

CHAPTER 8

HOW CAN THE RPL PRACTICE BE IMPROVED

8.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the overall analysis of the research results in relation to the main research problem, implications of the findings, and recommendations. The main research question was “How does the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria implement RPL?” To make the question operational three research sub-questions dealing with the quality of inputs, the process, and outputs of the RPL system respectively were:

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

The concept ‘quality’ was defined in this study in terms of excellence, value for money, meeting customer requirements, fitness of purpose, transformation, and conforming to specifications (Harvey & Green 1993; Harvey & Knight 1996). The fundamental principle of RPL is that learning can occur in formal, informal and non-formal situations. There is a general agreement (nationally and internationally) that if such learning is identified, it should be awarded academic credit. There are proven and tested models of prior learning assessment. To safeguard the integrity of the assessment process, standards, principles, and procedures for prior learning assessment are in place in many countries. In higher education, with recent developments regarding quality and quality assurance, the proposition is that RPL provisioning should form part of an institution’s quality assurance mechanisms. In this study, the intention was to determine whether quality principles and quality assurance measures are in place in the designed RPL system, in the particular case study.

The conceptual framework for this study was framed around the ISO 9001:2000 Process-Based Model of Quality Assurance, Deming's quality model of continuous improvement, various notions of quality as advocated by the 'quality gurus', and the systems theory (see Chapter 3, section 3.6). The research purpose was to examine the design of the RPL system in close proximity, and to identify strengths and weaknesses of the system in relation to the inputs used, the process of assessment and the outputs and outcomes of the system (outputs refer to short-term goals and outcomes being long term/distant goals).

To obtain a detailed portrait of the design of the RPL system, I used various research methods and designed several instruments to gather data, namely interviews, observations, questionnaires (student and lecturer), observational checklist, document analysis, development of cases, and fieldwork notes (reflective journal). Much of the information was obtained from those who are directly involved with the process of RPL implementation in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, either as policy analysts, developers or implementers. The other data sources involved those who are not directly involved with the process, namely registered students, non-academic staff and lecturers. The assumption was that even those not directly involved with RPL should have received information from the institution in one way or the other, for example, through information sessions or workshops on RPL.

Most of the questions posed to the participants related to their reactions to and feelings about the RPL system, their attitudes and perceptions, as well as finding evidence of changes in their knowledge and skills (see Annexure F and G). I spent a lot of time at the site of investigation, i.e. the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, where I interacted with key informants and had the opportunity of being part of central activities and events related to the RPL assessment process.

Quantitative data was analysed using frequency of responses generated through the SPSS programme, where I interpreted what each response means. Qualitative data (interviews and observations) was analysed using discrepancy and interpretational methods. To summarise data from the documents reviewed, I developed a schedule for content analysis. No problems were experienced with regard to the management of data. The database created is stored in safe places, both electronically and manually in a

filing system. I will keep the information until all the other processes (verification, evaluation and moderation) related to the assessment of this research study have been completed.

The main findings regarding RPL provisioning in the Faculty of Education (University of Pretoria) is that the system is quality assured. However, due to various reasons ranging from issues of capacity to sustainability of the system, very few (less than 20) students have enjoyed its benefit to date. The majority of registered students (undergraduate and postgraduate levels), non-academic staff, and lecturers do not know about this RPL system; let alone what to do if they would like to seek assessment of their prior learning. Different people within the institution have different perceptions, knowledge and skills on RPL, and were exposed to RPL in different ways.

In terms of other specific issues related to the quality in the inputs, process, and outputs in this study, I identified strengths and weaknesses of the RPL system in each area and provided recommendations. The greatest challenge in this study was evaluating the RPL practice in the Faculty as an external researcher, i.e. not having a full understanding of internal issues (political, organisational, and managerial) regarding RPL provisioning (see Chapter 4, section 4.10 for a list of other limitations to this study).

8.2 QUALITY OF THE INPUTS USED TO DESIGN THE RPL SYSTEM

Ten areas of practice were evaluated during the research process, to determine whether there is quality in the inputs used to design the RPL system. The premise was that the quality of inputs determines the quality of the designed system. Based on the evaluation of the quality in the inputs, strengths and weaknesses were identified to enable me to make proper recommendations as to what needs to be improved and why, based on best practices in RPL provisioning identified in Chapter 2 from five countries (USA, UK, Canada, Australia and The Netherlands). The ideal is not to copy other country's quality assurance practices in RPL provisioning, but to determine what would work for the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria.

8.2.1 Institutional policy and environment

Strengths: At a macro level, much has been done to ensure successful implementation

of RPL in all the faculties of the University of Pretoria, albeit only on paper. The vision and mission statements of the university, although not very specific about RPL, imply that RPL procedures and processes must be in place. The institution subscribes to the notions of equal educational opportunities for all; access into higher education programmes and qualifications; redress of historical injustices of the previous education system; and flexible lifelong learning opportunities. The indication is that the vision of this institution was a direct response to the call of the previous Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, for institutions to restructure and transform so as to meet the challenges of the 21st century, amongst those being responsive to issues of massification, global competitiveness and demonstrating that quality is happening in their institutions (NPHE:2001).

In the institution's strategic plan for the period 2003-2005, there is a clear reference to RPL, more especially in terms of making a commitment to developing mechanisms for lifelong learning and assessment of prior learning. The many short learning programmes offered by Continuing Education at the University of Pretoria (CE at UP) are an indication of the institution's commitment to addressing the needs of adult learners. In relation to the management strategy (devolution of power) employed by the institution, the responsibility of implementing RPL is rightfully left in the hands of the deans of faculties.

The formulation of an institution-wide RPL policy (University of Pretoria 2002) is a key aspect that indicates the level of preparedness of the institution to offer RPL services. This policy satisfies all the criteria for a creditable RPL policy: the institution is clear on what RPL is and why it intends to offer this service; there are clear standards and principles to ensure credibility and integrity of RPL results; the institution has a simple RPL process that is easy to follow when seeking assessment for prior learning. Obstacles to RPL implementation have been identified and possible strategies for overcoming them have been developed. This is an indication of the depth of the groundwork that took place during the conceptualisation and formulation of this policy. The initiative taken by the Faculty of Education to develop mechanisms for RPL provisioning for postgraduate admissions is commendable. This resulted in the release of a good policy, once again, in particular for this Faculty.

Weaknesses: The above policy intents did not live up to expectations in terms of the actual practice in the Faculty of Education (where the study took place), nor in terms of its beneficiaries (target group for RPL) and the government. The lack of a clear subsidy structure for RPL implementation in public higher education institutions is a matter of serious concern. Without funding from government specifically for RPL, the sustainability of the RPL system becomes questionable. At institutional level, the fact that there is no action plan or resource plan for implementing RPL, which should indicate activities, timelines, responsibilities and available resources (such as trained RPL assessors, buildings and funding for RPL), creates problems for those who are to take the process of implementation further. This becomes a situation of being expected to implement a system without the necessary support from ‘suppliers’, and without any recognition by the institution of the efforts of those who try hard to implement the system.

At Faculty level, the issue of who is awarded RPL is a very contentious one. Although there is an assertion from the institution that RPL should be available to all, this is not in fact the case. From the policy-making perspective, RPL was intended for historically disadvantaged groups, i.e. those people who were not exposed to proper educational and employment opportunities because of the apartheid laws of the previous government. It is understood that this involves blacks, coloureds and Indians, in this order. The policy is aimed at people in these designated groups, with vast work related experience, but no formal qualifications to display; or those with various other formal qualifications (completed or uncompleted). In the Faculty under investigation, the RPL system benefited people who do not fall within these categories. It involved a limited number (around 15) of RPL cases assessed for prior learning in the Departments of Curriculum Studies, and Educational Management, Law and Policy Studies only, for the PGCE, PGCHE, ACE and MEd programmes.

In relation to admission procedures and entrance requirements, there are statutory obstacles to RPL implementation that have not been dealt with. This refers particularly to the 50% residency clause and the matriculation exemption as an entrance requirement into higher education. The latter condition means that any student without the option of mature-age exemption (with schooling at only Grade 11 or lower) currently has no means of admission to suitable university programmes by means of

proof of equivalent learning through experience. Should such a learner be admitted into a university, he/she is not eligible to be awarded a degree, even if the learner completes the programme successfully. At most, a 'certificate' may be awarded (SAQA 2004:10).

Regarding the first obstacle, the implications are that accreditation agreements between institutions need to be established to facilitate portability of 'RPL credits'. Currently such agreements to ensure effective validation, articulation and recognition of assessment outcomes are non-existent. This problem is further exacerbated by the fact that there is no regional integration, at least in the province (Gauteng) where the study was done, which has five regions. There is also no evidence of collaboration amongst institutions, professional bodies and workplaces, where possible and necessary.

The strategy employed by the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria to identify suitable RPL candidates, may be viewed as selective and prejudicial. There will always be differences of opinion about the criteria used to identify such candidates. Credibility in RPL implementation depends on openness and transparency about policies, procedures and processes for assessment. RPL candidates should be the ones to make the claim for RPL, i.e. by approaching the Faculty, and not vice versa. It was found that the Faculty is in violation of Principle 1 for good practice guidelines in the assessment and accreditation of prior learning (Nyatanga *et al* 1998:18).

Although there is conclusive evidence that those who are part of the assessment process (RPL assessors) received training on prior learning assessment, there are very few Faculty members with such expertise. The only Faculty members trained were Programme Managers, Heads of Departments and subject specialists who are part of this process, either by way of identifying a prospective candidate, developing assessment tools for prior learning, providing support and advice to the RPL candidate, conducting the assessment, or any other related activity. Faculty assessors have not transferred this skill to others, by way of mentoring up-and-coming RPL assessors, if there are any, or those who may have an interest in the process. At the policy level, there is an institutional will to widen access to academic qualifications through the RPL route. However, the situation on the ground does not suggest that the RPL targeted groups have an opportunity of being assessed in the Faculty of Education, nor are there

guarantees that they would enjoy the same support structures as the 15 previous RPL candidates.

Recommendations for faculty RPL implementers and policy makers

- The government needs to be clear as to how it intends to assist institutions financially to implement RPL.
- The Faculty in question needs to make its position clear on RPL, i.e. whether it intends to offer the service beyond 2006 or not, and what the reasons would be for ending the current RPL service.
- Identifying potential RPL candidates may work well as a strategy for the Faculty, in terms of such candidates being able to complete the assessment process, but potential candidates who approach the institution need to be given the same support and advice as identified candidates.
- The expertise to assess prior learning should not be confined to a few Faculty members, but through mentoring, other RPL assessors should be equipped in this area.
- A review of current access and admissions procedures and systems needs to be conducted in the Faculty to ensure that RPL admissions are not marginalised.
- Institutional agreements and regional collaborations need to be encouraged by the relevant parties. The HEQC needs to play its rightful role in this regard, as the ETQA for the higher education sector, in terms of ensuring that RPL is properly implemented in the sector and monitored on a regular basis.

8.2.2 Resources allocated for RPL services

Strengths

The integrated model of RPL provisioning adopted by the faculty has advantages in the sense that it is cost-effective.

Weaknesses

Very few Faculty academics become exposed to the RPL assessment process.

Recommendations

In the event where the University of Pretoria may offer full-scale RPL, a separate, free standing RPL unit needs to be established, where all the learners seeking RPL will be referred.

8.2.3 Training and registration of RPL assessors and key personnel

Strengths: All Faculty personnel involved in the RPL assessment process attended a weeklong training course offered by City and Guilds International in 2002. This included, in particular, Programme Managers who act as evidence facilitators and advisors, and members of the RPL committee who play a major role in assessing candidates' portfolios and interviewing them. Although the Faculty does not use the general RPL terminology, that is RPL evidence facilitators, advisors, assessors, and moderators, there is an indication that in terms of the application of roles and responsibilities, different people do different things during the assessment to ensure objectivity.

Weakness: There is no evidence to suggest that trained assessors and advisors are registered with the relevant ETQA, i.e. the ETDPSETA, as assessors, which is a national SAQA requirement.

Recommendations

Although not being registered as an assessor with the ETDPSETA does not in principle mean that one does not have the expertise to assess, it is essential not only to receive training, but to complete all the other requirements needed for being officially recognised as an assessor, with expertise in RPL assessment.

8.2.4 Fees for RPL services

Strengths: The RPL service is affordable, with minimal direct payments required from the candidate or his/her employer. In the case where candidates need to take a course or module in relation to the development of their portfolios, a minimal fee is usually charged. In essence, the RPL assessment process is affordable in that it costs less than a full-time module or learning programme. One of the Faculty members who handled the RPL assessment process of some RPL candidates, said they used their departmental

budget to cover all the costs related to those assessments, such as printing and communication. The portfolio development module is credit bearing, which means that there is government subsidy for students who enrol for it.

Weaknesses: There is no evidence that research has ever been conducted at the University of Pretoria to investigate the cost effectiveness of the RPL service. There is also no indication that development priorities have been identified towards the sustainability of the system. One of the senior members of the Faculty was emphatic that “*he/she would rather get all the money for RPL purposes from the government*”. This senior member of the Faculty was not very enthusiastic about establishing partnerships with the private sector or the SETAs, for purposes of funding.

Recommendations

The sustainability of the RPL system in the Faculty of Education, and across the whole institution, is questionable. Apart from reasons provided, such as the lack of a clear subsidy structure (a budget particularly for RPL) from government and the involvement of the private sector in terms of funding, the institution needs to initiate research on how to sustain this system, including the cost effectiveness of the current RPL system.

8.2.5 Support services to RPL candidates

Strengths: RPL candidates/learners were provided with the necessary support and advice from the Programme Managers (PMs) who are responsible for the academic programmes in which the RPL applications fell. During the one-on-one contact sessions between the PM and a candidate, expectations were clarified and candidates were assisted to make the most appropriate choice regarding the programme of study, in relation to their career path and work-related experience. As part of the PMs’ responsibilities, RPL learners were given assistance on how to prepare for the assessment, including the preparation and presentation of the evidence in a coherent and systematic manner. The option of taking the PDC module on the development of the portfolio was communicated to RPL candidates. The PDC is a short learning programme that is credit bearing.

Weaknesses: One-on-one contact sessions held on a monthly basis are beneficial, but may not be appropriate for all RPL learners, more especially those who have to travel to the institution from long distances, even from other provinces in the country.

Recommendations

With technological advancements, the institution (Faculty) should consider an online RPL assessment programme, such as an E-portfolio, to remove time and space barriers to assessment, for those who have the necessary resources. It is acknowledged that this would be a huge move by the institution, undoubtedly with major financial implications; thus, such a recommendation depends on the future of the RPL system in the institution.

8.2.6 Monitoring and evaluation of the RPL assessment process

Strengths: There are structures identified for evaluation and monitoring of the RPL process at various levels (departmental, Faculty and institutional). In line with the quality assurance strategy of the University, knowledge about diagnostic, formal and summative activities is available to all units of operation. In fact, a quality assurance manager has been deployed by the quality assurance unit in the Faculty, to ensure that everyone becomes acquainted with processes related to institutional audits and reviews by the HEQC. The QA unit provides the necessary support to the Faculty in terms of establishing proper quality management systems for any operation or activity of interest.

Weaknesses: To confirm that the Faculty has an effective process of RPL implementation, users of the system (clients) need to offer their views and opinions on how they experienced the assessment process. For all the assessments done during the four-year period, information on how the users of the system felt about it (client satisfaction), was not collected, until this study was conducted. It is difficult to see how the Faculty intends to improve its practice, if there are no means of obtaining feedback from those who participated in the assessment process in various ways, either as assessors or as candidates/learners.

Recommendation

An evaluation instrument needs to be developed in the Faculty of Education to be administered to all the users of the RPL system (students and Faculty assessors) for feedback purposes.

8.2.7 Methods and processes of RPL assessment

Strengths: During the preparatory RPL stage, it is evident that the Programme Managers and respective Heads of Departments discuss expectations with the candidates. Individualised assessment plans (fit for purpose) to suit their learning needs are designed. There is evidence that in all the assessments, assessors paid attention to the following principles:

- **Validity:** the assessment identified the knowledge and skills it purported to assess.
- **Reliability:** the assessment could be repeated with the same outcome.
- **Sufficiency:** the assessors judged the appropriateness and comprehensiveness of the evidence.
- **Authenticity:** that is the candidate's own learning was given credit.
- **Currency:** the evidence presented was relevant to the purpose of the portfolio.

The learner centred model of RPL assessment used in the institution affords learners the opportunity of being actively involved in the process. Due to time-related constraints, two main methods of assessment are used in the Faculty, that is, portfolio assessment and interviews, which have proven to be appropriate in all the assessments conducted between 2003 and 2006. The criteria for evaluating the portfolio and interviewing the candidate, developed by the Programme Manager who handled the particular RPL applications, comply with the ETQA requirements.

For example, candidates assessed for entry to the MEd programme, needed to demonstrate acquisition of learning outcomes at NQF level 7. All the assessment reports provided information on the evidence presented, assessment outcomes, and the additional recommendations made by the RPL committee. The RPL assessment goes through a series of stages before being finally approved/disapproved at the Senate level.

In between these stages, verification and moderation of results takes place at different levels and through various structures, which is an indication of the rigour involved.

Weaknesses: Both the institution-wide RPL policy and the one used in the Faculty of Education do not have clauses for appeal procedures. The implication is that if the candidate is not satisfied with the manner in which he/she was assessed, there is very little room for requesting that the assessment be reviewed.

Recommendation

The two policies on RPL, that is, those for the entire institution and for the Faculty of Education, need to be reviewed specifically to include a clause on appeal procedures.

8.2.8 Learner records and the reporting system to the relevant ETQA

Strengths: Information on all the RPL cases is obtainable from the relevant departments, and has been done in accordance with the requirements of the National Learner Record Database (NLRD) at SAQA. Such information includes:

- The names and contact details of all the candidates assessed;
- The procedure and process followed for assessing each candidate;
- The documents submitted by the candidate before and during the assessment;
- The outcomes of the RPL assessment at various levels (Departmental; Faculty and Senate);
- Minutes of the meetings held by the RPL committee with the candidate.

Weaknesses: Although the Faculty has the necessary information on RPL candidates, such information has not been forwarded for capturing to contribute towards the development of the SAQA RPL database.

Recommendation

To expedite the development of the national database on RPL assessments this is meant to facilitate portability of 'RPL credits', the Faculty of Education should find efficient ways of recording this information with SAQA. Submission of this information is a

national requirement. The research results indicate that the manner in which the information is recorded in the different departments of the Faculty meets the requirements for submission.

8.2.9 RPL and curriculum development

Strengths: The learning programmes offered in the Faculty are structured in accordance with SAQA requirements.

Weaknesses: Learning programmes do not indicate very clearly how the nature and form of knowledge produced in previously excluded constituencies and locations (informal and non-formal learning contexts), have been accommodated. Although the programmes are properly designed (according to SAQA requirements), this is not an indication that candidates' prior knowledge and skills have been affirmed or taken into account. It is also not very clear how the curricula allow for flexible entry and exit points to allow for diverse learning needs and backgrounds.

Recommendations

Depending on the future of RPL in the Faculty, a review of current curricula needs to be conducted, to allow for recognition of prior learning. All the other programmes offered in the Faculty should be open for RPL admissions, not only the PGCHE. The Faculty needs to be very clear what they mean by 'RPL' and 'equivalent qualifications'. The two terms are used differently, in different programmes. For the PGCHE programme, the RPL language is explicit, whereas for the other programmes, what the Faculty means is subject to interpretation.

8.2.10 Approach to quality and quality assurance

Strengths: As indicated in Chapter 5, quality is a key driver at the University of Pretoria. There is an integrated quality assurance mechanism aligned to the HEQC review processes. The quality cycles promoted by the institution fits in very well with Deming's model of continuous quality improvement (Plan, Act, Review and Apply). The quality assurance approach of the institution relies on self-evaluation; external peer assessment to validate the internal self-evaluation processes; internal accreditation

processes; and ongoing monitoring.

Weaknesses: With regard to RPL implementation, internal self-evaluation processes are not being utilised fully. Even if the Faculty claims to have been involved in self-reflection exercises on RPL practice, there is no evidence that such activities actually took place. In fact, one of the respondents indicated that they do not have a platform for discussing RPL related issues. RPL practice has not been subjected to a rigorous process of quality assurance, with specific reference to internal evaluation. The external evaluation of the practice conducted by the HEQC in 2003 as part of the pilot institutional audits, offered valuable baseline information; however, since it covered the entire institution, there is no guarantee that all aspects of RPL implementation were investigated. The institution promotes peer review, but there is no evidence of any initiative to involve other higher education institutions that have implemented RPL, to offer critical advice on how things are being done in the Faculty of Education. The Faculty lacks a system of obtaining information and feedback on the effectiveness of the RPL programme from RPL candidates and others involved in the process. It is part of the HEQC's responsibility to evaluate and monitor the full implementation of RPL in the sector, but there is no robust way of engaging academics in dialogue on RPL related matters.

Recommendations

The Faculty needs to develop an evaluation instrument for RPL candidates and lecturers who participate in the process, to gather their views on the implementation process. Instead of paying lip service to ensuring that RPL is properly implemented in the sector, the HEQC needs to open up communication around these issues, in particular by organising workshops, seminars and conferences. The CHE needs to review its position on RPL, which should be to promote RPL for increased access, rather than for other purposes. The current stance of the HEQC serves on its own, as an obstacle in facilitating RPL implementation; it reduces the process to a marginal activity, as opposed to broadening avenues thereof. If the HEQC can advocate RPL vigorously, that is, by taking its rightful leadership position in the matter, the situation on the ground is likely to improve.

8.3 QUALITY OF THE PROCESS OF RPL ASSESSMENT

To determine whether there is integrity in the manner in which RPL candidates are assessed, an evaluation is presented in this section of whether all the stages in the learner-centred model (Simosko & Cook 1996:21-27) adopted for use by the institution, are adhered to.

Strengths: There is a model adopted and adapted for use by the university, which is used in institutions offering AP(EL) in England.

Weaknesses: Although there is such a model, with several steps and activities to be followed, several areas of under-performance were identified at the **Pre-Entry** stage. Information on RPL is not easily accessible by those within or outside the University and Faculty structures. The Faculty has not held any information sessions (workshops or seminars) for its community. Provisioning of RPL is not a major activity in the Faculty at all; hence there are no marketing or advocacy campaigns to recruit RPL candidates. From the Faculty's perspective, there is no need for such activities. RPL is not available to all, contrary to what the institution indicates in its RPL policy. It is being offered based on identifying suitable RPL candidates. Furthermore, the lack of formalised or informal relationships between faculties and other institutions has a negative impact on the portability and transferability of RPL results.

Recommendations

Depending on the future of the RPL system in the Faculty, a handbook (brochure) that provides potential applicants with step-by-step advice on how to identify, describe, and document their knowledge and skills for the purpose of assessment, needs to be produced and made available to all. This handbook should provide easily locatable facts about the assessment process, registration, and time frames. It should be the prerogative of the readers to decide whether or not they want to be assessed for their prior learning. Orientation workshops and portfolio development courses to introduce adult learners to the concept and process are a necessity.

With regard to **Profiling**, although an initial interview is conducted with the identified RPL candidate, this service is not open to everybody. I argue that exclusion of other potential RPL candidates is due to the practice of identifying suitable RPL candidates, rather than opening up the system to all potential candidates. Based on the applications obtained, prospective candidates could then be called for an interview.

Recommendations

The practice of identifying suitable candidates is exclusive in nature. It shifts the focus for RPL from those for whom it was intended, and empowers Faculty academics to decide who may be assessed for RPL. To open up equitable opportunities for lifelong learning, the RPL system needs to be made public. All RPL applications received need to be given the same treatment, i.e. prospective candidates should be properly profiled. It should be the candidate who makes the claim for RPL and not academics identifying suitable candidates.

All the candidates involved played their part in terms of **Gathering, Generating and Compiling** the evidence for their RPL claim, with appropriate guidance and support from their evidence facilitators and advisors. Assessment reports indicate that they were able to match their prior learning with the learning outcomes and competencies against which they were evaluated. The evidence provided satisfied all the criteria: sufficiency; authenticity; currency; validity; and reliability. There is also an indication that this was a highly interactive process with formal one-on-one contact sessions and informal communication between the PM and RPL candidate on a monthly basis, until the portfolio was at a stage to be submitted for evaluation.

Recommendations

The above situation indicates that there are people in the Faculty who have the expertise to assist RPL candidates with the development of their portfolio and preparation for the one-hour interview. It is clear that given the necessary guidance and support, people are able to make sense of their prior learning experiences. If this strategy has worked for the few candidates who have been assessed to date, there are no grounds for justification that it cannot work for others who may be interested in being assessed.

The assessment reports bear witness to the fact that prior learning **Assessment** was conducted fairly for the 12 candidates availed. This conclusion is based on the fact that all RPL learners had access to adequate information about the programmes for which they were seeking RPL, including the expected learning outcomes, and the kinds of evidence of learning they needed to provide. They were all informed about the assessment criteria for evaluating their portfolios and how they would be assessed during the interviews. The assessment was about demonstrating their learning, rather than testing other irrelevant characteristics. An extract from the assessment report of Mrs Elsie van der Waldt (Chapter 6, section 6.2.4.1) is indicative of this fact.

The assessments were carried out according to accepted practice, in which learner rights were respected, roles and responsibilities were carried out effectively, with minimum room for subjectivity and laxity. All the former candidates from the Faculty of Education were empowered with new knowledge and skills in terms of what RPL is and how to assess it, as they were subjected to the assessment process themselves.

Recommendation

Faculty assessors who participated in the assessment of prior learning have practical experience, which needs to be developed and used in other RPL cases. The skill should not become redundant due to lack of activity in assessing prior learning.

In terms of **Accreditation**, the institution recognises RPL results for the purposes of access (ease of entry into academic programmes) for those who do meet the minimum entrance requirements. All the 12 candidates assessed were admitted into various programmes of study at levels higher than what their original qualifications would have allowed. However, the outcomes of RPL assessments may only be used for study in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria.

Recommendation

See the recommendation made above, regarding formal agreements between faculties and institutions.

With regard to **Informing the Candidate**, this is usually done in writing once the Office of Administration has received the outcome of the RPL application from the Senate of the University.

Recommendations

It was noted that contrary to the institution's stated principle, some candidates were allowed to register prior to the decision by the Senate, which should serve as the approval for the candidate to register. If allowed to continue, this practice may give candidates the impression that assessment is an automatic process.

Learner records on RPL cases are available in all the departments that have participated in RPL provisioning. The information includes details of the applicants; documents submitted during application; statistical evidence; copies of qualifications; methods of assessing them; the evidence submitted (portfolios); and assessment reports. This is highly commendable, however, such information should also be submitted to the NLRD of SAQA as a national requirement.

8.4 QUALITY OF THE OUTPUTS OF THE RPL SYSTEM

The outputs of what is produced during the design phase are: the RPL system; related services rendered to clients; the paperwork produced and information released. To determine whether there is quality in the outputs, client satisfaction with the system was measured. An evaluation instrument (20 items) was developed and administered to the 12 RPL cases, in order to elicit feedback from them in terms of how they experienced the RPL system. A very simple questionnaire (5 items) was administered to the few Faculty academics who participated directly in the assessment process. As indicated in Chapter 7, the RPL system is satisfactory at the level of those who benefited from it, namely the former RPL candidates. However it is unsatisfactory at the level of lecturers and others who did not participate directly in the assessment process, which is undergraduate and postgraduate students, non-academic staff and other lecturers in various departments.

There were more items in which students indicated satisfaction than those in which they did not. Of the 18 closed items, the findings indicate that students were satisfied with 10

aspects (RPL inquiry; support received; in the process feedback; information on the RPL feedback process; end of process feedback; the cost of RPL in relation to the support given; and the cost of RPL in relation to process involved). Many indicated that they would recommend RPL to others. The items they were dissatisfied with are: RPL publicity material; information on the Portfolio Development Course; guidance; RPL credits; academic level; reflection; RPL programme outcomes and the matching process.

In order to improve the level of client satisfaction, the Faculty needs to:

- Provide more information on RPL (brochures; handbooks, information sessions and workshops);
- Provide information to all candidates on how to develop their portfolios; that is what needs to be done and how much it will cost. To leave the entire responsibility in the hands of the candidates may result in the submission of sub-standard portfolios.
- Appoint qualified RPL coaches with expertise in assisting candidates to make sense of their prior learning experiences;
- Inform candidates on how many RPL credits would be acquired after being assessed. For example, it should be stated clearly that being assessed into the MEd programme without the BEd Honours qualification means being awarded those credits. Furthermore, the implications of receiving RPL credits need to be made clear to students.
- Inform candidates about the academic level for which RPL is being sought. This confusion resulted from the fact that all the former RPL candidates did not apply for RPL *per se*, but were identified as suitable candidates; hence they were uninformed regarding what levels they were being assessed into.
- Provide all candidates with the learning outcomes, competencies and assessment criteria of the desired programme at the beginning of the process;
- Involve candidates in the assessment process by explaining how the matching between their prior learning and programme outcomes is done. This is a form of knowledge empowerment.

Most of the lecturers cited some areas of concern regarding the RPL system, such as the fact that it takes too much of their time. The process of taking just one RPL candidate through the process involves a lot of time and effort. The progress (academically and professionally) that most of the RPL learners are showing in their fields of study was cited as one of the motivating factors. Many lecturers would like to participate in the RPL assessment process as assessors, advisors and evidence facilitators. However, they are not familiar with the typical RPL language and this has influenced their choice of roles within the process. None want to be involved with the verification and moderation of RPL results, which are major activities to assure the quality of the assessment process. It came as a surprise that none of the lecturers wants to develop the RPL policy further in the Faculty.

With regard to knowledge and awareness of RPL activities in the Faculty, I found that most of the students, non-academic staff and lecturers lack knowledge of the RPL system in the following critical areas: What is RPL? Who should apply for RPL? What is the purpose of RPL at the University of Pretoria? How does one construct and develop a portfolio? Which methods of RPL are being used? How long does the process take? How much are clients expected to pay for RPL services? What kind of assistance and support would they be given, should they decide to go through the process themselves? What is their role during the RPL assessment process? Would they be able to appeal against the judgement given on their RPL application?

Of this group of participants, most were of the view that if they knew about the RPL system in the Faculty, they would want to be assessed for their prior learning. These findings indicate that by not making the RPL system public, the Faculty may be excluding a lot of people who may have the necessary prior learning to improve their qualifications without having to repeat the learning they already possess.

8.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Quality provisioning of RPL in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria is dependent on the following recommendations:

- Make RPL policies and related documentation public and available to all;

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- Change the strategy of identifying ‘suitable potential candidates’ and allow those who have a claim for RPL to present their applications. This is referred to as ‘RPL on demand’;
- Open more programmes in the Faculty, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, for RPL admissions, and not only one programme (the PGCHE), i.e. broaden the scope for RPL provisioning;
- Obtain feedback from the clients of the RPL system, and use the findings for self-reflection and self-evaluation purposes; and
- Identify evaluation and monitoring structures that will be functional.

If the university community (both internal and external) do not know anything about the RPL system in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria, the likelihood is that few people will apply for prior learning assessment. The strategy of identifying suitable candidates promotes manipulation by Faculty academics to offer access to the institution’s academic structures to only a select few, excluding scores of other people who might be equally suitable. The manner in which the national RPL policy is currently viewed and implemented in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria does not lend itself to realising national goals for transforming the higher education sector, using RPL as a key strategy.

Future areas of research

- An attempt was made to portray a deeper understanding of how RPL is implemented in the Faculty of Education at the University of Pretoria. It will be equally important to undertake a study of such magnitude in the other eight faculties of the university.
- To bridge the overwhelming gap in terms of research generally on RPL implementation in the higher education sector, there is a need to conduct studies in institutions of higher learning (public and private providers), more especially where there might be concerns for quality RPL services.
- The challenges towards full-scale implementation of RPL due to lack of government funding, necessitates a study in the area of cost effectiveness of the RPL system in the higher education sector.