RPL: Lessons from abroad

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the focus is on recognition of prior learning (RPL) in the United States of America (USA) and Canada. The aim is to inform policy makers and RPL implementers (in South Africa) regarding the principles and implementation of RPL. Methods of assessment, financial implications, best practices, etc are discussed. Research data on RPL from these countries, as well as one case study (an American university) form the basis of the discussion. It is argued, in conclusion, that closer co-operation amongst South African institutions for higher education in South Africa (SA) is necessary to develop a national RPL strategy for higher education.

INTRODUCTION

RPL is an assessment strategy that has grown out of educational development overseas, gaining much prominence in countries such as the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. In South Africa, it has come in on the back of a political and social reconstruction and development renewal process, which seeks to establish a single national coordinated system of education.

RPL has deleted the borders between working, learning and leisure. Institutions of higher education have to acknowledge that learning can take place in a number of settings, and that it can serve as a tool for planning further (lifelong) learning.

The fact that RPL has only recently been introduced into higher education in South Africa, could be one reason why it is inviting resistance. It has also introduced a new perspective on learning, a perspective that challenges the traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Add to that the questions on the financial viability of RPL, and it becomes clear why RPL is reluctantly accepted in some academic circles. These learners represent new challenges that could add to the heavy load of overworked academics.

On the other hand, if the drop in the number of students in higher education in South Africa is taken into consideration, RPL could become a necessity, even a survival strategy for many departments at universities and technikons. Organizations and companies could be targeted, and personalized and tailor made programmes developed to meet the needs of a new clientele.

It seems obvious that those implementing RPL in South Africa, should keep existing resources, including time, people and finances, in mind when implementing RPL. Resources need to be used effectively, efficiently and equitably. When financial resources are limited, there is still a wealth of time, energy, talent and innovation with priority to the most disadvantaged.

At the Rand Afrikaans University, an RPL team consisting of faculty representatives, a consultant and other university officials has developed a broad RPL policy. This team now forms a core of “experts” in this institution, but more people should get involved in the implementation of RPL at faculty level. There seems to be a need for information on RPL (on the basic principles, but also different implementation procedures and mechanisms) at this university, and also at other institutions of higher education. The purpose of this article is to present a number of international RPL case studies and in doing so, inform those who have to develop and implement procedures and mechanisms for the recognition of prior learning. An implicit question, circling through the following brief of international case studies, is addressed to the institutions of higher education: Can RPL provide the bridge between students’ knowledge and the academic ways of knowing, and between students’ language and discursive academic norms?

Important issues underlying recognition of prior learning will be illustrated with examples, and research data from different countries, namely Australia, Britain, the USA and Canada. The relevance and implications for the South African scene where the central challenge is how to enable previously excluded groups to participate fully and successfully in higher education, will be highlighted.

The purpose of this article is to report on research
done in the USA and Canada, and in doing so, inform policy makers and implementers at institutional level.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

RPL is defined as a process for the systematic assessment of the knowledge, insights, skills and attitudes, and understandings that learners bring with them, however these are acquired, so that they can be used more effectively as the foundation for new learning (Benton & Benton 1997:3). In the Regulations under the South African Qualifications Authority Act (Republic of South Africa, March 1998), a specific definition of RPL is adopted, namely: “Recognition of prior learning means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of what meets the requirements.” It brings together learning from different sources, for example, the world of work, NGO’s, community based voluntary services, living and working in different cultures, and formal education. RPL recognizes what a person knows or can do, before undertaking a task, job or course, wherever and however they may have acquired the knowledge and skills (Cohen et al 1993:49).

RPL ASSESSMENT

The assessment of prior learning (in a sense, all assessment is of prior learning) is an essential part of successful planning for future learning. It offers both process and content information to assist new learning.

Two temptations, related to the direction of learning, that often lead to serious errors in assessment (Whitaker 1989:2 4), are:

- the temptation to confuse educational inputs with learning outcomes. This serious error in classroom assessment, where “seat time” is included in the determination of grades or the allocation of credits, is often transplanted into portfolio assessment. “Years of experience” are inappropriately equated with “units of credit”. The error is the assumption that time spent leads to learning acquired.
- the temptation to overvalue the teacher’s personal conception of learning outcomes. Two different teachers might choose different content, assignments, tests, etc for the same set of outcomes, and the assessment is warped accordingly. Effective assessment is enhanced by clarity of learning outcomes.

The assessment of prior learning is an essential part of successful planning for future learning. There are three principal parties to the assessment of prior/ experiential learning: the learner, the mentor and the assessors (Benton & Benton 1997:4):

- It is the learner who finds and presents evidence of what is claimed and shows the relevance of this prior learning to the programme, or the qualification being sought. RPL starts, therefore, with the learner engaging in self assessment to develop a deep self knowledge. This process of discovery, as many good RPL programmes demonstrate, can be facilitated with the help of an adviser or mentor.
- The mentor or faculty adviser provides the RPL applicant with professional advice and guidance in educational planning before and after assessment. It is of crucial importance that the help relationship does not deteriorate into one of dependency for the learner. A good understanding of the principles of adult learning will help mentors to develop the right kind of relationship with RPL applicants. Guidance and support may be provided to individuals or groups of RPL applicants. An RPL workshop is an effective way of helping a group with similar needs. A portfolio preparation workshop can be used to take RPL applicants on a guided tour of their personal learning history, but also to engage them in initial support and critical dialogue.
- RPL relies on the collective judgement of subject-matter experts. In an interactive assessment system, the subject matter experts work closely with the RPL mentors so that what is required of RPL applicants is clearly understood and that any negotiation with them is carried out smoothly. It is the responsibility of the assessors (subject matter experts) to give prompt and positive feedback on assessment.

Urban Whitaker (1989) argues that the rules of assessment should be applied to prior experiential learning with the same rigor as is applied to any other kind of learning for identical assessment goals. However, the level of knowledge and skills necessary for an RPL student to be admitted to an undergraduate programme could be very different from the regular student’s knowledge and skills, and the assessment could need to take that particular aim into account. Adult learners who have learnt a great deal from life, and who are going into higher education for the first time, will need an environment that is both supportive and challenging, and which develops openness to other perspectives. A holistic assessment system that goes into the different ramifications of prior and experiential learning is the best insurance against credentialism. Like any other assessment, RPL is governed by a set of rules, which defines what is expected of all the parties involved. In other words, there are standards and principles that all parties must adhere to, and established procedures for achieving the assessment goals agreed upon by them.

Professionals who do not understand the process and
the rules that govern it cannot implement RPL. But, just as important, are those largely unwritten rules of mutual trust and respect that make RPL a deeply meaningful experience for the learner and the RPL professionals (Benton & Benton 1997: 5-7).

STANDARDS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN RPL

The following standards, developed by Whitaker (1989:9-18), have been adapted for the South African context. They are divided into two categories, namely academic standards and administrative standards.

**Academic Standards**

- Credit should be awarded only for learning, and not for experience.
- Credit should be awarded only for higher education level learning.
- Credit should be awarded only for learning that has a balance, appropriate to the subject, between fundamental, practical and reflexive competence.
- Appropriate subject matter and academic experts must determine competence levels and credit awards.
- Credit should be appropriate to the academic context in which it is accepted.

**Administrative standards**

- Credit awards and their transcript entries should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
- Policies and procedures applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available.
- Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not determined by the amount of credit awarded.
- All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should receive adequate training for the functions they perform, and there should be provision for their continued professional development.
- Assessment programs should be regularly monitored, reviewed, evaluated, and revised as needed, to reflect changes in the needs being served and in the state of the assessment practice.

These standards can be regarded as basic principles and, thus, as guidelines for the implementation of RPL at institutional level.

**LESSONS FROM THE ABROAD**

RPL, just like other educational innovations, develops in the context of people and institutions. Each country should learn from the experience it already has, but also learn from the successes and failures of what has been tried elsewhere.

RPL, just like other educational innovations, develops in the context of people and institutions. In the following case studies, the focus is on the national stand on RPL, but also (where available) individual institutions’ RPL procedures and problems. Based on international experiences, there appears to be three fundamental human resource development applications of RPL (Canadian Labour Force Development Board, 1996:7-8):

- In Canada and the USA, it has been used largely *within* established education or training systems to accredit prior learning as part of a final academic credential.
- In England, Australia and New Zealand, accreditiation of RPL is used *outside* the established education or training system to accredit skills acquisition toward an occupational standard of qualification.
- In Scotland and France, RPL is used to *connect* the occupational systems with the formal learning system.

In South Africa, RPL is currently developed at institutional level. The extent to which the institution establishes connections with occupational systems, employers and companies is often left up to the individual within an institution. In the absence of a national RPL strategy in South Africa, different institutions have to “invent the wheel again”, wasting valuable time and money in the process. Closer cooperation amongst the different institutions is needed.

**United States of America**

One of the distinguishing characteristics of American higher education is diversity. It is therefore not surprising that RPL provision in the United States has taken many different forms. An advantage of diversity, when it is tuition driven, is that professionals tend to feel more inclined to be innovative in their practice. The main disadvantage is that many of the innovations do not have a chance of being widely known and implemented. Even the very successful RPL programmes do not have the influence they should have on mainstream development. Thus, while American universities have pioneered many innovative programmes, the absence of a national qualifications framework has possibly made it harder to move these into mainstream education.

Prior learning assessment (PLA as it is called in the
US), was originally instituted as a way of accrediting the college level learning of veterans of World Wars I and II. It became a permanent feature of US academic life during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It was supported by the American pattern of relatively broad access to higher education. However tenaciously opposed by many conservatist academics, it was perhaps less of an anomaly here than in other Anglophone countries. On the other hand, the great diffuseness of educational policy, the individualist values of American culture, and the ingrained suspicion of centralized authority has made the standardization of vocational qualifications more an alien concept in the US than elsewhere (Michelson 1996:2).

**RPL assessment tools**

According to research done by the Council for Adult and Experiential learning (CAEL 1999a:3 4), primary tools for RPL assessment in the USA are:

- Standardized exams that have been developed to assess knowledge and skills gained through non college experience (eg CLEP exams).
- Challenge exams that are institution based often these are the same tests used as final exams in the specified courses.
- Guidelines for assessment developed by eg the American Council on Education.
- Individual assessments that are institution based, eg portfolio reviews and/or oral interviews or the assessment of nationally recognized certificates of achievement.

In the absence of national guidelines or standardized exams that assess prior learning, South African institutions will have to rely on challenge exams and individual assessments. The establishment of the National Qualifications Framework should assist in the national recognition of qualifications.

**A case study**

The Empire State College (ESC) was founded by the State University of New York in 1971, and it provides highly individualized, student centred education to a population of adult learners. The learning contracts are made up of an *individualized* plan of study known as a “degree programme”. No curriculum pre dates the students; rather each curriculum is expected to meet broad standards of coherence, academic level, breadth of study, balance of theory and practice, and depth. In many US colleges, students only receive credit to the extent that their college level knowledge conforms to specific course curricula offered by the particular institution. ESC has no “offerings” as such, and has therefore a far less regimented perception of adult learning  a student’s prior knowledge can be recognized and ordered according to the contours of the student’s knowledge. The articulation of assessment of a student’s prior learning takes place within the context of academic planning (Michelson 1996:2 4).

**RPL and educational planning at ESC**

- During the first semester, students register for a 4 to 8 credit learning contract known as Educational Planning. In small groups and/or individually, students undertake a series of activities under the guidance of a mentor. The goals are to explore and articulate educational objectives, to identify both college level prior learning and appropriate means for assessing it, and to conceptualize and draft their degree programmes. (In other US colleges, assessment activities are carried out through non credit bearing workshops and counseling sessions.)

- The resulting learning contract (degree programme) will reflect learning from three sources: previous college study, other learning established through a variety of methodologies, and new learning to be accomplished at ESC. Up to 75% of the credits towards a baccalaureate can be gained through various forms of formal and informal prior learning. All degrees must meet the requirements for the number of credits at advanced (3rd and 4th year of college) level.

- ESC students receive credit for college level prior learning that they can demonstrate using any of the following assessment options:

  - College transcripts (academic records) ESC accepts credits gained at accredited colleges and universities at the grade of 'C' or better.

  - Certification of formal study in the non collegiate sector. For credit to be gained this way, the programmes must first be assessed by the ESC or by an agency such as the American Council on Education.

  - National standardized exams such as College Level Examination Program (CLEP), etc.

  - Portfolio assisted assessment students submit a portfolio of essays and supporting documents detailing their knowledge in specific fields. A portfolio is a three step project:

    - Students have to identify significant learning experiences (paid and unpaid work) as sources of both practical and theoretical knowledge.

    - Then they are required to generate an extended narrative discussion in which
they detail both the experiences they have had and the learning that resulted from those learning experiences.

- Finally, they are required to provide various forms of documentation (ie training certificates, letters from supervisors or appropriate persons, proof of employment, etc) to confirm participation in the activities the student is claiming, within which learning took place.

- The evidence, e.g. the portfolio, is forwarded to academic staff or outside consultants who are experts in the various fields of the student’s learning. This is in accordance with a major principal of good practice, namely that appropriate subject matter and academic experts must make the determination of competence levels and of credit awards.

- Once the evidence has been evaluated for credit, the learning contract or degree programme enters a two step process of review:

  Under the guidance of an assistant dean for assessment a degree programme must be approved by committees of academic staff at each of the seven regional centers.

  Once approved, the degree programme is sent for centralized administrative review.

- Funding: Originally assessment at ESC was funded through general college funds, although students did pay for the 4 to 8 credits they would earn for Educational Planning at the same rate as any other credits. Academic staff involved in the Educational Planning course or assessment of evidence, did it as part of their assigned duties. All students currently pay the same amount regardless of the credits they will receive. Additional costs, to be paid by the students, could include fees for standardized tests, etc. It seems likely that in future, students will be responsible for ever larger proportions of the costs of RPL (Michelson 1996:5 15).

ESC is representative of US practices in a number of ways (Michelson 1996:15): Firstly, it is college based rather than industry driven; secondly, the assessment methods are typical of US practice; and thirdly, the strategy for student support is comparable to that of other institutions, and fourthly, their funding mechanisms fall within the US practice.

Best RPL practices

CAEL (1999b:1 9) has identified a number of principles at work in institutions serving adult learners in higher education in the USA. These principles can be seen as a summary of the best RPL practices in the US, and may be carried out through a variety of practices at an institution. These institutions:

- honor the uniqueness of adult learners and the diversity within that population.
- actively reach out to adult learners to make them aware of educational opportunities that fit their needs and goals.
- build systems of academic and motivational support for adult learners at numerous points of contact, including the means to assist prospective students to become college ready.
- address life and career goals as early as the point of initial inquiry in order to keep the educational process focused on meeting adult learners’ goals.
- create pathways for adult learners to gain credit for learning from a variety of sources so that college level learning acquired before enrollment can be accepted towards institutional credentials and degrees.
- use experiential and problem based instructional methods centered on the adult learners’ lives and work so that those concepts connect to useful knowledge and skills.
- encourage faculty members to function as managers or facilitators of learning in order to enhance the capacity of adult students to become self-directed, lifelong learners.
- define and certify the knowledge, skills and abilities acquired by learners as criteria for assigning credit and conferring educational credentials.
- use information technology to provide relevant and timely information and to enhance the learning experience.
- in partnership with employers and/or unions, develop programmes and services that build on organizational cultures to improve the employability and productivity of employees at all levels.
- encourage the appropriate use of organizations’ technological resources to create access to learning and services during non working hours.

Canada

A cross Canada study on Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) has been conducted by a partnership of six colleges and an independent PLAR consultant. The purpose of the report, “A slice of the iceberg”, is to provide information that will assist institutions, governments, adult learners and work places with their decisions on funding, development, delivery, use and evaluation of new and existing RPL services. The “iceberg” metaphor depicts the concept that only a small percentage of adult learning is recognized, and that most learning exists below the surface where it is more difficult to identify, assess and recognize in any formal way (Aarts et al 1999:vii 4).
RPL assessment tools

Much energy has been devoted to the development of assessment tools. This involved screening interview manuals, information manuals, administration manuals, portfolio manuals, evaluation report manuals, and checklists to identify non academic prior learning, policies and procedures. It also involved accurately measuring and evaluating non academic learning in relation to the outcomes of the programmes offered by the institutions.

Since the examinations used in class are usually inadequate to measure non academic prior learning, the lecturers often have to create new examinations that are suited to the prior learning concerned. Some of these can be described as “house tools” since they are devised for a particular context, using the resources available, and there is no guarantee that they can be used in another institution. The so called “national tools” are developed for use in different institutions. Some tools straddle these two types: departments or teams of lecturers work together to develop them. The situation is slightly different when an institution decides on the portfolio as the favoured or exclusive assessment tool. It is then up to the candidate to demonstrate, first in writing, that he/she has mastered the outcomes (Isabelle & Landry 1988:170 171).

Research on which assessment methods were used in Canadian institutions during 1993 1998, brought the following to light (Aarts et al 1999:31):

- Challenge exam 57.2%
- Demonstration 27.4%
- Portfolio assessment 15.0%
- Work evaluation 0.4%
- Evaluation of military training 0.1%
- Standardised tests 0%

RPL costs

Indirect costs for the institutions, relative to their use by traditional students, were estimated in narrative format (Aarts et al 1999:52 53):

- Indirect costs concerning general administrative services, building and equipment, the library, educational technology, financial aid, marketing, classroom / lab. space, parking were considered as LOW.
- Costs concerning financial services, the registrar, student support counseling and advising and programme development were seen as MEDIUM.
- Costs concerning the RPL facilitator, office space and non salary expenses were seen as HIGH.

Learner’s costs were calculated by comparing two hypothetical students’ costs one traditional and the other one an RPL student. It was found that:

- at two of the 7 colleges, the costs would have been the same for the students;
- at the other five colleges, the RPL student would have paid less than the traditional student between 27 37% less (Aarts et al 1999:59).

Key findings

Key findings of the research on RPL in Canada (Aarts et al 1999:69 71) are summarized below:

Adult learners did have educationally relevant, college level prior learning. The grades achieved by RPL learners in courses acquired through RPL and the success rate of 96% for all courses acquired through RPL support this finding.

Prior learning can be successfully assessed and recognized within a post secondary educational setting. Although the number of assessments were low in relation to the number of courses the institutions delivered through traditional means over the 5 years, academic credit for more than 10 000 courses was granted.

Early concerns that RPL learners might attempt to acquire large portions of their credentials through RPL and thereby jeopardize the legitimacy of institutions’ credentials were unrealized. The evidence indicates that most RPL learners undertake only one assessment and the overall average is 2.3 assessments per learner.

RPL strengthened adult learners’ confidence in their own capacities to pursue further education. The statistical evidence also indicates that RPL learners take more courses than traditional students do over a long term (5 years).

RPL represented important efficiencies for adult learners, particularly those who decided to return to education to achieve employment related training and occupational credentials. RPL students consistently referenced the advantages of RPL for working adults, including a reduced course load, so that time away from work and the family was kept to minimum.

RPL learners were successful students. They earned solid grades in their courses the average course grades were high, and they graduated at a higher rate.

RPL can be effectively used as a marketing tool to attract learners requiring training for employment or occupational certification. Marketing strategies would increase RPL activity levels and improve links among institutions, workplaces and occupational bodies. There is a need for greater public awareness of RPL.
and marketing to individuals, workplaces, occupational associates and other organizations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The vast differences between SA (a developing country) on the one hand, and the USA and Canada on the other, are obvious: RPL candidates in these first world countries are sophisticated learners who are competent in articulating their learning experiences in their mother tongue (with the exception of a small number of non English speaking candidates). Vast differences at institutional level include the absence of a national qualifications framework, and institutional autonomy in Canada and the US. However, the value of their experiences and research for SA institutions of higher education is also obvious. Contexts and applications may differ, but the same principles apply. Examples of applications in different contexts also serve the purpose to inform policy makers and implementers at institutional level.

The fact that RPL has only recently been introduced into higher education in South Africa, could be one reason why it is inviting resistance in some institutions. It has also introduced a new perspective on learning a perspective that challenges the traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Add to that the questions on the financial viability of RPL, and it becomes clear why RPL is reluctantly accepted in academic circles. These learners represent new challenges that could add to the heavy load of over worked academics.

On the other hand, if the drop in the number of students in higher education in South Africa is taken into consideration, RPL could become a necessity even a survival strategy for many departments at universities and technikons. Organizations and companies could be targeted, and personalized and tailor made programmes developed to meet the needs of a new clientele.

Research on RPL in SA is an urgent need. It has to be a large scale well organized national research project to identify and analyze in detail the RPL procedures (formal and informal) being implemented in universities and technikons in SA. This should include the outcomes of current RPL practices for students, staff, and the institution. The RPL candidate’s competence in reflecting on his/her experience in order to identify learning that took place, should be addressed, as well as the extent to which the same standards are applied when traditional students and RPL candidates are assessed. A comprehensive report on South African practices could lead to a more detailed and coherent national higher education policy, including suggestions for crediting procedures arising from a range of specific assessment needs.

REFERENCES


