

# CHAPTER 1

## *INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW*

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### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This study is an instrumental case study, addressing descriptive, explanatory, and exploratory research perspectives. It focuses on **quality** provisioning of RPL<sup>1</sup> (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<sup>2</sup>, (Beekman 2001:1). RPL is a statutory obligation, promulgated by these acts: The South African Qualifications

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<sup>1</sup> 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).

<sup>2</sup> 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<sup>3</sup>) 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<sup>4</sup> 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 Assurers) and their constituent providers<sup>5</sup>. 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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<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> NDoE stands for National Department of Education.

<sup>5</sup> “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<sup>6</sup>) 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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<sup>6</sup> 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; Huger 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; Lockett 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:

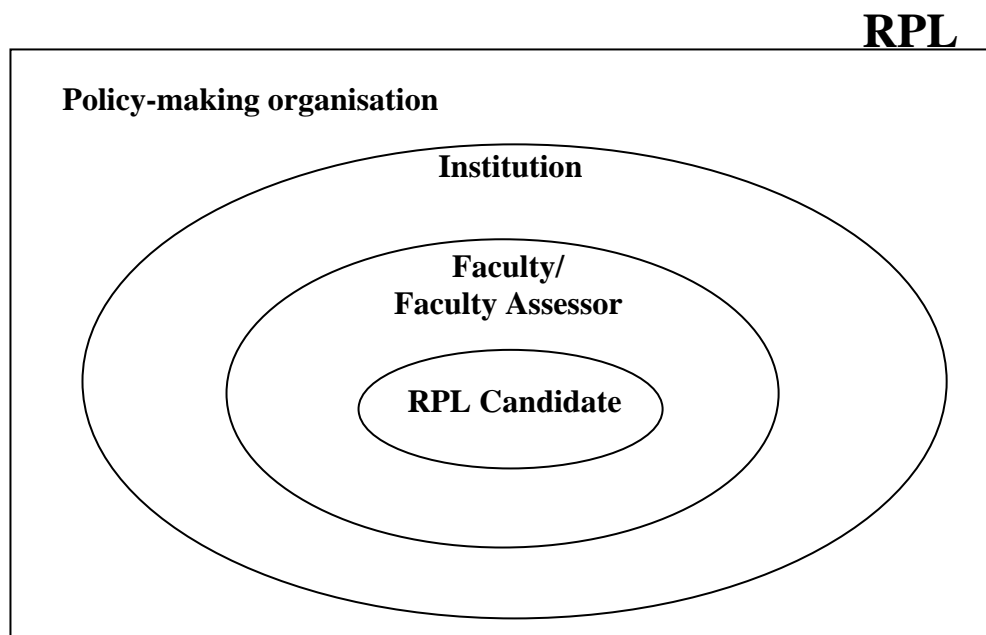
1. The Council on Higher Education (CHE)/Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) who are responsible for the facilitation of RPL implementation and monitoring of the progress of their constituents towards full implementation, as their band ETQA. It remains the prerogative of its constituencies (public 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.



*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

## Chapter 1

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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 new 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<sup>7</sup> (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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<sup>7</sup> 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,

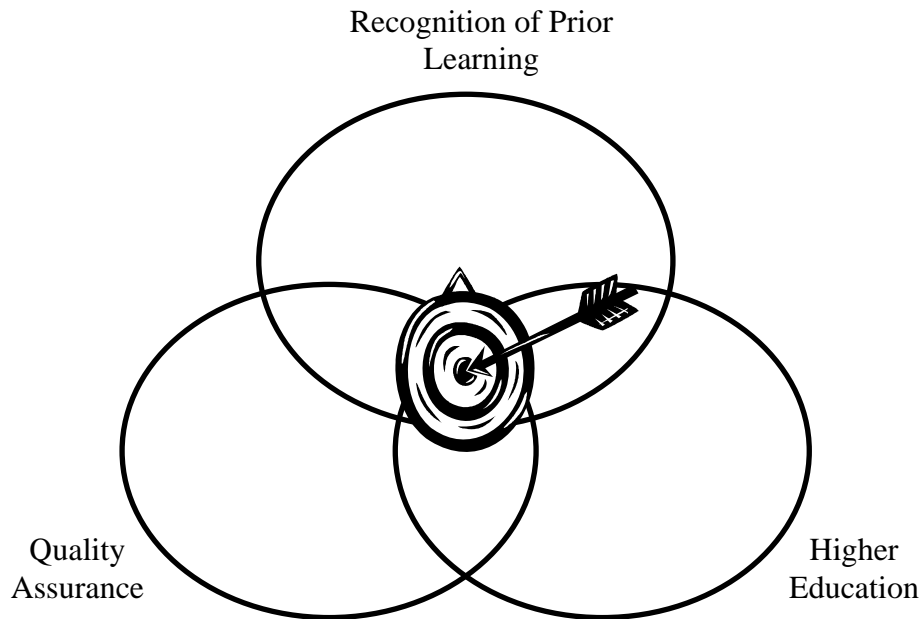


personnel, procedures, inputs, and so on, while it is still being developed. Summative evaluations, in contrast, examine the effects or outcomes of some object. They summarise it by describing what happens subsequent to delivery of the programme, assessing whether the object has caused the outcome, determining 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<sup>8</sup> 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*

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

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

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

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.

<sup>8</sup> 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 advises 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<sup>9</sup> 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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<sup>9</sup> 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*

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<b>Founded:</b>	1930
<b>Location:</b>	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
<b>Number of Students:</b>	Almost 33 000 residential students on campus and more than 28 000 additional distance education students
<b>Number of Faculty:</b>	There are NINE faculties
<b>Highest Offering:</b>	Doctoral and postdoctoral programmes
<b>Web Page:</b>	<a href="http://www.up.ac.za">http://www.up.ac.za</a>

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### 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.

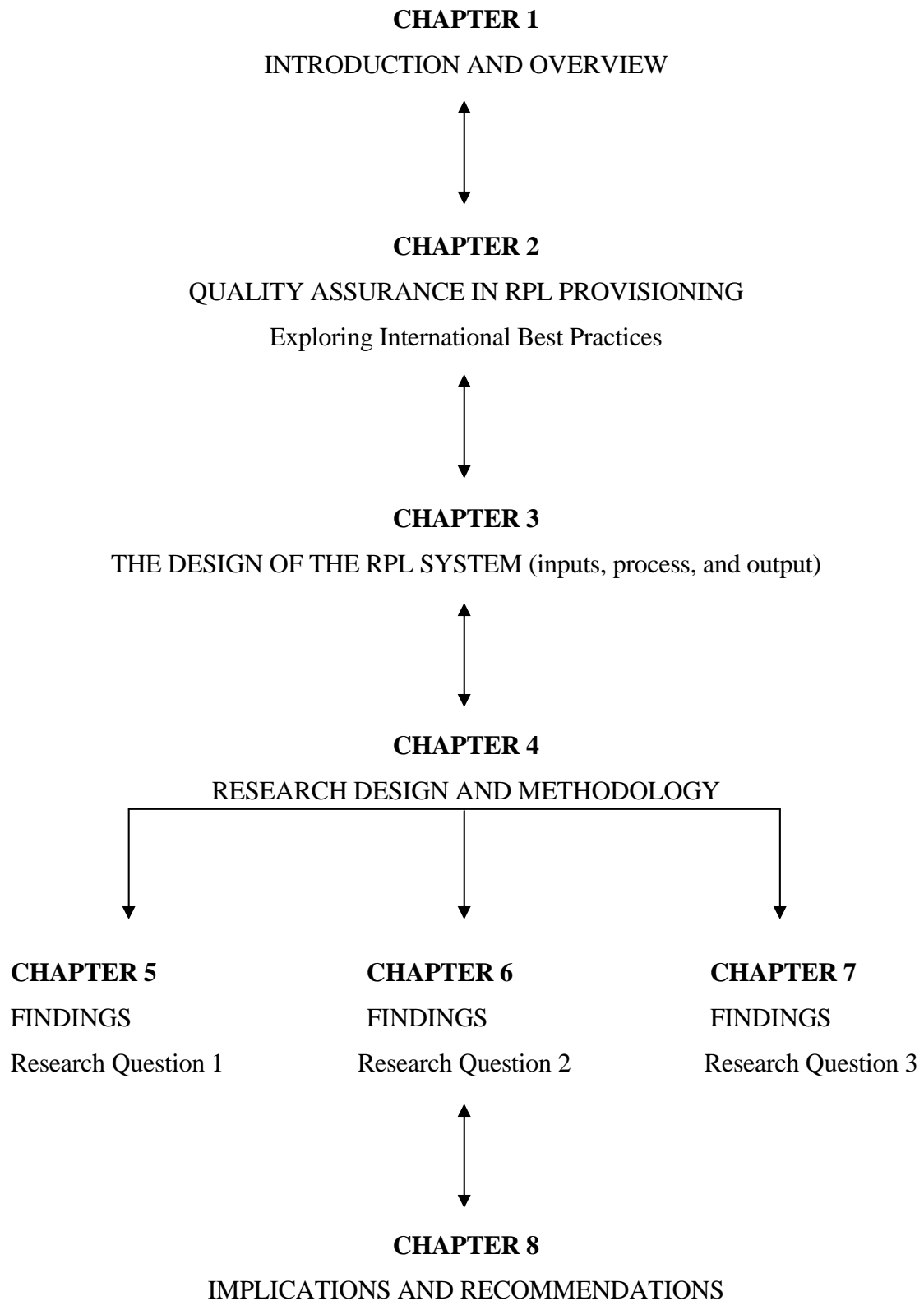


Figure 1.3: Diagrammatic representation of the overview of this Thesis

## 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.