the RPL process, i.e. RPL candidates and Faculty assessors. However, the emphasis was on **voluntary participation.** Mertens and McLaughlin (2004:146) argue that research conducted with volunteer participants generally tends to yield an accurate and realistic picture of the phenomenon studied. In most instances, such participants have hands on experience (practical) with the phenomenon studied and hence carry a wealth of valuable information, which they are willing to share 'without reservations'. They usually speak from an informed position and as a result, their voice in the entire research process needed interrogation. An in-depth analysis and comparison of individual RPL cases will be developed and compared with other (McNamara 2007). These cases are particularly useful in depicting a holistic portrayal of a client's experiences and results regarding a programme to evaluate the effectiveness of programme processes.

The following table provides an overview of the methods used in this study, i.e. the overall purpose, advantages, and challenges of each:

Table 4.1: *An overview of the methods for data collection used in the study*

Method	Overall purpose	Advantages	Challenges
Interviews	- when researcher wants to fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questions	- to get a full range of information - develops relations with client - allows flexibility with clients	- can take much time - can be hard to analyse and compare - can be costly - interviewer can bias client's responses
Document analysis/review	- when researcher wants an impression of how a programme operates without interrupting the programme	- can get comprehensive and historical information - doesn't interrupt programme or client's routine - information already exists - few biases about information	- often takes much time - information may be incomplete - need to be quite clear about you are looking for - not a flexible means of getting data; data restricted to what already exists

Observation	-	to get accurate information about how a programme actually operates, particularly processes	-	view operation of a programme as they are actually occurring	-	can be difficult to interpret seen behaviour
			-	can adapt to events as they occur	-	can be complex to categorise behaviours
					-	can influence behaviours of participants
					-	can be expensive
Survey questionnaires, interviews and checklists	-	when researcher needs to quickly and/or easily get lots of information from people in a non-threatening manner	-	can complete anonymously	-	might not get careful feedback
			-	inexpensive to administer	-	wording can bias client's responses
			-	easy to compare and analyse	-	are impersonal
			-	administer to many people	-	in surveys may need sampling expert
			-	can get lots of data	-	doesn't get full story
			-	many sample questionnaire already exist		
Case studies	-	to fully understand or depict client's experiences in a programme, and conduct comprehensive examination through cross comparison of cases	-	fully depicts client's experiences in programme input, process, and results	-	usually quite time consuming to collect, organise and describe
			-	powerful means to portray programme to outsiders	-	represents depth of information rather than the breadth

Source: http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/fnl_eval.htm#anchor1585345 retrieved on 15 February 2007

In the following section is a summary of data collection strategies in tabular form.

Table 4.2: *A summary of data collection strategies*

Research Questions	Data collection strategies	Data source
1. What is the quality in the inputs used to design the RPL system (product; services; and materials)?	• Interviews (individual) • Document/text review • Document/text analysis • Interactive field notes • Reflective journal notes • Observational checklist	**People** ⇒ The Dean: Faculty of Education ⇒ The HOD: Curriculum Studies ⇒ The HOD: Education Management, Law and Policy Studies ⇒ The Director: Centre for Evaluation and Assessment ⇒ The Director: Joint Centre

for Science, Mathematics and Technology Education
⇒ The Director: QA Unit
⇒ Registered students (postgraduate and undergraduate)
⇒ Non-academic staff
⇒ Lecturers in all the departments of the Faculty

Documentation

⇒ Institutional RPL policy
⇒ Faculty specific RPL policy
⇒ Admissions policy
⇒ Mission and vision statement of the institution
⇒ Strategic plan of the institution
⇒ Institutional documents on QA or any other communiqué
⇒ The National RPL policy
⇒ Criteria and guidelines for implementing RPL.
⇒ Criteria and guidelines on QMS

2. How does the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria assess RPL candidates for their prior learning? What is the quality of the RPL assessment process?	• Observations (participant and non-participant) • Document/text review • Document/text analysis • Observational checklist • Interactive field notes • Reflective journal notes	**People** ⇒ RPL candidate(s) ⇒ RPL assessor(s) ⇒ RPL advisor(s) ⇒ RPL evidence facilitator(s) ⇒ RPL administrator(s) **Documentation** ⇒ RPL learner's records ⇒ Letters and email correspondence between RPL candidates and staff involved in the RPL assessment process (artefacts) ⇒ The institution's RPL Assessment Policy ⇒ Criteria and Guidelines for Registration of Assessors ⇒ Standards developed/adapted by the institution for the assessment of prior learning

		⇒ Procedures and processes for prior learning
		Structure
		⇒ The 'RPL Unit'
3. What is the quality of the output (outcomes) of the RPL system? Is there client satisfaction with the RPL system?	• Questionnaires • Interviews • Observational checklist • Interactive field notes • Reflective journal notes	**People** ⇒ RPL learners ⇒ Lecturers who participated in the RPL assessment process ⇒ Progress of RPL learners (profile of one candidate)
		Documentation ⇒ Sample of portfolios submitted ⇒ Motivations by HODs for particular RPL candidates ⇒ External examiner's report ⇒ Faculty Board recommendations ⇒ Senate's decision on RPL recommendations ⇒ External auditors report on the RPL practice (institution wide) ⇒ Internal evaluations on the RPL practice (Faculty level) ⇒ Artefacts

4.6.1 Instruments and techniques for data collection

The instruments for data collection were developed in a deeply intense process. I was guided by my supervisor in the development of the questions in the instruments used. I started off with a set of basic questions, which were checked by my supervisor and other masters and doctoral students I regard as 'critical friends', and revised according to suggestions and comments provided. The refinement of the instruments assisted in focusing the questions more directly to my three research questions, thereby ensuring that the data collected would be relevant only to the three research questions. Instruments were piloted before the actual study and the responses and comments used to refine the instruments further.

4.6.1.1 Interviews

An interview is regarded as the explicit intentions and actions of the researcher, or interviewer, which converts 'a conversation' between two or more people into a 'study' of phenomena (Powney & Watts 1987:6). It is a useful way of getting large amounts of data quickly, where immediate follow-ups and clarification are possible. In the same way, limitations and weaknesses of this strategy need to be highlighted. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999:109-110), a lot depends on the cooperation of the interviewees. They might be unwilling or uncomfortable in sharing what the interviewer hopes to get, more especially when the interviewer lacks proper skills in relation to listening, questioning, posing probing questions and handling people.

For the purpose of this study, the interview schedule was most appropriate to elicit the necessary information from respondents, to enable the researcher to answer the first research question adequately. This question deals with quality in the inputs used to design the RPL programme. According to the ISO 9001 model of a process-based quality management system, the quality of inputs determines the quality of the output of the designed system (Fox 1993:263-265), and consequently the level of satisfaction with the system itself. I engaged in purposeful dialogue with those involved in the conceptualisation and design of the RPL programme to determine if there was

compliance with national specifications in terms of materials, actions, methods, people, and operations used.

The national requirements/specifications for implementing RPL from the policy document entitled "Criteria and Guidelines for RPL implementation" released in 2004 consulted formed part of the developed quality indicators in this area. The research conducted by Heyns (2003:186) identified elements (characteristics) of a credible RPL system. Osman (2004) presented the institutional variables required for implementing RPL. Using established RPL practices from countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia, and The Netherlands offered valuable lessons to improve the Faculty's current RPL practice (Lamdin 1992; Wong 1999; Simosko & Associates 1988; Simosko & Cook 1996). A table that indicates quality indicators in the inputs used for designing the RPL system, used as standards for basing judgement on quality in this area of evaluation, is included in Chapter 3, section 3.2.1.

A semi-structured interview schedule[23] for determining quality in the inputs used to design the RPL programme, was administered on the Dean: Faculty of Education; Head of Department: Curriculum Studies; Head of Department: Education Management, Law and Policy Studies; Director: Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA); and Director: Joint Centre for Science, Mathematics and Technology Education (JCSMTE).

There was also a need to interview people on the ground to find out if they know about the RPL product and services offered in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria. A semi-structured interview schedule[24] was designed for these respondents and open-ended and a few closed questions ranging from what RPL is to issues related to specific aspects of the RPL process were posed. The assumption when these questions were structured was that, the institution must have communicated this information to its population by way of information sessions, workshops or publicity materials. Everyone within the Faculty of Education of the

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[23] See Annexure A for the Interview Schedule on the quality of inputs used to design the RPL system

[24] See Annexure B for the Interview Schedule on RPL knowledge and awareness of its activities

University of Pretoria was a potential participant, and the main criterion was willingness to participate in interviews. This process involved registered students in the Faculty of Education (undergraduates and postgraduates); lecturers in all the departments of the School of Educational Studies for Postgraduate Programmes in the Faculty; and its non-academic staff. It was important to determine whether there is articulation between the institution's intent to provide RPL and what the university's population know about the RPL system that is in place. In most instances, institutional policy documents and intents may be available and clearly articulated by administrators of the institution, but the extent to which students and staff are aware of activities related to RPL may be another issue.

In order to determine if there is a relationship between what the Quality Assurance (QA) Unit of the University of Pretoria promotes and application of quality and quality assurance principles at service delivery level, an interview[25] was conducted with the Director of the Quality Assurance Unit.

The interviews were audio taped, through the knowledge and permission of the interviewees. Interviewing participants in this study enabled me to get a full range and depth of the information needed. A pleasant relationship was established with all the participants and there was a lot of flexibility in handling the interview situation as each contributor turned out to be unique in relation to the experience on RPL related matters they brought along. All the participants were given an opportunity to express their views and opinions on RPL freely without being coerced into a particular viewpoint, although they were given specific directives in terms of what to provide information on (Mertens & McLaughlin 2004:169).

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[25] See Annexure C for the Interview Schedule for the link between the QA Unit and units of operation at the micro level (service delivery)

Table 4.3: *A summary of the respondents interviewed*

Interviews	Respondents	Numbers
1. The design of the RPL system	The Dean: Faculty of Education	2
	The HOD: Curriculum Studies	1
	The HOD: Education Management, Law and Policy Studies	1
	The Director: Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA)	1
	The Director: Joint Centre for Science, Mathematics and Technology Education	2
2. Knowledge and awareness of RPL activities	Registered students	
	Undergraduates	3
	Postgraduates	4
	Non-academic staff	4
	Lecturers	6
3. The link between the QA Unit and application of quality assurance measures at service delivery level	The Director: Quality Assurance	2
Total:		**26**

This total number includes pilot interviews. All the interviews were conducted during the same period, i.e. between April and June 2006. I then transcribed all these interviews and submitted the transcripts to my subjects for verification and/or amendments. None of the participants had any major concerns regarding the contents of the transcripts, they actually added to the data by providing additional information or clarifying what they meant. The interview process ended with a huge volume of data from all these various data sources.

4.6.1.2 Observations

An observation tool was designed to assist in gathering data in relation to the second research question. With this instrument, the intention was to determine the manner in the Faculty conducts RPL assessments, i.e. whether the entire process conforms to national and international principles, standards, and procedures. In the USA, who is

the pioneers of RPL provisioning, there are principles, ten standards, and a well-developed process of assessing and accrediting prior learning (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:38). Other countries have adapted these standards to suite their particular contexts, including South Africa, and particularly the University of Pretoria.

The observation (participant and non-participant)[26] on RPL assessments involved six stages of the assessment process. According to the University of Pretoria's RPL policy, the institution makes use of the learner-centred assessment model used in the United Kingdom (Simosko & Cook 1996:21-27). The stages in the assessment process were the pre-entry (applications and administration); candidate profiling; gathering, generating and compiling evidence; assessment; accreditation; and the post-assessment guidance.

A good practice checklist[27] with two subheadings, namely, Macro (Administrative) Quality and Micro (Academic) Quality was used (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:41), to collect data that would enable one to determine quality in the RPL assessment process. I completed this observational checklist in an unobtrusive manner, at various stages of the data collection process.

As a 'partly internal evaluator', the observation period included informal interviews of various participants, such as the administrative personnel, RPL assessors and members of the RPL committee, to verify certain aspects of the RPL assessment procedure and process in the Faculty, against what should be. There was a lot of cooperation from Faculty academics because of the trust established over time.

4.6.1.3 Survey questionnaires and interviews

I administered survey questionnaires[28] to the students who have gone through the RPL assessment process in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, to determine if they were satisfied with the entire process and procedures.

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[26] See Annexure D for the observation tool (participant and non-participant)

[27] See Annexure E for the checklist on macro and micro quality

[28] See Annexure F for the student survey questionnaire

Administration of this survey was by e-mail, which had the advantage of prompt responses, lower item non-responses, and more complete answers to open-ended questions (Ary *et al.* 2002:385; Babbie 1995:256-257; Babbie & Mouton 2001:262-264).

The third research question focuses on the quality of the output of the RPL system and the intent with the questionnaire was to determine if there is client satisfaction in a number of areas, such as the availability of the RPL product, services and materials; the RPL product is delivered at a time and place convenient to the clients; the system contributes to the development of RPL candidates; the system is reliable and that it performs as expected by the state, the institution and the clients. In this case, the major clients were the RPL candidates/learners and lecturers who participated in the RPL process. This question explores, from the customer's perspective, what aspects of the RPL system provides satisfaction and what needs to be refined and improved. Another element inherent in this question is whether the designed RPL system meets the requirements of the state. The administration of questionnaires was followed by interviews[29] to get lecturers to comment on how they experienced the assessment process, and their opinions on what needs to be done to bring about improvement to the current practice.

There are certain issues of interest from the quantitative data that were explored to find out how they do contribute to improving provisioning of RPL. Issues and themes were identified by analysing the open-ended responses, until data saturation was observed, at which point analysis of the open-ended responses was terminated. Lincoln and Guba (1985:350) define data saturation as "continuing data collection produces tiny increments of new information in comparison to the effort expended to get them". The main issue of focus is whether the RPL system meets customer requirements.

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[29] See G for the lecturer interview schedule

4.6.1.3.1 Format of the questionnaire and questionnaire items

The number of items in the student questionnaire was kept to a minimum (20 items) so as not to frustrate the respondents with a lengthy questionnaire. For the closed-ended questions, a 5-point Likert scale (Likert 1932 in Ary *et al* 2002:224) used ranged from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, which was easy to score on Ms-Excell. Open questions were kept to a minimum (two) and RPL candidates were asked to give concise answers (in point form) to these two open responses. Since all the other relevant information (personal particulars) on these candidates is available at the various departments, I left out the section on biographical data. In using the data from archival records, I will mask the identities of the actual participants, by using pseudo-names.

The instrument for collection of quantitative data (student questionnaire) is a standard (but adapted) one used in England at institutions offering RPL to elicit constructive feedback from RPL candidates on the assessment process (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:37-38). The construction of the questionnaire involved RPL specialists in that country and by implication it had the following characteristics: (1) it is appropriate for measuring what it is supposed to measure; and (2) questionnaire items are a representative sample of the attitude under investigation, i.e. client satisfaction. A covering letter[30] crafted and mailed to all the respondents detailed the purpose of the study, a request for cooperation, and the protection provided to the respondents.

4.6.1.3.2 Pre-testing the student questionnaire and lecturer interview schedule

Without standards for validity, questionnaires can be misused and actually may have deleterious effects on the respondents. **Content validity** is the degree to which the sample of questionnaire items represents the content that the questionnaire intends to measure (Borg & Gall 1979:212). **Construct validity** on the other hand is the extent to which a particular questionnaire can measure a construct it purports to measure, such as client satisfaction. The standardised questionnaire administered to five

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[30] See Annexure H for a copy of the covering letter for the student survey questionnaire

Masters and PhD students addressed these questions: Do the respondents seem comfortable with the questionnaire and motivated to answer it? Are certain items confusing? Could some items result in hostility or embarrassment on the part of the respondents? How long will it take a respondent to complete the questionnaire? Do all respondents interpret the items in the same way? The purpose of giving the draft questionnaire and interview schedule to my supervisor and critical reader was for them to check whether the instruments will provide the desired data and whether there may be any unforeseen problems overlooked during the process of development, prior to being administered. Based on the comments received, I then made improvements to the original document.

To test for the **validity and reliability of the item scores,** the SPSS programme enabled the calculation of the item analysis and the index of reliability. The calculation of the item analysis generated three statistics, namely, the item discrimination index, the number and/or percentage of respondents marking each choice to each item and the item mean and standard deviation. The item discrimination index shows the extent to which each item discriminates among the respondents in the same way as the total score discriminates. All the items used in the analysis correlate at least .25 with the total score. The output of the SPSS programme is in tabular form, indicating all the necessary information needed for analysis of the results. The other score from the item analysis indicate the extent to which responses spread out among the response categories preferred over items.

Reliability is concerned with the extent to which the measure would yield consistent results each time it is used. To calculate the index of reliability, the best index to use for an attitude scale is **Coefficient Alpha**, which provides a measure of the extent to which all the items are positively inter-correlated and working together to measure one trait or characteristic (Ary *et al* 2002:259). The SPSS programme (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) is very useful in calculating this value. I highlighted all the items with very low scores, and made possible explanations regarding their usefulness, followed by the necessary amendments.

Reliability interpretation

The values range from 0.00 to 1.00. The higher the value, the more reliable the item score is. Higher reliability indicates that item statements are measuring the same construct (George & Mallery 2001). The table below describes interpretation of reliability scores:

Table 4.4: *Interpretation of reliability scores*

Reliability score	Description
.90 and above	Excellent reliability
.80 - .90	Very good
.70 - .80	Good. There are probably a few questions that could be improved
.60 - .70	It is somewhat low. There are probably some questions that could be improved
.50 - .60	This suggests the need to revise the test, or to supplement it by other measures for grading
.50 or below	Reliability is questionable: probably the instrument needs revision

Table 4.5: *A summary of questionnaire returns (%)*

Survey questionnaires/interviews	RPL learners	Lecturers	Total
Determine client satisfaction and get opinions on the RPL system	13 (92%)	5 (92%)	18

4.6.1.4 Document/text review and analysis

Document analysis is a research method applied to written or visual materials for the purpose of identifying specified characteristics of the material (Ary *et al* 2002:442). In this study, it was used to identify the biases and prejudices towards RPL; the discrepancies between national/international policy documents and institutional ones, and between institutional and Faculty documents on RPL and quality assurance, and to describe the prevailing practice in RPL provisioning. A number of data sources developed and used by the institution during the implementation of RPL were consulted, in the form of documentation, archival records and artefacts:

a) The Institutional RPL policy, or any document that outlines how the institution intends to assess and accredit prior learning
b) Faculty specific RPL policy, Faculty of Education
c) The institutions admissions policy for the years 2005 and 2006
d) Institutional documents on Quality Assurance (QA)
e) Documents from the CHE/HEQC or communiqués with information on RPL
f) Section of the report on the institutional audits conducted by the CHE/HEQC, which highlighted RPL issues
g) The Institutions mission, vision and strategic plan (current and operational one)
h) Internal records on RPL statistics/cases
i) The National RPL policy document from SAQA
j) Policy document on criteria and guidelines for RPL implementation from SAQA
k) Policy document on criteria for the registration of assessors from SAQA
l) Assessment Reports from the RPL committee of the Faculty of Education indicating how the RPL candidates was assessed
m) Documents forwarded to the Faculty Board and the SENATE of the University of Pretoria on RPL candidates
n) Portfolios submitted by RPL candidates for assessment
o) External examiners report of the RPL assessment
p) Standards, procedures and processes for RPL assessment in other countries (QA measures)

4.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis:

I have used the following approach to analyse the data collected in case studies, that is, **Interpretational Analysis:** examining the data for constructs, themes and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon studied. Analysis of the data was inductive and on-going (Miles & Huberman 1994:68). The data was analysed by constructing categories and/or themes that cut across the sources. Pre-coded categories derived from the conceptual framework, as well as from codes emerging from ongoing fieldwork were used to analyse the data. The perspectives/views of different participants were compared and contrasted according to the different interests they represent. One of the analytical challenges confronting the study is how best to understand the different views, understanding and interpretations (perceptions) and opinions held by different participants where there are multiple realities. Therefore, the **Discrepancy Analysis** served as a useful tool to interrogate the voices of participants. The discrepancies between what an institution stated and what it actually does is very common and has been the subject of intensive studies of late.

There are three sets of observations to demonstrate discrepancies within organisations: firstly, that the objectives, goals and targets espoused by the policy makers are not always those actually pursued; the second point concerns the differences between what the organisation does, believes it does, is believed by others to do, and is supposed to do, and thirdly, discrepancy between the expected/espoused institutional environment versus the actual situation of the institution. This is in terms of who says what, and who is strategically positioned to ensure that the status quo is maintained, if the institution is opposed to a change of approach.

I therefore utilised the conception of discrepancy analysis to analyse the quality of RPL provisioning by comparing different sources of information with a view to constructing an understanding of reality that reflects its complexity (Potter in Miles & Huberman 1994:606-620). Findings from the research will be presented qualitatively, using texts as well as tables, matrices and diagrams where possible. An attempt made to establish a strong chain of evidence (audit trail) was to increase validity and reliability of the findings. In order to analyse the data from documentation, archival records and artefacts, **Content Analysis** and pattern matching was done (Franzosi in Miles & Huberman 1994:547-554).

Quantitative data analysis:

For the 5-point **Likert Type** scale, the data will be analysed statistically to determine frequencies of responses (Ary, Jacobs & Razavieh 2002:329). The Likert scale is the most appropriate in determining/assessing respondent's attitude (satisfaction) on the RPL programme. Respondents answered a set of statements on the output of the design process, involving the RPL product, related services rendered, paperwork produced and information on RPL. The respondents were to indicate for each item whether they strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree and strongly disagree. To score the scale, the response categories were weighted. For favourable or positively stated items, the numeric values 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 respectively were assigned to the response categories beginning at the favourable end (strongly agree). The total score was determined by summing up the numeric responses given to each item by individual respondents. This total score represented the respondent's attitude to the item. There have been some questions whether the undecided option should be included in a

Likert scale. Most experts in the field recommend that the researcher include a neutral or undecided choice because some respondents actually feel that way and do not want to be forced into agreeing and disagreeing *(ibid 2002:225)*.

4.8   RESEARCHER'S ROLE IN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

In relation to the qualitative part of this study, I was the 'main instrument' for data collection. Creswell (1994:145) states that data in this type of research is mediated through this human instrument, rather than through inventories, questionnaires, or machines. Although qualitative studies have several advantages, one of the consequences of being the principal instrument of data collection is that the researcher could ring personal biases to the study (Marshall & Rossman 1999; Wolcott 1995). In terms of my research role, I oscillated between being a 'partial internal evaluator' to a 'total external evaluator'. The main challenge I faced was having limited knowledge of the RPL practice, organisational and the political environment prevalent in the Faculty.

Trust amongst staff (participants) was developed over time. This alone facilitated access to the site of investigation and ensured maximum cooperation from participants, and I envisage that the results would provide a fresh look at the RPL practice to those who are involved in the process of assessing prior learning (Shapiro & Blackwell 1987; Patton 1997; Scriven 1997; Weiss 1998; Kushner 2000). One of the disadvantages of using internal evaluators only, is that they tend to be less objective, than external evaluators.

There were various activities and processes related to RPL provisioning I was invited to by Faculty academics, as an external researcher. Involvement in all these activities and processes enabled me to view operations (events and activities) of RPL provisioning as they are actually occurring.

4.9 TRUSTWORHTY FEATURES

The trustworthiness of reported observations and interpretations of interviews would strive for maximum validity through the following mechanisms:

Triangulation: multiple sources of data (people; documents and facilities) and various strategies for data collection increased the likelihood of understanding the phenomenon under study from various points of view. Data triangulation assisted in determining whether the data collected with one procedure or instrument confirmed the data collected using a different procedure or instrument. I wanted to find support for the observations and conclusions in more than one data source. This method was also to assist with the search for convergence of a major theme or pattern in the data from these various sources, which leads to credibility of the findings.

Member checks: the tape-recorded and transcribed data was taken back to the people from whom they were derived to confirm the accuracy of the information. In addition, participants were asked to comment both on the categories developed for the analysis of data, as well as the final narrative. Feedback from the participants gave further insights and drew attention to some other aspects missed. Through member checking I wanted to demonstrate courtesy to the participants by letting them see what has been written about them.

Building an audit trail: I developed a database containing raw data gathered during interviews, observations, administration of the questionnaire, and records of my decisions about whom to interview or what to observe and why, and only this information will be utilised. The results of all the interviews, questionnaire data, including documents availed by the institution, and notes on observation as well as from the reflective journal were kept in a database (electronic and manual). This database was given to my supervisor to examine, prior to the writing up stage, and will be availed to any other third-party auditor to attest to the dependability of procedures and confirmability of the findings.

Repeated observation: Repeated observation of the processes of RPL provisioning and gathering data over a considerable period increased the validity of the findings. Being in

the field over time solidified evidence because I was able to confirm the data over time, and compare interview data with observational data.

Peer/Expert Review: I used multiple sources of evidence, establish a chain of evidence and had key informants review various aspects of the research process. This activity was done during the data collection as well as the writing up stages.

Working with a team: The key peer reviewer(s) who assisted with the review throughout the research process were also requested to comment on the following aspects: content of the study; structure and layout of the research report; presentation of data after analysis and overall quality of the report, i.e. they acted as quality controllers of my research project.

I acquired the services of established and reputable academics from the University of Pretoria to act as my critical readers or experts in the field of research methodologies, the content on RPL, assessment (evaluation), quality and quality assurance, to further test the validity of my findings on 'the quality of the implementation of the RPL programme in higher education'. In addition, a professional in the field of language editing edited the final narrative. A graphic designer worked on the all the diagrams used, as well as the design and layout of the Thesis.

4.9.1   Ethical considerations

I used the case study protocol where the institution and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity (the identity of the cases were masked), wherever possible. In elaborating on the protocol or ethical issues, I ensured that all the participants were made aware of the purpose (goal) and outcomes (objectives) of the study. The research instruments designed served the purpose of eliciting information the study intends to get. There was an undertaking from the onset not to deceive participants in any way. All the participants interviewed were requested to complete a consent form prior to the interviews. See **Annexure I** for a copy of the consent form signed by all the participants interviewed. The Dean of the Faculty of Education granted permission to conduct fieldwork at the Groenkloof Campus (Faculty of Education) of the University of Pretoria. See **Annexure J** for a copy of the permission

letter from the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria. In terms of reciprocity, the research report is going to be part of the university's property, accessed by all members of staff and the student body, as well as being utilised for any other purpose the university might deem fit.

4.10 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Yin (1989:22) argues that good case studies are very difficult to do, because of the intricacies and the rigour that is involved. The limitations of this study are:

I will be the main instrument for the collection and analysis of data. This creates the possibility of researcher bias being introduced in the research study. In order to minimise the effect of this limitation, I made use of a variety of strategies, in order to establish reliability and validity of the research findings. I also ensured that I adhere to proper ethical standards during the research process and I handled the data collection period and analysis thereof with the needed rigour and scrutiny.

Since case studies in general provide little basis for making scientific generalizations, I have stated that it is not my intention to make broad generalisations, even within the other faculties of the University of Pretoria. I have stated the purpose of the study explicitly, namely, improving quality provisioning of RPL at an institution of higher learning; it will remain the prerogative of the readers if they may find the findings in this study relevant to improve their own RPL practices. According to Yin (1994:10) the study may be "generalisable to theoretical propositions" but not to all higher education institutions and faculties within the University of Pretoria.

Qualitative studies usually result in large amounts of data that needs to be managed and kept safely (having a research database) and careful consideration needs to be taken when analysing qualitative data. The loss or omission of information could result in a lack of continuity or incoherence in the final analysis of the data. I then created a logical case study database for each set of data collected, both manually and electronically and the databases were then stored in various places of safety.

The sample size for administration of the questionnaire was very small. Calculations of the item index and reliability coefficients was done as a standard practice, however, very little could be done to increase either the validity or reliability scores in cases where the researcher was expected to increase the population size. The use of standardised and published instruments is not promoted by many authors, since there could be inherent problems with such instruments impacting negatively on the quality of results obtained. In addition to instrument having 'face validity', it was pre-tested, and checked by specialists in the area of RPL for accuracy and appropriateness of items to measure client satisfaction.

I experienced that it takes great effort and skill to apply mixed model designs appropriately in a case study. The researcher needs to be specific in terms of where the mixing occurs, and be able to justify the use of such approaches at those various points adequately. All the methods for data collection have advantages and disadvantages, however great care was taken in coming up with alternative ways to circumvent the limitations of each instrument used.

4.11 RESEARCH MANAGEMENT PLAN

The plan for conducting the research was drawn in the early stages of the research process and was followed accordingly. However, the process of implementation was not a smooth one since there were many changes made and adjustments to the original schedule. Specifically, this related to the following aspects: changing the research topic; reformulating the main research question; rephrasing the research question(s); revisiting the research design and methodology and making the necessary adaptations, prior to the data collection phase and reviewing the literature on an ongoing basis and making the necessary changes to the content of the Thesis.

The following section presents the research management plan in tabular form

Table 4.6: *The research management plan*

ACTIVITY	TIMELINES
A. Research project starts	January to September 2005 (9 months)
Milestones	
Development of the research proposal	
<u>Sub-activities</u>	
- Research topic: finalisation and acceptance - Ethics statement: acceptance - Research proposal: defence and acceptance	
B. Data collection: Phase 1	September to November 2005 (3 months)
Compilation of the Institutional Profile	
- Review relevant institutional documents - Develop a framework for document/text analysis - Keep fieldwork notes - Keep reflective journal notes	
C. Review of the research process	January to March 2006 (3 months)
<u>Sub-activity</u>	
- Analysis of the data collected for the compilation of the institutional profile	
D. Data collection: Phase 2	April to June 2006
The other part of the data collection was to address the three research questions.	
<u>Sub-activities</u>	
- Develop interview schedules - Start interviews - Keep fieldwork notes - Transcribe interview tapes - Keep reflective journal (notes)	
E. Capture data and edit data	July 2006 (1 month)
F. Data analysis	August to September 2006 (3 months)

G.	**Write Thesis**	October to December 2006
		(3 months)
H.	**Final editing**	January to February 2007
		(2 months)
I.	**Submission of the Thesis for External Examination**	April 2007

4.12 SUMMARY

The case study of the evaluation of the RPL programme in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria was designed to provide a detailed and comprehensive picture of the quality assurance measures built into the programme. In the quest for a deeper understanding of a quality RPL system, I utilised various strategies for data collection and approached the 'case' from an interpretative perspective. I applied both naturalistic/constructivist and positivist paradigms in the research design. In order to ensure validity and reliability of the research findings, a pilot study was done and the results were used to refine the instruments that were finally used. I identified the limitations of this study and indicated strategies to be employed to overcome the challenges of using mixed methods in case studies.

Individual participants for the study were selected because they were viewed as 'information rich' and illuminative cases, in the sense that they offered useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest. The rationale for sampling was aimed at insight about the phenomenon and not only empirical generalizations from a sample to a population. The intent was to conduct interviews that aim to capture direct quotations about people's personal perspectives and experiences with the phenomenon and do observations that yield detailed and thick descriptions and for document review, only those that would add depth to these experiences were carefully selected. In the next chapter, I will provide the account of the research findings.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

QUALITY OF THE INPUTS USED TO

DESIGN THE RPL SYSTEM

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 polices, 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[31] 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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[31] 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 t**o, 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[32] 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 to 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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[32] 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[33], 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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[33] 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[34]) 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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[34] 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[35], 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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[35] 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 ETDPSETA. 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 ETDPSETA, 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 in 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[36] meeting.

5.2.7.2   Procedures and processes of RPL assessment

In terms of the procedure and process of RPL assessment, the Programme Manager[37] 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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[36] RPLCF stands for the RPL Committee of the Faculty of Education.

[37] 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[38]

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 19th of April 2006 where he was subjected to an oral examination (interview) that lasted for an

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[38] 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 (**a**pproach). 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 (**d**eployment).
- The progress made against the plan needs to be determined and changes should be effected when necessary (**r**eview of the plan).
- The feedback received of the evaluation process needs to generate an **i**mprovement 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;

- 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).

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.

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS

QUALITY OF THE OUTPUTS OF THE

RPL SYSTEM

7.1   INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the research findings in relation to research question 3:

"What is the effect of the output of the RPL system on client satisfaction?"

According to Oakland (1993:103), a quality system is one in which the components or requirements (inputs) used to build it are of the highest quality, and in which an effective process of implementation is used, resulting in quality outputs. The argument is that removal of any one of the components from the system alters the entire system, and as a result, there is no way in which the system can bring about the expected results (customer satisfaction). What this means for this study is that the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria must always monitor how well the outputs of the RPL system perform, in the eyes of the customer, through feedback. Two feedback loops providing this information are the 'voice' of the customer and the 'voice' of the process (capability/quality of the process) in providing the required information. To determine the 'voice' of the customer, I developed eighteen closed and two open-ended statements. The rationale was to evaluate whether the end-users of the system and the RPL implementers are satisfied with the quality of the outputs of the RPL system, namely, the RPL product, related services rendered to the clients, information communicated on RPL and the paperwork produced (marketing and record-keeping).

In keeping with the Process-Based Quality Assurance model, determining the quality of the output of the RPL system includes an analysis of the institutional policy and RPL regulatory framework; institutional self-evaluation (including critical peer review); institutional audit of artefacts; student feedback; and external views (which may include professional bodies, external examiners and funding bodies) as part of external audits.

The term 'client satisfaction' in this study means what the state (external client) intended with the RPL policy, and what students, lecturers and non-academic staff (internal clients) have to say about the quality of the output of the system. The central issue for internal clients is does the system meet their requirements? There is a general agreement from various authors, as indicated in Chapter 4, section 4.5.2, as to what client requirements for RPL are, namely:

- Availability of the RPL product or service: is it prominent (noticeable or conspicuous) when the customer needs it, and not just when the producer is willing to put it on offer?

- Delivery mode: is the RPL product or service delivered to the customer at a time and place convenient to him?

- Reliability: is the RPL system living up to customer expectations all the time and not letting him/her down?

- The cost of RPL services: is the RPL product or service satisfying the customer's needs at the lowest possible cost?

- Performance: is the RPL system doing what the client (external and internal) wants or not?

With respect to students, I administered a survey questionnaire to gather structured feedback from those involved in the RPL process, i.e. RPL candidates, to determine whether they were satisfied with the assessment process or not (see Appendix H for the student questionnaire). Another short survey using an interview schedule (see Appendix I), was administered to lecturers who participated in the RPL assessment, to obtain comments on their experiences. Interviews conducted with students (undergraduate and postgraduate), non-academic staff, and lecturers were on their knowledge and awareness of RPL related activities in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, which served as another source of information on client satisfaction. A number of institutional documents were also analysed to assist in responding to this research question. Various areas of evaluation identified, included: the quality of the paper work generated and produced, related services rendered by Faculty personnel, the RPL product itself, and information on RPL from the Faculty, in relation to the above mentioned requirements by the clients.

7.1.1   Reporting structure for the research findings

In this chapter, the presentation of the research results is in three sections:

Table 7.1: *The reporting structure for the research findings*

Section	Description
Section A	Students feelings, attitudes and perceptions towards the RPL system
Section B	Lecturers views on the RPL system
Section C	Knowledge and awareness of RPL and its activities in the Faculty of Education at University of Pretoria

In all the sections, reflective notes taken during the research investigation are used to add depth to the research findings.

7.2   STUDENTS' FEELINGS, ATTITUDES AND PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS THE RPL SYSTEM

The student questionnaire[45] had 18 closed items and 2 open-ended ones, as described in Chapter 4, section 4.7.1.3. The rationale for developing and constructing this instrument was to gather structured feedback from students involved in the RPL assessment process in the years 2003 to 2006. Respondents were required to respond to the questions using a 5-point Likert scale: 5 = strongly disagree; 4 = disagree; 3 = not sure (neither agree nor disagree with the statement); 2 = agree; and 1 = strongly agree. To test for the reliability of the scale, the **index of reliability** was calculated. For this purpose, the coefficient *alpha* provided a measure of the extent to which all the items are positively inter-correlated and work together to measure one trait or characteristic (namely client satisfaction). The Cronbach's Alpha value for all the items was approximately 0.80, which is within the range of being acceptable (good, with very few items that needed improvement, which have been highlighted), as discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.1.2. Table 7.1 indicates an extract from the SPSS output in relation to the validity and reliability of the individual item scores (usable items):

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[45] This instrument was adapted from the original one used in England for institutions offering AP(E)L (Nyatanga *et al.* 1998:37), in order to elicit constructive feedback from end-users of the system.

Table 7.2: *Item-Total Statistics*

	Scale Mean if Item Deleted	Scale Variance if Item Deleted	Corrected Item-Total Correlation	Cronbach's Alpha if Item Deleted
RPL inquiry: how it was handled by Faculty personnel	45.33	90.970	.654	.709
Information about the RPL assessment process	45.67	87.879	.757	.698
Support services for RPL learners	45.92	87.720	.609	.708
Guidance/coaching given to RPL learners	46.08	89.720	.568	.714
Number of RPL credits given	46.75	100.750	.281	.743
Information about the academic level on which to base prior learning	46.75	93.841	.695	.713
Ability to reflect on prior experiences to demonstrate learning	45.92	94.265	.451	.727
Information on the RPL feedback process	46.08	100.083	.434	.733
RPL learner feedback at the end of the process	45.58	94.629	.453	.727
Information on RPL programme outcomes	46.42	100.083	.256	.746
The cost of RPL services in relation to the support given	45.17	100.879	.346	.738

7.2.1 Profile of the respondents

This section describes the nature and characteristics of the respondents. Knowledge of the respondents' attributes makes it possible to draw informed conclusions and to make recommendations on their involvement in the RPL assessment process. Much of the information in this section was collected from the archival records made available by the different departments in Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, which assessed candidates for their prior learning, during the period 2003 to 2006. Other

information reported in this section was obtained by mining the data from the questionnaires (open-ended items) completed by former RPL candidates.

Age: Although respondents' ages are known, such information was not used, since in South Africa today the use of people's ages in research findings has become a sensitive issue. Generally, respondents fear that they will be discriminated against based on age, and as a result may feel uncomfortable in disclosing their actual ages. The group that is most likely to consider RPL are older educators/teachers (25 years of age and older), who have been working for over ten years, and do not have the necessary paper qualifications for promotion purposes, or for admission into university for masters and doctoral studies. Adult learners generally may be balancing all the adult roles of student, partner, worker, parent, and community volunteer.

Table 7.3: *RPL candidates' demographics*

	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Females	9	75%
Males	3	25%
Race		
Blacks	1 (female)	8.3%
Indians	2 (females)	16.7%
Whites	8 (2 males and 6 females)	66.7%
Coloureds	1 (male)	8.3%

From the data given above, in line with the principles of equity (equitable opportunities), most of the RPL candidates are females; however, in terms of race, most of the candidates admitted via RPL are whites, not the group that is understood to have been historically disadvantaged, i.e. blacks mainly, followed by coloureds, then Indians.

Employment: All the candidates are currently employed within the education and training sector, at various levels. Some are teachers, heads of departments, or principals of schools (primary and secondary), whereas some are employed at a university level as lectures. A large number of them are in full-time employment, with some still on contract (temporary). Two students who were part-time educators, without the necessary minimum qualifications required by the professional body (SACE – South African Council of Educators), have since been appointed on a full time basis as

educators, after obtaining the ACE (Advanced Certificate in Education) qualification through the RPL route. Generally, it seems that RPL has contributed positively towards career advancement (mobility) of most of the former RPL candidates.

Table 7.4: *Year assessed*

Year assessed	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number	4	2	3	3
Percentage	33.3%	16.7%	25%	25%

The data provided above indicate that there were candidates assessed for their prior learning in the Faculty of Education in each year, ranging from 2003 to 2006, with one additional assessment done in 2003 compared to 2005 and 2006. The implication for the use of this information in the analysis is that there are respondents who experienced the RPL system in different years, from the beginning of the implementation of the RPL programme, to more recent years. This made it easier to portray the challenges and developments in the four years that the programme has been running.

7.2.2   Availability of RPL publicity material

Participants were asked about the availability of RPL information to RPL candidates prior to the assessment process. The intention was to determine if candidates were able to access and use any of the publicity material on RPL from the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. Publicity material means any material on RPL generated and produced by the Faculty in any format (paper, electronic or other means of communication). Such materials are usually in the form of RPL brochures; posters; information sessions; preparation sessions (broad RPL marketing); individual counselling; and information on RPL provided by other related career or training organisations within the institution, such as CE at UP (Continuing Education at the University of Pretoria).

The development of a good product or service alone is insufficient; it is vital that its existence be made known to the potential buyers, or prospective candidates. This is essentially the purpose of providing communication about RPL, which according to

Field (1993) may be broadly classified as: advertising, which consists of the purchase of space in newspapers, television, cinema, local radio, or outdoor space (locations); sales promotions, consisting of exhibitions, or displays, perhaps in local stores, libraries, and theatres; and publicity, often of a 'free' nature, by means of local editorials, radio or television programmes.

RPL promoters (Fiddler *et al* 2006:33) in the United States of America advise that each institution assessing prior learning needs to have a published rationale (publicised purpose) for recognising or awarding credits in each of its programmes or offerings. The assertion is that as programme requirements respond to changes in society or professions and seek to serve unique needs of individual learners, institutions should publish processes for making exceptions, as well as extending or changing the rationale for determining what is creditable. The other dimension in item 1 was to ascertain the accuracy and consistency of information provided to the public and prospective RPL candidates by Faculty personnel. I used specific criteria, such as, is the material clear enough, readily and easily accessible. To achieve this, I analysed all the documents released by the various departments of the Faculty for any discrepancies that might exist. The results are provided in tabular form for each item:

Table 7.5: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the availability of RPL publicity material*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	0
	Agree	2
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	6
	Total	n = 12

More than half (n = 8) of the respondents indicated that the publicity material on RPL was not available at the time they were assessed. These results apply to the assessments done during the period 2003-2006 in the Department of Curriculum Studies and the Department of Education Management, Law and Policy Studies, of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria. At the beginning of the RPL programme, not much information was available on RPL for either lecturers or RPL candidates, as indicated

by the majority of students interviewed. The term 'publicity material' may have been interpreted differently by respondents.

However, the situation of not publicising RPL widely is unacceptable. The results mean that only the few candidates admitted into various academic programmes and qualifications through the RPL route receive information on RPL from Faculty academics they interact with during the various stages of the assessment process. They are the ones who end up being the custodians of RPL information. Since such information is not in the public domain, other potential beneficiaries of this system do not know how the system operates or what to do if they want their prior learning assessed.

7.2.3   RPL enquiries: how they were handled by the designated Faculty personnel

The participants were also asked about service delivery, that is, the manner in which RPL administrators (personnel at the Administration Office in the Faculty of Education), evidence facilitators, and advisors handle or respond to inquiries from prospective RPL candidates and other interested parties, if any. The intention was to determine if their service (information, guidance and counselling) was helpful or not. All staff serving as points of contact within the institution, or those who represent this institution in public fora, are responsible for rendering the service of providing information and expert advice to those who need it.

A well-trained receptionist, secretary or switchboard operator can make the difference between a satisfied or complaining customer. Even if there is no separate office or centre for RPL administration, the appointed contact staff should be equipped and trained to have the expertise to handle all matters related to RPL assessments. Furthermore, in line with TQM policy, all staff in the Faculty, including senior managers and non-academic staff, should be able to provide basic information about RPL, or else to point inquirers in the right direction. The argument is that quality services should pervade the entire institution since quality should be everybody's business.

The results in this area are as follows:

Table 7.6: *Former RPL candidate's responses on how designated Faculty personnel handled RPL enquiries*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	4
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	1
	Total	n = 12

Slightly more than half (n = 7) of the respondents pointed out that their RPL enquiry was handled in a helpful manner. The results mean that the Head of Department and/or Programme Manager, and the Head: Administration were able to deal adequately with questions and queries from identified RPL candidates on what RPL is and what the procedures and processes for prior learning assessment are. The few Faculty academics mentioned above, are the ones who deal directly with RPL application. These results do not necessarily indicate that inquirers generally would receive the information they require from any other Faculty personnel except those who deal directly with RPL assessments. The reason is that the majority of administrative staff, as well as lecturing staff, do not have exposure to any form of training on RPL. In section 7.2.4 below, interview results indicate that lecturers and non-academic staff do not know enough about RPL and its activities within the Faculty. An administrator in the Faculty indicated that much of what she knows about RPL is from personal enquiry, and she was emphatic that *"a lot of people do not know about this RPL"*. It is doubtful therefore that all the other Faculty employees, except the few mentioned herein, would be in a position to assist callers effectively on RPL related matters.

7.2.4   Information about the RPL assessment process

A question was asked about whether the RPL candidates gained knowledge on the RPL process from their evidence facilitators and/or advisors. The RPL assessment process is about standards, principles, procedures and processes for RPL assessment. The rationale for providing this information is that candidates need to know what the process of RPL assessment entails, what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. At a practical level, there are certain conditions in policy documents that candidates are required to meet. For

example, they need to be aware that they have to wait for Senate's approval of their applications, prior to registering for the desired (targeted) programme. If the learner-centred model for RPL assessment adopted by the institution is properly applied, this kind of information is usually handled during the first meetings between the Programme Manager and the candidate, i.e. during the Pre-entry stage. Ideally, the assessment process has to be highly interactive, with the learner being an active participant. The RPL model of assessment adopted by the institution, coupled with procedures and processes of assessment in the Faculty were explained in detail in Chapter 3, section 3.3.

Table 7.7: *Former RPL candidate's responses on knowledge about the RPL assessment process*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	2
	Agree	5
	Neither agree nor disagree	1
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	2
	Total	n = 12

Slightly more than half (n = 7) of the respondents were of the opinion that the RPL process was explained to them. In order for RPL candidates to get the maximum benefit from the assessment process, someone needs to take them through what each stage entails. The one-on-one sessions between the Programme Manager and the candidate are in essence information/training sessions on the RPL assessment process. Ideally, being actively involved and participating in these sessions, candidates would be empowered with knowledge (what is RPL assessment); skills (for example, portfolio construction and development); and a changed attitude regarding the RPL phenomenon.

In Chapter 1, section 1.6.3.1 and Chapter 2, section 2.3.1, it was argued that the developmental approach adopted by the University for RPL implementation enables a change or transformation of the individual who initially entered the programme with little or no knowledge, which enhances their subsequent performance. These candidates learn about the activities that are critical in the assessment process, such as when to submit their portfolio for review (which is essential to be done in line with the calendar

of the Faculty Board Meetings), and what to do when Senate's decision is awaited, concerning the motivations submitted for each candidate. The reality is that there are very few Faculty academics with the necessary information on RPL to be passed on to beneficiaries of the RPL system.

7.2.5 Information about the Portfolio Development Course (PDC)

Participants were asked if they had been informed about the options of taking the Portfolio Development Course/Module to enhance their success with the assessments. For many who are new to RPL and portfolio assessment, documenting learning in this way can be a daunting task. How does one do it? How is it evaluated? What is a portfolio? (Hoffmann 2006a:7). Embarking on the reflective process, which will ultimately lead to the production of the required evidence, is a skill that needs developing and mastering (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:10). Although the institution may have guidelines on documenting prior learning in a portfolio, a course instructor, coach or mentor is needed to ensure that the candidate reflects on prior experiences and writes about their higher education learning and not just their experience. There are no guarantees that a candidate can furnish the institution with an up-to-standard portfolio on his/her own. Theresa Hoffmann (2006a:8), the RPL specialist in the USA, says she had to spend a lot of time with her candidates assisting them to make sense of their experiences.

It is to be expected therefore, that institutions concerned about the quality and principles of good RPL practice should establish processes and mechanisms for supporting candidates who seek RPL. A portfolio development course should be a well-structured one, for which the candidate may need to pay a separate fee. In this questionnaire item, therefore, the intention was to determine whether information on any portfolio development course had been communicated to candidates. The argument is that the success rate with RPL assessment depends on enrolment for this module, where the learner becomes exposed to specialised coaching and mentoring services.

It was also imperative to know how much this course costs, where is it offered, how long it takes or whether or not it is credit worthy. I analysed a portfolio submitted for assessment at the end of the PDC in order to make a judgement on its quality. It was

essential to determine whether the student was able to attain the learning outcomes in this module, of which portfolio development was one.

Table 7.8: *Former RPL candidate's responses on knowledge about enrolling for the Portfolio Development Course*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	3
	Agree	0
	Neither agree nor disagree	1
	Disagree	5
	Strongly disagree	3
	Total	n = 12

Two-thirds of the participants (n = 8) indicated that they were not informed of the option of taking the Portfolio Development Course (PDC). This situation raises the following moral questions: (1) If portfolio assessment is one of the main methods of prior learning assessment in the Faculty, how can RPL learners (PGCHE RPL candidates) be expected to submit a well-developed portfolio for assessment if there is no form of support towards this requirement? Furthermore, if the RPL system was open to all, the question would be, how does the institution expect those who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (mainly in terms of academic deprivation) to develop on their own, a portfolio that meets the criteria for entry into their programme of choice? (2) Who is encouraged to register for the PDC module and who is not?

These are not easy questions to answer. It seems that at this stage, support services towards the development of the portfolio are not uniformly applied. One of the reasons given during the informal interview conducted with one of the RPL assessors was that the level of preparedness of the candidate determines the nature of support provided. Three types of learners are identified: some candidates are able to produce a portfolio without assistance at all; some do so with minimal guidance from the Progamme Manager, and a sizeable number require substantial guidance. It also became clear during the research process that as a matter of preference, Faculty assessors like to work with candidates who have the capacity to complete the assessment process successfully, rather than spend time on candidates who may pull out of the process. The indication is

that respondents may have been confused about what enrolment for portfolio development mean, as most of them do not have a point of reference.

Whether RPL learners register for the Portfolio Development Course or are assisted by Programme Managers, the process is assumed to be empowering. It is expected that candidates will acquire the following expertise by the end of the process: What does a portfolio consist of? How do you begin to construct a portfolio? How do you analyse prior learning and produce the evidence required? How is this prior learning matched to the learning outcomes/competencies required? How are all the factors brought together for the portfolio? The portfolio I scrutinised was structured in accordance with the general guidelines applicable elsewhere in other practices in the world (Nyatanga *et al* 1988:11; Hoffmann 2006a:7-8). It contained the following sections:

- A cover sheet and checklist, listing pertinent personal and education information, and a checklist of the sections of the portfolio to inform RPL staff and evaluators, about who the student is and what the portfolio contains.

- Personal, career, and educational goals: in this section, the candidate had an opportunity to reflect on these three life dimensions. This enables them to focus their thoughts and efforts efficiently.

- List of significant life events, which paints a picture for the student, coach, and assessor of the student's learning opportunities and significant life events, at a glance. This provides a foundation for writing the autobiography, by categorising learning events according to occupational, personal, community work and educational settings.

- Autobiography, which jump-starts the student's writing process and helps build confidence in disclosing personal information about their life experiences. It sets the stage for uncovering knowledge areas for the student to build upon. Often learning areas are present that the student is unaware of, prior to reflecting on this section. This section also helps lend credibility to the portfolio contents because it demonstrates to assessors how unique the learning experiences are and how they began.

- The learner's accomplishments and proficiencies stated by academic area. In this section, a candidate provides assessors with information about their skills and

abilities in a résumé-like format. This section can be useful in building the knowledge base needed to accomplish the desired results.

- Life learning narrative, which utilises information from the autobiography and accomplishments to create a baseline in the course or academic areas for which one wants credit. This is the most critical part of the portfolio, because the learner demonstrates to the assessor a body of knowledge and real life applications from their experiences that justify the credit they seek. This narrative also provides an in-depth analysis of processes where theory is applied.

- The evidence of learning, which allows the assessor to see actual copies of materials produced by the learner such as letters from employers verifying achievements, pictures of artwork, and business plans. This is where learners provide verifiable evidence to support their claims.

In circles where RPL is a common practice, to ensure that the portfolio meets required standards, the course instructor, coach or mentor is the first in line in the 'gate-keeping' process, to determine whether or not the student is writing about relevant prior learning. This process involves a coaching method of drawing out intuitive learning from the student, which is not readily accessible without reflection. Since this is not conscious knowledge, it is more difficult to access on one's own. In accordance with what Hoffmann (2006a:8) advocates, course mentors and coaches who play a role here need to have a 'toolbox' of techniques, models, and strategies to use in order to meet the unique needs of each learner.

7.2.6   Request to RPL candidates to provide evidence to support the claim for RPL

Participants were asked about whether they were required to give evidence to support their claim for RPL. The process of RPL requires a lot of work and commitment from both the assessor and the candidate. This stage of gathering evidence is the central and often the most difficult of the RPL process. It should be borne in mind that there are strong arguments against RPL assessment being trivialised or reduced to a cheap sale of credits. The evidence of learning presented to the assessor is in the form of actual copies of materials or products produced by the student, such as letters from employers

verifying achievements, pictures of artwork, or business plans, as indicated above. Nyatanga, Foreman and Fox (1998:13-14) make a distinction between direct and indirect evidence that might be requested by the assessing/awarding institution. They say direct or primary evidence is the evidence that reflects the candidate's or applicant's own work, such as reports and publications. See details of the nature of evidence needed to substantiate one's claim for RPL in Chapter 3, section 3.3.

Table 7.9: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the evidence required to support the claim for RPL*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	7
	Agree	1
	Neither agree nor disagree	0
	Disagree	1
	Strongly disagree	3
	Total	n = 12

Two-thirds (n = 8) of the respondents confirmed that they were requested to provide evidence to support their claim for RPL. The most common form of evidence requested in this category include qualifications obtained, workshops/training sessions/conferences attended, reference letters from former employers, minutes of meetings, witness testimonies, and samples of the candidate's work. However, even if it is not possible to produce any of the above, assessors may observe actual 'performance', which may be used as evidence, as long as the observer is suitably qualified to form a judgement, or act as a witness. A standard format in use in other practices to guide employers regarding information to be provided about their employee (current and former) is as follows:

Dear Mr X

You are being asked to write on behalf of Mr Y who is seeking recognition, credit and/or qualifications for competencies he/she already has. If you have agreed to write on behalf of this person, we would appreciate you following these guidelines:

1. Please make sure that your letter or report is on company/business letterhead paper and typed, if possible.
2. Include in your letter or report:

a. Dates of employment (or time during which you knew or worked with Mr Y)
b. Post(s) held by Mr Y and the capacity in which you know/knew him
c. A list of competencies which Mr Y is claiming
d. A statement of your verification (if you agree) and a summary description of the context in which the competencies have been demonstrated
e. Please provide your signature and position.

Please note that witness testimonies may not be used as the sole source of information to assess Mr Y, however, they are often used in conjunction with other types of evidence and can play an important role in Mr Y's assessment. For this reason, please do not testify to any claim in which you feel the applicant is not fully competent.

Other forms of indirect evidence included in the portfolios scrutinised were appraisals of the candidate made by others; newspaper cuttings; prizes and certificates; references provided about the candidate; and photographs of the candidate doing the work and simulating the desired role. Careful consideration was given to ensuring that the evidence matches the learning outcomes and assessment criteria against which the candidate wishes to be assessed. In order to enable the assessor to put the evidence into context, candidates were advised to clarify the relationship of the evidence to the learning outcomes or competencies, in terms of the underlying theory. The notion of portfolio development is a new one in the education and training sector, and perhaps at the initial stages of RPL implementation in the Faculty, candidates struggled with the RPL terminology.

7.2.7   Support services for RPL candidates

Two statements were directed at the participants to determine whether RPL candidates received support and guidance during the RPL assessment process. As mentioned earlier, it is doubtful that candidates can successfully complete the process on their own. The support service is intended mainly to create an enabling environment, to enable students to succeed. Field (1993:89-92) identifies types of guidance and support, namely, pre-entry support, support during participation, exit support and re-entry support. At its most basic, pre-entry guidance and support is concerned with giving accurate information in a friendly, non-threatening manner. Once they have decided to take part in the RPL assessment process, new students (candidates) require access and guidance services, such as personal support and learning support. As we move towards the notion of life-long learning and the need for individuals to return later to continue

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their studies, exit support becomes more important. The range of services should include enabling students to take advantage of their achievements; guidance on the learner's next step; progression to further study; careers advice and guidance; and preparation for employment. The two items were stated separately, in order to avoid confusing respondents in terms of what was required.

Table 7.10: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the support given to RPL candidates*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	3
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	1
	Disagree	1
	Strongly disagree	4
	Total	n = 12

The results indicate that half (n = 6) of the respondents were satisfied with the nature of support they received during their assessment process. The practice in the Faculty is in accordance with the requirements in the national RPL policy (2002:20), in that support services should form part of pre-assessment advice and counseling. Broadly speaking, the candidates received support in terms of preparation for the assessment itself, educational planning, and post-assessment support. Considering the fact that candidate support structures are a measure to enhance success rate, it is not surprising that all the candidates assessed in the period 2003-2006 were successful in their applications (all the RPL applications were approved by the Senate of the University). Assessors indicated that taking one candidate through the assessment process is a labour-intensive process, particularly since the Faculty uses one-on-one sessions (there are no group sessions).

Although I was not part of the sessions that took place between the Faculty advisors/assessors and the candidates, evidence suggests that there was sufficient time spent with the candidates to assist them in making effective choices about learning programmes, career and work-related opportunities. The main reason behind providing support to RPL candidates during the assessment process is to eliminate any barriers to successful assessment. Since most (if not all) of the candidates were working adults, many other strategies were employed to remove time, place, and other barriers to

assessment (for example, technologically advanced ways of communication such as email and telephones). Some of the RPL candidates were not familiar with university-level learning; they needed to be assisted, and any technical barriers to their probability of success were removed. This responsibility rests with Programme Managers who meet these candidates more frequently than any of the Faculty academics involved in the assessment process.

7.2.8   Guidance given to RPL candidates

Table 7.11: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the guidance given to RPL candidates*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	3
	Agree	1
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	1
	Strongly disagree	4
	Total	n = 12

These results point to the fact that less than half (n = 5) of the respondents felt that they were not given sufficient guidance in terms of clarification of expectations; outcomes of the RPL process; essential criteria to be used to evaluate them and the nature of evidence needed for their portfolio assessment. A third (n = 4) of the respondents felt that guidance was provided, and a quarter of respondents (n = 3) were not sure if they were given guidance or not. I have used the term 'guidance' to mean the coaching (or mentoring) that is involved in assisting adult learners to reflect on their experiences in a meaningful, yet simple way.

The coaching role demands a tremendous commitment of time and energy to elicit candidate responses that can be used in the portfolio narrative (Hoffman 2006a:13). In the event where the RPL coach does not have the toolbox of information and techniques, the assessment process may be compromised, as indicated by the above results. These results are not surprising in the sense that this is an area of weakness in the RPL assessment process in this Faculty. Although RPL has been implemented for a number of years now in the Faculty, there is still no clarification on how prior learning

is being assessed. It is not clear which model of assessment is used in the Faculty, considering the fact that there are well-developed models used in other countries, such as the Kolb and Bloom; and the ABC models of prior learning assessment. Another unresolved issue is about transparency of what actually happens between the Programme Manager and the candidates.

7.2.9 Number of RPL credits given for RPL

The participants were asked to indicate whether information was given to RPL candidates about the number of credits they could claim for their prior learning. In most instances, institutions are up-front about conditions for the award of RPL credits. For example, some institutions award credits up to half of the number of modules required to complete a programme. In other cases, RPL credits could be awarded for an entire qualification. However, the central issue is that such conditions need to be communicated to the candidates to assist in proper decision-making regarding involvement in the assessment process.

Table 7.12: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the number of RPL credits given for RPL*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	1
	Agree	1
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	3
	Strongly disagree	5
	Total	n = 12

Two-thirds (n = 8) of respondents indicated that they were not informed of the number of credits they could claim for their prior learning. This is not surprising in the sense that the institution does not use the typical RPL language of 'RPL credits'. RPL candidates may be accustomed to terms such as 'access', 'exemption' or 'advanced standing'. If we consider the situation in this Faculty, all the RPL candidates were exempted from doing an entire course/qualification. For example, they were admitted to a Masters programme without the BEd Honours, which is the usual prerequisite. This

means that the number of credits awarded for the BEd (Hons) degree in various specialisations ranged from 120 to 180.

7.2.10 Information about the academic level on which to base prior learning

Participants were asked whether candidates were given information about the NQF level on which to base their prior learning, i.e. what the level descriptors mean and what the outcomes of the desired programme are. A registered qualification contains a broad description of what a learner can expect to be able to do on successful completion of a particular programme (SAQA 2004:61). In RPL assessment, if a candidate wishes to be exempted from the BEd (Hons) qualification, for example, then the assessment will be based on the candidate's knowledge and understanding of the outcomes expected to be achieved at NQF level 7. This information needs to be communicated to the candidate during the early stages of the assessment process, so that the candidate can present relevant evidence that meets the criteria for admission into that particular programme. As indicated in Chapter 3, section 3.2.1, university credits should be awarded for university level learning. The depth, breadth, and complexity of the programme should be the cornerstone of this type of learning and useful criteria to be considered during assessment.

Table 7.13: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the academic level on which to base prior learning*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	0
	Agree	2
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	4
	Strongly disagree	4
	Total	n = 12

Two-thirds of the respondents (n = 8) were of the opinion that they were not informed of the academic level on which to base their prior learning. It is an unacceptable practice not to inform candidates from the outset, of the NQF level of the programme into which they wish to be admitted. These results show that the Faculty is not adhering to its stated responsibilities towards the leaner in that 'learning outcomes that are to be

met by the candidate will be availed' (University of Pretoria 2002:13). A thorough explanation of the level descriptors for each level on the NQF needs to be provided. When equivalence of learning is determined, it is important to have a clear understanding of the broad descriptor associated with the level, breadth and depth of learning required (SAQA 2002a:15). For example, the RPL candidate needs to know that he/she will be evaluated on the learning outcomes of a programme pegged at a particular level, and what the expected learning is in that programme. The results indicate that communication of this vital information to candidates was compromised. However, if considered in another way, the reason for poor results in this area could be the use of what I would term SAQA's language of 'NQF levels', as opposed to the University practice of referring to it as the 'requirements for a BEd (Hons) degree'.

7.2.11 Ability to reflect on prior learning

A question was included to determine the role that reflection played in enhancing the ability of individual candidates to document their prior learning in a meaningful manner. It is not easy to draw out intuitive learning from a learner, because it is not readily accessible without reflection (Hoffmann 2006a:8). For the reflection process to be successful, the candidate needs the help of a mentor or a coach, an activity that requires a lot of time and a number of sessions between the candidate and mentor.

Table 7.14: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the role that reflection on prior learning played on the RPL learner*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	3
	Agree	1
	Neither agree nor disagree	4
	Disagree	1
	Strongly disagree	3
	Total	n = 12

A third (n = 4) of the respondents were not sure if being part of the assessment process had been helpful at all. It is expected that the RPL assessment process should improve candidates' reflective abilities. The reflection stage is the most critical one in RPL assessment, since this is where much time is spent in writing the academic narrative,

and where a person has to demonstrate that learning did take place in various contexts. I argue that most of the RPL candidates were not exposed to an intense reflective process during their assessment, hence their hesitancy to commit themselves in the affirmative. It must be borne in mind that candidates cannot go through this reflective process on their own – they need assistance from their coaches (mentors). It seems that candidates did not engage with state of the art tools, techniques and rubrics that can be used to assist them to reflect on their prior learning, i.e. tried and tested methods of increasing the reflective capabilities of individual RPL learners. Considering that quality means empowerment and transformation, the above results are not acceptable, since one expects each RPL candidate to emerge from the process equipped with new knowledge and skills regarding prior learning assessment.

7.2.12 Information on formative feedback to RPL candidates

A number of questions attempted to determine how the Faculty handles the feedback process on RPL assessments, that is whether (1) RPL candidates have been made aware of the feedback process, (2) were they given feedback during the process and (3) in what form the feedback at the end of the process is provided. Feedback is essential in assisting the learner to plan his/her learning appropriately. Being kept informed at all the stages of the assessment process is essential, in the sense that if RPL candidates are not satisfied with the manner in which they were assessed, they may appeal against the Senate's decision. It is also important that the Faculty produces evidence that learner rights have been respected during the assessment process. In the institutional RPL policy (University of Pretoria 2002:13), the institution has committed itself to protecting learner rights in the following ways:

- Providing a fair and transparent process;
- Making available the standards and criteria to be used in the assessment and accreditation processes to the candidate, prior to the assessment process;
- Making available the learning outcomes to be met, to the candidate before the start of the process;
- Ensuring that candidates are assessed through assessment methods which are flexible and appropriate to the programme/subject;

- Making sure that RPL candidates are evaluated and assessed for academic credit within a reasonable period of time; and

- Putting systems in place to ensure that credits gained through RPL can be transferred.

Table 7.15: *Former RPL candidate's responses on whether feedback was given during the assessment process*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	0
	Agree	4
	Neither agree nor disagree	1
	Disagree	5
	Strongly disagree	2
	Total	n = 12

Slightly more than half (n = 7) of respondents said the staff who handled their assessment did not keep them informed at each stage of the RPL process. Adding to these results, one of the candidates interviewed telephonically raised a major concern with the assessment process. The concern was mainly with the time the Faculty took to assess them and the actual communication of the results. The candidate suggested that it would have been helpful if the Faculty had "informed them all the time regarding their applications, in order to ease their uncertainty about their pending RPL results". Although the number of dissatisfied clients in this area is small, the message for strengthening the formative feedback process is legitimate.

7.2.13 Information on the RPL feedback process

Table 7.16: *Former RPL candidate's responses on whether candidates were informed on how the institution would handle the feedback process*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	0
	Agree	4
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	4
	Strongly disagree	1
	Total	n = 12

Less than half (n = 5) of the respondents said they were not given information on the RPL feedback process; and a third (n = 4) of participants responded in the positive. RPL results go through various levels before approval or rejection by the Senate of the University of Pretoria. It is essential that candidates know how the institution handles their results and what to do at each stage to avoid any confusion or uncertainty. The above picture raises concerns in the sense that the information on the RPL feedback process is indicated only in the Faculty's RPL policy document. This affirms earlier findings that, since the policy is not in the public domain, very limited information, as communicated by the lecturers, reaches those candidates who would benefit from it. This situation is not acceptable, since it brings about a lot of uncertainty. These results also show that the institution is not adhering to its commitment to the learner articulated in its policy that "the assessor must provide the candidate with written feedback on the outcome of the application, and should the candidates require post-assessment guidance, the service should be provided" (University of Pretoria 2002:7).

7.2.14 Information on summative feedback to RPL candidates

Table 7.17: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the manner in which the end of process feedback was handled*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	3
	Agree	4
	Neither agree nor disagree	1
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	2
	Total	n = 12

More than half (n = 7) of the respondents indicated that they were given feedback at the end of the process. As mentioned earlier, it is common practice that written feedback should be given to RPL candidates on the outcome of their RPL applications. Candidates need to receive such feedback because if they need to develop another plan or learning pathway, they should know well in advance. Time should not be wasted in referring them to other options, should their applications not be viable for RPL purposes.

7.2.15 Information on RPL programme outcomes for RPL purposes

Participants were asked as to whether they had been informed of specific programme outcomes on which they could base their prior learning. For example, if RPL assessment is required for entry into the MEd programme, then one needs to satisfy the entry requirements of that programme. It is the responsibility of RPL advisors to explain what the programme outcomes mean and what candidates need to do to demonstrate their prior learning. As standard practice, each Programme Manager compiles a set of criteria to be used by the RPLCF for assessing and reviewing the prior learning experiences of the candidate. Such criteria should consider the outcomes of the programme or degree for prior learning purposes.

Table 7.18: *Former RPL candidate's responses on programme outcomes for RPL purposes*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	1
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	1
	Strongly disagree	5
	Total	n = 12

According to the above results, less half (n = 6) of the respondents indicated that they were not informed of specific programme outcomes on which they could base their prior learning. A quarter (n = 4) mentioned that they were given assessment criteria for the programmes and or qualifications for which they were requesting RPL. The results indicate that there is a lack of transparency from the Faculty regarding the RPL assessment process.

7.2.16 Information on matching specific programme outcomes with prior learning

Participants were asked as to whether they were given information on how they could match specific programme outcomes with their prior learning. RPL in SAQA terms is about matching one's skills and knowledge to specific standards and the associated criteria of a qualification. Again, the process cannot be done without the assistance of a

qualified assessor, who may also be a subject specialist in the field of study in which the candidate is interested.

Table 7.19: *Former RPL candidate's responses on how matching specific programme outcomes with prior learning is done*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	1
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	1
	Disagree	3
	Strongly disagree	4
	Total	n = 12

More than half (n = 7) of the respondents disagreed with this particular statement. According to them, they were not informed on how they could match specific programme outcomes with their prior learning. The matching process is one of the critical aspects of prior learning assessment. All the candidates who go through the assessment process should know and master the art of matching specific programme outcomes with their prior learning. Denying them such an opportunity is disempowering. It is also not in line with the developmental and transformative models and approaches to RPL provisioning that the institution cites in its policy documents.

7.2.17 Recommending RPL to others

Participants were also questioned as to whether former RPL candidates had confidence in the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. Did they see any value in the process, and if so, would they recommend it to others?

Table 7.20: *Former RPL candidate's responses on recommending RPL to others*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	4
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	0
	Strongly disagree	2
	Total	n = 12

More than half (n=7) of the respondents indicated that they would recommend RPL to others. Three of the former RPL candidates were not sure if they could do that. These results show that there are former candidates who saw value in the RPL system, and would inform others about this service. The question here is how will the Faculty deal with those who initiate such a process?

7.2.18 The relationship between the cost of RPL services and support given

An attempt was made to determine the cost of going through the RPL assessment process, considering the support given and the process involved. Specific areas of interest included how much do the candidates pay for the entire process. Do users perceive the assessment practice as affordable, and does it provide value for money?

Table 7.21: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the cost of RPL in relation to the support given*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	4
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	0
	Total	n = 12

More than half (n = 7) of the candidates who went through the RPL assessment process at this institution indicated that the cost of undergoing RPL is reasonable, considering the support they were given. These results are in line with the requirements from SAQA in that RPL assessments should be affordable, i.e. cost should not create another barrier, more especially for those who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. There is very little that RPL candidates pay for, apart from the usual registration fees. For those candidates who may register for the PDC module, a nominal fee is usually expected, which is subsidised by funding for public institutions. Other costs (materials and communication) related to the assessment are usually included in the budget allocated to individual departments.

7.2.19 The relationship between the cost of RPL services and the process of assessment

Table 7.22: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the cost of RPL in relation to the process involved*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	3
	Agree	4
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	0
	Total	n = 12

More than half (n = 7) of the respondents were of the opinion that the cost of undergoing RPL is reasonable if one considers the process involved. The cost of RPL services includes other costs incurred by the candidate, such as transport and maintaining contact with the Faculty assessors. If we consider the notion of quality which means 'value for money', then these results are in line with the belief that the products and services rendered by an institution should be affordable. The integrated assessment process contributes to reducing the cost for RPL services.

7.2.20 Areas of improvement in the RPL system

There is general agreement amongst the former RPL candidates (mainly those who went through the system in 2003) that, at the time they were assessed, a lot was not clear in terms of the RPL process. Many of them felt that the assessment took a long time. Some had to wait up to a year for notice of their outcome; the shortest time was six months. Six months is quite reasonable, but a year creates a lot of uncertainty for a student. A commitment has been made by the institution to assess candidates' prior learning within a 'reasonable' period of time (no time specification is given).

Their dissatisfaction with the feedback process is best captured by this response: "I applied in January 2003 for RPL and my application was only approved in June of the following year. By that stage, I had submitted a number of assignments and written exams, without knowing whether or not I would be accepted".

The above statement also indicates that the institution did not adhere to its own rule, which states that no RPL candidate should be allowed to register prior to the outcome of their application being received from the Senate of the University. In this particular case, even though the student enrolled *provisionally* for the desired programme, it may be argued that a negative outcome would have had serious implications for the University and student. Some students may argue that being part of the learning process in this way may have raised their hopes.

Despite all the areas of weakness identified in this section (lack of publicity; the process taking a long time and delays in receiving feedback), many former RPL candidates spoke about the value of the RPL system. The best way of articulating such opinions is reflected in a very comprehensive letter written by one of the former candidates:

Letter from Candidate B on her experience with the RPL assessment process

"I got to hear about the RPL process through one of the Unions (name not mentioned). This information enabled me to apply and the lecturer was very helpful in accommodating me by meeting me in town, where I work. I had not studied at a university for a number of years and was feeling very strange about it. However, I was asked to submit any documents that I had that could be used for evaluation purposes. That was a bit challenging as I was unsure what this evidence constituted. However, I found some documents that I could use. The lectures commenced and I was in a class where another student was a RPL candidate. We could compare notes and both of us were reasonably concerned about the fact we did not hear anything about the process. We were verbally told things during our lectures by the original lecturer but not by any other people. We kept enquiring about our "status" but were informed that it was in the process or at the Senate. This was worrying to us as we were attending lectures at the time and were worried that our applications would be turned down at a later stage once we had completed almost the whole year. Our lecturer then informed us that our applications had been successful. In my case, it meant having to ride from a town about 300 km away every Friday and Saturday and it was a worry that this may have been in vain. However, all is well that ends well. I would suggest that all students be kept up to date with regular written updates about the process and whether any additional documents are necessary. I would also suggest that all such students go through a lecture or two or a short course to acclimatise them to university life again and maybe introduce them to things they might not have been exposed to before. In my case, it was reference techniques. Possibly even written material could be done in the form of an assignment, to update information that might have been missed with not having done an Honours or BEd, for example educational theories".

7.3 LECTURERS' VIEWS ON THE RPL SYSTEM

A short interview schedule was administered to lecturers who participate in the RPL assessment process at the University of Pretoria, to establish what motivates or frustrates them with the RPL system that is in place. Lecturers responded to the questions in the structured interview schedule in the privacy of their own offices. The following results emerged:

7.3.1 Is the RPL system motivating or not?

I defined motivation as something that gives one a reason for wanting to be part of the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. Where the respondents responded in the negative regarding this RPL system, they mentioned the following: the paper work involved; the length of the process; and the process being labour intensive. They felt that the process needs to be speeded up so that RPL candidates are given the outcome of their results within the shortest possible time. Respondents who felt that the system is motivating, mentioned the following reasons: they perceive RPL as a way of accommodating previously disadvantaged learners in the university system, by way of granting them admission into university programmes and qualifications; it is a way in which more students from diverse backgrounds are attracted to the university, who may not otherwise have access to university learning. An excerpt on how one of the respondents viewed the RPL system is included below:

An extract from interviews on lecturer views on the RPL system

"Some students are serious about improving themselves and upgrading their qualifications. Usually these students apply for RPL as an access route to further studies. There are however, also students who see this as an 'easy short-cut', but they are eliminated early in the process. Serious students are keen to supply the necessary documentation and to follow the different procedures in the process. The process is just and fair and no student is discriminated against on any grounds. All students are treated according to the principles of human dignity with an equal chance of success. I support the RPL process because of the above and because it opens up opportunities for access to further studies. If the student is prepared to make a serious effort, he/she has a good chance to be successful"

7.3.2 The preferred role in the RPL system

At first, I used RPL terminology in this question, but most of the respondents did not know the differences between an evidence facilitator, advisor, assessor, moderator or verifier. The most common term used at this institution is 'RPL assessor'. The findings indicate that the preferred roles by Faculty academics in the RPL system are as follows:

Table 7.23: S*ummary of the preferred roles in the RPL assessment process as reported by the researcher*

Role	Percentage
Assessor	33.3%
Advisor	33.3%
Evidence Facilitator	33.3%
Moderator	0%
Verifier	0%
Policy developer	0%

Roles[46] are very critical in the RPL assessment process. There should be people who assist the candidate with the planning and preparation for the assessment (evidence facilitator and advisor). Trained and skilful people are needed to evaluate the evidence submitted by the candidate in an appropriate manner. Such people need to be familiar with the methods of RPL assessment, the model being used to assess prior learning, and the tools and techniques used in the assessment process. If the respondents had been aware of the meaning and importance of each role, I believe that the picture would have changed significantly, as no role would have been viewed as being of lesser importance than the others.

7.3.3 RPL learner performance in academic programmes in the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria

RPL learner performance is one of the identified factors that contribute towards satisfaction with the RPL system. I argue that if the RPL candidates who have been assessed at this institution are doing well in their chosen programmes, this is reason enough to indicate that the RPL system has some positive value. Most of the lecturers

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[46] An explanation of the different roles in the RPL assessment process was presented in Chapter 3, section 3.3.2.

(eighty-six percent) indicated that they found being part of this system motivating in the sense that the majority of students admitted into this institution via the RPL route, are progressing very well.

7.4 KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF RPL ACTIVITIES

I identified knowledge and awareness of RPL activities as one of the factors contributing to client satisfaction. The rationale is that if the internal clients of the institution do not know what RPL is and are not aware of RPL activities at the University of Pretoria, there is no way in which the system could be satisfactory. The interview schedule used for students, lecturers, and the non-academic staff, asked questions on a number of critical areas, on which I could base my decision on the quality of the output of this system. I had to use a number of probing questions to ascertain whether there is some kind of understanding on what RPL is, and the process and procedures for assessment. I also wanted to find out how many students and lecturers would want to be assessed for their prior learning, if they knew about the system and how it operates.

The overall finding in this instance is that the RPL system that is in place at the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria does not meet the requirements of the state. The central issue is that the system is not known to the majority of the student body and lecturers (the non-academic staff included). Eighty-three percent (14/17) of those I interviewed indicated that if they knew about the RPL system and how it works, they would like to be assessed for their prior knowledge. I found that most of the students and lecturers lack knowledge of the RPL system in the following critical areas:

Amongst the internal clients, there was no knowledge of what RPL is. Most of the explanations provided lacked accuracy and detail. Most of them were not aware about who is eligible for RPL, or whether they may also take advantage of the system. The purpose of RPL in the Faculty of Education was not clear to most of the participants. They also did not know which methods of RPL assessment are being used in the Faculty, or how long the process takes. None of them could give actual figures in terms of how much they would pay for RPL services. Responses related to the support given during the process of assessment were in generic terms, not in relation to what the

institution has committed itself in its policy documents. Participants were not aware what their roles would be, should they want to be assessed for their prior learning.

Twenty-nine percent (2/7) of the senior managers interviewed indicated that even the institutional and Faculty-specific policies were not yet in place. One of them said: *"I had to do some digging to find information on RPL"*. There have been developments in this area over the last few years in the sense that: the University now has an institution-wide RPL policy; there is a Faculty-specific RPL policy (Faculty of Education), in which clear procedures and processes for RPL assessments are articulated; and brochures on programmes offered are now available to all (lecturers, registered students, and prospective students). The brochures describe programmes identified by the Faculty for RPL purposes, and specify the conditions laid down for assessment of prior learning.

One of the senior members of the Faculty emphasised that the *"RPL policy is not usually made available to RPL candidates; however access to it is possible should the candidate require it"*. The concern raised by one of the HODs interviewed was that *"the institution does not want to publicise its procedures and processes on RPL because people might flock to the university in large numbers"*. The implication of this statement is that since RPL provisioning is still taking place on a minimal scale, mainly due to lack of capacity, it would not be advisable to publicise it widely.

The interview results indicated that lecturers get to know about RPL policy matters during monthly departmental meetings, and the quarterly Faculty Board Meeting (FBM). They are able to access electronic copies of the institutional and Faculty-specific RPL policies from the University's website. The only weakness identified in this approach of publicising information on RPL is that the Faculty leaves the responsibility of familiarising oneself with the policy documents to the lecturer. There can never be guarantees that all lecturers take it upon themselves to go through all the Faculty documentation on RPL.

The level of ignorance differed, with students being less informed, followed by lecturers. Non-academic staff, more especially those who handle student applications, were articulate to a reasonable extent on RPL related matters. The interviews showed

that students and lecturers are not aware of the following activities, which form part of the RPL process: information sessions or workshops on RPL; any marketing or publicity activities on RPL; and publication of RPL policies and related documentation.

7.5   SUMMARY

When RPL was conceptualised by the state, with the backing of the labour movement, it was intended to address the anomalies of the past educational system. The intention was to open up doors of learning to adult learners who had the necessary work-related experience that could easily be equated to the requirements for entry into university programmes. The state has published a national RPL policy, as well as guidelines for implementation. Although institutions are expected to implement RPL considering their individual circumstances, openness and transparency on what the institution does and why it is doing it, is critical. If the university population and the broader public do not know about the RPL system and related processes, the conclusion is that a limited few (the elite) will benefit from it.

The research results for client satisfaction with the RPL system are summarised in this chapter in five broad categories mentioned in section 7.1 above. The research findings indicate that there is very little publicity material available to those within and outside the university. Information about the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria is not available when the customer needs it – it is provided mainly when the institution is willing to put it on offer. Internal clients (students, lecturers and non-academic staff) in the Faculty do not know much about RPL related activities. Only very few students were informed, namely those who were assessed for their prior learning between 2003 and 2006.

This approach of disseminating information on RPL to only a few is regarded as exclusive in nature. It also creates the impression of a strategy based on favouritism rather than fairness, openness and transparency. There will always be questions posed regarding the criteria used for the selection of candidates who happen to know about the system, when RPL initiatives and activities are not widely publicised to students. The strategy adopted by the Faculty in terms of the dissemination of RPL information is

dependent on the identification of potential RPL candidates, as opposed to the widely accepted practice of publicising RPL activities and leaving the decision making to individuals, in terms of whether or not they want to participate in the process. The conclusion drawn regarding this situation is that RPL products, information, and paperwork are not available when prospective clients want it; only when the institution is willing to put it on offer, to a select few, and then only for specialised programmes and qualifications. These results also mean that the institution is not adhering to its own principle stated in the institutional RPL policy (University of Pretoria 2002:4) in that *"RPL should be available to all"*. Since the RPL service is not widely advertised, only those who are identified by Faculty members as suitable RPL candidates benefit from the RPL system that is currently in place.

With regard to the delivery mode for the service, most of the former RPL candidates are those who work close and very far from the institution. A lot of them travel to the institution for the one-on-one contact sessions with their Programme Coordinators. Communication between them and the institution is mainly electronic (telephone and e-mail). The assessment process may not have been convenient for most of the candidates.

There are several indications that the RPL system did live up to customer expectations. All of the participants who were assessed between 2003 and 2006 gained access into various programmes offered in the School of Educational Studies, in the Faculty of Education, through the RPL route. The former candidates were satisfied with the support given by Faculty assessors. To all of them, being assessed for prior learning meant not having to study formally for learning they already possessed. There is an indication that going through this process improved their knowledge and skills on prior learning assessment and how to compile RPL portfolios containing relevant evidence.

The RPL system in the Faculty is an affordable one. Most of the former RPL candidates were satisfied that they did not have to pay a lot of money for being assessed. There was only a nominal fee for taking the Educator Professional Development programme offered in the Faculty.

For those who experienced the RPL assessment process (RPL candidates), the system performed as they expected it to. All the RPL candidates who were assessed between 2003 and 2006 gained access into various programmes offered in the School of Education Studies, in the Faculty of Education, through the RPL route. A certain segment of internal clients, mainly those who did not go through the assessment process, indicated a lack of knowledge of RPL related activities. Furthermore, 83.7% of those interviewed indicated that if the RPL system was open to all, they would want to be assessed for their prior learning.

On the other hand, if we consider the findings in the light of other information acquired during the research process, there are reservations about the following aspects: Whatever the size of the RPL programme, comprehensive written guidelines should be developed in the form of a handbook (brochure), and kept current. Written guidelines result in a level of public scrutiny that ensures accountability. Desirable components of such a handbook include the programme rationale, assessment procedures, standards, crediting policies, administrative procedures, and examples of documents and relevant forms. All students participating in the RPL assessment programme should receive the same handbook as in other programmes. The information should enable prospective students to make an informed judgement as to whether participation is likely to prove useful, affordable, and worth the student's time. For example, a flow diagram showing how to proceed through steps and decision points may be especially helpful in describing the process (Fiddler *et al.* 2006:69) to be documented in this handbook.

CHAPTER 8

HOW CAN THE RPL PRACTICE BE

IMPROVED

8.1   INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the overall analysis of the research results in relation to the main research problem, implications of the findings, and recommendations. The main research question was "How does the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria implement RPL?" To make the question operational three research sub-questions dealing with the quality of inputs, the process, and outputs of the RPL system respectively were:

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

The concept 'quality' was defined in this study in terms of excellence, value for money, meeting customer requirements, fitness of purpose, transformation, and conforming to specifications (Harvey & Green 1993; Harvey & Knight 1996). The fundamental principle of RPL is that learning can occur in formal, informal and non-formal situations. There is a general agreement (nationally and internationally) that if such learning is identified, it should be awarded academic credit. There are proven and tested models of prior learning assessment. To safeguard the integrity of the assessment process, standards, principles, and procedures for prior learning assessment are in place in many countries. In higher education, with recent developments regarding quality and quality assurance, the proposition is that RPL provisioning should form part of an institution's quality assurance mechanisms. In this study, the intention was to determine whether quality principles and quality assurance measures are in place in the designed RPL system, in the particular case study.

The conceptual framework for this study was framed around the ISO 9001:2000 Process-Based Model of Quality Assurance, Deming's quality model of continuous improvement, various notions of quality as advocated by the 'quality gurus', and the systems theory (see Chapter 3, section 3.6). The research purpose was to examine the design of the RPL system in close proximity, and to identify strengths and weaknesses of the system in relation to the inputs used, the process of assessment and the outputs and outcomes of the system (outputs refer to short-term goals and outcomes being long term/distant goals).

To obtain a detailed portrait of the design of the RPL system, I used various research methods and designed several instruments to gather data, namely interviews, observations, questionnaires (student and lecturer), observational checklist, document analysis, development of cases, and fieldwork notes (reflective journal). Much of the information was obtained from those who are directly involved with the process of RPL implementation in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, either as policy analysts, developers or implementers. The other data sources involved those who are not directly involved with the process, namely registered students, non-academic staff and lecturers. The assumption was that even those not directly involved with RPL should have received information from the institution in one way or the other, for example, through information sessions or workshops on RPL.

Most of the questions posed to the participants related to their reactions to and feelings about the RPL system, their attitudes and perceptions, as well as finding evidence of changes in their knowledge and skills (see Annexure F and G). I spent a lot of time at the site of investigation, i.e. the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, where I interacted with key informants and had the opportunity of being part of central activities and events related to the RPL assessment process.

Quantitative data was analysed using frequency of responses generated through the SPSS programme, where I interpreted what each response means. Qualitative data (interviews and observations) was analysed using discrepancy and interpretational methods. To summarise data from the documents reviewed, I developed a schedule for content analysis. No problems were experienced with regard to the management of data. The database created is stored in safe places, both electronically and manually in a

filing system. I will keep the information until all the other processes (verification, evaluation and moderation) related to the assessment of this research study have been completed.

The main findings regarding RPL provisioning in the Faculty of Education (University of Pretoria) is that the system is quality assured. However, due to various reasons ranging from issues of capacity to sustainability of the system, very few (less than 20) students have enjoyed its benefit to date. The majority of registered students (undergraduate and postgraduate levels), non-academic staff, and lecturers do not know about this RPL system; let alone what to do if they would like to seek assessment of their prior learning. Different people within the institution have different perceptions, knowledge and skills on RPL, and were exposed to RPL in different ways.

In terms of other specific issues related to the quality in the inputs, process, and outputs in this study, I identified strengths and weaknesses of the RPL system in each area and provided recommendations. The greatest challenge in this study was evaluating the RPL practice in the Faculty as an external researcher, i.e. not having a full understanding of internal issues (political, organisational, and managerial) regarding RPL provisioning (see Chapter 4, section 4.10 for a list of other limitations to this study).

8.2   QUALITY OF THE INPUTS USED TO DESIGN THE RPL SYSTEM

Ten areas of practice were evaluated during the research process, to determine whether there is quality in the inputs used to design the RPL system. The premise was that the quality of inputs determines the quality of the designed system. Based on the evaluation of the quality in the inputs, strengths and weaknesses were identified to enable me to make proper recommendations as to what needs to be improved and why, based on best practices in RPL provisioning identified in Chapter 2 from five countries (USA, UK, Canada, Australia and The Netherlands). The ideal is not to copy other country's quality assurance practices in RPL provisioning, but to determine what would work for the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria.

8.2.1   Institutional policy and environment
Strengths: At a macro level, much has been done to ensure successful implementation

of RPL in all the faculties of the University of Pretoria, albeit only on paper. The vision and mission statements of the university, although not very specific about RPL, imply that RPL procedures and processes must be in place. The institution subscribes to the notions of equal educational opportunities for all; access into higher education programmes and qualifications; redress of historical injustices of the previous education system; and flexible lifelong learning opportunities. The indication is that the vision of this institution was a direct response to the call of the previous Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, for institutions to restructure and transform so as to meet the challenges of the 21st century, amongst those being responsive to issues of massification, global competitiveness and demonstrating that quality is happening in their institutions (NPHE:2001).

In the institution's strategic plan for the period 2003-2005, there is a clear reference to RPL, more especially in terms of making a commitment to developing mechanisms for lifelong learning and assessment of prior learning. The many short learning programmes offered by Continuing Education at the University of Pretoria (CE at UP) are an indication of the institution's commitment to addressing the needs of adult learners. In relation to the management strategy (devolution of power) employed by the institution, the responsibility of implementing RPL is rightfully left in the hands of the deans of faculties.

The formulation of an institution-wide RPL policy (University of Pretoria 2002) is a key aspect that indicates the level of preparedness of the institution to offer RPL services. This policy satisfies all the criteria for a creditable RPL policy: the institution is clear on what RPL is and why it intends to offer this service; there are clear standards and principles to ensure credibility and integrity of RPL results; the institution has a simple RPL process that is easy to follow when seeking assessment for prior learning. Obstacles to RPL implementation have been identified and possible strategies for overcoming them have been developed. This is an indication of the depth of the groundwork that took place during the conceptualisation and formulation of this policy. The initiative taken by the Faculty of Education to develop mechanisms for RPL provisioning for postgraduate admissions is commendable. This resulted in the release of a good policy, once again, in particular for this Faculty.

Weaknesses: The above policy intents did not live up to expectations in terms of the actual practice in the Faculty of Education (where the study took place), nor in terms of its beneficiaries (target group for RPL) and the government. The lack of a clear subsidy structure for RPL implementation in public higher education institutions is a matter of serious concern. Without funding from government specifically for RPL, the sustainability of the RPL system becomes questionable. At institutional level, the fact that there is no action plan or resource plan for implementing RPL, which should indicate activities, timelines, responsibilities and available resources (such as trained RPL assessors, buildings and funding for RPL), creates problems for those who are to take the process of implementation further. This becomes a situation of being expected to implement a system without the necessary support from 'suppliers', and without any recognition by the institution of the efforts of those who try hard to implement the system.

At Faculty level, the issue of who is awarded RPL is a very contentious one. Although there is an assertion from the institution that RPL should be available to all, this is not in fact the case. From the policy-making perspective, RPL was intended for historically disadvantaged groups, i.e. those people who were not exposed to proper educational and employment opportunities because of the apartheid laws of the previous government. It is understood that this involves blacks, coloureds and Indians, in this order. The policy is aimed at people in these designated groups, with vast work related experience, but no formal qualifications to display; or those with various other formal qualifications (completed or uncompleted). In the Faculty under investigation, the RPL system benefited people who do not fall within these categories. It involved a limited number (around 15) of RPL cases assessed for prior learning in the Departments of Curriculum Studies, and Educational Management, Law and Policy Studies only, for the PGCE, PGCHE, ACE and MEd programmes.

In relation to admission procedures and entrance requirements, there are statutory obstacles to RPL implementation that have not been dealt with. This refers particularly to the 50% residency clause and the matriculation exemption as an entrance requirement into higher education. The latter condition means that any student without the option of mature-age exemption (with schooling at only Grade 11 or lower) currently has no means of admission to suitable university programmes by means of

proof of equivalent learning through experience. Should such a learner be admitted into a university, he/she is not eligible to be awarded a degree, even if the learner completes the programme successfully. At most, a 'certificate' may be awarded (SAQA 2004:10).

Regarding the first obstacle, the implications are that accreditation agreements between institutions need to be established to facilitate portability of 'RPL credits'. Currently such agreements to ensure effective validation, articulation and recognition of assessment outcomes are non-existent. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that there is no regional integration, at least in the province (Gauteng) where the study was done, which has five regions. There is also no evidence of collaboration amongst institutions, professional bodies and workplaces, where possible and necessary.

The strategy employed by the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria to identify suitable RPL candidates, may be viewed as selective and prejudistic. There will always be differences of opinion about the criteria used to identify such candidates. Credibility in RPL implementation depends on openness and transparency about policies, procedures and processes for assessment. RPL candidates should be the ones to make the claim for RPL, i.e. by approaching the Faculty, and not vice versa. It was found that the Faculty is in violation of Principle 1 for good practice guidelines in the assessment and accreditation of prior learning (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:18).

Although there is conclusive evidence that those who are part of the assessment process (RPL assessors) received training on prior learning assessment, there are very few Faculty members with such expertise. The only Faculty members trained were Programme Managers, Heads of Departments and subject specialists who are part of this process, either by way of identifying a prospective candidate, developing assessment tools for prior learning, providing support and advice to the RPL candidate, conducting the assessment, or any other related activity. Faculty assessors have not transferred this skill to others, by way of mentoring up-and-coming RPL assessors, if there are any, or those who may have an interest in the process. At the policy level, there is an institutional will to widen access to academic qualifications through the RPL route. However, the situation on the ground does not suggest that the RPL targeted groups have an opportunity of being assessed in the Faculty of Education, nor are there

guarantees that they would enjoy the same support structures as the 15 previous RPL candidates.

Recommendations for faculty RPL implementers and policy makers

- The government needs to be clear as to how it intends to assist institutions financially to implement RPL.

- The Faculty in question needs to make its position clear on RPL, i.e. whether it intends to offer the service beyond 2006 or not, and what the reasons would be for ending the current RPL service.

- Identifying potential RPL candidates may work well as a strategy for the Faculty, in terms of such candidates being able to complete the assessment process, but potential candidates who approach the institution need to be given the same support and advice as identified candidates.

- The expertise to assess prior learning should not be confined to a few Faculty members, but through mentoring, other RPL assessors should be equipped in this area.

- A review of current access and admissions procedures and systems needs to be conducted in the Faculty to ensure that RPL admissions are not marginalised.

- Institutional agreements and regional collaborations need to be encouraged by the relevant parties. The HEQC needs to play its rightful role in this regard, as the ETQA for the higher education sector, in terms of ensuring that RPL is properly implemented in the sector and monitored on a regular basis.

8.2.2   Resources allocated for RPL services

Strengths

The integrated model of RPL provisioning adopted by the faculty has advantages in the sense that it is cost-effective.

Weaknesses

Very few Faculty academics become exposed to the RPL assessment process.

Recommendations

In the event where the University of Pretoria may offer full-scale RPL, a separate, free standing RPL unit needs to be established, where all the learners seeking RPL will be referred.

8.2.3 Training and registration of RPL assessors and key personnel

Strengths: All Faculty personnel involved in the RPL assessment process attended a weeklong training course offered by City and Guilds International in 2002. This included, in particular, Programme Managers who act as evidence facilitators and advisors, and members of the RPL committee who play a major role in assessing candidates' portfolios and interviewing them. Although the Faculty does not use the general RPL terminology, that is RPL evidence facilitators, advisors, assessors, and moderators, there is an indication that in terms of the application of roles and responsibilities, different people do different things during the assessment to ensure objectivity.

Weakness: There is no evidence to suggest that trained assessors and advisors are registered with the relevant ETQA, i.e. the ETDPSETA, as assessors, which is a national SAQA requirement.

Recommendations
Although not being registered as an assessor with the ETDPSETA does not in principle mean that one does not have the expertise to assess, it is essential not only to receive training, but to complete all the other requirements needed for being officially recognised as an assessor, with expertise in RPL assessment.

8.2.4 Fees for RPL services

Strengths: The RPL service is affordable, with minimal direct payments required from the candidate or his/her employer. In the case where candidates need to take a course or module in relation to the development of their portfolios, a minimal fee is usually charged. In essence, the RPL assessment process is affordable in that it costs less than a full-time module or learning programme. One of the Faculty members who handled the RPL assessment process of some RPL candidates, said they used their departmental

budget to cover all the costs related to those assessments, such as printing and communication. The portfolio development module is credit bearing, which means that there is government subsidy for students who enrol for it.

Weaknesses: There is no evidence that research has ever been conducted at the University of Pretoria to investigate the cost effectiveness of the RPL service. There is also no indication that development priorities have been identified towards the sustainability of the system. One of the senior members of the Faculty was emphatic that *"he/she would rather get all the money for RPL purposes from the government"*. This senior member of the Faculty was not very enthusiastic about establishing partnerships with the private sector or the SETAs, for purposes of funding.

Recommendations

The sustainability of the RPL system in the Faculty of Education, and across the whole institution, is questionable. Apart from reasons provided, such as the lack of a clear subsidy structure (a budget particularly for RPL) from government and the involvement of the private sector in terms of funding, the institution needs to initiate research on how to sustain this system, including the cost effectiveness of the current RPL system.

8.2.5   Support services to RPL candidates

Strengths: RPL candidates/learners were provided with the necessary support and advice from the Programme Managers (PMs) who are responsible for the academic programmes in which the RPL applications fell. During the one-on-one contact sessions between the PM and a candidate, expectations were clarified and candidates were assisted to make the most appropriate choice regarding the programme of study, in relation to their career path and work-related experience. As part of the PMs' responsibilities, RPL learners were given assistance on how to prepare for the assessment, including the preparation and presentation of the evidence in a coherent and systematic manner. The option of taking the PDC module on the development of the portfolio was communicated to RPL candidates.   The PDC is a short learning programme that is credit bearing.

Weaknesses: One-on-one contact sessions held on a monthly basis are beneficial, but may not be appropriate for all RPL learners, more especially those who have to travel to the institution from long distances, even from other provinces in the country.

Recommendations

With technological advancements, the institution (Faculty) should consider an online RPL assessment programme, such as an E-portfolio, to remove time and space barriers to assessment, for those who have the necessary resources. It is acknowledged that this would be a huge move by the institution, undoubtedly with major financial implications; thus, such a recommendation depends on the future of the RPL system in the institution.

8.2.6   Monitoring and evaluation of the RPL assessment process

Strengths: There are structures identified for evaluation and monitoring of the RPL process at various levels (departmental, Faculty and institutional). In line with the quality assurance strategy of the University, knowledge about diagnostic, formal and summative activities is available to all units of operation. In fact, a quality assurance manager has been deployed by the quality assurance unit in the Faculty, to ensure that everyone becomes acquainted with processes related to institutional audits and reviews by the HEQC. The QA unit provides the necessary support to the Faculty in terms of establishing proper quality management systems for any operation or activity of interest.

Weaknesses: To confirm that the Faculty has an effective process of RPL implementation, users of the system (clients) need to offer their views and opinions on how they experienced the assessment process. For all the assessments done during the four-year period, information on how the users of the system felt about it (client satisfaction), was not collected, until this study was conducted. It is difficult to see how the Faculty intends to improve its practice, if there are no means of obtaining feedback from those who participated in the assessment process in various ways, either as assessors or as candidates/learners.

Recommendation

An evaluation instrument needs to be developed in the Faculty of Education to be administered to all the users of the RPL system (students and Faculty assessors) for feedback purposes.

8.2.7 Methods and processes of RPL assessment

Strengths: During the preparatory RPL stage, it is evident that the Programme Managers and respective Heads of Departments discuss expectations with the candidates. Individualised assessment plans (fit for purpose) to suit their learning needs are designed. There is evidence that in all the assessments, assessors paid attention to the following principles:

- Validity: the assessment identified the knowledge and skills it purported to assess.
- Reliability: the assessment could be repeated with the same outcome.
- Sufficiency: the assessors judged the appropriateness and comprehensiveness of the evidence.
- Authenticity: that is the candidate's own learning was given credit.
- Currency: the evidence presented was relevant to the purpose of the portfolio.

The learner centred model of RPL assessment used in the institution affords learners the opportunity of being actively involved in the process. Due to time-related constraints, two main methods of assessment are used in the Faculty, that is, portfolio assessment and interviews, which have proven to be appropriate in all the assessments conducted between 2003 and 2006. The criteria for evaluating the portfolio and interviewing the candidate, developed by the Programme Manager who handled the particular RPL applications, comply with the ETQA requirements.

For example, candidates assessed for entry to the MEd programme, needed to demonstrate acquisition of learning outcomes at NQF level 7. All the assessment reports provided information on the evidence presented, assessment outcomes, and the additional recommendations made by the RPL committee. The RPL assessment goes through a series of stages before being finally approved/disapproved at the Senate level.

In between these stages, verification and moderation of results takes place at different levels and through various structures, which is an indication of the rigour involved.

Weaknesses: Both the institution-wide RPL policy and the one used in the Faculty of Education do not have clauses for appeal procedures. The implication is that if the candidate is not satisfied with the manner in which he/she was assessed, there is very little room for requesting that the assessment be reviewed.

Recommendation

The two policies on RPL, that is, those for the entire institution and for the Faculty of Education, need to be reviewed specifically to include a clause on appeal procedures.

8.2.8   Learner records and the reporting system to the relevant ETQA

Strengths: Information on all the RPL cases is obtainable from the relevant departments, and has been done in accordance with the requirements of the National Learner Record Database (NLRD) at SAQA. Such information includes:

- The names and contact details of all the candidates assessed;
- The procedure and process followed for assessing each candidate;
- The documents submitted by the candidate before and during the assessment;
- The outcomes of the RPL assessment at various levels (Departmental; Faculty and Senate);
- Minutes of the meetings held by the RPL committee with the candidate.

Weaknesses: Although the Faculty has the necessary information on RPL candidates, such information has not been forwarded for capturing to contribute towards the development of the SAQA RPL database.

Recommendation

To expedite the development of the national database on RPL assessments this is meant to facilitate portability of 'RPL credits', the Faculty of Education should find efficient ways of recording this information with SAQA. Submission of this information is a

national requirement. The research results indicate that the manner in which the information is recorded in the different departments of the Faculty meets the requirements for submission.

8.2.9 RPL and curriculum development

Strengths: The learning programmes offered in the Faculty are structured in accordance with SAQA requirements.

Weaknesses: Learning programmes do not indicate very clearly how the nature and form of knowledge produced in previously excluded constituencies and locations (informal and non-formal learning contexts), have been accommodated. Although the programmes are properly designed (according to SAQA requirements), this is not an indication that candidates' prior knowledge and skills have been affirmed or taken into account. It is also not very clear how the curricula allow for flexible entry and exit points to allow for diverse learning needs and backgrounds.

Recommendations

Depending on the future of RPL in the Faculty, a review of current curricula needs to be conducted, to allow for recognition of prior learning. All the other programmes offered in the Faculty should be open for RPL admissions, not only the PGCHE. The Faculty needs to be very clear what they mean by 'RPL' and 'equivalent qualifications'. The two terms are used differently, in different programmes. For the PGCHE programme, the RPL language is explicit, whereas for the other programmes, what the Faculty means is subject to interpretation.

8.2.10 Approach to quality and quality assurance

Strengths: As indicated in Chapter 5, quality is a key driver at the University of Pretoria. There is an integrated quality assurance mechanism aligned to the HEQC review processes. The quality cycles promoted by the institution fits in very well with Deming's model of continuous quality improvement (Plan, Act, Review and Apply). The quality assurance approach of the institution relies on self-evaluation; external peer assessment to validate the internal self-evaluation processes; internal accreditation

processes; and ongoing monitoring.

Weaknesses: With regard to RPL implementation, internal self-evaluation processes are not being utilised fully. Even if the Faculty claims to have been involved in self-reflection exercises on RPL practice, there is no evidence that such activities actually took place. In fact, one of the respondents indicated that they do not have a platform for discussing RPL related issues. RPL practice has not been subjected to a rigorous process of quality assurance, with specific reference to internal evaluation. The external evaluation of the practice conducted by the HEQC in 2003 as part of the pilot institutional audits, offered valuable baseline information; however, since it covered the entire institution, there is no guarantee that all aspects of RPL implementation were investigated. The institution promotes peer review, but there is no evidence of any initiative to involve other higher education institutions that have implemented RPL, to offer critical advice on how things are being done in the Faculty of Education. The Faculty lacks a system of obtaining information and feedback on the effectiveness of the RPL programme from RPL candidates and others involved in the process. It is part of the HEQC's responsibility to evaluate and monitor the full implementation of RPL in the sector, but there is no robust way of engaging academics in dialogue on RPL related matters.

Recommendations

The Faculty needs to develop an evaluation instrument for RPL candidates and lecturers who participate in the process, to gather their views on the implementation process. Instead of paying lip service to ensuring that RPL is properly implemented in the sector, the HEQC needs to open up communication around these issues, in particular by organising workshops, seminars and conferences. The CHE needs to review its position on RPL, which should be to promote RPL for increased access, rather than for other purposes. The current stance of the HEQC serves on its own, as an obstacle in facilitating RPL implementation; it reduces the process to a marginal activity, as opposed to broadening avenues thereof. If the HEQC can advocate RPL vigorously, that is, by taking its rightful leadership position in the matter, the situation on the ground is likely to improve.

8.3   QUALITY OF THE PROCESS OF RPL ASSESSMENT

To determine whether there is integrity in the manner in which RPL candidates are assessed, an evaluation is presented in this section of whether all the stages in the learner-centred model (Simosko & Cook 1996:21-27) adopted for use by the institution, are adhered to.

Strengths: There is a model adopted and adapted for use by the university, which is used in institutions offering AP(EL) in England.

Weaknesses: Although there is such a model, with several steps and activities to be followed, several areas of under-performance were identified at the **Pre-Entry** stage. Information on RPL is not easily accessible by those within or outside the University and Faculty structures. The Faculty has not held any information sessions (workshops or seminars) for its community. Provisioning of RPL is not a major activity in the Faculty at all; hence there are no marketing or advocacy campaigns to recruit RPL candidates. From the Faculty's perspective, there is no need for such activities. RPL is not available to all, contrary to what the institution indicates in its RPL policy. It is being offered based on identifying suitable RPL candidates. Furthermore, the lack of formalised or informal relationships between faculties and other institutions has a negative impact on the portability and transferability of RPL results.

Recommendations

Depending on the future of the RPL system in the Faculty, a handbook (brochure) that provides potential applicants with step-by-step advice on how to identify, describe, and document their knowledge and skills for the purpose of assessment, needs to be produced and made available to all. This handbook should provide easily locatable facts about the assessment process, registration, and time frames. It should be the prerogative of the readers to decide whether or not they want to be assessed for their prior learning. Orientation workshops and portfolio development courses to introduce adult learners to the concept and process are a necessity.

With regard to **Profiling,** although an initial interview is conducted with the identified RPL candidate, this service is not open to everybody. I argue that exclusion of other potential RPL candidates is due to the practice of identifying suitable RPL candidates, rather than opening up the system to all potential candidates. Based on the applications obtained, prospective candidates could then be called for an interview.

Recommendations

The practice of identifying suitable candidates is exclusive in nature. It shifts the focus for RPL from those for whom it was intended, and empowers Faculty academics to decide who may be assessed for RPL. To open up equitable opportunities for lifelong learning, the RPL system needs to be made public. All RPL applications received need to be given the same treatment, i.e. prospective candidates should be properly profiled. It should be the candidate who makes the claim for RPL and not academics identifying suitable candidates.

All the candidates involved played their part in terms of **Gathering, Generating and Compiling** the evidence for their RPL claim, with appropriate guidance and support from their evidence facilitators and advisors. Assessment reports indicate that they were able to match their prior learning with the learning outcomes and competencies against which they were evaluated. The evidence provided satisfied all the criteria: sufficiency; authenticity; currency; validity; and reliability. There is also an indication that this was a highly interactive process with formal one-on-one contact sessions and informal communication between the PM and RPL candidate on a monthly basis, until the portfolio was at a stage to be submitted for evaluation.

Recommendations

The above situation indicates that there are people in the Faculty who have the expertise to assist RPL candidates with the development of their portfolio and preparation for the one-hour interview. It is clear that given the necessary guidance and support, people are able to make sense of their prior learning experiences. If this strategy has worked for the few candidates who have been assessed to date, there are no grounds for justification that it cannot work for others who may be interested in being assessed.

The assessment reports bear witness to the fact that prior learning **Assessment** was conducted fairly for the 12 candidates availed. This conclusion is based on the fact that all RPL learners had access to adequate information about the programmes for which they were seeking RPL, including the expected learning outcomes, and the kinds of evidence of learning they needed to provide. They were all informed about the assessment criteria for evaluating their portfolios and how they would be assessed during the interviews. The assessment was about demonstrating their learning, rather than testing other irrelevant characteristics. An extract from the assessment report of Mrs Elsie van der Waldt (Chapter 6, section 6.2.4.1) is indicative of this fact.

The assessments were carried out according to accepted practice, in which learner rights were respected, roles and responsibilities were carried out effectively, with minimum room for subjectivity and laxity. All the former candidates from the Faculty of Education were empowered with new knowledge and skills in terms of what RPL is and how to assess it, as they were subjected to the assessment process themselves.

Recommendation

Faculty assessors who participated in the assessment of prior learning have practical experience, which needs to be developed and used in other RPL cases. The skill should not become redundant due to lack of activity in assessing prior learning.

In terms of **Accreditation,** the institution recognises RPL results for the purposes of access (ease of entry into academic programmes) for those who do meet the minimum entrance requirements. All the 12 candidates assessed were admitted into various programmes of study at levels higher than what their original qualifications would have allowed. However, the outcomes of RPL assessments may only be used for study in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria.

Recommendation

See the recommendation made above, regarding formal agreements between faculties and institutions.

With regard to **Informing the Candidate,** this is usually done in writing once the Office of Administration has received the outcome of the RPL application from the Senate of the University.

Recommendations

It was noted that contrary to the institution's stated principle, some candidates were allowed to register prior to the decision by the Senate, which should serve as the approval for the candidate to register. If allowed to continue, this practice may give candidates the impression that assessment is an automatic process.

Learner records on RPL cases are available in all the departments that have participated in RPL provisioning. The information includes details of the applicants; documents submitted during application; statistical evidence; copies of qualifications; methods of assessing them; the evidence submitted (portfolios); and assessment reports. This is highly commendable, however, such information should also be submitted to the NLRD of SAQA as a national requirement.

8.4 QUALITY OF THE OUTPUTS OF THE RPL SYSTEM

The outputs of what is produced during the design phase are: the RPL system; related services rendered to clients; the paperwork produced and information released. To determine whether there is quality in the outputs, client satisfaction with the system was measured. An evaluation instrument (20 items) was developed and administered to the 12 RPL cases, in order to elicit feedback from them in terms of how they experienced the RPL system. A very simple questionnaire (5 items) was administered to the few Faculty academics who participated directly in the assessment process. As indicated in Chapter 7, the RPL system is satisfactory at the level of those who benefited from it, namely the former RPL candidates. However it is unsatisfactory at the level of lecturers and others who did not participate directly in the assessment process, which is undergraduate and postgraduate students, non-academic staff and other lecturers in various departments.

There were more items in which students indicated satisfaction than those in which they did not. Of the 18 closed items, the findings indicate that students were satisfied with 10

aspects (RPL inquiry; support received; in the process feedback; information on the RPL feedback process; end of process feedback; the cost of RPL in relation to the support given; and the cost of RPL in relation to process involved). Many indicated that they would recommend RPL to others. The items they were dissatisfied with are: RPL publicity material; information on the Portfolio Development Course; guidance; RPL credits; academic level; reflection; RPL programme outcomes and the matching process.

In order to improve the level of client satisfaction, the Faculty needs to:

- Provide more information on RPL (brochures; handbooks, information sessions and workshops);

- Provide information to all candidates on how to develop their portfolios; that is what needs to be done and how much it will cost. To leave the entire responsibility in the hands of the candidates may result in the submission of sub-standard portfolios.

- Appoint qualified RPL coaches with expertise in assisting candidates to make sense of their prior learning experiences;

- Inform candidates on how many RPL credits would be acquired after being assessed. For example, it should be stated clearly that being assessed into the MEd programme without the BEd Honours qualification means being awarded those credits. Furthermore, the implications of receiving RPL credits need to be made clear to students.

- Inform candidates about the academic level for which RPL is being sought. This confusion resulted from the fact that all the former RPL candidates did not apply for RPL *per se*, but were identified as suitable candidates; hence they were uninformed regarding what levels they were being assessed into.

- Provide all candidates with the learning outcomes, competencies and assessment criteria of the desired programme at the beginning of the process;

- Involve candidates in the assessment process by explaining how the matching between their prior learning and programme outcomes is done. This is a form of knowledge empowerment.

Most of the lecturers cited some areas of concern regarding the RPL system, such as the fact that it takes too much of their time. The process of taking just one RPL candidate through the process involves a lot of time and effort. The progress (academically and professionally) that most of the RPL learners are showing in their fields of study was cited as one of the motivating factors. Many lecturers would like to participate in the RPL assessment process as assessors, advisors and evidence facilitators. However, they are not familiar with the typical RPL language and this has influenced their choice of roles within the process. None want to be involved with the verification and moderation of RPL results, which are major activities to assure the quality of the assessment process. It came as a surprise that none of the lecturers wants to develop the RPL policy further in the Faculty.

With regard to knowledge and awareness of RPL activities in the Faculty, I found that most of the students, non-academic staff and lecturers lack knowledge of the RPL system in the following critical areas: What is RPL? Who should apply for RPL? What is the purpose of RPL at the University of Pretoria? How does one construct and develop a portfolio? Which methods of RPL are being used? How long does the process take? How much are clients expected to pay for RPL services? What kind of assistance and support would they be given, should they decide to go through the process themselves? What is their role during the RPL assessment process? Would they be able to appeal against the judgement given on their RPL application?

Of this group of participants, most were of the view that if they knew about the RPL system in the Faculty, they would want to be assessed for their prior learning. These findings indicate that by not making the RPL system public, the Faculty may be excluding a lot of people who may have the necessary prior learning to improve their qualifications without having to repeat the learning they already possess.

8.5   CONCLUDING REMARKS

Quality provisioning of RPL in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria is dependent on the following recommendations:

• Make RPL policies and related documentation public and available to all;

- Change the strategy of identifying 'suitable potential candidates' and allow those who have a claim for RPL to present their applications. This is referred to as 'RPL on demand';

- Open more programmes in the Faculty, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, for RPL admissions, and not only one programme (the PGCHE), i.e. broaden the scope for RPL provisioning;

- Obtain feedback from the clients of the RPL system, and use the findings for self-reflection and self-evaluation purposes; and

- Identify evaluation and monitoring structures that will be functional.

If the university community (both internal and external) do not know anything about the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, the likelihood is that few people will apply for prior learning assessment. The strategy of identifying suitable candidates promotes manipulation by Faculty academics to offer access to the institution's academic structures to only a select few, excluding scores of other people who might be equally suitable. The manner in which the national RPL policy is currently viewed and implemented in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria does not lend itself to realising national goals for transforming the higher education sector, using RPL as a key strategy.

Future areas of research

- An attempt was made to portray a deeper understanding of how RPL is implemented in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. It will be equally important to undertake a study of such magnitude in the other eight faculties of the university.

- To bridge the overwhelming gap in terms of research generally on RPL implementation in the higher education sector, there is a need to conduct studies in institutions of higher learning (public and private providers), more especially where there might be concerns for quality RPL services.

- The challenges towards full-scale implementation of RPL due to lack of government funding, necessitates a study in the area of cost effectiveness of the RPL system in the higher education sector.

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LIST OF ANNEXURES

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