Recognition of prior learning: an educational correction

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INTRODUCTION

The process of recognition and accreditation of prior learning through non-formal study and experience is nothing new and has been practised in parts of the world for decades. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is nothing more than just another form of learning. At Unisa the preliminary work has been done. The next phase is to enter into negotiations with individual departments as to how their needs can be accommodated and how to empower staff members to do RPL. The following information should answer some of the most frequently asked questions (FAQs) about RPL, and about how we are doing it at Unisa. You can click on the FAQs on the left, or print out the whole article with all the questions and answers.

WHAT IS RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING?

"Recognition for prior learning" (RPL) means the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner, howsoever obtained, to the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements" (definition accepted by SAQA, Regulation 452, No 18787, March 1998).

RPL recognises what a person has already learnt from:

- other courses (formal or informal training)
- work experience (company or industry-based or working with experts in the field)
- life experience (e.g. community work and hobbies).

The RPL process at Unisa will measure the skills and knowledge a person has against the learning outcomes of specific modules. The learning (current knowledge and skills) for each learning outcome must be described and substantiated with evidence by the RPL candidate.

DO INSTITUTIONS HAVE A CHOICE IN IMPLEMENTING RPL?

No. RPL is statutory as it is promulgated in the following acts:

- South African Qualifications Authority Act (Act 58 of 1995)
- Employment Equity Act (Act 55 of 1998)
- Skills Development Act (Act 97 of 1998)

RPL is also prominent in the National Plan for Higher Education (February 2001) in Outcomes Three and Four, with special reference to mature students from the SADC region.

WHAT IS THE RATIONALE BEHIND THIS LEGISLATION?

Besides the obvious educational correction for recognition of all learning, RPL adheres to the ideological principles of justice and equity to redress past inequalities where all the people in South Africa did not have the means or opportunities to obtain a formal education.
WHY SHOULD UNISA IMPLEMENT RPL?

Unisa, like all other institutions, has a statutory obligation. Unisa is, however, in a unique position for RPL because it has:

- mostly mature students who already have an abundance of experience, some of which might be recognised and accredited;
- no space problem to accommodate students;
- an existing network world-wide, and especially in Africa.

There are specific benefits for the student to reduce the time of studying, the cost of education and well-deserved advanced placement. The institution benefits in serving the community, creating flexibility and fostering appropriate student placement, retention and an increased output of graduates.

WHAT PURPOSE WILL RPL SERVE AT UNISA?

RPL will:

- facilitate access through "alternative access" routes - more students can be attracted.
- facilitate transfer within the learning continuum and enable students to achieve upward and lateral mobility in UNISA - a more flexible system provides for advanced placement and the earlier completion of courses.
- recognise non-formal and informal learning as another form of education.

WHO WILL BE ELIGIBLE FOR RPL?

Only mature students who turn 23 years of age during the year of application and who meet normal admission criteria with regard to a Senior Certificate will be allowed to apply for undergraduate RPL credit. Submissions of standards for equivalency to the Senior Certificate will be investigated and negotiated with the Matriculation Board in future.

The focus is on lifelong learning and only candidates who want access or advanced placement while studying for a specific qualification or learning programme at Unisa will be considered. RPL is an opportunity to further a career and not just a "nice-to-have" piece of paper or a chance to accumulate credits.

WHAT IS MEANT BY 'LEARNING' IN THE RPL SENSE?

The RPL concept of learning refers to competency, as required by SAQA. It includes the following:

- practical competence - demonstrated ability to know how to do something and decision-making;
- foundational competence - demonstrated understanding of what is done and why
- reflexive competence - demonstrated ability to integrate or connect performances and decision-making with understanding to enable learning from actions and to be able to adapt to change and unforeseen circumstances; and
- applied competence - the ability to put into practice, in the relevant context, the learning outcomes acquired in obtaining a qualification.

WHAT ABOUT ASSESSMENT OF EXPERIENCE?

Only learning is assessed - not experience. It does not matter where or how the learning has been acquired. Time, place or duration of the learning experience should be disregarded. It is about what the applicant knows, can do, reflect and apply. It is quality that counts and not quantity.
In other words, what you learn is more important than how long it took you to learn it. At the same time, your learning must be current. A computer course 10 years ago may not lead to any RPL credit because of the date of the learning experience.

WHAT ABOUT STANDARDS?

All assessment will be done by academics appointed by the academic departments. Unisa has only one assessment policy based on sound educational principles. The criteria for assessment are applicable to all assessment at Unisa. With RPL, criteria like currency and authenticity of learning becomes exceptionally important.

WHO IS FAVOURED -- RPL OR 'REGULAR' STUDENTS?

The principle is that all students should be treated equally. Students should not be discriminated against because of the way they have acquired their learning. Existing policies are applicable to all students. Therefore, RPL students will also have the opportunity for supplementary assessment and to appeal.

WILL RPL FUNCTION AS A SEPARATE SYSTEM AT UNISA?

No. RPL is an integrated part of the academic process. It will be accommodated within the existing Unisa academic and administrative systems, as far as possible. For example, the RPL portfolio assignments will be managed like all other assignments through the Assignment division; challenge examinations through the Examination department; appeals and credit transfer through the existing routes, etc. The idea is to keep the RPL process as simple and uncomplicated as possible.

WHAT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS WITH REGARD TO RPL?

Academics state learning outcomes for each module.

This was done with the Experiential learning Database compiled by academics for all modules. The RPL office will keep copies in a data bank to supply candidates with the necessary information in order to compile application documents and/or RPL portfolios.

Academics decide on the admission of candidates.

This will be done in coordination with the RPL office. Negotiations between the RPL office and academic departments will take place as to how it should be done in practice. Straightforward cases might be handled by the RPL office, while more complex or borderline cases will have to be decided on by the academics.

Academics do all assessment and accreditation.

Only a subject expert with training in RPL should do assessment. This is an important quality control measure.

Academics will NOT do administrative RPL work.

The RPL office, in coordination with the administrative departments of the university, will be responsible for all administrative functions.

Academics will NOT be expected to give guidance to candidates.
The RPL office will guide the candidates through the RPL portfolio module (RPL000-X) and the application process. Only in selective cases will the RPL office contact a specific lecturer for assistance. We will try to keep candidates away from academic staff to prevent a situation where lecturers spend hours on guidance. This is also to ensure that there is no ground for malpractice claims and queries about quality control.

WHAT ABOUT THE WORKLOAD?

The assessment of seven RPL portfolios per individual lecturer, per semester, is seen by many institutions as manageable within the normal workload. The situation at Unisa should be continuously evaluated, once a clear picture emerges of the type of applications and the specific modules in demand. In cases of a specific module being flooded with applications, one way of dealing with it would be to have RPL applicants write a challenge examination rather than doing an RPL portfolio.

WHAT SYSTEMS ARE IN PLACE?

An RPL policy has been drafted, circulated, discussed and refined since September 1999 to date. All credit should go to Professor Wendy Kilfoil for advocating and driving the process. The policy has been accepted and Dr Litha Beekman from the Bureau for Student Counselling and Career Development (Johannesburg Learning Centre) has been seconded from 1 August 2001 to implement the process.

An Office for Experiential Learning has been opened at the main campus, Theo van Wyk 10-39 since January 2002. Dr Litha Beekman has been appointed as the Director, Experiential Learning (telephone: 012-429-4901).

An RPL module, Compiling an RPL Portfolio: Recognition for Prior Learning, RPL000-X, has been developed for first time RPL applicants, and learners will be expected to enrol for this module to guide them in the process of compiling their RPL Portfolio. The first admissions are expected in January 2002.

The Director at the RPL office will liaise with the RPL committee, which consists of delegates from academic faculties as well as administrative personnel from the registration and examination departments.

IN WHAT PHASE OF IMPLEMENTATION ARE WE NOW?

There will be a three-year pilot project phased in from 2002 to 2004. Negotiations with academic departments will be arranged to accommodate particular needs and to do training.

Phase One will focus on advanced placement in undergraduate degrees based on existing UNISA modules for students with matriculation exemption. RPL Portfolios will be allowed as well as selective challenge examinations (at this stage only the Faculty of Science, for computer science modules, is allowed to set these challenge exams). Postgraduate qualifications and non-formal qualifications will be trialed.

Phase Two will implement the system more fully and extensive marketing will be done.

WHAT METHODS OF ASSESSMENT ARE APPLICABLE?

RPL is just another form of learning and the general educational principles with regard to assessment of learning are applicable. The criteria to decide what method of assessment will be used include: reliability, validity, authenticity, directness, fairness, flexibility,
appropriateness, integration, and cost and time effectiveness. The evidence a candidate submits should be assessed as to whether it can be verified as his/her own work, whether it is sufficient, current and up to date and whether the breadth and depth of knowledge are sufficient and on university level.

Different methods will be used for different modules and departments. The academic departments will decide what methods they will use. All the above mentioned criteria should however be taken into account.

There are primarily two formal RPL assessment processes accepted at Unisa with the RPL Portfolio Development Model as the most common. The two processes include:

- RPL Portfolio Development Process where candidates register for an RPL module, which they complete while compiling a portfolio of evidence.
- Non-Portfolio Process, which includes challenge examinations.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A CHALLENGE EXAM AND AN ORDINARY EXAM?

Challenge examinations are one of the most familiar types of RPL assessment methods being used. A challenge examination may either be directly linked to specific course content or to a set of generic outcomes. For example, one English Literature challenge examination may test analytical and critical thinking skills as they apply to specific readings while another challenge examination may test analytical and critical thinking skills in a more general way.

Challenge examinations, based on generic skills, are not based on a particular textbook, nor do they require that a candidate be exposed to a particular instructor at a particular time. The examination should cover a wide body of accepted knowledge or concepts in the challenged course, spelled out in the course learning outcomes.

A challenge examination may involve a combination of different assessment methods, for example: an oral examination, case study, performance test, simulation, written examination or may be a project completed at home or at the workplace, interview, etc.

In a challenge examination, the candidate tells you that he/she already has the knowledge outlined in the learning outcomes for a specific module. All they want is for the faculty to assess what they know and can do. No tutorial support should be provided to students challenging a course.

An ordinary examination mostly assesses knowledge and skills acquired through studying a specific prescribed textbook.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RPL ACCREDITATION AND CREDIT TRANSFER?

Credit transfer is the existing process whereby formal credit awarded by one institution may be applied towards a credential offered by another institution. RPL accreditation, in contrast, is for those candidates who claim to have the knowledge and skills for a specific module, which they have not acquired formally through study at another institution.

WHAT IS RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT?

A portfolio is a file or folder of information that systematically documents an individual’s learning experiences and accomplishments. RPL Portfolio Development is the process of collecting, substantiating, and organizing documented evidence to support a candidate’s claim for RPL recognition and accreditation. An RPL portfolio is an excellent way to assess most modules for RPL. The process of developing and compiling an RPL portfolio and the
exercises to articulate experience into learning achievements is a valuable academic exercise for candidates who have not been in formal institutional training for a while.

RPL Portfolio Development is the most common method for RPL assessment worldwide. It is, however, like all other assessment methods, not applicable or perhaps not the most appropriate method to assess all learning. Practical skills like laboratory work and computer skills are two examples of learning that are often assessed through observation or challenge examinations.

WHO WILL VERIFY THE RPL PORTFOLIO EVIDENCE FOR AUTHENTICITY?

The RPL office staff will verify a sample of the evidence by contacting previous employers and direct supervisors. The academic assessor will add to this by screening for inconsistencies with regard to evidence submitted in the RPL Portfolio.

WILL A WHOLE DEGREE BE ACCREDITED THROUGH RPL?

According to the SAQA legislation, RPL can be done for part of a course or a course in whole. The principle is to give people recognition for what they can do and know. The purpose is also to avoid repetition and to save time by completing a qualification earlier. At this stage Unisa will use the following guidelines:

- Give credit for a whole module or course.
- Give credit for a whole degree in the form of status to study further at Unisa for postgraduate purposes.
- The residency clause of 50% to obtain a Unisa degree is still applicable. To the RPL candidate a 50% residency requirement would mean that half the credits for a credential could be earned as a result of RPL, but the remaining 50% would need to be earned as a result of direct or distance instruction by Unisa.

WHERE WILL THE RPL CREDIT BE REFLECTED?

RPL credit will be reflected on the student’s results. It will be indicated as an RPL credit. The grading will not reflect specific marks; it will be reflected as “Competent” or “Not Competent”.

WHAT WILL RPL COST?

The fees will be calculated in a fair way. The candidate will pay for the services rendered. The current guidelines for undergraduate level RPL at Unisa are:

- two-thirds of the price for a normal undergraduate module/course when registering for the portfolio module RPL000-X
- one-third of the price for the module/course applied for when registering for the assessment.

WHAT PROCESS WILL BE FOLLOWED AT UNISA?

All requests should be referred to the RPL office, where all administrative matters will be handled in cooperation with the administrative departments for the time being. A manual system will be used until 2002 when computer programmes will be developed for RPL as the process unfolds and a picture can be formed of the type of candidates and the modules applied for.

SUMMARY

It should be clear from the above answers that the foundation for the macro RPL process at Unisa has been laid, but that negotiations are still being initiated between the newly
established RPL office personnel and individual departments to develop the process on the micro level. The process will also be phased in to allow for the accommodation of academic as well as administrative departmental needs. The RPL system will be developed and refined as it unfolds.

REFERENCES


Internal sources

- RPL Committee minutes 2001
- Unisa RPL policy 2001

Internet sources for Accreditation of Prior Learning

For more information, check out these internet sources about RPL and APL

http://www.mohawkc.on.ca/dept/pla/platbhpmp
http://www.mala.bc.ca/pla/GLOSSARY
http://www.cwv.edu/saell/pla/policy.html
http://www.bcit.bc.ca/~plar/faq.html
http://www.alva.tesc.edu/all_about_us/portpol.html
http://www.ola.bc.ca/pla/resources/tools/tool4.html

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Litha Beekman has been appointed as the Director, Experiential Learning. An Office for Experiential Learning has been opened at the main campus, Theo van Wyk 10-39 since January 2002. You can contact her by email at beekmaw@unisa.ac.za or by phone at 012-429-4901.