Recognition of prior learning (RPL): from principle to practice in higher education

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ABSTRACT
Significant developments in RPL are taking place in the formal education and training systems in South Africa alongside other policy and curriculum initiatives towards access, equity, flexibility and lifelong learning. Demands to have learning gained informally from experience recognised will be great. This raises questions regarding the kind of RPL practices that could exist within higher education. Offering RPL could pose a big challenge to education and training systems, especially in terms of the absence of learner centredness and the lack of curriculum flexibility in many parts of the higher education system. The problem, however, does not lie in the acceptance and adoption of the notion of RPL, but in the measurement and evaluation of learning that has taken place in varied ways and circumstances. The consideration of RPL requires a new commitment by higher education institutions to rethink some accepted meanings of higher education learning and particularly of higher education programmes. This article aims to contextualise RPL as a principle and to show the implications of recent developments in education for implementing RPL in higher education in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION
An important outcome of the new education dispensation in South Africa is the principle adopted by the education authorities that recognition be given to prior learning of all learners in the country. The White Paper on Education and Training (1995) states that learning and skills acquired through experience and on site training or self education could be formally assessed and credited towards certificates, in order to enable people to qualify for entry to additional education and/or training. Applying this principle means that people will be assessed on what they have learned, irrespective of where, when and how, to establish and verify their knowledge, understanding, skills and attributes against clearly defined standards of performance, and then be placed at the appropriate level of education and training, including higher education.

Higher education institutions in South Africa are receiving requests from learners for access to and/or advanced placement in their programmes, without adherence to the stipulated entrance requirements. These potential learners have acquired a range of relevant competencies through non formal and in formal studies, work environments and life experiences. Because of pressure of time and resources they may only be able to enrol at higher education institutions if ways can be found to give them credit for knowledge, skills and understanding they already have with respect to particular programmes for which they want to enrol (Geyser 1999:192,195). Implementing RPL provides these learners with a shorter route to higher and further education, because by having their relevant prior learning assessed for academic credit, they can have a flying start in learning programmes at higher education institutions (Benton & Benton 1997:11).

Recognition of prior learning has been used in vocational and non formal education for a long time and is common practice in higher education in many countries. This article aims to indicate how South African higher education can learn and benefit from current practices in countries where the principle is implemented in higher education. Cognisance is taken of the aspects of international RPL practices that are potentially transferable to the South African situation. The article starts with a terminological discussion of RPL, explains the theoretical frame works underpinning the principle of RPL and gives an international comparative perspective of RPL assessment and accreditation practices in several contexts. Because the learners’ needs are the point of departure in RPL, it must do justice to sound adult learning principles and practices. Some andragogical issues and implications are therefore discussed. Finally, the article discusses how RPL could best be implemented in higher education in South Africa to relate to and do justice to the new initiatives and emerging structures in higher education.
TERMINOLOGICAL AND CONCEPTUAL DISCUSSION

Common to all definitions of RPL is the notion that all learning should be recognised and accredited, irrespective of whether it occurred inside or outside the formal structures of education and training. This implies that prior learning should be seen on a continuum ranging from

- learning from credentialed university, technikon, college, professional and secondary school courses (formal education)

through

- learning from non credentialed courses in industry training programmes, on the job training and training with NGO’s and private providers (non formal education)

to

- learning from life experience and informally and incidentally acquired knowledge and skills (informal education).

The first two types of prior learning on the continuum pose the least problems for recognition and assessment of prior learning. The so called equivalency degrees, where individuals are entitled to a degree by passing a series of tests, regardless of where they did the learning, are one extreme of this type of RPL. However, almost all such programmes have added study components for those unable to complete the examinations without assistance (Rose 1989:212). The type of learning at the other extreme (informal education) represents learning gained through multiple activities, ranging from in service training activities, hobbies or the work experience itself. Recognising informally acquired knowledge and skills represents, arguably, the most challenging aspect of RPL in education and training at institutional levels. In the previous dispensation in South Africa, formal education in the university sector of higher education was very narrowly and stringently defined. RPL, especially the way it is embedded in the NQF, provides the possibility for revitalising higher education. It expands the educational possibilities for potential tertiary education students, allowing them to demonstrate and apply what they have previously learned outside the classroom. When translating such experience into credit, the main debating issues are the structuring of such experience and questions about how it should be evaluated. Measuring this learning has become the most difficult aspect of prior learning assessment. However, credit should not be awarded for an experience, but only for the actual learning gained.

To have undergone a learning process is not seen as guaranteeing that learning has taken place. Effective learning refers to the process and its outcomes. Similarly, to have had a significant experience does not necessarily mean that there has been any learning or specific achievement as a result (Harris & Sad dington 1995:2). Accepting the principle of recognising prior experiential learning therefore raises questions about the nature and meaning of higher education learning and the credit system.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AND RPL

In some sources RPL is grounded in the theories which relate explicitly learning to experience. It implies that learning that takes place outside the classroom where the learner is in direct contact with the realities being studied or practised to achieve a level of competence in a particular skill or knowledge domain. Such learning may begin as ‘unintentional learning’ (Simosko & Associates 1988). Experiential learning is present at all levels of education and has proved particularly important as a potential means of revitalising higher education. It expands the educational possibilities for potential tertiary education students, allowing them to demonstrate and apply what they have previously learned outside the classroom. When translating such experience into credit, the main debating issues are the structuring of such experience and questions about how it should be evaluated. Measuring this learning has become the most difficult aspect of prior learning assessment. However, credit should not be awarded for an experience, but only for the actual learning gained.

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MAIN ANDRAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS OF RPL

Adopting the principle of RPL represents a shift of emphasis from the instructional inputs of institutions and teaching staff to the learning process, the outcomes of learning and the outputs of learners. A system in which RPL is eminent of necessity places more emphasis on learning than on the process of delivery of that learning. RPL, especially the way it is embedded in the NQF, provides the possibility for more meaningful and relevant learning and educational experiences. RPL is underpinned, inter alia, by the notions of learner centredness, lifelong learning, learning occurring through a wide variety of styles, preferences and contexts, and learning being individual and unique. These are commonly accepted adult learning principles and by implementing RPL in higher education will be enhanced and more justice will be done to them in higher education.

In the measurement and evaluation of prior learning in higher education, the central questions have become: What serves as acceptable higher education level learning, and how can it be evaluated? There is also the challenging question of how to define higher education knowledge and understanding not to end
up with narrowly defined learning outcomes as templates for assessment. The introduction of RPL, therefore, inevitably has to add new dimensions to the measurement and evaluation of learning. New meanings are given to known concepts, such as “evaluation”, “tests”, “measurement”, “credits” and “assessment”. Prominence is also given to new related concepts of “verification”, “evidence”, “portfolio” and “validation” in higher education.

COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON RPL

Since the late 1960s higher education institutions all over the world have recognised and assessed prior learning. In those countries RPL was developed and implemented because of a mixture of demographic, economic, and social factors. Avoiding recruitment difficulties by providing adequate services for adult learners; attending to national concerns about skills levels, productivity and economic competitiveness; and increasing accessibility and provision for adult learners for reasons of equity were the major driving forces for introducing RPL in higher education institutions.

In the USA research conducted initially by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in colleges and universities demonstrated that it was possible to equate non-college learning with traditional curricula and to develop reliable assessment methods. Through CAEL’s subsequent training and development work, RPL became firmly established in higher education in the USA from the 1970s (Harris & Saddington 1995:4). However, the evaluation of prior learning currently used in the many programmes in the USA has several configurations and variations in the rules, procedures, credits and assessment instruments, depending on the particular institution. Currently standardised examinations, the challenge process, portfolio development and course evaluation are all recognised RPL practices in the USA. Most higher education institutions offering RPL allow for either advanced standing or certain levels of credit either in a course, across courses or as a general credit in a degree programme (Harris & Saddington 1995:19).

In the United Kingdom several research and development projects on RPL were conducted in the early to mid 1980s. The aim was to review entry requirements and non standard access routes into higher education and to “negotiate, establish, monitor and appraise schemes for the assessment of prior learning” (Evans 1987). The research established that RPL could be a useful tool to achieve vocational qualifications because the process challenges organisations and institutions to be more flexible in their learning and assessment practices (Harris & Saddington 1995:5). As in the USA, there are diverse RPL practices across institutions in the higher education sector in the UK. Individual higher education institutions have mainly developed their own approaches to RPL, guided by national policy guidelines, the policies and requirements of the many professional validating and awarding bodies, and available expertise (Harris & Saddington 1995:21–23).

In Australia, as in South Africa, RPL is still in its infancy. Credit transfer has long been an informal arrangement amongst the Australian universities. Many individual institutions had local credit arrangements with technical and further education institutions and particular industries or professional bodies. In 1992 the Australian Vice Chancellor’s Committee and the Department of Employment, Education and Training established a joint working party who identified three sources of prior learning which may meet university level standards: learning from work experience; credentialed learning from courses by professional bodies, industry and other organisations; and uncredentialed learning from relevant life experience (Gay & Wilson 1997:7). They also examined the principles and practice of assessing this learning and issued guidelines which made provision through RPL for subject exemption, following a systematic and planned approach to RPL in universities (University of Technology, Sydney 1993). Currently RPL is used in several universities in Australia as an option for admission to a course and for advanced standing or credit in a course. The main approaches adopted or recommended at this level are portfolio development and the challenge process. Higher education providers, providers of technical and further education and industry also collaborate closely in RPL and identifying education and training needs (Harris & Saddington 1995:6,25).

In South Africa RPL has come in on the back of the political and social reconstruction and development renewal process. RPL appears in all the recent major education policy statements and documents and also features in higher education legislation (Harris & Saddington 1995:7,8). Unlike the countries discussed above, the introduction of RPL in South Africa has a strong social justice element. In the South African Qualifications Authority Act 58 of 1995 (Republic of South Africa 1995), Section 2 on the National Qualification Framework (NQF) places particular emphasis on two sets of social goals: social change, redress and equity on the one hand, and national and individual economic development on the other. In the current political, economic and social context in South Africa, RPL is viewed as having the capacity to contribute to redress and equity by opening up more inclusive ways for people to attain qualified status; enable more people to reach higher levels of qualification and expertise by beginning with an acknowledgement of existing skills and knowledge; and offer the first step in attaining the goal of developing a multi skilled and flexible workforce by
acting as an auditing tool to quantify existing competence (Harris & Saddlington, 1995:7).

However, RPL in South Africa has so far led to confusing, even disappointing results. “Given its embeddedness in power relationships and value judgements, it is not surprising that RPL in South Africa has raised at least as many questions as it has answered” (Michelsen 1999:100). Although developing RPL practices in South Africa faces inherent challenges and pitfalls similar to other countries, they seem to be more acute. There is a risk that RPL may have more symbolic redress value than actual potential, presenting the possibility that the majority of the active population may remain in marginal positions, irrespective of RPL, the NQF and so on (Harris 1997:8). An important aspect of RPL is that it raises the hopes of applicants of getting jobs. When people obtain qualifications, they expect to find jobs. The job prospects of applicants may be improved, but in South Africa, more than anywhere else, it would be wise to provide teaching so that all RPL candidates’ chances of securing jobs are enhanced (Gawe 1999:26). A significant RPL project recently undertaken in higher education in South Africa involved a joint venture between the Human Sciences Research Council, the University of Cape Town and the Peninsula Technikon. The project was underpinned by several hypotheses, including that RPL might be a way to deal with the historical lack of opportunities for disadvantaged adults to gain access to qualifications in higher education; that higher education institutions should review their admissions practices and introduce alternative procedures that take account of prior learning; that there may be a need to theorise or retheorise and conceptualise RPL in ways that suit South African contexts; that there may be opportunities to unlock some aspects of international RPL practices; and that models of RPL would need to be conceptualised and implemented that cater for the particular relationships between field, policy, institution, curriculum, programme and learners in context (Harris 1999:38). However, “many policy makers and practitioners continue to uncritically and somewhat triumphantly advocate the ‘obvious good’ of RPL. It is the view of the writer that more work needs to be done on problematising and elaborating the RPL concept in order to evaluate its feasibility especially within a transforming higher education system such as in South Africa” (Harris, 1997:1).

**RPL PRACTICES**

To establish that a student possesses the necessary higher education level learning, the sources of the prior learning must be identified, the factors affecting this learning have to explored and present knowledge and skills must be identified. This individual RPL assessment process, therefore, involves essentially the same steps as the traditional classroom based assess ment practices of making reliable, valid and objective judgements about what students know and can do in relation to the criteria and standards set. Once this is done the competencies demonstrated are matched in content and standard with the relevant course, part qualification or whole qualification for which credit is sought; recommendations are made about how much credit should be granted; and a decision is made of its articulation with the student’s envisaged programme of study.

The actual measurement of learning may involve several methods and techniques. The five major sets of assessment practices according to which a learner’s prior learning can be recognised and accredited range from highly individualised to highly formalised.

1. **Portfolio development**
2. **Assessment interviews**
3. **Challenge tests**
4. **Standardised examinations**
5. **Programme and course evaluations for credit transfers**

The portfolio development process allows for a wide range of experiential learning to be recorded, helping adults discover the fit between their past learning and higher education programmes or qualifications, but is time consuming and labour intensive. In some cases it may involve higher order skills than what is actually being assessed or the level of qualification sought. Assessment interviews involving interactive questioning make less literacy demands on candidates and are potentially less intimidating than other approaches, but show the same disadvantages in terms of heavy emphasis and reliance on assessor skill, and time and high costs involved. Challenge examinations are useful in situations where individuals have little documentary evidence for experience and learning. However, challenge examinations may relate too closely to course content and their content, format and scoring standards may differ between institutions or even within the same institution. Standardised testing is particularly useful where there is a nationally uniform curriculum and is more transferable between institutions than challenge examinations. However, it does not allow for assessment of behavioural and cross field competencies.

Programme and course evaluation for credit transfer require inter institutional agreements on evaluation standards and also a national system of credit transfer between higher education institutions and other providers. This process may also be extended to provide for non formal courses, such as on the job training, training within NGO’s, adult education courses and in house training, to be credited towards degrees. This generates closer networks between community, industry, labour and educational institutions (Harris & Saddlington 1995:17,18).
IMPlications of RPL for Higher Education in South Africa

Although the development of RPL has provided for many prospects and exciting innovations in higher education, it has also raised many issues and problems as yet unresolved. The process of RPL is complex and several strategies would need to be examined to implement it successfully in higher education in South Africa. Smooth and successful implementation will depend on adherence to definite criteria, conditions and critical issues that will influence the introduction of a credible, comprehensive and widely accessible RPL system in the higher education sector in South Africa.

Establishing parity and equivalence

The disparity between institutional and individual aims and goals is of primary importance. Very often students enter an institution for vocational reasons even though the institution maintains a clear liberal arts orientation and offers generalised bachelor’s degrees. This disparity may translate into continuous misunderstanding and friction as students attempt to negotiate the system. This requires a policy on RPL, comprehensive and flexible enough to improve how it deals with prior learning that does not seem to fit neatly into its existing course descriptions (Benton & Benton 1997:5,6). It is not unusual for students to enter higher education with unrealistic expectations about the kind of credits they will be awarded (Rose 1989:217). The awarding of credits should, therefore, be done by experts according to definite criteria that can be justified to the prospective students.

This lack of realism results from a lack of knowledge or clear understanding of what is considered higher education level learning. RPL involves generalisable knowledge that is applicable outside the specific context in which it was acquired. Many students who have learned something experientially will generally not be familiar with major arguments for and against particular approaches, ability to synthesise, and so on. In this regard, Michelson (1999:102) mentions explicitly tying RPL to curriculum development by giving many people a say in defining curriculum as well as RPL standards and criteria. This is vital when admitting unconventional students and/or awarding unconventional forms of learning in higher education. For example, a university will have to clarify its own idea of higher education and put some guidelines in place to enable RPL professionals, applicants and programme developers to know the extent of the institution’s commitment to learning that it has not taught and how flexible it will be in course construction (Benton & Benton 1997:5).

How are equivalencies to be established? Without having students produce the equivalent of a course’s work, how is one to decide whether sufficient learning has indeed taken place? The equivalence criterion can be problematic in the sense that it searches for certificated or experiential learning that matches the intended course of study in academic level and amount as well as for sufficient proof that candidates have undertaken at least the same amount of study as if they had registered for tuition (Dale 1997:13). Should RPL learners be guaranteed places on higher education programmes? If there were no assurance of acceptance, many potential learners might question the investment of their time and money in RPL applications. Conversely, guaranteeing enrolment based on RPL could be seen as discriminatory by secondary school graduates. Having gone the RPL route may lead to such achievements being devalued by those who do not understand the rigour of the process. Differentiation between exemption via RPL, exemption via credit transfer and traditional course based assessment could imply that credits earned through RPL are of a different, even lesser, value to other credits (Harris & Saddlington 1995:29). Policies should be developed on reserving spaces in higher education programmes for RPL learners.

Standard setting and quality assurance

Faculty members and administrators who hesitate to adopt prior learning credits often raise the problem of standards. Standards must be set by establishing criteria against which experiential learning is to be evaluated to determine whether it is adequate for higher education purposes. Gawe (1999:27) states that, unless academics and employers work together and agree on the assessment criteria to be used to judge competence and the routes by which these competencies have been achieved, RPL may create more frustrations than solutions. Mathews (1995:258) asserts that the lesson for the development of standards is that the experience of assessment must be drawn more into the process of forming the standards. Sets of standards and general guiding principles for RPL work have been devised in the past. Their main features are that

- credit is awarded only for learning, and not for experience;
- that credits must be appropriate to the academic context in which they are accepted;
- and that competence levels and credit awards are determined by appropriate subject matter and academic experts with assessment experience (Evans 1987; Whitaker 1989).

RPL services will only be credible if they meet stringent quality assurance measures. However, the more serious obstacle to RPL in higher education revolves around the issue of quality control. Standards and regulations must be in place to ensure that
credit awarded by RPL is no less reliable and valid than that obtained via conventional assessments. Commonality in standards of practice may be ensured through a system of internal verification by persons appointed in individual institutions, who support assessors and assessment procedures, and external verification by quality assurance authorities.

Curriculum structures and credit transfer

There are several distinct prerequisites for curriculum structures if RPL is to be operated effectively and to negotiate progression for individuals in higher education. The curriculum must be based on explicit learning outcomes and also have a modular structure for delivery. This allows for customised programmes of education and training to be arranged to augment prior learning. Curricula embedded in open and distance learning, individual tutoring, flexible work shops and adequate guidance and counselling will add to the flexibility required to ensure the smooth functioning of RPL (Harris & Saddington 1995:27). The impact of RPL on learning programmes, curriculum development and curriculum policy will have to be investigated. This also implies investigating and exploring alternative adult friendly curricular organisations (Geyser 1999:195).

The amount of credit awarded for RPL learning must be carefully considered. Should the amount of credit via RPL be limited in higher education? Will it be possible and feasible to gain a full qualification via RPL or should students enrol for a set portion of a course, say, the final year? In higher education the amount of credit via RPL is usually limited to between 25% and 75% although in some overseas institutions it is possible to gain full qualifications via the RPL route. The policy is generally to enforce a residency requirement that a student must complete at least 50% of a qualification at the institution that issues the certificate. The argument here, in terms of RPL, is that lack of fine tuning at entry level will be balanced with opportunities to evaluate students rigorously in the remaining 50%, helping them to meet the exit outcomes of the qualification (Killfoil 2000:5).

Learner proficiency

It is becoming recognised internationally that language proficiency can present a tremendous barrier in gaining access to education and training. Options will have to be investigated if language is not to present a barrier to RPL projects in the South African context. The portfolio development process generally requires good writing skills on the part of applicants in order to adequately describe their prior learning in relation to qualifications and levels of education and training. In the South African situation an option could be for adults to follow ABET courses and adult secondary education courses until their language and general education is deemed to be at an appropriate level for RPL. They eventually have to upgrade their language skills to effectively participate in subsequent higher education learning programmes (Harris & Saddington 1995:28,29).

Staffing and staff development

RPL assessment is a labour intensive activity. Making an RPL assessment decision involves more staff and staff time per student than a regular course assessment decision. Giving selected faculty members a special role in RPL without support, like reducing their teaching load, would overburden them unnecessarily. It should not be assumed that all faculty members have the ability or inclination to carry out assessment or to provide professional guidance and support to RPL applicants. Even those who have the inclination may not have the mentoring facilitation skills or the understanding of RPL required to make it work (Benton & Benton 1997:17). Training is therefore recommended in all contexts for all personnel directly involved with the delivery of RPL, for the functions they perform in implementing RPL.

Costs and financing

Despite its inherent attractiveness, the start up costs, the costs of RPL services and the operating costs of introducing and conducting RPL can be relatively high compared to the total institutional expenditure per student. The cost for an individual assessment and accreditation of prior learning can be as high as 70% of awarding credit through a traditional course delivery and assessment process (University of Technology, Sydney 1993). In granting RPL exemptions, an institution may suffer loss of income through subsidy fees for the subject not studied. These costs must, however, be balanced against the benefits gained from the introduction of RPL, although this may be difficult to quantify. Some general cost benefits associated with RPL include less loss through student drop out because students are less likely to be placed inappropriately in courses, and increasing institutional capacity since a greater number of students can obtain a greater number of qualifications (Gay & Wilson 1997:21).

The charging of fees for RPL services will need to be addressed in a way that makes the RPL process affordable and accessible for the majority of the population without making it an elitist service. It is cautioned that fees should not be set or charged in terms of the level of learning to be assessed, or the level of advanced placement, or the number of credits applied for or awarded. This could resemble the selling of qualifications and also inaccurately reflect the true costs of assessment. Recommended practice
involves charging on the basis of services performed in the process of assessment and accreditation, including time spent (Geyser 1999:197). The method of financing and the charging of RPL fees could be linked to the staff formula, subsidies for provider institutions and levy rebates at industry level for skills training incorporating RPL credits or incentives (Harris & Saddington 1995:33).

Setting up RPL policy and policy structures

Successful implementation of RPL and of prior learning assessment in the various departments of higher education institutions requires a comprehensive institutional policy that would address RPL in terms of principles, procedures, structures, planning and support. For RPL to work best in practice, the whole institution must make a commitment to be open to the knowledge and understanding that learners bring with them. Such institutional policy structures should reflect the principles of outcomes-based education and training, and lifelong learning. It is critical that RPL be underpinned by the competency standards and outcome statements required by the NQF and SAQA. National policy guidelines, standards and models will need to serve as a guide to higher education institutions to develop their own statements and policies for practically implementing RPL and to be credible and legitimate. Application of the national standards should meet with relevant standards generation criteria and stringent evaluation, auditing and quality assurance measures and be monitored through the relevant SAQA accredited ETQAs, NSBs and SETAs.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that RPL poses enormous challenges for higher education and does so in such a way that it influences the type of RPL practices higher education will opt for and the premises on which it is inevitably based. In many national contexts RPL has come of age. This is not so in higher education in South Africa. There is, however, a growing acceptance of the philosophical, andragogical and socio economic arguments for RPL and its appropriacy to higher education teaching and learning. Adopting the principle of RPL provides the opportunity for higher education innovation on many levels. It will help right inequality and exclusiveness in higher education institutions and will help decisions on what is higher education knowledge, skills and learning. However, tensions may emerge as RPL moves to the mainstream. Trivialising higher education learning or diminishing the value or status of higher education qualifications, and credentialism a search for quick credits and qualification fixes or merely speeding up the acquisition of a degree must be guarded against. The emphasis should remain on the accessibility of higher education, on higher education learning and institutional recognition of relevant learning no matter where it took place. If there is to be real innovation and transformation in higher education, and for the RPL process in South Africa to be credible and relevant, "it must be transferred as soon as possible from a debate of ethos into a practical, workable and understandable process which is recognised as having real street value" (Harris & Saddington 1995:32 33).

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