

Recognition of Prior Learning Practices in a South African Institution of Higher Learning: Implications for Academic Development

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ABSTRACT The aim of the study was investigate implications for academic developers on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The research population consisted of three faculties in one South African university. The researchers used a qualitative research approach with case study as a research design. The study followed an interpretivist paradigm because it consisted of faculties' subjective experience on RPL. Purposive sampling consisted of a case from each one of the three faculties used. Data were collected using narrative reports of three cases from three faculties, and these were sent to the advisory centre that serves as a consultant of RPL issues. Data were presented from each of the cases and analysed thematically. The study revealed that there was a lack of knowledge from university RPL committees in three faculties understudied. It was concluded that faculties lack knowledge on RPL practices. It was, therefore, recommended that all RPL committees in the university be trained about RPL policies and issues.

INTRODUCTION

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is a process that allows candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Candidates undergo a series of assessments specifically designed to assist them to display their competence. At the end of the assessment process, each candidate is issued with credits for the learning that they have been able to display. These credits are linked to SAQA-registered qualifications. Through RPL, a candidate could earn credits for a few unit standards or a full qualification. RPL recognises any learning that the candidate has acquired, whether it was from formal training, workplace experience, or general life experience. Researchers such as Judy (2015) understand RPL to be a process whereby skills and knowledge, gained by individuals outside formal learning processes, are assessed and granted formal recognition. RPL is also seen as a catalyst for social transformation as it provides tools whereby candidates of all ages can gain access to jobs and places of higher education,

previously unavailable to them because of their lack of formal education. RPL serves to develop South Africa's existing human capital, thereby strengthening the country's economy.

Moreover, RPL gives students or applicants an opportunity to gain a formal qualification of the skills they acquired in the workplace in order to secure that much deserved promotion. Furthermore, RPL enables student/applicant to bridge the gap between informal, non-formal prior learning and formal learning. Lastly, another benefit of RPL is that it allows applicants to gain access to a higher course of study despite the entrance criteria.

The RPL Process

Prior learning is assessed against the requirements of formal training programmes, in accordance with the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA). This assessment is carried out by academic specialists in the relevant fields with assistance from trained RPL assessors. Once assessment has been carried out and RPL students have been declared competent and ready to enter formal training at a certain level, support opportunities are made available to enable them to bridge the gap between non-formal and formal learning and, thus, to succeed at their chosen lifelong learning paths (Cattle and Atwood

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2014). However, during the RPL process, the following should be taken into consideration: identifying what a person knows and can do; matching the person's knowledge, skills and experience to specific standards and the associated assessment criteria of a qualification; assessing the learning against those standards; and crediting the person for skills, knowledge and experience built up through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past.

In practice, what this means is that a learner or an employee's non-traditional or non-formal experience and learning can be recognised. According to Michelson (2015), the RPL assessment is mostly summative in nature, with formative assessment done only to a student where further action is taken after the advisory session. The assessment of candidates is done against the same unit standards and exit level outcomes of qualifications using the same assessment criteria as for other full time students. What is demanded of a full time student has to be met fully by an RPL student during assessment.

Assessment of RPL students can be on a one-to-one basis or even on group basis just like full time learners. If fifty percent is demanded as a pass mark for full time students, the same should apply for RPL learners. Moreover, certificates obtained through RPL should be the same as those obtained through full time learning so as to prevent discrimination of the RPL students. However, recording of RPL students and their achievements should be kept by the respective ETQAs and providers involved. This will help track the success or failure of RPL implementation in South Africa.

Types of RPL

There are, essentially, two types of RPL, and these are:

- The recognition of prior accredited learning – learning undertaken in a classroom or formalised study environment;
- The recognition of prior experiential learning – or learning achieved through workplace and/or life experience.

The first type is relatively simple to implement, provided there is a common means of assigning values to both the learner's previous qualification and the target qualification. The South African Qualifications Framework provides a standardised currency, via the mecha-

nisms of level and credit, for determining the value of learning. Recognition of prior experiential learning is far more difficult to implement as, according to many, it involves designing instruments that will capture, measure and evaluate learning acquired experientially, and often informally, in a range of differing contexts (Kistan 2012). The recognition of both the above types of learning, accredited and experiential, usually involves the following process: the candidate is advised to reflect on his/her prior learning and experience in the light of identified learning outcomes; the student identifies his/her readiness and indicates this to the RPL advisor; the RPL advisor prepares the candidate for an assessment by explaining and demonstrating how to compile a portfolio of evidence; once the student is ready, the advisor informs the assessor; the assessor meets with the student and evaluates his readiness. If not ready he/she is advised on areas to develop. Once the student is ready, the process continues; and the assessor meets with the student and identifies the assessment plan and the methods of assessment.

This is a supportive process, and students must fully understand the process before it begins. When ready, the student will submit the portfolio of evidence to the assessor, which contains all the "proof" to show competency on the specific outcomes of the unit standard and/or qualification. If the portfolio is adequate, the student is certified competent, or not competent, and the student will be advised on how to reach competency. RPL is, therefore, a process that recognises what the student already knows and can do regardless of whether this learning was achieved formally or informally.

The understanding of what RPL, therefore, does not cause a major problem. For some candidates and or training practitioners, where the problem exists is in the understanding and interpretation of the *how* and the *what* – how is RPL assessed and what is to be assessed? Normally, upon submission of a Portfolio of Evidence, the candidate will be assessed against the unit standard, part qualification or full qualification. RPL credits should only be awarded where the student can demonstrate his/her ability to apply foundational (theory) and practical competence in the various outcomes and related assessment criteria. Credits will be awarded if the candidate demonstrates competence related to the specific outcomes and not exclusively for work experi-

ence. If the competency of a student undergoing formal learning can be assessed on the basis of a written assessment, then surely it make sense that anyone who feels they can take a test or undergo the same assessment should be permitted to apply (Hendricks and Volbrecht 2015).

Recognition of Prior Learning Mechanism

Authors such as Anderson (2014), argue that the major purpose of setting up a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) mechanism under the Qualifications Framework (QF) is to enable employees of various backgrounds to receive formal recognition of the knowledge, skills and experience already acquired. It enables employees with learning aspirations to know what competencies they have acquired through experience or previous training in the industries so that they can determine their starting point for learning and progression, and reduce duplication in training for the same skills. In other words, they may skip certain familiar modules and proceed to courses of a relatively higher level or wider scope so that they can receive more effective training that better suits their needs. The RPL mechanism operates based on the Specification of Competency Standards (SCSs) formulated by the respective industries to ensure its credibility.

The RPL mechanism is a “recognition” rather than an “exemption” system. This principle is premised on the assumption that the skills and knowledge possessed by the employee seeking recognition have been acquired through previous learning and/or work experience and can be recognized through the RPL mechanism. On the other hand, giving an exemption would imply that the employee does not possess such skills and knowledge in the first instance (Osman and Cattle 2015).

Benefits of Recognising Prior Learning

RPL opens access for ‘non-traditional’ students, that is, people who may not have the opportunity to further their studies are able to obtain higher qualifications. RPL acknowledges the value of learning outside a formal setting for example values and recognises learning in the workplace. In other words, according RPL a practice, learning goes beyond the classroom. Therefore, any learning that took place beyond the classroom should also be recognised and cred-

ited. Furthermore, RPL practice validates the worth that students have achieved by themselves, and it enables progression to other programmes of study. This process eliminates unnecessary repetition and duplication of material already familiar to the student. Public (and private) money is better used because people who already have skills and knowledge are not re-trained, and it shortens the time necessary to earn a qualification; this motivates students who might otherwise be discouraged by the length of time required to complete a college level course or a particular programme of study. Moreover, RPL practice enhances students’ pride and self-esteem for what they have accomplished as students. Lastly, RPL practice enhances students’ perception and understanding of learning as a lifelong process (Van Rooy 2012).

Theoretical Framework

With regard to theoretical framework, the Kolb (2006) model of learning style was used. The theory is relevant to this study because it explains in detail learning styles that students utilize in their learning endeavours. The theory encourages the process of RPL because it explains different ways in which people can learn, both inside and outside the classroom (formally and informally). Kolb explains that different people naturally prefer a certain single different learning style. Various factors influence a person’s preferred style. Notably, in his experiential learning theory model (ELT), Kolb defines three stages of a person’s development, and suggests that our propensity to reconcile and successfully integrate the four different learning styles improves as we mature through our development stages.

Brief Descriptions of the Four Kolb Learning Styles in the Context of Higher Education

1. Diverging (*Feeling and Watching - CE/RO*)

Experienced students are able to look at things from different perspectives. They are sensitive and prefer to watch rather than do, tending to gather information and use imagination to solve problems. They are best at viewing concrete situations and use several different viewpoints. Kolb called this style ‘Diverging’ because these students perform better in situations that

require ideas-generation, for example, brainstorming. Students with a Diverging learning style have broad cultural interests and like to gather information and prefer to work in groups, to listen with an open mind and to receive personal feedback (Kolb 2006).

2. Assimilating (Watching and Thinking - AC/RO)

The Assimilating learning preference makes a case for a concise, logical approach. Ideas and concepts are more important than people. These students require good clear explanation rather than practical opportunity. They excel at understanding wide-ranging information and organising it in a clear logical format. Students with an Assimilating learning style are less focused on people and more interested in ideas and abstract concepts; they are also more attracted to logically sound theories than approaches based on practical value. This learning style is important for effectiveness in information and science careers. In formal learning situations, students with this style prefer readings, lectures, exploring analytical models, and having time to think things through (Kolb 2006).

3. Converging (Doing and Thinking - AC/AE)

According to Kolb (2006), students with a Converging learning style can solve problems and will use their learning to find solutions to practical issues. They prefer technical tasks and are less concerned with people and interpersonal aspects. Students with a Converging learning style are best at finding practical uses for ideas and theories. They can solve problems and make decisions by finding solutions to questions and problems. Moreover, students with a Converging learning style are more attracted to technical tasks and problems than social or interpersonal issues. A Converging learning style enables specialist and technology abilities. Lastly, students with a Converging style like to experiment with new ideas, to simulate, and to work with practical applications.

4. Accommodating (Doing and Feeling - CE/AE)

The Accommodating learning style is 'hands-on', and relies on intuition rather than logic. These students use other people's analy-

sis and prefer to take a practical, experiential approach. They are attracted to new challenges and experiences and to carrying out plans. They commonly act on 'gut' instinct rather than logical analysis. Students with an Accommodating learning style will tend to rely on others for information than carry out their own analysis. This learning style is prevalent and useful in roles requiring action and initiative. Students with an Accommodating learning style prefer to work in teams to complete tasks. They set targets and actively work in the field through trying different ways to achieve an objective (Kolb 2006).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research approach used in this study was the qualitative approach. According to DeVos et al. (2013), qualitative researchers are concerned with understanding of the problem rather than measurement or statistics. In the context of this study, researchers investigated and discussed three RPL cases handled by three faculties in order to come up with solutions for challenges experienced. Therefore, there is a need for deep understanding of the problem. Researchers such as Leedy (2001) argue that the purpose of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of the individual because each culture and each setting is unique. In this study, researchers are aware that each case discussed is unique. In a qualitative research, an interpretation of data is done by identifying themes and generates discussion (Kolb 2006). In this study, themes were identified in 3 cases discussed, and they were used to guide the discussion of the results. Researchers such as Mouton and Marrias (1998) argued that in qualitative research, procedures are not strictly formalised, the scope is more likely to be undefined, and a more philosophical mode is adopted.

RESULTS

In South Africa, universities have equal admission requirements which are: Bachelor in National Curriculum Statement (NSC) certificate; while in the old certificates, matric exemption provided endorsement of qualifying for admission in any universities. However, there are other ways through which students may gain admission at university. One of the controversial ways of students being admitted at universities

is Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The results of this study were based on RPL practices and policy implications drawn from three faculties in one South African university. A summary of themes and sub-themes is given on Table 1.

Table 1: Responses on policy implications from three faculties

Main theme	Sub-themes
National policy on RPL	University RPL policy; University RPL committees; RPL policy implementations.
Principles of RPL	RPL assessment; Forms of RPL

National Policy on RPL

The national RPL Policy provides for the role of SAQA in co-ordinating the development of RPL policies and practices across all sub-frameworks of the NQF, in co-operation with the three Quality Councils, namely: education institutions and skills development providers; workplaces and other assessment sites; recognised professional bodies and RPL practitioners.

University RPL Policy

The university understudied has an RPL policy that guides their RPL practices. The policy covers the process of gathering evidence and making judgments about a student's performance in relation to standards and qualifications. It also aims to regulate the implementation of the RPL at the university and to ensure that consistent practices and standards are applied in the procedures that are followed. However, faculties understudied appear not to be aware of the policy as one of the participants mentioned that:

"We are not aware of any RPL policy in our university. For us to gain knowledge on RPL, we need to browse through internet and read national policy, which is not even clear to us".

Reflecting on the above response, it appears that the RPL policy in the university was drafted without considering and involving different stakeholders and university faculties in particular.

University RPL Committees

University RPL committees were supposed to be trained on all RPL-related issues in the

university. Their role is to discuss each case of RPL in the university and make recommendations based on the merit of the case being studied. However, RPL committees appear not be clear about their roles and responsibilities. One of the participants said:

"We are in the committee of RPL, but the reality is we are not so clear about our role as committee members. Furthermore, the policy was designed without involving us, but we are expected to implement the policy that we did not draft".

Looking at the above response, one may argue that upon selection of RPL committees in the faculties, members were not prepared enough in the form of trainings and policy familiarization, and these created some problems when it comes to implementation of the policy.

Policy Implementation

In a university setting, after the policy has been approved in the relevant structures, faculties should take a lead to ensure that the policy is being implemented by staff members. However, staff members in this university isolate themselves from the RPL policy since they were not involved initially during the implementation stage. A participant in the study mentioned that:

"You cannot expect us to implement the policy we don't understand. The structure that designed the policy should have taken a lead to train us about the policy so that we can implement something that we understand".

This kind of response shows that there is communication breakdown between staff development advisory consultants and faculties when it comes to policy design and implementation. Therefore, there is a need to improve such communication.

Principles of RPL

The University rationale for adopting RPL was part of the National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa, with specific reference to the emphasis on increased access to higher education, the broadening of the social base of higher education and on increasing the number of graduates. The evaluation of prior learning is an academic task and, like other forms of assessment, is done by academic experts in a given field, drawing on other experts as needed.

RPL is based on a developmental model, not a deficit model of adult learning; it builds on knowledge and skills that adults have already acquired. The RPL practices for specific programmes must be context-specific and framed appropriately to respond to differing contexts. Furthermore, it must be available to all staff and students currently at the institution and to those wishing to gain access to the institution for study purposes. RPL must be used in ways that allow students a reasonable chance of succeeding in their studies. Provision of academic support must be an integral part of the RPL process. Students are expected to contribute towards RPL administration fees, and the contribution does not exceed the cost of a full-time face-to-face module/course or learning programme. The administration fees should not create barriers for potential students.

RPL Assessment

When establishing assessment mechanisms and assessing learning from work or life experience, the university's RPL committee should have some skills to assess students or candidates for RPL purposes. However, RPL committees in the university understudied appeared to have no idea regarding how to assess students for RPL purposes. Some of the RPL committee members indicated:

"We do not have any knowledge of assessing students for RPL purposes. In most cases, we told that ours is to prepare the student, thereafter, an external body will be appointed to assess the portfolio prepared by students".

Reflecting from above statement, one may argue that the university appointed RPL committees without providing the members with proper training and workshops.

Forms of RPL

RPL may take different forms. Depending on the purpose of RPL, candidates should know the kind of RPL they are applying for. In the university understudied, the most common RPL practice is that of specific credits. One participant mentioned that:

"We are aware that if a candidate has acquired some experience in a discipline that is related to specific subjects, such a candidate may be credited for such courses through RPL".

Reflecting on the above response, RPL committees at the university understudied were not aware of other forms of RPL processes, hence they were only aware of RPL for specific credits.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of this study was guided by the following themes: RPL policies; RPL assessment; and forms of RPL.

Recognition of Prior Learning Policies

The idea of RPL is aligned to main elements of the South African national policy discourse since 1994: transformation; accreditation; life-long learning; and the NQF. The RPL process is a multi-dimensional one. It is a process through which non-formal learning and informal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in the formal education and training system, or workplace. RPL processes can include guidance and counselling, and extended preparation for assessment. Assessment, an integral feature of all forms of RPL, does not exist in isolation from a range of other strategies that allow for different sources of knowledge and forms of learning to be compared and judged. RPL is multi-contextual, meaning, how it takes place differs from one context to another. RPL may be developed and implemented differently for the purposes of personal development, further learning and advancement in the workplace, and recognition within the three Sub-frameworks of the NQF. Furthermore, it may be conducted by a variety of methods using a combination of teaching-learning, mentoring and/or assessment approaches, as appropriate. The purposes and contexts determine the practices and outcomes of RPL in each case. In the national RPL policy, it is outlined that RPL builds on the strengths of the policy developed by SAQA in 2002, as well as new insights gained from on-going practice and research, as it establishes the principles, framework and priorities for the further development of RPL, as part of an evolving South Africa (Department of Education 2007).

Recognition of Prior Learning Assessment

Assessment in RPL is different from any other assessment. In this study, participants were not aware of how to approach assessment in this

process. The idea of having RPL committees was a good idea. However, it has to go with the responsibility of training them on how to assess students during the RPL process. The advisory committee (Academic Developers) has a responsibility to train the university RPL committee and other staff members on how to conduct assessment during the RPL processes. When assessing candidates in RPL, the following should be taken into consideration: authenticity – the applicant has actually demonstrated the learning outcome that is being claimed; currency – the learning outcome is still valid and demonstrable; quality – learning has reached the acceptable level; relevance – learning is applicable to the area claimed; transferability – the learning outcome can be applied outside the specific context in which it was learned; and comparability – the assessment mechanisms adopted should ensure that prior learning is comparable in content and standard with the course(s) in which credit is sought. The standards applied in assessing prior learning should not be greater than those required to pass the course(s). Authors such as Alexander et al. (2011) also confirm that assessment is an integral feature of all forms of RPL, but it does not exist in isolation from a range of other strategies associated with bringing these different sources of knowledge and forms of learning into a shared discursive space where comparisons and judgments can be made. Therefore, it is important for RPL committees in the universities to familiarise themselves with all assessment processes of RPL.

Forms of Recognition of Prior Learning

It was revealed in the study that RPL committees in the university understudied were not aware of other forms of RPL and other RPL for specific credits. As a result, the process has been compromised because candidates were denied access to other RPL forms that the committees were not aware of. Therefore, it is important for academic developers to train and familiarise university RPL committees and other staff members about all forms of RPL in the interest of students or candidates. The following are forms RPL that all universities must use:

RPL for Access

This RPL occurs when a candidate wants to gain access into a particular module/course or

programme when a candidate is able to demonstrate through appropriate assessment(s) the entry or exit level outcomes of the module, course or programme preceding that particular module/course or programme;

RPL for Specified Credit

This RPL occurs when the candidate wants to be credited specifically for designated subjects, modules, units or competencies;

RPL for Unspecified Credit

This RPL results in the student being required to complete fewer subjects, modules or competencies, for example, by exempting a student from undertaking elective modules.

RPL for Block Credit

This RPL results in exemption from the requirements to undertake a block component of a course/programme, for example, first semester or first year.

RPL for Exemption Standing

This is a form of RPL which involves exempting a student from undertaking preparatory subjects, units' modules or competencies in the early stages of the course or programme, while still requiring the student to undertake the same number of subjects, units, modules or competencies as they would be required to complete if they had not been granted exemption. This usually involves substituting the exempted subjects, units, modules or competencies from others.

RPL for Advanced Standing

This form of RPL results in the award of credits towards a qualification for which a candidate has registered.

RPL for Advanced Status

This is a form of RPL which provides access to a level of a qualification higher than the logical next level following on the preceding qualification. In support of all these forms of RPL, Alexander et al. (2011) emphasized in their study that RPL may be employed at any level of learn-

ing and in many different contexts. Furthermore, it may be conducted through a variety of methods using a combination of teaching-learning and assessment approaches as appropriate. Various purposes and contexts determine the practices and outcomes of RPL. In line to this argument, Pitman (2014) conducted a similar study and confirmed that once a student has been awarded credit on the basis of RPL, subsequent credit transfer based on these learning outcomes should not include revisiting the RPL assessment, but should be based on credit transfer agreements, articulation arrangements or other agreements between institutions.

CONCLUSION

Recognition of prior learning in South Africa should be aligned with the RPL national policy, and such a policy should give equal admission requirements to all candidates, regardless of their status. Therefore, academic developers have a role to come up with university policy that is aligned with the national policy. Assessment for RPL processes should have clear instruction and clear procedures. It is the role of academic developers to advise both the candidates and RPL committees on all processes and forms of RPL.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommended that academic developers should train university RPL committees on all RPL practices and policies. Committees of RPL should also be selected on the basis of their knowledge on RPL. Furthermore, the study recommended that all RPL processes be published in the university admission policies and calendars.

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