

CHAPTER 7

FINDINGS

QUALITY OF THE OUTPUTS OF THE RPL SYSTEM

7.1 INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

- Availability of the RPL product or service: is it prominent (noticeable or conspicuous) when the customer needs it, and not just when the producer is willing to put it on offer?
- Delivery mode: is the RPL product or service delivered to the customer at a time and place convenient to him?
- Reliability: is the RPL system living up to customer expectations all the time and not letting him/her down?
- The cost of RPL services: is the RPL product or service satisfying the customer’s needs at the lowest possible cost?
- Performance: is the RPL system doing what the client (external and internal) wants or not?

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

7.1.1 Reporting structure for the research findings

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

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

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

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

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

The student questionnaire⁴⁵ had 18 closed items and 2 open-ended ones, as described in Chapter 4, section 4.7.1.3. The rationale for developing and constructing this instrument was to gather structured feedback from students involved in the RPL assessment process in the years 2003 to 2006. Respondents were required to respond to the questions using a 5-point Likert scale: 5 = strongly disagree; 4 = disagree; 3 = not sure (neither agree nor disagree with the statement); 2 = agree; and 1 = strongly agree. To test for the reliability of the scale, the **index of reliability** was calculated. For this purpose, the coefficient *alpha* provided a measure of the extent to which all the items are positively inter-correlated and work together to measure one trait or characteristic (namely client satisfaction). The Cronbach's Alpha value for all the items was approximately 0.80, which is within the range of being acceptable (good, with very few items that needed improvement, which have been highlighted), as discussed in Chapter 4, section 4.1.2. Table 7.1 indicates an extract from the SPSS output in relation to the validity and reliability of the individual item scores (usable items):

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

Table 7.2: *Item-Total Statistics*

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

7.2.1 Profile of the respondents

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

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

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

Table 7.3: *RPL candidates' demographics*

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

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

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

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

Table 7.4: *Year assessed*

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

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

7.2.2 Availability of RPL publicity material

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The results in this area are as follows:

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

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

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

7.2.4 Information about the RPL assessment process

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

7.2.5 Information about the Portfolio Development Course (PDC)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- A cover sheet and checklist, listing pertinent personal and education information, and a checklist of the sections of the portfolio to inform RPL staff and evaluators, about who the student is and what the portfolio contains.
- Personal, career, and educational goals: in this section, the candidate had an opportunity to reflect on these three life dimensions. This enables them to focus their thoughts and efforts efficiently.
- List of significant life events, which paints a picture for the student, coach, and assessor of the student's learning opportunities and significant life events, at a glance. This provides a foundation for writing the autobiography, by categorising learning events according to occupational, personal, community work and educational settings.
- Autobiography, which jump-starts the student's writing process and helps build confidence in disclosing personal information about their life experiences. It sets the stage for uncovering knowledge areas for the student to build upon. Often learning areas are present that the student is unaware of, prior to reflecting on this section. This section also helps lend credibility to the portfolio contents because it demonstrates to assessors how unique the learning experiences are and how they began.
- The learner's accomplishments and proficiencies stated by academic area. In this section, a candidate provides assessors with information about their skills and

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

- Life learning narrative, which utilises information from the autobiography and accomplishments to create a baseline in the course or academic areas for which one wants credit. This is the most critical part of the portfolio, because the learner demonstrates to the assessor a body of knowledge and real life applications from their experiences that justify the credit they seek. This narrative also provides an in-depth analysis of processes where theory is applied.
- The evidence of learning, which allows the assessor to see actual copies of materials produced by the learner such as letters from employers verifying achievements, pictures of artwork, and business plans. This is where learners provide verifiable evidence to support their claims.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Mr X

You are being asked to write on behalf of Mr Y who is seeking recognition, credit and/or qualifications for competencies he/she already has. If you have agreed to write on behalf of this person, we would appreciate you following these guidelines:

1. Please make sure that your letter or report is on company/business letterhead paper and typed, if possible.
2. Include in your letter or report:

- a. Dates of employment (or time during which you knew or worked with Mr Y)
- b. Post(s) held by Mr Y and the capacity in which you know/knew him
- c. A list of competencies which Mr Y is claiming
- d. A statement of your verification (if you agree) and a summary description of the context in which the competencies have been demonstrated
- e. Please provide your signature and position.

Please note that witness testimonies may not be used as the sole source of information to assess Mr Y, however, they are often used in conjunction with other types of evidence and can play an important role in Mr Y's assessment. For this reason, please do not testify to any claim in which you feel the applicant is not fully competent.

Other forms of indirect evidence included in the portfolios scrutinised were appraisals of the candidate made by others; newspaper cuttings; prizes and certificates; references provided about the candidate; and photographs of the candidate doing the work and simulating the desired role. Careful consideration was given to ensuring that the evidence matches the learning outcomes and assessment criteria against which the candidate wishes to be assessed. In order to enable the assessor to put the evidence into context, candidates were advised to clarify the relationship of the evidence to the learning outcomes or competencies, in terms of the underlying theory. The notion of portfolio development is a new one in the education and training sector, and perhaps at the initial stages of RPL implementation in the Faculty, candidates struggled with the RPL terminology.

7.2.7 Support services for RPL candidates

Two statements were directed at the participants to determine whether RPL candidates received support and guidance during the RPL assessment process. As mentioned earlier, it is doubtful that candidates can successfully complete the process on their own. The support service is intended mainly to create an enabling environment, to enable students to succeed. Field (1993:89-92) identifies types of guidance and support, namely, pre-entry support, support during participation, exit support and re-entry support. At its most basic, pre-entry guidance and support is concerned with giving accurate information in a friendly, non-threatening manner. Once they have decided to take part in the RPL assessment process, new students (candidates) require access and guidance services, such as personal support and learning support. As we move towards the notion of life-long learning and the need for individuals to return later to continue

their studies, exit support becomes more important. The range of services should include enabling students to take advantage of their achievements; guidance on the learner's next step; progression to further study; careers advice and guidance; and preparation for employment. The two items were stated separately, in order to avoid confusing respondents in terms of what was required.

Table 7.10: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the support given to RPL candidates*

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

The results indicate that half (n = 6) of the respondents were satisfied with the nature of support they received during their assessment process. The practice in the Faculty is in accordance with the requirements in the national RPL policy (2002:20), in that support services should form part of pre-assessment advice and counseling. Broadly speaking, the candidates received support in terms of preparation for the assessment itself, educational planning, and post-assessment support. Considering the fact that candidate support structures are a measure to enhance success rate, it is not surprising that all the candidates assessed in the period 2003-2006 were successful in their applications (all the RPL applications were approved by the Senate of the University). Assessors indicated that taking one candidate through the assessment process is a labour-intensive process, particularly since the Faculty uses one-on-one sessions (there are no group sessions).

Although I was not part of the sessions that took place between the Faculty advisors/assessors and the candidates, evidence suggests that there was sufficient time spent with the candidates to assist them in making effective choices about learning programmes, career and work-related opportunities. The main reason behind providing support to RPL candidates during the assessment process is to eliminate any barriers to successful assessment. Since most (if not all) of the candidates were working adults, many other strategies were employed to remove time, place, and other barriers to

assessment (for example, technologically advanced ways of communication such as email and telephones). Some of the RPL candidates were not familiar with university-level learning; they needed to be assisted, and any technical barriers to their probability of success were removed. This responsibility rests with Programme Managers who meet these candidates more frequently than any of the Faculty academics involved in the assessment process.

7.2.8 Guidance given to RPL candidates

Table 7.11: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the guidance given to RPL candidates*

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

These results point to the fact that less than half ($n = 5$) of the respondents felt that they were not given sufficient guidance in terms of clarification of expectations; outcomes of the RPL process; essential criteria to be used to evaluate them and the nature of evidence needed for their portfolio assessment. A third ($n = 4$) of the respondents felt that guidance was provided, and a quarter of respondents ($n = 3$) were not sure if they were given guidance or not. I have used the term 'guidance' to mean the coaching (or mentoring) that is involved in assisting adult learners to reflect on their experiences in a meaningful, yet simple way.

The coaching role demands a tremendous commitment of time and energy to elicit candidate responses that can be used in the portfolio narrative (Hoffman 2006a:13). In the event where the RPL coach does not have the toolbox of information and techniques, the assessment process may be compromised, as indicated by the above results. These results are not surprising in the sense that this is an area of weakness in the RPL assessment process in this Faculty. Although RPL has been implemented for a number of years now in the Faculty, there is still no clarification on how prior learning

is being assessed. It is not clear which model of assessment is used in the Faculty, considering the fact that there are well-developed models used in other countries, such as the Kolb and Bloom; and the ABC models of prior learning assessment. Another unresolved issue is about transparency of what actually happens between the Programme Manager and the candidates.

7.2.9 Number of RPL credits given for RPL

The participants were asked to indicate whether information was given to RPL candidates about the number of credits they could claim for their prior learning. In most instances, institutions are up-front about conditions for the award of RPL credits. For example, some institutions award credits up to half of the number of modules required to complete a programme. In other cases, RPL credits could be awarded for an entire qualification. However, the central issue is that such conditions need to be communicated to the candidates to assist in proper decision-making regarding involvement in the assessment process.

Table 7.12: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the number of RPL credits given for RPL*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	1
	Agree	1
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	3
	Strongly disagree	5
Total		n = 12

Two-thirds (n = 8) of respondents indicated that they were not informed of the number of credits they could claim for their prior learning. This is not surprising in the sense that the institution does not use the typical RPL language of 'RPL credits'. RPL candidates may be accustomed to terms such as 'access', 'exemption' or 'advanced standing'. If we consider the situation in this Faculty, all the RPL candidates were exempted from doing an entire course/qualification. For example, they were admitted to a Masters programme without the BEd Honours, which is the usual prerequisite. This

means that the number of credits awarded for the BEd (Hons) degree in various specialisations ranged from 120 to 180.

7.2.10 Information about the academic level on which to base prior learning

Participants were asked whether candidates were given information about the NQF level on which to base their prior learning, i.e. what the level descriptors mean and what the outcomes of the desired programme are. A registered qualification contains a broad description of what a learner can expect to be able to do on successful completion of a particular programme (SAQA 2004:61). In RPL assessment, if a candidate wishes to be exempted from the BEd (Hons) qualification, for example, then the assessment will be based on the candidate's knowledge and understanding of the outcomes expected to be achieved at NQF level 7. This information needs to be communicated to the candidate during the early stages of the assessment process, so that the candidate can present relevant evidence that meets the criteria for admission into that particular programme. As indicated in Chapter 3, section 3.2.1, university credits should be awarded for university level learning. The depth, breadth, and complexity of the programme should be the cornerstone of this type of learning and useful criteria to be considered during assessment.

Table 7.13: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the academic level on which to base prior learning*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	0
	Agree	2
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	4
	Strongly disagree	4
Total		n = 12

Two-thirds of the respondents ($n = 8$) were of the opinion that they were not informed of the academic level on which to base their prior learning. It is an unacceptable practice not to inform candidates from the outset, of the NQF level of the programme into which they wish to be admitted. These results show that the Faculty is not adhering to its stated responsibilities towards the learner in that 'learning outcomes that are to be

met by the candidate will be availed' (University of Pretoria 2002:13). A thorough explanation of the level descriptors for each level on the NQF needs to be provided. When equivalence of learning is determined, it is important to have a clear understanding of the broad descriptor associated with the level, breadth and depth of learning required (SAQA 2002a:15). For example, the RPL candidate needs to know that he/she will be evaluated on the learning outcomes of a programme pegged at a particular level, and what the expected learning is in that programme. The results indicate that communication of this vital information to candidates was compromised. However, if considered in another way, the reason for poor results in this area could be the use of what I would term SAQA's language of 'NQF levels', as opposed to the University practice of referring to it as the 'requirements for a BEd (Hons) degree'.

7.2.11 Ability to reflect on prior learning

A question was included to determine the role that reflection played in enhancing the ability of individual candidates to document their prior learning in a meaningful manner. It is not easy to draw out intuitive learning from a learner, because it is not readily accessible without reflection (Hoffmann 2006a:8). For the reflection process to be successful, the candidate needs the help of a mentor or a coach, an activity that requires a lot of time and a number of sessions between the candidate and mentor.

Table 7.14: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the role that reflection on prior learning played on the RPL learner*

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

A third (n = 4) of the respondents were not sure if being part of the assessment process had been helpful at all. It is expected that the RPL assessment process should improve candidates' reflective abilities. The reflection stage is the most critical one in RPL assessment, since this is where much time is spent in writing the academic narrative,

and where a person has to demonstrate that learning did take place in various contexts. I argue that most of the RPL candidates were not exposed to an intense reflective process during their assessment, hence their hesitancy to commit themselves in the affirmative. It must be borne in mind that candidates cannot go through this reflective process on their own – they need assistance from their coaches (mentors). It seems that candidates did not engage with state of the art tools, techniques and rubrics that can be used to assist them to reflect on their prior learning, i.e. tried and tested methods of increasing the reflective capabilities of individual RPL learners. Considering that quality means empowerment and transformation, the above results are not acceptable, since one expects each RPL candidate to emerge from the process equipped with new knowledge and skills regarding prior learning assessment.

7.2.12 Information on formative feedback to RPL candidates

A number of questions attempted to determine how the Faculty handles the feedback process on RPL assessments, that is whether (1) RPL candidates have been made aware of the feedback process, (2) were they given feedback during the process and (3) in what form the feedback at the end of the process is provided. Feedback is essential in assisting the learner to plan his/her learning appropriately. Being kept informed at all the stages of the assessment process is essential, in the sense that if RPL candidates are not satisfied with the manner in which they were assessed, they may appeal against the Senate's decision. It is also important that the Faculty produces evidence that learner rights have been respected during the assessment process. In the institutional RPL policy (University of Pretoria 2002:13), the institution has committed itself to protecting learner rights in the following ways:

- Providing a fair and transparent process;
- Making available the standards and criteria to be used in the assessment and accreditation processes to the candidate, prior to the assessment process;
- Making available the learning outcomes to be met, to the candidate before the start of the process;
- Ensuring that candidates are assessed through assessment methods which are flexible and appropriate to the programme/subject;

- Making sure that RPL candidates are evaluated and assessed for academic credit within a reasonable period of time; and
- Putting systems in place to ensure that credits gained through RPL can be transferred.

Table 7.15: *Former RPL candidate's responses on whether feedback was given during the assessment process*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	0
	Agree	4
	Neither agree nor disagree	1
	Disagree	5
	Strongly disagree	2
Total		n = 12

Slightly more than half ($n = 7$) of respondents said the staff who handled their assessment did not keep them informed at each stage of the RPL process. Adding to these results, one of the candidates interviewed telephonically raised a major concern with the assessment process. The concern was mainly with the time the Faculty took to assess them and the actual communication of the results. The candidate suggested that it would have been helpful if the Faculty had “informed them all the time regarding their applications, in order to ease their uncertainty about their pending RPL results”. Although the number of dissatisfied clients in this area is small, the message for strengthening the formative feedback process is legitimate.

7.2.13 Information on the RPL feedback process

Table 7.16: *Former RPL candidate's responses on whether candidates were informed on how the institution would handle the feedback process*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	0
	Agree	4
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	4
	Strongly disagree	1
Total		n = 12

Less than half ($n = 5$) of the respondents said they were not given information on the RPL feedback process; and a third ($n = 4$) of participants responded in the positive. RPL results go through various levels before approval or rejection by the Senate of the University of Pretoria. It is essential that candidates know how the institution handles their results and what to do at each stage to avoid any confusion or uncertainty. The above picture raises concerns in the sense that the information on the RPL feedback process is indicated only in the Faculty's RPL policy document. This affirms earlier findings that, since the policy is not in the public domain, very limited information, as communicated by the lecturers, reaches those candidates who would benefit from it. This situation is not acceptable, since it brings about a lot of uncertainty. These results also show that the institution is not adhering to its commitment to the learner articulated in its policy that "the assessor must provide the candidate with written feedback on the outcome of the application, and should the candidates require post-assessment guidance, the service should be provided" (University of Pretoria 2002:7).

7.2.14 Information on summative feedback to RPL candidates

Table 7.17: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the manner in which the end of process feedback was handled*

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

More than half ($n = 7$) of the respondents indicated that they were given feedback at the end of the process. As mentioned earlier, it is common practice that written feedback should be given to RPL candidates on the outcome of their RPL applications. Candidates need to receive such feedback because if they need to develop another plan or learning pathway, they should know well in advance. Time should not be wasted in referring them to other options, should their applications not be viable for RPL purposes.

7.2.15 Information on RPL programme outcomes for RPL purposes

Participants were asked as to whether they had been informed of specific programme outcomes on which they could base their prior learning. For example, if RPL assessment is required for entry into the MEd programme, then one needs to satisfy the entry requirements of that programme. It is the responsibility of RPL advisors to explain what the programme outcomes mean and what candidates need to do to demonstrate their prior learning. As standard practice, each Programme Manager compiles a set of criteria to be used by the RPLCF for assessing and reviewing the prior learning experiences of the candidate. Such criteria should consider the outcomes of the programme or degree for prior learning purposes.

Table 7.18: *Former RPL candidate's responses on programme outcomes for RPL purposes*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	1
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	2
	Disagree	1
	Strongly disagree	5
Total		n = 12

According to the above results, less half ($n = 6$) of the respondents indicated that they were not informed of specific programme outcomes on which they could base their prior learning. A quarter ($n = 4$) mentioned that they were given assessment criteria for the programmes and or qualifications for which they were requesting RPL. The results indicate that there is a lack of transparency from the Faculty regarding the RPL assessment process.

7.2.16 Information on matching specific programme outcomes with prior learning

Participants were asked as to whether they were given information on how they could match specific programme outcomes with their prior learning. RPL in SAQA terms is about matching one's skills and knowledge to specific standards and the associated criteria of a qualification. Again, the process cannot be done without the assistance of a

qualified assessor, who may also be a subject specialist in the field of study in which the candidate is interested.

Table 7.19: *Former RPL candidate's responses on how matching specific programme outcomes with prior learning is done*

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

More than half ($n = 7$) of the respondents disagreed with this particular statement. According to them, they were not informed on how they could match specific programme outcomes with their prior learning. The matching process is one of the critical aspects of prior learning assessment. All the candidates who go through the assessment process should know and master the art of matching specific programme outcomes with their prior learning. Denying them such an opportunity is disempowering. It is also not in line with the developmental and transformative models and approaches to RPL provisioning that the institution cites in its policy documents.

7.2.17 Recommending RPL to others

Participants were also questioned as to whether former RPL candidates had confidence in the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. Did they see any value in the process, and if so, would they recommend it to others?

Table 7.20: *Former RPL candidate's responses on recommending RPL to others*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	4
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	0
	Strongly disagree	2
Total		n = 12

More than half (n=7) of the respondents indicated that they would recommend RPL to others. Three of the former RPL candidates were not sure if they could do that. These results show that there are former candidates who saw value in the RPL system, and would inform others about this service. The question here is how will the Faculty deal with those who initiate such a process?

7.2.18 The relationship between the cost of RPL services and support given

An attempt was made to determine the cost of going through the RPL assessment process, considering the support given and the process involved. Specific areas of interest included how much do the candidates pay for the entire process. Do users perceive the assessment practice as affordable, and does it provide value for money?

Table 7.21: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the cost of RPL in relation to the support given*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	4
	Agree	3
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	0
Total		n = 12

More than half (n = 7) of the candidates who went through the RPL assessment process at this institution indicated that the cost of undergoing RPL is reasonable, considering the support they were given. These results are in line with the requirements from SAQA in that RPL assessments should be affordable, i.e. cost should not create another barrier, more especially for those who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. There is very little that RPL candidates pay for, apart from the usual registration fees. For those candidates who may register for the PDC module, a nominal fee is usually expected, which is subsidised by funding for public institutions. Other costs (materials and communication) related to the assessment are usually included in the budget allocated to individual departments.

7.2.19 The relationship between the cost of RPL services and the process of assessment

Table 7.22: *Former RPL candidate's responses on the cost of RPL in relation to the process involved*

		Frequency
Valid	Strongly agree	3
	Agree	4
	Neither agree nor disagree	3
	Disagree	2
	Strongly disagree	0
Total		n = 12

More than half ($n = 7$) of the respondents were of the opinion that the cost of undergoing RPL is reasonable if one considers the process involved. The cost of RPL services includes other costs incurred by the candidate, such as transport and maintaining contact with the Faculty assessors. If we consider the notion of quality which means 'value for money', then these results are in line with the belief that the products and services rendered by an institution should be affordable. The integrated assessment process contributes to reducing the cost for RPL services.

7.2.20 Areas of improvement in the RPL system

There is general agreement amongst the former RPL candidates (mainly those who went through the system in 2003) that, at the time they were assessed, a lot was not clear in terms of the RPL process. Many of them felt that the assessment took a long time. Some had to wait up to a year for notice of their outcome; the shortest time was six months. Six months is quite reasonable, but a year creates a lot of uncertainty for a student. A commitment has been made by the institution to assess candidates' prior learning within a 'reasonable' period of time (no time specification is given).

Their dissatisfaction with the feedback process is best captured by this response: "I applied in January 2003 for RPL and my application was only approved in June of the following year. By that stage, I had submitted a number of assignments and written exams, without knowing whether or not I would be accepted".

The above statement also indicates that the institution did not adhere to its own rule, which states that no RPL candidate should be allowed to register prior to the outcome of their application being received from the Senate of the University. In this particular case, even though the student enrolled *provisionally* for the desired programme, it may be argued that a negative outcome would have had serious implications for the University and student. Some students may argue that being part of the learning process in this way may have raised their hopes.

Despite all the areas of weakness identified in this section (lack of publicity; the process taking a long time and delays in receiving feedback), many former RPL candidates spoke about the value of the RPL system. The best way of articulating such opinions is reflected in a very comprehensive letter written by one of the former candidates:

Letter from Candidate B on her experience with the RPL assessment process

“I got to hear about the RPL process through one of the Unions (name not mentioned). This information enabled me to apply and the lecturer was very helpful in accommodating me by meeting me in town, where I work. I had not studied at a university for a number of years and was feeling very strange about it. However, I was asked to submit any documents that I had that could be used for evaluation purposes. That was a bit challenging as I was unsure what this evidence constituted. However, I found some documents that I could use. The lectures commenced and I was in a class where another student was a RPL candidate. We could compare notes and both of us were reasonably concerned about the fact we did not hear anything about the process. We were verbally told things during our lectures by the original lecturer but not by any other people. We kept enquiring about our “status” but were informed that it was in the process or at the Senate. This was worrying to us as we were attending lectures at the time and were worried that our applications would be turned down at a later stage once we had completed almost the whole year. Our lecturer then informed us that our applications had been successful. In my case, it meant having to ride from a town about 300 km away every Friday and Saturday and it was a worry that this may have been in vain. However, all is well that ends well. I would suggest that all students be kept up to date with regular written updates about the process and whether any additional documents are necessary. I would also suggest that all such students go through a lecture or two or a short course to acclimatise them to university life again and maybe introduce them to things they might not have been exposed to before. In my case, it was reference techniques. Possibly even written material could be done in the form of an assignment, to update information that might have been missed with not having done an Honours or BEd, for example educational theories”.

7.3 LECTURERS' VIEWS ON THE RPL SYSTEM

A short interview schedule was administered to lecturers who participate in the RPL assessment process at the University of Pretoria, to establish what motivates or frustrates them with the RPL system that is in place. Lecturers responded to the questions in the structured interview schedule in the privacy of their own offices. The following results emerged:

7.3.1 Is the RPL system motivating or not?

I defined motivation as something that gives one a reason for wanting to be part of the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. Where the respondents responded in the negative regarding this RPL system, they mentioned the following: the paper work involved; the length of the process; and the process being labour intensive. They felt that the process needs to be speeded up so that RPL candidates are given the outcome of their results within the shortest possible time. Respondents who felt that the system is motivating, mentioned the following reasons: they perceive RPL as a way of accommodating previously disadvantaged learners in the university system, by way of granting them admission into university programmes and qualifications; it is a way in which more students from diverse backgrounds are attracted to the university, who may not otherwise have access to university learning. An excerpt on how one of the respondents viewed the RPL system is included below:

An extract from interviews on lecturer views on the RPL system

“Some students are serious about improving themselves and upgrading their qualifications. Usually these students apply for RPL as an access route to further studies. There are however, also students who see this as an ‘easy short-cut’, but they are eliminated early in the process. Serious students are keen to supply the necessary documentation and to follow the different procedures in the process. The process is just and fair and no student is discriminated against on any grounds. All students are treated according to the principles of human dignity with an equal chance of success. I support the RPL process because of the above and because it opens up opportunities for access to further studies. If the student is prepared to make a serious effort, he/she has a good chance to be successful”

7.3.2 The preferred role in the RPL system

At first, I used RPL terminology in this question, but most of the respondents did not know the differences between an evidence facilitator, advisor, assessor, moderator or verifier. The most common term used at this institution is 'RPL assessor'. The findings indicate that the preferred roles by Faculty academics in the RPL system are as follows:

Table 7.23: *Summary of the preferred roles in the RPL assessment process as reported by the researcher*

Role	Percentage
Assessor	33.3%
Advisor	33.3%
Evidence Facilitator	33.3%
Moderator	0%
Verifier	0%
Policy developer	0%

Roles⁴⁶ are very critical in the RPL assessment process. There should be people who assist the candidate with the planning and preparation for the assessment (evidence facilitator and advisor). Trained and skilful people are needed to evaluate the evidence submitted by the candidate in an appropriate manner. Such people need to be familiar with the methods of RPL assessment, the model being used to assess prior learning, and the tools and techniques used in the assessment process. If the respondents had been aware of the meaning and importance of each role, I believe that the picture would have changed significantly, as no role would have been viewed as being of lesser importance than the others.

7.3.3 RPL learner performance in academic programmes in the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria

RPL learner performance is one of the identified factors that contribute towards satisfaction with the RPL system. I argue that if the RPL candidates who have been assessed at this institution are doing well in their chosen programmes, this is reason enough to indicate that the RPL system has some positive value. Most of the lecturers

⁴⁶ An explanation of the different roles in the RPL assessment process was presented in Chapter 3, section 3.3.2.

(eighty-six percent) indicated that they found being part of this system motivating in the sense that the majority of students admitted into this institution via the RPL route, are progressing very well.

7.4 KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS OF RPL ACTIVITIES

I identified knowledge and awareness of RPL activities as one of the factors contributing to client satisfaction. The rationale is that if the internal clients of the institution do not know what RPL is and are not aware of RPL activities at the University of Pretoria, there is no way in which the system could be satisfactory. The interview schedule used for students, lecturers, and the non-academic staff, asked questions on a number of critical areas, on which I could base my decision on the quality of the output of this system. I had to use a number of probing questions to ascertain whether there is some kind of understanding on what RPL is, and the process and procedures for assessment. I also wanted to find out how many students and lecturers would want to be assessed for their prior learning, if they knew about the system and how it operates.

The overall finding in this instance is that the RPL system that is in place at the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria does not meet the requirements of the state. The central issue is that the system is not known to the majority of the student body and lecturers (the non-academic staff included). Eighty-three percent (14/17) of those I interviewed indicated that if they knew about the RPL system and how it works, they would like to be assessed for their prior knowledge. I found that most of the students and lecturers lack knowledge of the RPL system in the following critical areas:

Amongst the internal clients, there was no knowledge of what RPL is. Most of the explanations provided lacked accuracy and detail. Most of them were not aware about who is eligible for RPL, or whether they may also take advantage of the system. The purpose of RPL in the Faculty of Education was not clear to most of the participants. They also did not know which methods of RPL assessment are being used in the Faculty, or how long the process takes. None of them could give actual figures in terms of how much they would pay for RPL services. Responses related to the support given during the process of assessment were in generic terms, not in relation to what the

institution has committed itself in its policy documents. Participants were not aware what their roles would be, should they want to be assessed for their prior learning.

Twenty-nine percent (2/7) of the senior managers interviewed indicated that even the institutional and Faculty-specific policies were not yet in place. One of them said: “*I had to do some digging to find information on RPL*”. There have been developments in this area over the last few years in the sense that: the University now has an institution-wide RPL policy; there is a Faculty-specific RPL policy (Faculty of Education), in which clear procedures and processes for RPL assessments are articulated; and brochures on programmes offered are now available to all (lecturers, registered students, and prospective students). The brochures describe programmes identified by the Faculty for RPL purposes, and specify the conditions laid down for assessment of prior learning.

One of the senior members of the Faculty emphasised that the “*RPL policy is not usually made available to RPL candidates; however access to it is possible should the candidate require it*”. The concern raised by one of the HODs interviewed was that “*the institution does not want to publicise its procedures and processes on RPL because people might flock to the university in large numbers*”. The implication of this statement is that since RPL provisioning is still taking place on a minimal scale, mainly due to lack of capacity, it would not be advisable to publicise it widely.

The interview results indicated that lecturers get to know about RPL policy matters during monthly departmental meetings, and the quarterly Faculty Board Meeting (FBM). They are able to access electronic copies of the institutional and Faculty-specific RPL policies from the University’s website. The only weakness identified in this approach of publicising information on RPL is that the Faculty leaves the responsibility of familiarising oneself with the policy documents to the lecturer. There can never be guarantees that all lecturers take it upon themselves to go through all the Faculty documentation on RPL.

The level of ignorance differed, with students being less informed, followed by lecturers. Non-academic staff, more especially those who handle student applications, were articulate to a reasonable extent on RPL related matters. The interviews showed

that students and lecturers are not aware of the following activities, which form part of the RPL process: information sessions or workshops on RPL; any marketing or publicity activities on RPL; and publication of RPL policies and related documentation.

7.5 SUMMARY

When RPL was conceptualised by the state, with the backing of the labour movement, it was intended to address the anomalies of the past educational system. The intention was to open up doors of learning to adult learners who had the necessary work-related experience that could easily be equated to the requirements for entry into university programmes. The state has published a national RPL policy, as well as guidelines for implementation. Although institutions are expected to implement RPL considering their individual circumstances, openness and transparency on what the institution does and why it is doing it, is critical. If the university population and the broader public do not know about the RPL system and related processes, the conclusion is that a limited few (the elite) will benefit from it.

The research results for client satisfaction with the RPL system are summarised in this chapter in five broad categories mentioned in section 7.1 above. The research findings indicate that there is very little publicity material available to those within and outside the university. Information about the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria is not available when the customer needs it – it is provided mainly when the institution is willing to put it on offer. Internal clients (students, lecturers and non-academic staff) in the Faculty do not know much about RPL related activities. Only very few students were informed, namely those who were assessed for their prior learning between 2003 and 2006.

This approach of disseminating information on RPL to only a few is regarded as exclusive in nature. It also creates the impression of a strategy based on favouritism rather than fairness, openness and transparency. There will always be questions posed regarding the criteria used for the selection of candidates who happen to know about the system, when RPL initiatives and activities are not widely publicised to students. The strategy adopted by the Faculty in terms of the dissemination of RPL information is

dependent on the identification of potential RPL candidates, as opposed to the widely accepted practice of publicising RPL activities and leaving the decision making to individuals, in terms of whether or not they want to participate in the process. The conclusion drawn regarding this situation is that RPL products, information, and paperwork are not available when prospective clients want it; only when the institution is willing to put it on offer, to a select few, and then only for specialised programmes and qualifications. These results also mean that the institution is not adhering to its own principle stated in the institutional RPL policy (University of Pretoria 2002:4) in that “*RPL should be available to all*”. Since the RPL service is not widely advertised, only those who are identified by Faculty members as suitable RPL candidates benefit from the RPL system that is currently in place.

With regard to the delivery mode for the service, most of the former RPL candidates are those who work close and very far from the institution. A lot of them travel to the institution for the one-on-one contact sessions with their Programme Coordinators. Communication between them and the institution is mainly electronic (telephone and e-mail). The assessment process may not have been convenient for most of the candidates.

There are several indications that the RPL system did live up to customer expectations. All of the participants who were assessed between 2003 and 2006 gained access into various programmes offered in the School of Educational Studies, in the Faculty of Education, through the RPL route. The former candidates were satisfied with the support given by Faculty assessors. To all of them, being assessed for prior learning meant not having to study formally for learning they already possessed. There is an indication that going through this process improved their knowledge and skills on prior learning assessment and how to compile RPL portfolios containing relevant evidence.

The RPL system in the Faculty is an affordable one. Most of the former RPL candidates were satisfied that they did not have to pay a lot of money for being assessed. There was only a nominal fee for taking the Educator Professional Development programme offered in the Faculty.

For those who experienced the RPL assessment process (RPL candidates), the system performed as they expected it to. All the RPL candidates who were assessed between 2003 and 2006 gained access into various programmes offered in the School of Education Studies, in the Faculty of Education, through the RPL route. A certain segment of internal clients, mainly those who did not go through the assessment process, indicated a lack of knowledge of RPL related activities. Furthermore, 83.7% of those interviewed indicated that if the RPL system was open to all, they would want to be assessed for their prior learning.

On the other hand, if we consider the findings in the light of other information acquired during the research process, there are reservations about the following aspects: Whatever the size of the RPL programme, comprehensive written guidelines should be developed in the form of a handbook (brochure), and kept current. Written guidelines result in a level of public scrutiny that ensures accountability. Desirable components of such a handbook include the programme rationale, assessment procedures, standards, crediting policies, administrative procedures, and examples of documents and relevant forms. All students participating in the RPL assessment programme should receive the same handbook as in other programmes. The information should enable prospective students to make an informed judgement as to whether participation is likely to prove useful, affordable, and worth the student's time. For example, a flow diagram showing how to proceed through steps and decision points may be especially helpful in describing the process (Fiddler *et al.* 2006:69) to be documented in this handbook.