Prior learning assessment and quality assurance practice: Possibilities and challenges

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Abstract

The use of RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) in higher education to assess RPL candidates for admission into programmes of study met with a lot of criticism from faculty academics. Lecturers viewed the possibility of admitting large numbers of under-qualified adult learners, as a threat to the institution’s reputation, or an erosion of academic standards. Although RPL rests on the assumption that some equivalency between prior learning and academic learning is possible, RPL assessment and validation demands special expertise, which few faculty academics and administrators possess. An evaluation of the RPL assessment practice in the Faculty of Education at a South African University is used to substantiate the arguments raised in this article. Findings from interviews with assessors, observations of the assessment process, questionnaires administered on RPL candidates and documents analysed indicated that there is a credible process of RPL assessment in this Faculty, with a few areas of concern.

INTRODUCTION

RPL was conceptualised by the South African government as a strategy for achieving the key objectives of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), namely, access and redress. A national policy document on RPL giving guidance regarding the establishment of proper QA measures in RPL provisioning, was followed by the
RPL is defined as ‘the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification and the acceptance for the purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements’ (SAQA 2004, 10). This means that regardless of where and how a person achieved the learning, if such learning meets the requirements of a programme or qualification, the university should admit the assessed candidate.

RPL provisioning is a critical area for quality assurance, that is, internal and external evaluations with peer reviews and ongoing monitoring. Nationally and internationally, there is a very high premium placed on the quality of the RPL assessment process. Many RPL implementers with hands on experience (Simosko and Cook 1996; Whitaker 1989; Hoffmann 2006a and Hoffmann 2006b) maintain that RPL provisioning must form part of the overall QA system of an institution to ensure integrity of the RPL assessment outcomes. This article presents an investigation into how this Faculty conducted prior learning assessments. The findings should highlight strengths and weaknesses of the RPL assessment practice. This section will include possible strategies for improvement.

KEY ISSUES ON RPL IMPLEMENTATION

Osman and Castle (2004, 132 and 136) gave various concerns raised by Faculty academics towards the provisioning of RPL in higher education. RPL requires flexible entry and exit points and pathways through programmes, as well as a range of offerings from which students can make selections, conditions not easily found in higher education in South Africa. Although there is an assumption that there is some equivalency between experiential learning and academic learning, most faculty academics consider prior learning inappropriate or irrelevant to their particular programmes of study. Gawe (1999, 27) states, ‘Unless academics and other stakeholders agree on the RPL assessment criteria used to judge competence and the routes by which these competencies were achieved, assessment may create more frustration than solutions’.

Countries such as the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, Australia, The Netherlands, Scotland, New Zealand, Greece and Ireland offer RPL, with varying degrees of success. In the USA, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) formed over thirty years ago plays a major role in the implementation of Prior Learning Assessment (PLA), for their college and university affiliates. There are tried and tested models and well-developed tools and techniques for prior learning assessment. This means that institutions affiliated to CAEL operate from a common framework for assessing prior learning. Many countries, as well as South Africa based their RPL policies and practices on the American RPL model of quality assurance.

Quality Assurance involves ‘the determination of standards, appropriate methods, and quality requirements set by an expert external body, accompanied by a process of
evaluation that examines the extent to which a practice meets the required standards’ (Murgatroyd and Morgan 1993, 45). Bell, McBride and Wilson (1994, 3) say, ‘Quality Assurance is based on the principle of prevention of quality problems, rather than the detection of these problems as it is in quality control’. Gone are the days when a university could rest content in the knowledge that it is a top-notch institution without its academic products and services validated both internally and externally (SAUVCA 2002, 11). It is hard to envisage how an assessing and/or awarding institution can guarantee the quality of its RPL admissions without putting in place proper policies and procedures and mechanisms for continuous improvement of the practice.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS STUDY

The conceptual framework for this study provides a means to describe, explain and explore provisioning of RPL using the construct of quality and quality assurance. The framework is a three-pronged model synthesised from well-established theories of quality, quality assurance and quality management, such as, the Total Quality Management (TQM) philosophy, including Deming’s cycle of quality improvement (Plan-Do-Check-Act), the Systems Theory and the ISO 9001:2000 series for the requirements of a Quality Management System (QMS).

The common thread between the theories used is evaluation interpreted as process-based evaluation of the RPL programme. The internal QA processes of the institution aligned to the external Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) processes for Institutional Audits governs the design of RPL assessments. The alignment with national quality assurance arrangements necessitates that the university’s approach also embrace notions of quality such as fitness for purpose, value for money, exceptional, meeting customer requirements, and transformation (Harvey and Green 1993).

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this investigation was to show how the targeted Faculty at this institution deals with problems and issues experienced during the assessment of RPL candidates. To evaluate the entire RPL assessment process, quality indicators developed reflected principles, procedures and processes of prior learning assessment derived from the model of RPL assessment in place at the Faculty of Education. For benchmarking, other models of RPL assessment in use in other countries were considered (Simosko and Cook 1996, 21–27), including the one suggested by SAQA (2004, 32). Sound assessments are critical to the development of a credible RPL assessment practice. RPL assessors need to adhere to a range of standards, principles, and procedures of good practice in prior learning assessment and validation.

An observation tool used to gather data was to determine the manner in which the Faculty conducts RPL assessments. The fieldworker completed the observation instrument in an unobtrusive manner, during the various stages of the assessment.
process, involving the pre-entry; candidate profiling; gathering, generating and compiling evidence; assessment; accreditation; and post-assessment guidance activities. The observation period included informal interviews with various participants, such as administrative personnel, RPL assessors and members of the RPL committee, to verify certain aspects of the assessment process.

A survey (questionnaires) on 15 RPL candidates probed whether they were satisfied with the entire assessment process. A good practice (observational) checklist with two subheadings, macro (administrative) quality and micro (academic) quality, was used (Nyatanga, Foreman and Fox 1998, 41) to collect data to determine quality in the RPL assessment process in the Faculty investigated. All data collection instruments were pilot tested on a representative sample, and later modified according to comments received.

Site of investigation
The notion of quality through quality assurance is new to South African Higher Education Institutions however; the selected university was successful in implementing the University’s Quality Strategy, with principles thereof reflected or should be, in the implementation of the RPL programme in the Faculty studied. This institution uses an integrated approach to Quality Assurance drawn from the TQM philosophy, the Business Excellence Model, the SA Excellence Model and the ISO 9000 family of standards. One of the recent changes and accomplishments in this university is the establishment of the Quality Assurance Unit in 2004, to promote quality within the institution.

The selected institution fits Deming’s description of one committed to the development of a quality culture (Arcaro 1995, 63–66). It is evident that the institution has adopted a total quality philosophy. There is constancy of purpose in bringing about change and improvement and promoting the pursuit of excellence in programmes offered. The institution promotes the notion of lifelong learning, a key aspect of RPL. There is an attempt to deliver quality services at reduced costs. The release of the institution-wide RPL policy is an indication of a commitment to offering RPL services within all the nine faculties of the university.

FINDINGS
Results indicated that this Faculty makes use of two main forms of RPL assessment, namely, portfolio assessment, and a 1-hour interview conducted with the candidate to determine whether he or she meets the entry-level requirements of the targeted programme, with the involvement of an external expert in both instances. The Programme Manager (PM) for a particular RPL application compiles a set of criteria for the RPL committee of the faculty (RPLCF) during the portfolio assessment and interviews. For example, if a candidate wishes exemption from the BEd (Hons) programme, the interview will focus on the candidate’s knowledge and understanding of the outcomes expected at NQF level 7.
The Head of Department (HOD), in liaison with the PM, then compiles a report based on the outcomes of the RPLCF and tables it at the first Faculty Board Meeting (FBM). Such a report usually contains the applicant’s formal application, copies of the academic qualifications, transcripts of the candidate’s academic records, recommendations by the HOD, PM and external subject specialist as well as a global percentage mark or score reflecting the candidate’s command of the field of specialisation, and copies of testimonials. It remains the prerogative of PMs to recommend the completion of any module that might supplement the prior learning experiences of a candidate should this be necessary.

The Dean of the Faculty and the School Chair designate will present the decision of the FBM at the meeting held by the Senate of the University, which makes final decisions on each RPL application. Faculty administration will then be informed of the outcomes of the assessments and then inform the candidate accordingly, usually in writing. Lastly, no students register into a programme while the outcomes of the RPL applications are pending. The following is an exposé of an assessment process of one of the candidates (pseudo-name used) assessed in the Faculty of Education for prior learning.

**Case 1: Richard Zeeman’s prior learning assessment**

The candidate was not in possession of the required B.Ed. (Hons.) degree to be admitted into the M.Ed. (CIDD) programme. He holds a BA degree from the University of Pretoria, received in 1994, and a Higher Education Diploma (HED) from UNISA, obtained in 1999. Apart from having attempted the M.Phil. qualification, he also has numerous attendance and completion qualifications for short learning programmes such as Project Management, Supervision and Management Skills and Leadership Training. Richard appeared before the RPL committee on the 19th of April 2006 where he went through an oral examination. There were three RPL committee members involved in this particular assessment process, namely, the HOD, PM and the external consultant and specialist in the field of Technology Education.

The interview focused on a thorough discussion to determine why Richard wanted exemption from the B.Ed. (Hons.) programme, his subject knowledge regarding his field of specialisation, his general understanding of educational research as methodology, and the foci and procedures he has in mind with his proposed research at M-level. The RPLCF also assessed Richard’s portfolio.

The RPLCF found that Richard had a profound understanding of his field of specialisation and educational research. The proposal he tabled indicated a good intellectual clarity and understanding of the problems encountered in practice. The committee concluded that Richard demonstrated the requirements that commensurate with the exit level outcomes of NQF level 7, which are a demonstration of a sound knowledge base and critical understanding of computer-integrated education (CIE) issues. The recommendation was for him to complete one of the B.Ed. (Hons.)
research modules in qualitative research. The executive committee of the Senate of the University endorsed the decision to admit him into the M.Ed. (CIDD) programme.

**Student’s feelings, attitudes and perceptions towards the RPL assessment system**

The student questionnaire had 18 closed items and 2 open-ended ones. The rationale for developing and constructing this instrument was to gather structured feedback from 15 students involved in the RPL assessment process in the years 2003 to 2006. Thirteen of the fifteen candidates completed the questionnaires. Respondents were required to respond to the item statements using the 5-point Likert scale: 5 = strongly disagree; 4 = disagree; 3 = not sure (neither agree nor disagree with the statement); 2 = agree; and 1 = strongly agree.

**Availability of RPL publicity material**

The intention with this question was to determine if candidates were able to access and use any of the publicity material on RPL from the Faculty of Education at this institution. The development of a good product or service alone is insufficient, it is vital that its existence be made known to the potential buyers, or prospective candidates. According to Field (1993) RPL information may be broadly classified as advertising, which consists of the purchase of space in newspapers, television, cinema, local radio, or outdoor space (locations), sales promotions, consisting of exhibitions, or displays, perhaps in local stores, libraries, and theatres; and publicity, often of a ‘free’ nature, by means of local editorials, radio or television programmes.

RPL promoters in the USA advise that each institution assessing prior learning needs to have a published rationale for recognising or awarding credits in each of its programmes or offerings (Fiddler, Marienau and Whitaker 2006, 33). The contention is that as programme requirements respond to changes in society or professions and seek to serve unique needs of individual learners, institutions should publish processes for making exceptions, as well as extending or changing the rationale for determining what is creditable.

More than half (n = 8) of the respondents indicated that the publicity material on RPL was not available at the time they were assessed. The situation of not publicising RPL widely is unacceptable. The results mean that only the few candidates admitted into various academic programmes and qualifications through the RPL route receive information on RPL from Faculty academics they interact with during the various stages of the assessment process. Since such information is not in the public domain, other potential beneficiaries of this system will not know how the RPL assessment system operates or what to do if they want their prior learning assessed.

**How designated Faculty personnel handled RPL enquiries**

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

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

Slightly more than half (n = 7) of the respondents pointed out that their RPL enquiry was handled in a helpful manner. The results mean that the HOD and/or PM, and the Head, Administration were able to deal adequately with questions and queries from identified RPL candidates on what RPL is and what the procedures and processes for prior learning assessment are. Few Faculty academics deal directly with RPL applications. These results do not necessarily indicate that inquirers generally would receive the information they require from any other Faculty personnel except those who deal directly with RPL assessments. The reason is that the majority of administrative staff, as well as the lecturing staff, do not have exposure to any form of training on RPL. An administrator in the Faculty during interviews indicated that much of what she knows about RPL is from personal enquiry, and was emphatic that ‘a lot of staff members do not know about this RPL’ (Motaung 2007, 246).

**Information about the RPL assessment process**

This question was about whether the RPL candidates gained knowledge on the RPL process from their evidence facilitators and/or advisors. The rationale for providing this information is that candidates need to know what the process of RPL assessment entails, what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. If the learner-centred model for RPL assessment adopted by the institution is properly applied, this kind of information is usually handled during the first meetings between the PM and the candidate. Ideally, the assessment process has to be highly interactive, with the learner being an active participant.

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

**Support services for RPL candidates**

Two questions directed at the participants determined whether RPL candidates received support and guidance during the RPL assessment process or not. As mentioned earlier, it is doubtful that candidates can successfully develop the portfolio on their own. The intent with support services is mainly to create an enabling environment for RPL learners to succeed. Field (1993, 89–92) identifies types of guidance and support, namely, pre-entry support, support during participation, exit support and re-entry support.

At its most basic, pre-entry guidance and support is concerned with giving accurate information in a friendly, non-threatening manner. Once they have decided to take part in the RPL assessment process, new candidates require access and guidance services, such as personal support and learning support. As we move towards the notion of life-long learning and the need for individuals to return later to continue their studies, exit support becomes more important. The range of services should include enabling students to take advantage of their achievements, guidance on the learner’s next step, progression to further study, careers advice and guidance, and preparation for employment.

The results indicate that half (n = 6) of the respondents were satisfied with the nature of support they received during their assessment process. The practice in the Faculty is in accordance with the requirements in the national RPL policy (SAQA 2002, 20), in that support-services should form part of pre-assessment advice and counseling. Broadly speaking, the candidates received support in terms of preparation for the assessment itself, educational planning, and post-assessment support. Considering the fact that candidate support structures are a measure to enhance success rate, it is not surprising that all candidates assessed in the period 2003–2006 got admission into the desired programmes.

There is sufficient evidence that suggests that Faculty assessors/advisors spent sufficient time with the candidates to assist them in making effective choices about learning programmes, career and work-related opportunities. Since all of the candidates were working adults, many other strategies employed (the use of technology in communication) helped to remove time, place and other barriers (technical barriers), mainly for those RPL candidates who were not familiar with university-level learning (Motaung, 2007).

**Guidance given to RPL candidates**

These results point to the fact that less than half (n = 5) of the respondents felt that they were not given sufficient guidance in terms of clarification of expectations, outcomes of the RPL process, essential criteria to be used to evaluate them and the nature of evidence needed for their portfolio assessment. The term ‘guidance’ means
the coaching (or mentoring) that is involved in assisting adult learners to reflect on their experiences in a meaningful, yet simple way. The coaching role demands a tremendous commitment of time and energy to elicit candidate responses fit for use in the portfolio narrative (Hoffman 2006a, 13). We argue that in the event where the RPL coach does not have the toolbox of information and techniques, he/she may compromise the quality of the assessments.

**Ability to reflect on prior learning**

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

A third (n = 4) of the respondents were not sure if being part of the assessment process had been helpful at all. The reflection stage is the most critical one in RPL assessment, since this is where a person has to demonstrate that learning did indeed take place. We argue that most of the RPL candidates were not exposed to an intense reflective process during their assessment, hence their hesitancy to commit themselves in the affirmative. It must be borne in mind that candidates cannot go through this reflective process on their own, they need assistance from their coaches. It seems as if most of the candidates did not engage with the state of the art tools, techniques and rubrics useful in assisting them to reflect on their prior learning.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

At the pre-entry stage, information on RPL is not easily accessible by those within or outside the University structures. The Faculty has not held any information sessions for its community. The impression is that provisioning of RPL is not a priority in this Faculty, hence, there are no marketing or advocacy campaigns to recruit 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.

Depending on the future of the RPL assessment practice in the Faculty, a handbook that provides potential applicants with systematic advice on how to identify, describe, and document their knowledge and skills for the purpose of assessment, is a necessity. This handbook should provide easily locatable facts about the assessment process, registration, and notable dates. It should be the prerogative of the readers to decide whether they want assessment for their prior learning or not.

With regard to profiling, although faculty advisors conduct the initial interview with the identified RPL candidate, this service is not open to everybody. We argue that the practice of identifying suitable candidates is exclusive in nature. It shifts the focus for RPL from the beneficiaries of the system, and empowers Faculty
academics to decide whom to assess and accredit. To open up equitable opportunities for lifelong learning, transparency regarding the RPL assessment system is critical. Ideally, candidates should be the ones to make the claim for RPL and not academics identifying what they term ‘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 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 assessment criteria: sufficiency, authenticity, currency, validity, and reliability. We argue that RPL candidates need to be engaged in a much more intense process of reflection, where the state of the art tools are utilised, than just matching.

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 was maintained. This situation says there are staff members in the Faculty who have the expertise to assist RPL candidates with the development of their portfolio and preparation for the 1-hour interview. It is clear that given the necessary guidance and support, people are able to make sense of their prior learning experiences.

The assessment reports bear witness to the fact that the Faculty adhered to the principle of fair assessment for the 15 RPL cases investigated. These 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 had information about the assessment criteria for evaluating their portfolios and interviews. The assessments carried out indicate good practice. RPL assessors and advisors respected learner rights.

In terms of accreditation, all the 15 candidates assessed gained access into various programmes of study at levels higher than what their original qualifications would have allowed. However, these candidates are restricted to use their assessments outcomes for study in the Faculty of Education at this University only. The Office of Administration usually informs the candidate in writing once it has the outcome of the RPL application from the Senate of the University. Contrary to the institution’s stated principle, some candidates registered prior to the decision by the Senate. 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, assessment methods, the portfolios assessed, and assessment reports. The selected institution needs to forward the needed information to the National Learner record Database (NLRD) of SAQA, through its Education and Training Quality Assurance body, the HEQC as a national requirement.
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