

The ‘nuts and bolts’ of prior learning assessment in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria, South Africa

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In South Africa the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) was conceptualised to address issues of social justice. The concept intended to increase the participation rate of historically disadvantaged groups in higher education and to improve the knowledge and skills base of the workforce in pursuit of global competitiveness. The conceptualisation, however, does not imply that such intentions are actually realised at the level of practice. The system of prior learning assessment needs to meet national and international requirements, which are central to the assessment process. This means having a policy environment conducive to RPL provisioning. The assessment of this area of practice in the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria affirmed that if certain basic requirements, as indicated by various authoritative figures in the area of prior learning assessments, are in place, then RPL can become a reality, enabling the marginalised to access higher education. Results from interviews, document analysis and notes from a reflective journal assisted in determining the institutional policy and environment for RPL provisioning in this faculty. Participants included senior managers and lecturers involved in RPL assessments.

Keywords: higher education; RPL; RPL assessment

Prior learning assessment in higher education

The higher education sector in South Africa has experienced a number of changes since 1994 due to the new government’s restructuring agenda. Success in transforming the sector should, amongst other things, be demonstrated by what is being done to ensure participation by adult learners (25 years and older) in university-level learning. Higher education learning is no longer the preserve of small numbers of students, as it used to be in the past. Higher education institutions do not have a choice in providing Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) since it is a statutory obligation (South African Qualifications Authority, 2002).

Introduction of RPL in higher education was met with a lot of criticism from academics (Breier, 2001; Kistan, 2002). Notably, many institutions of higher learning had previously established their reputations by educating a hand-picked group of matriculated school leavers. Academics 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” (Osman & Castle, 2004). The equivalence of classroom learning to learning from experience was questioned by many. Nevertheless, today, learning throughout life is an acceptable premise, especially in the United States of America, where the concept originated.

In considering RPL, there must be an understanding that the institution is going to deal with groups of people who previously faced barriers in entering the sphere of higher education (Challis, 1993). These barriers are the fear of failure, negative experiences in previous learning settings, and being confronted with inflexible workplace settings which prohibit or discourage learning. For this reason, there should be a shared commitment from all those involved in this process, to provide a suitable institutional policy and environment for prior learning assessment. Institutional RPL policies and procedures should not serve as barriers but rather enabling mechanisms for RPL. Unless firm policies are put in place and structures and resources are allocated to the assessment process, RPL provisioning can easily become an area of contest and conflict. The main question is how does

the Faculty of Education assess RPL candidates for their prior learning and is there credibility in the system of assessment?

Explanation of terms

Adult learners have different needs and goals than their younger classroom counterparts. The main difference between non-traditional and traditional students is age, but with age comes experience and knowledge. Adult candidates may be aware of career choices available to them, but may still need assistance in determining the best path for them to follow. One way adult learners can accelerate their academic programmes, thereby saving time and money, is to seek out opportunities to gain recognition for learning acquired formally, informally, or non-formally.

The concept of prior learning assessment recognises that learning is a lifelong activity. Since learning occurs throughout an individual's life, no student is too old to finish a university degree. There is also recognition that adults bring tremendous assets to the classroom because they have had more professional and personal experience, have a desire to learn, are more willing to ask questions for a deeper understanding, and achieve higher grades than traditional university students. One of the principles advanced in the theory of andragogy is that the adult's vast experience is applicable to current learning. By creating opportunities for reflection, the RPL advisor can facilitate the assessment and re-assessment of assumptions into new understanding (Knowles, 1998).

The design of the RPL system

The design of a quality system of RPL assessment includes understanding the institutional context — the mission and vision of the university and the institutional policy and environment for RPL and the organizational structures needed for implementation. The starting point in designing such a system is to analyse the institutional context in which RPL provisioning will take place. It is at this stage that answers to several questions will prove helpful to the institution considering RPL provisioning (Challis, 1993). Why is it considering introducing RPL? To what extent in its provisioning does it wish to offer RPL? Who are the students it wishes to attract through RPL? Which staff does it need to involve within the institution? Whom does it need to work with outside the institution? How does it resource the service? What groundwork does it need to do before starting to offer RPL?

Furthermore, each higher education institution needs to define its mission and vision in harmony with its overall goals, then translate them into observable indicators and allocate the resources required. It must be evident from its mission statement and strategic plan that the institution intends to assess prior learning. There should be an action plan at departmental level to effect this process. Internal marketing prior to advertising the RPL facility externally is also a key necessity in order to ensure institution-wide awareness of RPL (Field, 1993).

Theoretical framework

It has been maintained that "all learning is experiential" (Hoffmann, 2006). 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). Kolb developed the process that explains how people learn from a particular activity (experience). Kolb (1984a) sees reflection as the source of learning and development. He defines learning as the process "whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience". Experience on its own does not promote learning, but reflection on that experience results in learning. Kolb (1984b) asserts: "People do learn from their experience, and the results of that learning can be reliably assessed and certified for university credit".

The four elements of learning Kolb (1999) presents are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. He describes how this 'reflective learning' takes place, which in principle is what RPL candidates need to demonstrate during the assessment process. Smith (2003) contends that the concrete experience coupled with active experi-

mentation, especially where this occurs in the workplace, in community involvement, or in life experience, is 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. What remains after determining this form of learning is to assess and accredit the candidate's prior learning against learning outcomes.

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. It is important that the RPL candidate be able to arrive at abstract conceptualisation, which is the requirement of formal higher education level learning. Osman and Castle (2002) established that many non-traditional learners were unable to make the transition of their own. The implication here is that learner support systems need to be in place. It may also be necessary to appoint an RPL coach to facilitate the correct articulation of the requisite learning acquired from other learning situations.

Methodology

The purpose in this investigation was to determine whether the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria adheres to the basic requirements for credible or quality prior learning assessment. 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), except for a loosely constructed set of propositions and assumptions.

I administered a semi-structured interview schedule to senior managers of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria, to elicit information on the design of the RPL programme. All relevant institutional documents on RPL and quality assurance were analysed. Finally, an interview with the representative of the Quality Assurance Unit of the University of Pretoria was done to determine if quality assurance measures were applied by RPL implementers at the level of service delivery (micro), to safeguard the integrity of the assessment process.

Given that RPL is emerging in an institutional context undergoing several changes, the case study allows for "interpretation within context" (Merriam, 1998), and for insight obtained from the study to serve as "recommendations" which may assist in adding or extending the knowledge base of RPL in higher education in South Africa. Purposeful sampling assisted in identifying the Faculty used in this study. The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting an information-rich case from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance. The criteria used in selecting the case were the existence of a process of prior learning assessment in the institution, willingness of the institution to participate in the study, and ease of access into the institution.

The experienced and knowledgeable participants selected were in a position to offer useful information on the area of interest. Interviews were conducted that captured direct quotations about persons' institutional and personal perspectives and experiences with RPL assessment. The strong chain of evidence that was established increased the validity and reliability of the findings. I used interpretational analysis: examining data for constructs, themes, and patterns that described and explained the area studied. To demonstrate discrepancies, observations were done to see if objectives, goals and targets espoused by the policy makers are those actually pursued, the differences between what the organisation does, believes it does, is believed by others to do, and is supposed to do, and the expected and espoused institutional environment versus the actual situation of the institution.

Findings

In this section I present the findings in respect of the institutional policy and environment, including

its vision and mission statement and the ways in which these address credible prior learning assessment in the Faculty of Education.

Institutional RPL policies and procedures

There is an institutional RPL policy that was 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 the purpose for RPL is, guiding principles for the implementation process, the legislative framework, the RPL assessment process, standards used for the assessment process, RPL assessment methods, the roles, rights and responsibilities of those involved. This policy addresses all the essential aspects of a policy; moreover it reflects alignment with the national RPL policy.

The Faculty of Education developed its own RPL policy which was finally approved by the Senate of the University of Pretoria in 2003. RPL is used 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 the opportunity to progress with regard to higher education learning and increases their opportunities for viable career options and pathways. There are, however, no actual 'RPL credits' awarded, just a formal acknowledgement that the candidate's prior learning based on work-related experience and academic qualifications is equivalent to the entry-level criteria for the desired programme of study or qualification.

The vision and mission statement of the University of Pretoria

The vision and mission statement expresses an explicit commitment to the principles of equity, redress, and inclusion. This institution fosters an inclusive and enabling, value-driven organisational culture, providing an intellectual home for the rich diversity of South Africans. The institution promotes flexible, life-long learning opportunities and an intellectually stimulating and culturally vibrant, pleasant and safe environment where its students can flourish. The development of lifelong learning opportunities is fostered by means of modular-based programmes of education, within which RPL emerges as an important mechanism, ensuring that learning is appropriate, avoids duplication and is economical for the individual and institution, although not fully exploited.

The strategic plan of the institution

There is a direct reference to RPL provisioning in the University of Pretoria's strategic plan for 2003–2005, especially the creation of opportunities for life-long learning. The institution committed itself in this to developing and deploying instruments to assess the academic potential and performance of learners with a view to admission to the university. However, there is no resource plan or implementation plan for the entire institution indicating how the process of RPL provisioning should unfold over a certain period, who is responsible, and when such a process should take place. To develop and implement the RPL policy at faculty level, individual deans of the nine faculties are responsible for driving the process. A lack of RPL provisioning in the faculty, as is the case in other faculties, is largely due to strategic avoidance (Matentjie, 2005).

Rules and regulations for admissions

The admission requirements for higher certificates, diplomas and bachelor degrees, which indicate possession of a National Senior Certificate as ordained by the Ministry of Education, state clearly that institutional admission policies must allow for equivalent, alternative routes of entry to higher education learning. In the Faculty, admission to Honours, Masters and Doctoral studies are still governed by Rule VI G.62, with the RPL route not being clearly delineated. There was only one programme in the School of Educational Studies in 2007 that was targeted for RPL admissions, namely, the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education (PGCHE), with code 99227050. The requirements for admission in this programme indicate that if the prospective student's application does not comply with the admission requirements, they may follow the RPL route by submitting a portfolio containing a record of their work-related experience.

The RPL product: who benefits from it?

Relatively few students have received RPL in the Faculty, despite a principle of the institution that “*RPL should be available to all*” (University of Pretoria, 2002). Seemingly, RPL in this country has not been a mechanism for social inclusion for those who come from previously disadvantaged backgrounds. Instead, those who benefited from the system had excellent academic records, and lots of experience in post-secondary education and training. There are two conditions for offering RPL: for candidates who lack the formal entry requirements and for those with exceptional academic achievements. The latter has acted as a pipeline for the few who accessed higher education learning in this Faculty via RPL.

The question remains unanswered of how the Faculty will deal with the disparities of the unjust educational system of the past or open up the doors of learning, to the many who were excluded from participation in higher education learning, because of the previous government’s educational policies.

Recruitment of RPL candidates

Although there is recognition that the University of Pretoria has a role to play in enhancing equal opportunities and supporting widening access to population groups that have traditionally had lower entry opportunities, the mechanisms for ensuring that this is practised are not effective. There is also no indication that there are recruitment drives aimed at dealing with this specified group of people. It appeared from the statements of four respondents during the interviews, that not all senior managers in the Faculty of Education were enthusiastic about developing mechanisms for RPL. One such statement 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*”.

Support for the RPL staff

Lecturers who participated in the RPL assessment process felt dissatisfied. The issue of lecturers’ workloads featured prominently in the responses given by senior managers regarding the challenges encountered with developing RPL. They indicated that a lot of work goes into taking just one RPL candidate through the assessment process. RPL is a duty which they are compelled to perform without extra payment in addition to their normal responsibilities, which are teaching, learning and assessment, research, community engagement, and engagement in professional development activities. Most senior administrators indicated that, considering their current workloads, they would have to rather concentrate on getting mainstream students through the academic programmes, even if they wanted to continue with the RPL assessment process. One of the participants suggested that, for RPL to continue, the Faculty needs to consider the use of RPL coaches/instructors because it is just too much work for individual lecturers.

Requirements for prior learning assessment

In RPL terms, the assessment process involves evidence facilitators, assessors, verifiers, moderators, advisors and RPL administrators, and it is recommended by SAQA (2002) that each task be performed by a different person to avoid potential conflict of interest and bias, wherever possible. RPL candidates need to be treated with extra sensitivity, as some of them come from unstructured learning environments, which may subject them to further prejudice, especially 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, and class there are numerous other biases too, including a bias against experiential and non-formal forms of learning. Therefore, training would assist those involved in the RPL assessment process in providing a holistic, learner-centred service that is in keeping with the objectives of the NQF and related policies. A few lecturers (fewer than five) in the Faculty of Education went through

a week-long training offered by an outside agency on RPL in 2002, namely, the City and Guilds International in preparation for their involvement in RPL assessments.

Roles and responsibilities

To ensure objectivity in the assessment process, the Head of Department and Programme Manager — a subject specialist in the relevant programme — must become involved in the initial RPL process. Thereafter the RPL committee members play an active role in assessing the portfolio developed by the RPL candidate, in the presence of external examiner(s), and the same group is responsible for the one-hour interview conducted with the candidate. It is obvious that the Programme Manager plays the role of evidence facilitator, advisor, and verifier, whilst the RPL committee members are assessors. I did not find any evidence of mentoring relationships between staff with prior learning assessment expertise and those without.

Validation, articulation, and recognition of RPL assessment

Since there are no agreements between the University of Pretoria and other institutions, such as Education and Training Quality Assurance bodies or workplaces, 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 particular programme. There is also no indication of any regional integration and collaboration on RPL assessments. The process of granting higher education institutions self-accreditation status for RPL purposes or the brokering of agreements by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) have not been completed. This situation creates another hurdle to ensuring that there is meaningful dialogue between institutions on RPL credits and RPL admissions in general.

Concluding remarks

At a macro level much has been done to ensure provisioning of RPL in all the faculties of the University of Pretoria. However, actual practice in the Faculty of Education has neither lived up to the expectations of policy intentions, nor to the expectations from its beneficiaries. There seems to be a mismatch between policy and practice, particularly in respect of the lack of funding formulas for RPL (subsidies from the National Department of Education).

At Faculty level, the issue of who goes through the RPL assessment process 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. In the Faculty under investigation, between 2003 and 2006, only about 15 people, who had not fallen within SAQA's target group, benefitted from the RPL system and were accepted into the PGCE, PGCHE, ACE, or MEd programmes.

The strategy employed by the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria to identify suitable RPL candidates may be viewed as highly selective. There will always be differences of opinion about the criteria used to identify such candidates. Nevertheless, credibility in RPL provisioning 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. Where the Faculty takes the initiative, the practice can lend itself to favouritism.

The findings therefore suggest that the current RPL policy has not yet achieved its objective as a mechanism to address issues of social justice. Neither has it substantially increased the participation rate of historically disadvantaged students. It is a well-known fact that good policy intentions do not necessarily lead to good practice. In the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria it is clear that the policy is still at a macro level and that very little progress has been made in implementing meaningful RPL at this institution.

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