PROGRESSIO

The future is not so bleak: Challenges with recognition of prior learning (RPL) systems and processes at the University of South Africa (Unisa)

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an overview of the difficulties presented in trying to implement recognition of prior learning (RPL) at the University of South Africa (Unisa) from 2003 to 2005. First, there is a brief introduction of RPL in general and the context of its implementation in South Africa. Second, a description of the RPL system and processes at Unisa is presented with references to some of the difficulties that emerge. In the last section, the main concerns of RPL implementation are listed and the main challenges are highlighted. The aim of this article is to share the Unisa experience so as to engage other adult education practitioners into bringing about a better understanding of how adult learner prior learning can be accommodated within academic learning.

Keywords: recognition of prior learning, life experience, skills training.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the merger process in 2003–2005, the University of South Africa (Unisa) was one of the largest distance education universities in the world with a population of close to 150000 students, and a staff component of about 3400. The merger of Unisa, the former Technikon Southern Africa (TSA), and the Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) has resulted in the formation of one of the largest comprehensive and dedicated distance education institution in South Africa an Africa.

The implementation of (recognition of prior learning (RPL)) processes and procedures at Unisa has been slowly gathering momentum from its inception in 2002. Unisa now has a general RPL policy and procedures in place, although the actual implementation varies with respect to the unique challenges and needs of each academic department. Functional teams with administrative divisions and faculties have been set up to guide the process, but a lot still needs to be done. A more focused evaluation will have to be facilitated in order to draw up more refined regulatory procedures for RPL in the new merged institution. RPL is a relatively new concept within the South African higher education environment and it is continually being modified as critical contextual issues emerge from practice.

THE PROBLEM

RPL has the potential of providing increased access to, and participation by a wider and diverse number of adults who have previously been poorly served by existing educational systems and institutions (Wheelahan 2002; Du Pre and Pretorius 2001). For distance education institutions primarily designed to serve working adult learners, RPL has the potential of opening up access and significantly accelerating their learning progression through the formal recognition of their prior learning. However, there is very little literature on RPL in the distance higher education context. A number of studies at higher education level have dealt with institutional implementation of prior learning assessment (Wolfson 1996; Belanger and Mount 1998; Aarts et al. 1999). There is also research on student and staff experiences of Prior learning assessment in higher education environments (Aarts et al., 1999; Wolfson, 1996). But according to Osman (2004), no published research in South Africa on the efficacy of particular assessment methods and approaches to RPL currently exists. This account offers an overview of the difficulties presented in trying to implement RPL at the University of South Africa from 2003 to 2005. The aim is to share the Unisa experience so as to engage other adult education practitioners into bringing about a better understanding of how adult learner prior learning can be accommodated within academic learning.

This report is the result of an examination of the RPL process at Unisa from 2003 to 2005 prior to the formation of the merged institution. The account presented is based on comments and responses to the *Report on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at Unisa: (Muckleneuk campus); Current practice and status, 2004* document which was distributed to all faculty heads of the university in 2004. Three out of the then existing five faculty heads responded. This was supplemented by a literature study of selected studies on RPL implementation in higher education environments and the writer's account of experiences while working in the RPL unit.

THE RPL AGENDA IN SOUTH AFRICA

The introduction of RPL in South Africa has its roots in initiatives of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). In the context of the social, economic and political influences of the 1990s which included political transformation, globalisation

and liberalization of markets, 'COSATU fought for the rights of workers to have increased access to higher education opportunities (and hence improved employment and promotional opportunities) in the face of increasing retrenchments and capital-intensive investment' (Ballim, Omar and Ralphs, 2000). The aim was to level the playing fields for the working class blacks who had systematically been denied access to higher education institutions by recognising and accrediting knowledge they had accumulated through their experience at work.

The agenda for RPL adoption in higher education institutions in South Africa is based on the same premises, with a view to

- contributing to the achievement of higher education policy goals of broadened participation, equity and redress
- making formal educational opportunities accessible to those previously denied access
- beginning to recognise different forms and sources of knowledge particularly indigenous and work place forms (Harris 1996).

DEFINITIONS AND A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF RPL

RPL as a defined concept with its own peculiar methodologies has its origins in the United States (US) in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Michelson 1997; Harris 1997; Trowler 1996). Since then it has developed into varied sets of practices in adult education learning sites such as universities, vocational colleges, community colleges and work-based training. Different acronyms are used for different regions. South Africans have borrowed the term *RPL* from the Australians, while the term used in the United Kingdom (UK) is *accreditation of prior experiential learning* (or APEL). In the US, the same concept is referred to as prior learning assessment (PLA) while the Canadians use prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). Although there are shifts in interpretation and emphasis depending on the approaches, purposes, location and application contexts, the broad concession is that adults are able to gain college-level learning through a variety of experiences outside the institution, and that the RPL process provides a mechanism for formally recognising and accrediting this learning (Attwood and Castle 2001; Michelson 1997).

Versions of RPL

Trowler (1996, 3) presents two versions of APEL, The credit-exchange model and the developmental model.

> In the *creditexchange* model, learner abilities are assessed and given credit value through assessment, while in the *developmental version*, the knowledge and abilities acquired through experience are worked on, reformulated into codified propositioned knowledge and accredited for the purposes of admission or advanced standing in higher education.

The Australian approach to RPL, which emphasises competency-based assessment, is more aligned with the credit-exchange model. In contrast, the developmental model

requires that the claimant reflects and evaluates their previous experience in order to extract and articulate learning derived from it (Evans 1988). More recently, Osman (2004, 142) in her outline of the theoretical perspectives and the construction of typology for mapping RPL provision, talks about an additional model, the transformational model. In this model 'non-formal and experiential learning are recognised on their own terms as valid academic knowledge. There is no need for such knowledge and learning from experience to be articulated and matched with knowledge prevalent in the receiving institution, or for such learning to be framed in ''expert'' definitions of it'.

Unisa's approach to RPL

Unisa, in its approach tried to adopt a model which has elements of both the *credit-based competency* model and a *developmental model.* In the credit-based model, emphasis is on accreditation of prior achievement, which is assessed through standardised tests or challenge examinations. This format is easier to administer and assess, particularly within the distance-learning environment, although it tends to omit learning acquired informally through experience. In the developmental model, the emphasis is on in-depth reflection to further and professional development which is assessed through a candidate's portfolio development. The limitation is that this process requires extensive tutor and learner support, is complex, specialised and expensive (Nyatanga et al. 1998).

THE RPL SYSTEM AT UNISA

The RPL unit at Unisa was set up to deal with the recognition, assessment and award of credit for: experiential learning acquired from paid work, unpaid or voluntary work; self-directed study; prior non-formal certificated learning (awarded by non-accredited institutions); prior achievements (demonstrable achievement in the workplace, community etc). In the next sections, brief elaborations of the Unisa RPL system as it existed from 2003 to 2005, including the methods of assessment, the RPL process, development of RPL learning outcomes, fees for RPL and services and support to learners are presented. The information presented in this section is taken from *Unisa RPL Brochure, 2005*.

Methods of assessment

Unisa is restricted to using those strategies that can be effectively used within a distance-learning environment for large student numbers. These will normally be pencil and paper mechanisms, such as the portfolio and the challenge examination. Currently, Unisa employs three forms of RPL assessment processes: *the portfolio* (general or the target portfolio), in which the candidate is required to compile information on what he or she has learned through past experiences and accomplishments; *the challenge exam,* which can be an oral examination, a demonstration of skills or competencies; faculty-*specific assessment,* which includes unique forms of assessment developed in departments. The main processes are shown in Table 1.

The RPL process at Unisa

Table 1: The RPL process at UNISA

Stages	Process	
	Pre-entry	Marketing of RPL availability and identification of target groups for specific marketing and co-ordination within departments.
1	Profiling	The candidate: • (through the application) produces a written statement that reflects on past experience or/ and clarifies learning professional development. • also provides evidence of past achievements. • identifies course/programme for which to seek credit for.
	Selection	• The candidate's file is sent to the academic department where the RPL panel or person determines whether the candidate is a potential RPL candidate.
2	Preparation for Assessment	There are three RPL assessment options: the Portfolio (general or the target portfolio); the Challenge examination; Faculty specific assessment.
3	Assessment	The lecturers (academic tutors) responsible for teaching the course /module are responsible for its assessment.
4	Accreditation	Credit is awarded based on the lecturer's re-commendations. Those unsuccessful enrol for the module normally. In the case of portfolio development, additional information could be added and the case would be treated as a supplementary case with a supplementary fee The candidate is informed by the advisor/facilitator.
	Appeal	Students are allowed to apply for an appeal to the Examinations department if they are not satisfied with the process.
5	Moderation and verification	Use of internal/external moderators to ensure consistency
6	Record keeping and student transcripts (Module codes)	Records of all the awarded credits are entered on the Unisa student database. (The aim is to have the RPL on the student academic record transcript similar to normal credits). **Note:** Currently, on successful completion of the RPL portfolio, the module code for which the applicant has gained credit is displayed on the candidate's transcript. The challenge exams have different modules codes which correspond with the normal related module codes.

Stages	Process	
7	Post RPL Counselling	The review of the RPL experience is re-commendable for future RPL implementation.

Development of RPL learning outcomes

The emphasis was on developing clear statements of learning outcomes, standards and competencies which students can use to determine whether their learning is relevant, equivalent to, and is at the appropriate breadth and depth of the modules, courses or qualifications for which they seek RPL assessment. The usual rules of evidence were adhered to, namely; validity, currency, sufficiency, reliability and authenticity.

Fees for RPL services

The fee structures are still operating according to either the 'old Unisa' or the 'old TSA' structures.

University-level courses ('old' Unisa courses)

A handling fee of R220 is payable with each application.

The fees are then charged according to the services offered:

- The portfolio development process RPL000–X is two thirds of a module
- The assessment fee for each is approximately one-third of an undergraduate module fee
- The postgraduate fees have not been clearly established.

technikon-level courses ('old' TSA courses)

A handling fee of R145 is payable with each application.

1 Module/Subject/Unit standard	R560
2 Modules/Subjects/Unit standards ...	R980
3 Modules/Subjects/Unit standards ..	R1 300
4 or more Modules/Subjects/Unit standards	R1 650
Direct access to B.Tech.	R1 650
Direct access to M.Tech.	R2 000
Direct access to D.Tech.	R2 200

There is still a big debate on exactly what should be charged, particularly for post-graduate students who do not require credit but seek admission or advanced standing at different qualification levels.

Services and support to learners

Students do not have information that is easy to understand or that is cognisant of the diversity of the learners, taking into account their literacy skills, social, cultural background and experiences. The ultimate aim should be to make sure that each potential RPL student is aware of the RPL policy, courses, modules and qualifications for which RPL is offered. Learning support with actual interaction with the learner is very limited. There is minimum support for portfolio development through a tutorial letter and a study guide. For the challenge exams, the candidates are not given any support other than a copy of the learning outcomes for the course modules for which they apply RPL credit. Training and registration of RPL assessors and moderators has yet to be effectively implemented.

THE RPL CHALLENGE

The Unisa system

Unisa has established itself as an open and distance learning (ODL) institution: 'a form of education where the acts of teaching and learning are separated in terms of time, place and/or pace which aims to promote openness concerning access to courses, choices regarding when, how and what to study, and openness concerning methods and criteria of assessing learning and progress' (Mackintosh 1998, 124).

As a university, Unisa has to comply with the statutory requirements for its academic and administrative organisation and functions as determined by the Higher Education Act. These are hierarchical in nature similar to those of face-to-face institutions, and area related to teaching, research and social responsibility, 'The practice of ODL is fundamentally different from contact forms of education provision' (Mackintosh 1998, 31). Because of its ODL focus, Unisa has to have its major infrastructure and resources devoted to the design, development and delivery of OLD resources, as well as with student support. Unisa is therefore constantly faced with conflicting requirements of 'the demands of the ODL learning material process in conjunction with the institutional complexities of a bureaucratised mega institution' (Mackintosh 1998, 31).

Technology, has now become a central pillar in ODL delivery where it 'is now being used for every aspect of the enterprise-educational administration, learner management, learner preparation for readiness, curriculum construction, instructional design, support services including tutoring and library services as well as learner evaluation' (Koul 2006, 3).This process is not made any easier by the added challenges brought about by the transformation demands of a merged institution. It is within this context that RPL provision challenges are examined.

General challenges

Higher education practitioners are now being called upon to match experiential and workplace learning with the theoretical and academic disciplines. Practitioners are continually searching for efficient mechanisms of merging different forms of knowledge from different learning sites (i.e. workplace, academic and experience) into a single interface. However, the limitations inherent in traditional higher education still persist. These include curricular, which are not responsive to current social and personal needs; curricular predominantly geared to the acquisition of certificates and credentials; inflexible learning systems which are both very difficult and slow to change; limited choices and learning paths for the average adult learner.

The challenges and limitations that have persistently created barriers to the implementation of adult learning programmes in universities and colleges are prevalent in the implementation of RPL as well. RPL, like most adult learning programmes remains peripheral to the mainstream programmes developed for the traditional student. This usually translates into a meagre share of the overall university resources being directed to RPL, with little reward or recognition of those academic staff members who spend countless hours profiling students and conducting RPL assessment.

There is also a tendency to accept the obvious good of RPL without questioning the extent to which RPL concepts can be effectively implemented within a changing adult education discourse, shaped by social, economic and cultural processes. The noble notions of what RPL is capable of achieving: valuing undervalued forms of knowledge, increasing participation and access to higher education, advantaging the previously disadvantaged and bringing about self-awareness and development of the adult learner (Cretchely and Castle 2001; Harris 1997) make RPL an attractive concept to implement.

The tensions within RPL implementation are primarily ideological and conceptual in nature. They demand that we clarify assumptions about relationship between knowledge contexts and learning in order to deal with the academic and administrative challenges for RPL delivery at an institutional level. Constraints brought about by the educational policy regulatory environments at a macro level and challenges introduced as a result of technological advances, economic capitalist tendencies and most recently, environmental and health awareness are affecting RPL provisions.

Challenges at Unisa

There are three main challenges identified at Unisa:

1. *Academic challenges:* brought about by the reality of different forms of knowledge and ways of knowing, juxtaposed on the current pressure for universities to become relevant to individual and social demands
2. *Institutional constraints:* such as institutional preparedness, financial constraints and issues related to the labour-intensive and service-driven nature of RPL delivery.
3. Challenges related to *learner needs:* such as their current competency levels and levels of preparedness for academic learning.

Academic challenges

There is a degree of mismatch between what learners know and can do, and the prescriptive dominant view of knowledge that is organised academically. There is a fundamental tension when one triesto equate practical knowledge or personal knowledge rooted in personal experience to publicly available promotional knowledge (Michelson 1997; Trowler 1996). Learners find it difficult to 'de-constitute and reconstitute previous unconscious performance into a codified propositional form' (Trowler 1996, 97). As a result there are no clear established faculty – negotiated RPL assessment frameworks from which learning outcomes and assessment criteria can be developed. In general, there is a lack of clarity and explicitness about RPL assessment. In the Unisa context, a number of courses are theory and research based, leaving no room for experiential learning components.

Institutional constraints

1. *Labour-intensive nature of RPL:* the main constraints relate to the labour-intensive nature of RPL assessment and the inability of current institutional arrangements to accommodate these requirements. There are not sufficient structures to deal with the

admission and preparation of candidates. The rate at which student support and feedback are given is extremely slow.

2. *Academic involvement:* there is not enough 'buy-in' from departments and their input regarding the RPL principles and process. For those involved, remuneration of time spent on evaluating and processing RPL applications is not usually properly negotiated. There are not enough resources devoted to staff development in order to get expertise in RPL implementation and assessment. As a result, RPL implementation is carried out in a manner which aims not to upset current academic positions and conceptualisations, defeating the entire purpose of RPL implementation.

3. *Curricular and admissions:* curricular and admission policies are slow to change and to adapt to the changing social requirements. As an example, the current Unisa mature (adult) learner access policy is still based on a policy which was developed for war veterans after World War II (Ballim, Omar and Ralphs 2000).

4. *Delivery strategies:* one challenge is the 'division of academic labour between scholarship and student services' (Michelson 1997, 45). This impact on the co-ordination and efficiency of RPL delivery. In Unisa, assessment is restricted to strategies (such as print-based assessment) that can be efficiently used within a distance-learning environment for large student numbers. Unisa has not fully exploited ways in which both traditional and modern technologies can be combined to try out new forms of authentic assessment such as electronic portfolios or video conferencing. Research in identifying innovative ways of conducting RPL assessment is non-existent.

Challenges related to learner needs

There is often an unproblematic assumption that all adults are experienced learners and that any form of non-accredited learning will have some potential of being recognised and awarded value in relation to formal qualifications and structures (Harris 1997). Much of our learner population would still require exposure to academic competencies in order to succeed in an academic environment. It is very difficult to convince them that even though they have experience in specific learning areas, this experience is not easily converted into the competencies associated with academic learning.

THE WAY FORWARD

There is a need to re-organise programmes of study to factor in RPL in the contexts of organisations and curricular. In particular, there is a need to recognise the cultural component of knowledge and to expand academic knowledge in order to include 'standpoints that are forming the life experiences of marginalise groups' (Michelson 1997, 44). There is also the need to 'advocate for recognition of forms of experiential learning that are borne out of particular social conditions, that – privilege social and political experience and blend this with support that may be required to meet the requirements for success in academic education' (Harris 1997, 18).

This requires internal and external engagement and debate about the current RPL strategy in relation to the institution, whereby there is an attempt to offer a full range of lifelong learning opportunities for a diverse student population, and ensure that we do not reinforce socially constructed inequalities by privileging the already privileged.

There is a need to translate RPL policy into operational strategies with a realistic view of what RPL is able to achieve within the university's desired ODL framework, mission, vision and strategy.

In order to assure quality in RPL provisions, a number of mechanisms have been suggested which involve increased wider participation of all stakeholders (i.e., student, academic and administration staff), in that there is

- a mechanism for translating the RPL policy into operational structures interfacing with faculty and university systems.
- a clear outline of the roles of various key personnel responsible for the academic quality and administrative accountability are clear and complementary.
- devolution of authority to faculties (colleges) on the question of academic quality assurance, with central audit and oversight from the RPL office and the RPL committee.
- appropriate staff development at the macro (administrative) and micro (academic) levels
- availability of clear course or module outcomes or competencies on which both staff and students can base their RPL assessment. These should include outcomes (standards and levels of student activity and performance) and the RPL process (quality of the processes producing the outcomes.
- mechanisms for identifying strengths of RPL provision though: (1) self evaluation (critical peer review); (2) Institutional audits; (3) student feedback; (4) external views (professional bodies and industry).

Delineating the RPL assessment processes clearly demands research efforts geared towards a better understanding of knowledge structures as they relate to RPL, and the development of clear criteria for conducting RPL assessment. There is an urgent need 'to better understand the complexity of the movement from experiential, everyday knowledge (a horizontal discourse) to hierarchical, disciplinary knowledge structures (a vertical discourse) . . . with an emphasis of a more textured understanding of horizontal knowledge structures (Harris 1997, 18). For future developers of prior learning assessment, this means that ways of developing criteria for assessment in which techniques for placing the different learning domains and sub-disciplines on an appropriate 'credit exchange–developmental continuum' for RPL assessment will have to be established. That way, an assessor would be better equipped to gauge when to use a credit exchange or developmental approach to RPL assessment, or to use some other appropriate forms of assessment.

Hopefully, RPL practices will be refined as more target groups are clarified and Unisa builds capability in assessment and advisory issues. At the moment Unisa still has to make our

- selection for RPL candidates practice and criteria transparent
- make sure that the assessment instruments it is using are valid, reliable, fair and transparent.
- develop a moderation mechanism.

More profoundly, the success of RPL sustenance will largely depend on how well Unisa is able to respond and adapt to current ODL market trends such as: maintaining *quality* within mass provision; providing courses which address labour demands while still focusing on the development of the individual, providing customer focused education products to all population groups, dealing with realities of having high-end technology solutions which cannot be accessed by the majority of our populations (Koul 2006).

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