

**A MANAGEMENT MODEL FOR THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR  
LEARNING (RPL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**

by

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## DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE

I declare that “A management model for the recognition of prior learning (RPL) at the University of South Africa” is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signature: 

Date: 24 November 2011

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### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to my late Swami and my dad.

## ABSTRACT

This study explored the implementation of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) at Unisa by investigating the strengths and weaknesses of the RPL methodology, instruments and processes when taking students through the RPL process. The successes and challenges experienced by the RPL academic advisors and the academic assessors were determined and guidelines provided for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa. The empirical research design was exploratory within a qualitative framework employing participant observation, focus group interviewing, individual interviewing and the distribution of questionnaires that consisted of open-ended questions. The research sample comprised 26 purposefully selected participants. With regard to the research findings, the challenges include a lack of administrative support, a lack of support from top management and the academic staff, and a lack of communication between management and the RPL department. The strength of the RPL department lay in its well-documented process manual.

**KEY TERMS:** Implementation of the recognition of prior learning (RPL); Recognition of prior learning (RPL); RPL student; Management; Strengths and weaknesses of the RPL methodology, instruments and processes; Academic advisors; Academic assessors; Exploratory research; Qualitative framework; Interviews.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

ABET:	Adult basic education and training
APEL:	Accreditation of prior experiential learning
APL:	Accreditation of prior learning
AQF:	Australian Qualifications Framework
AQFAB:	Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board
AQTF:	Australian Quality Training Framework
ASGISA:	Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa
CAEL:	Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
CAPLA:	Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment
CATS:	Credit accumulation and transfer scheme
CED:	Certificate in Education for Development
CETA:	Construction Education and Training Authority
CLLP:	Credit for Life-Long Learning Program
CNAA:	Council for National Academic Awards
COL:	Commonwealth of Learning
COSATU:	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CQFW:	Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales
CTP:	Committee of Technikon Principals
DSAR:	Directorate of Student Administrations and Registrations
EBE:	Experience-based Education Department
FET:	Further education and training
FSHEC:	Free State Higher Education Consortium
GET:	General education and training
HET:	Higher education and training
HSRC:	Human Sciences Research Council

IVTB:	Industrial and Vocational Training Board
JET:	Joint Education Trust
JIPSA:	Joint Initiative for Priority Skills
LET:	Learning from Experience Trust
MCEETYA:	Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs
MERSETA:	Metal and Engineering Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority
MOE&HR:	Ministry of Education and Human Resources
MQA:	Mauritius Qualifications Authority
NAMCOL:	Namibian College of Open Learning
NBEET:	National Board of Employment, Education and Training
NICATS:	Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System
NIED:	National Institute for Educational Development
NOLNet:	Namibian Open Learning Network Trust
NQA:	Namibia Qualifications Authority
NQF:	National Qualifications Framework
NVQ:	National Vocational Qualifications
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PoN-COLL:	Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning at the Polytechnic of Namibia
PLA:	Prior learning accreditation
PLAR:	Prior learning accreditation and recognition
QCF:	Qualifications and Credit Framework
RPL:	Recognition of prior learning
SA:	South Africa (SA)
SAIDE:	South African Institute for Distance Education

SAQA:	South Africans Qualifications Authority
SCQF:	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SETA:	Sector education and training authority
SIAST:	Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology
SQA:	Seychelles Qualifications Authority
TAFE:	Technical and further education
UNAM-CES:	Centre for External Studies at the University of Namibia
UNESCO:	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNISA:	University of South Africa
VET:	National vocational education and training
WHEP:	Workers' Higher Education Project

# CONTENTS

	Page
<b>CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION AND PLACEMENT OF THE STUDY</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 INTRODUCTION .....	1
1.2 BACKGROUND TO STUDY .....	2
1.2.1 Defining the concept of RPL .....	2
1.2.2 Models of RPL .....	3
1.2.3 RPL: an international perspective .....	5
1.2.3.1 Alternative terminology .....	5
1.2.3.2 RPL in the USA, UK and Australia .....	6
1.2.4 RPL: a South African perspective .....	7
1.2.5 RPL at Unisa .....	9
1.2.6 Problems with the implementation of RPL .....	10
1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT .....	12
1.4 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH .....	13
1.5 MOTIVATION FOR THE RESEARCH .....	13
1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN .....	14
1.6.1 Research design .....	14
1.6.2 Sampling strategy .....	15
1.6.3 Data collection .....	15
1.6.4 Data analysis .....	17
1.6.5 Trustworthiness and transferability .....	17
1.6.6 Ethical considerations .....	18
1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS .....	18
1.8 LAYOUT OF STUDY .....	20
1.9 CONCLUSION .....	21



<b>CHAPTER 2: RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>22</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION	22
2.2 THE ORIGIN OF RPL INTERNATIONALLY	22
2.2.1 The United States of America	22
2.2.2 The United Kingdom	24
2.2.3 Canada	25
2.2.4 Australia	27
2.3 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RPL INTERNATIONALLY	28
2.3.1 The United States of America	28
2.3.2 The United Kingdom	31
2.3.3 Canada	35
2.3.4 Australia	36
2.4 THE BENEFITS OF RPL	38
2.5 THE SCOPE OF RPL	41
2.5.1 The United States of America	41
2.5.2 The United Kingdom	41
2.5.3 Canada	42
2.5.4 Australia	43
2.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING RPL	44
2.6.1 Purposes of assessment	45
2.6.2 Strategy for assessment	45
2.6.3 Operationalisation	45
2.7 THE MANAGEMENT OF RPL INTERNATIONALLY	46
2.7.1 The United States of America	46
2.7.2 The United Kingdom	46
2.7.3 Canada	47
2.7.4 Australia	48
2.8 PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED IN MANAGING RPL INTERNATIONALLY	49
2.8.1 The United States of America	49
2.8.2 The United Kingdom	50

2.8.3	Canada .....	51
2.8.4	Australia .....	52
2.9	CONCLUSION .....	54
<b>CHAPTER 3: RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES/SOCIETIES .....</b>		<b>55</b>
3.1	INTRODUCTION .....	55
3.2	THE ORIGIN OF RPL IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES .....	56
3.2.1	Mauritius .....	56
3.2.2	Seychelles .....	58
3.2.3	Namibia .....	58
3.2.4	South Africa .....	60
3.3	THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RPL IN DEVELOPING ENVIRONMENTS .....	62
3.3.1	Mauritius .....	62
3.3.1.1	Pre-screening process .....	63
3.3.1.2	Facilitation process .....	63
3.3.1.3	Assessment process .....	64
3.3.2	Seychelles .....	64
3.3.2.1	Application .....	65
3.3.2.2	Pre-screening .....	65
3.3.2.3	Pre-assessment .....	65
3.3.2.4	Determination of standards .....	65
3.3.2.5	Evaluation for possible credit transfer .....	66
3.3.2.6	Planning and organisation of the RPL session .....	66
3.3.2.7	Assessment of the competencies .....	66
3.3.2.8	Moderation .....	66
3.3.2.9	Recommendation .....	66
3.3.2.10	Appeal .....	66
3.3.3	Namibia .....	67
3.3.4	South Africa .....	67
3.4	THE BENEFITS OF RPL .....	70

3.5	THE SCOPE OF RPL .....	72
3.5.1	Mauritius .....	72
3.5.2	Namibia .....	73
3.5.3	South Africa .....	74
3.6	A FRAMEWORK FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF RPL IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES .....	77
3.6.1	Mauritius .....	77
3.6.2	Seychelles .....	77
3.6.3	Namibia .....	78
3.6.4	South Africa .....	78
3.7	PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED WITH THE MANAGEMENT OF RPL IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES .....	80
3.8	CONCLUSION .....	81
<b>CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN</b> ...		<b>83</b>
4.1	INTRODUCTION .....	83
4.2	RESEARCH DESIGN .....	83
4.3	SAMPLING STRATEGY .....	86
4.4	DATA COLLECTION .....	87
4.4.1	Methods of data collection .....	88
4.4.1.1	Participant observation .....	88
4.4.1.2	Focus group interviewing .....	90
4.4.1.3	In-depth interviews .....	91
4.4.1.4	Open-ended questionnaires .....	92
4.5	DATA MANAGEMENT .....	93
4.6	DATA ANALYSIS .....	94
4.6.1	Organising the data .....	95
4.6.2	Becoming immersed in the data .....	95
4.6.3	Coding the data .....	95
4.6.4	Generating categories and themes .....	96
4.6.5	Interpreting the data .....	96

4.7	TRUSTWORTHINESS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH .....	97
4.7.1	Credibility .....	97
4.7.2	Transferability .....	99
4.7.3	Dependability .....	99
4.7.4	Confirmability .....	99
4.8	ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS .....	100
4.8.1	Informed consent .....	101
4.8.2	Confidentiality and anonymity .....	101
4.9	CONCLUSION .....	102
	<b>CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS OF THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>103</b>
5.1	INTRODUCTION .....	103
5.2	RESEARCH METHODS IN BRIEF .....	103
5.3	THE FUNCTIONING OF RPL AT UNISA .....	104
5.4	DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS .....	105
5.4.1	Identifiable strengths of the RPL methodology, instruments and process .....	105
5.4.1.1	Strengths of the RPL methodology .....	105
5.4.1.2	Strengths of the RPL instruments .....	106
5.4.1.3	Strengths of the RPL process .....	108
5.4.2	Identifiable weaknesses of the RPL methodology, instruments and process .....	108
5.4.2.1	Weaknesses of the RPL methodology .....	109
5.4.2.2	Weaknesses of the RPL instruments .....	109
5.4.2.3	Weaknesses of the RPL process .....	110
5.4.3	Experiences of the RPL academic advisors and assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa .....	111
5.4.4	Successes experienced in the implementation of RPL at Unisa .....	113
5.4.4.1	Student progress, access and crediting .....	113
5.4.4.2	Efficient administration process .....	114
5.4.4.3	Harmonious relationships .....	115
5.4.4.4	Methods of assessment .....	116

5.4.5	Challenges experienced in the implementation of RPL at Unisa .....	116
5.4.5.1	Lack of administrative support .....	116
5.4.5.2	Lack of support and commitment from the cadres of management, academic staff and non-academic staff .....	117
5.4.5.3	Inadequacy of the Unisa system to accommodate the RPL process .....	121
5.4.5.4	The time-consuming process to issue RPL credit .....	122
5.4.5.5	Lack of communication/consultation .....	123
5.4.5.6	Lack of basic office equipment and space .....	124
5.4.5.7	Feelings of insecurity .....	127
5.4.5.8	Staff appraisal .....	127
5.4.5.9	Poor presentation of RPL files .....	128
5.5	<b>GUIDELINES FOR THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF RPL AT UNISA .....</b>	<b>128</b>
5.5.1	Provision of RPL training for academic and non-academic Unisa staff .....	128
5.5.2	Improvements in the marketing of RPL .....	129
5.5.3	The management of support to academic and non-academic RPL staff at Unisa .....	129
5.5.4	Streamlining the RPL process .....	130
5.5.5	Repositioning of the RPL department .....	132
5.5.6	The RPL department needs in general .....	132
5.6	<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>133</b>
	<b>CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ..</b>	<b>135</b>
6.1	<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>135</b>
6.2	<b>SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>136</b>
6.2.1	Strengths and weaknesses of the RPL methodology, instruments and process at Unisa .....	136

6.2.2	Experiences, successes and challenges experienced by RPL academic advisors and assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa .....	138
6.2.3	Guidelines for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa .....	140
6.3	CONCLUSIONS .....	141
6.4	RECOMMENDATIONS .....	142
6.5	SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY .....	145
6.6	LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY .....	145
6.7	CONCLUSION .....	146
	REFERENCES .....	147
	APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS .....	162
	APPENDIX B: OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) ASSESSORS .....	163
	APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS .....	166

# CHAPTER 1

## ORIENTATION AND PLACEMENT OF THE STUDY

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The University of South Africa (Unisa), boasting a provisional 2010 formal headcount enrolment of 252 024 students (Unisa, 2011) has implemented recognition of prior learning (RPL) since 2003 (Kizito, 2006:130). The latter part of 2006 saw the permanent positioning of five RPL academic advisors in the RPL department, with each specialist being responsible for a specific college within Unisa. The RPL department has been repositioned under the Directorate of Student Admission and Registrations, working closely with the Department of Exemptions.

This study focuses on an exploration of the problems experienced in implementing RPL at Unisa. Some of the RPL problems at Unisa include a lack of institutional preparedness, lack of academic support, lengthy paperwork, and extensive time and procedures involved in the RPL process itself (Kizito, 2006:133). These problems are not exclusive to Unisa but have been identified internationally as well. In his recent research on RPL in the Australian vocational education and training system, Hargreaves (2006:7) identified the magnitude of paperwork, lack of awareness and understanding of RPL and the expensive/time-consuming process of RPL as barriers to implementing RPL. The academic RPL assessors and academic RPL advisors who are responsible for implementing the policy at Unisa were approached to document their problems experienced in conducting RPL at Unisa with the intention of contributing to the formulation of guidelines for viable practice. The study therefore called on the academic assessors and advisors to examine how they practised RPL and to reflect on their experience and practice.

During the literature search the researcher noticed that the majority of research conducted in the field of prior learning was done in the twentieth century. It was, however, imperative to consider this literature as it lent weight to and informed this study. Even though the research conducted in RPL internationally and nationally does reveal only some potential problems in the implementation of RPL, the

researcher felt it would be intriguing to see if similar barriers could be identified in conducting RPL at Unisa (Kizito, 2006:133; Garnett, Portwood & Costley, 2004:15; Bowman, Clayton, Bateman, Knight, Thomson, Hargreaves, Blom & Enders, 2003:13–15; Castle, Osman & Buchler, 2001:25–28).

## **1.2 BACKGROUND TO STUDY**

The background of the study informs the reader of the origin of RPL internationally and nationally as well as the alternative terminology used for RPL in the various countries. The problems experienced in the implementation of RPL internationally and nationally are also noted below.

### **1.2.1 Defining the concept of RPL**

According to Harris (2000:1), RPL is a form of assessment within education and training that identifies and recognises adults' former learning and competencies gained. Within the formal education and training framework, RPL recognises learning that is obtained informally, formally and non-formally.

From this definition it is clear that RPL refers to the formal acknowledgement of the candidates' learning obtained outside formal schooling through their work experience. Their work-related experience is then measured against the learning outcomes of the course or module that the candidate is applying for. Should their work experience meet these learning outcomes then the candidate is awarded an RPL credit. The strategy of recognising prior learning is used as an alternative point of entry for mature adults in further and higher education. It is driven by moral, economic and political imperatives and is associated with the discourse of lifelong learning, open access to learning and redress (Castle et al., 2001:25–28).

RPL as a learner-centred approach has its roots in the humanistic approach to adult education, which acknowledges adults' life experiences as viable foundations for their learning (Cretchley & Castle, 2001:487). In this approach, the workplace is regarded as an important source for the production of knowledge and not merely a site for the application of university knowledge. In South Africa RPL has been introduced to improve the quality of education and training. Given



their learning from their working experience, adults receive recognition within the formal education system.

RPL involves measuring the candidate's learning experience against the learning outcomes of a course or qualification by means of interviews, site visits, demonstrations, challenge exams and portfolios. If the candidate's learning experience meets the learning outcomes, the candidate is awarded the credit or given access to a course of study; the latter applying to where the candidate does not meet the entrance requirements. In this manner RPL provides an individually tailored route for the mature student into the formal education system (Cretchley & Castle, 2001:488–489).

The researcher concurs with Geysler (1999:194) that the emphasis in RPL is on learning and experience, regardless of where and how the learning and experience were gained. Experience is the input and a measurement of the learning is the output, with as a final aim an increase in the individual's competencies formally recognised.

### **1.2.2 Models of RPL**

RPL is grounded in the theory of experiential learning. Van Rooy (2002:76) defines experiential learning as learning that happens outside the classroom. It occurs in an environment where the learner has direct contact with the realities being practised, the aim being to attain a level of competence in that area or field of practice. Experiential learning is also inclusive in that it refers to experience obtained from work, from living, from reading, etc. (Evans, 2000:18). The assessment of experiential learning is, however, more concerned with older learners as opposed to school leavers.

From the literature on RPL there are three emerging models with regard to the approach to RPL: the credit exchange model, the developmental model and the transformation model (Osman, 2004:140). The credit exchange model is grounded in the discourse of human capital. It is to a large extent instrumental and assessment based. Standardised tests, examinations and performance-based testing are the assessment methods used in this model of RPL. It involves the student providing evidence of having achieved part of, or all the skills, knowledge and outcomes for the course or qualification. The university or institution then

assesses the evidence submitted. This model focuses on method rather than purpose and the approach is restricted to “how to” instead of “why should” (Osman, 2004:140–141). The credit exchange model prevails in many higher education institutions simply because it is a systematic and pragmatic approach to RPL (Osman & Castle, 2002:63–68). It is also an approach that is simple for students, assessors and the institution and easy to apply. Another advantage of this model is that it allows RPL administrators and assessors to control and measure the process. However, it is limited in promoting the principles of equity and redress in South Africa because a fair number of those students who qualify for credit exchange have had previous education and were not necessarily previously disadvantaged (Osman, 2004:140–141). Buchler (1999:5) supports this point by arguing that the danger does exist in institutions of implementing RPL in a narrow and technicist manner that does not promote the redress principle of considering and accommodating previously disadvantaged individuals. The implication is that a serious disadvantage of the credit exchange model is the fact that it does not acknowledge informal learning gained through experience (Osman & Castle, 2001:54–60).

The developmental model of RPL, on the other hand, acknowledges informal learning acquired through experience in non-formal contexts, thus granting access to or credit in courses or qualifications. In that regard the development model approach focuses in-depth on past experience. Osman and Castle (2001:54–60) state that universities are sceptical about this model because it challenges what they teach, how they teach and when they teach. Although this model accepts that learning can occur in a variety of contexts, the evidence submitted is still insufficient to award a credit. With the development model students submit portfolios of evidence of their competencies. These portfolios consist of reflective essays and as such require adequate tutorial support to assist students in producing the essays. It calls on students to analyse and give voice to their learning. The development model approach to RPL is advantageous as the portfolios of learning promote personal reflection and contribute to personal and professional development of the student (Harris, 2000:25). The personal reflection stands in contrast to the credit exchange model which does not require students to reflect on their experiences. Writers such as Fraser (1995), however, argue that the developmental model in turn does not allow the RPL candidate a

voice in the assessment process. Michelson (1997:145) suggests that it may in fact silence the student. The development model also emphasises individual empowerment through education and this is particularly important for students who previously did not have access to higher education.

The transformational model as the third model in the approach to RPL is described as “transformational” in that non-formal and experiential learning is recognised by itself and not against the knowledge and learning in the receiving institution (SAIDE, 2002:6). It recognises and celebrates indigenous knowledge and views learning as a social construct that has room for change (Osman, 2004:142–143). Harris (1999:134) refers to the transformational model as the “Trojan-horse” approach in that it involves the examination of the social construction of knowledge and the curriculum (Harris, 1999:135), and hence experiential knowledge and discipline-based knowledge is bridged.

Within the transformational model of RPL non-formal and experiential learning is given the same status as academic knowledge. In its approach the transformational model acknowledges the awareness of power and inequality rather than legitimate knowledge (Osman, 2004:142–143). It does not require the students’ work experience to be matched to the learning outcomes of the subject. The transformational model of RPL focuses on learning as social participation whilst diminishing the power of universities as the sites of the production of knowledge. The assessment methods include focus group discussions, collages, narratives, life histories, dialogue and forms of self-expression, taking into consideration endemic and collective forms of knowledge (Osman, 2004:142–143). However, it does pose challenges to what is taught, how it is taught and when it is taught (Osman & Castle, 2001:54–60). It also poses challenges with regard to a concurrence with work-related realities.

### **1.2.3 RPL: an international perspective**

#### **1.2.3.1 Alternative terminology**

The researcher concentrated on the following countries as RPL has been most widely practised as well as researched there. In various countries RPL is referred to differently. The following terminology is used (Evans, 2000:15):

- Australia: Recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- South Africa: Recognition of prior learning (RPL)
- Canada: Prior learning accreditation and recognition (PLAR)
- United States of America (USA): Prior learning accreditation (PLA)/ accreditation of prior learning (APL)
- United Kingdom (UK): Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL)

### **1.2.3.2 RPL in the USA, UK and Australia**

RPL has been practised in the USA, Australia and the UK for nearly three decades (Evans, 2000:33). As indicated in par. 1.2.3.1, in the USA, RPL is known as accreditation of prior learning (APL). It began in the 1970s as a research project, the 'Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning Project' at the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. Ten higher education institutions (colleges and universities) were involved in this research project. Today, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in the USA is responsible for promoting the principles of good APL practice (Nyatanga, Forman & Fox, 1998:3–5). CAEL was and still is instrumental in developing APL in the USA. Some of the objectives of CAEL include:

- To develop and disseminate techniques for evaluating work and life experiences that can be given academic credit.
- To create and distribute publications to help those involved in adult and experiential learning.
- To expand research-based knowledge about adult learners and good practice in assessment of their prior learning (Nyatanga et al., 1998:3).

APL has become a very important option for USA students as it allows them access into qualifications, thus serving as a vehicle for older students to get access to higher education.

However, the origins of APL lie in the UK, dating back to 1836 (Nyatanga, 1993: 892–893). Whilst America had CAEL as the body to promote the recognition of prior learning, the UK had the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), which helped promote the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). The CNAA was an organisation that awarded academic degrees from 1965 to 1992. When the CNAA closed, the Open University restarted APEL in the 1970s. In

the 1980s an exchange programme was developed in which UK educators were allowed to visit the American APL centres. Although APEL has enormous potential, its use in the UK has been minimal in comparison to France and Canada where adult learners have significantly and successfully gained professional qualifications through RPL (Nyatanga, 1993:892–893). Nevertheless, since the 1980s APEL has been used as a tool for entry into higher educational institutions in the UK.

RPL was introduced into Australia as part of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) in 1993 (Cameron, 2004:14). It is now steadfastly established in the national vocational education and training (VET) system and part of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) charter. According to the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for RPL, seven principles are listed as the basis for practising RPL. These seven principles, which have most relevance for the South African situation, are (AQFB, 2004:84–85):

- RPL is critical to the development of an open, accessible, inclusive, integrated and relevant post-compulsory education and training system, and is a key foundation for lifelong learning policies that encourage individuals to participate in learning pathways which include formal, non-formal and informal learning.
- There is no one RPL model that is suitable for all qualifications and all situations. In particular, different sectors give rise to different models. The model of RPL that is implemented must be aligned with the outcomes, goals and objectives of the qualification.
- RPL assessment should be based on evidence, and should be equitable, culturally inclusive, fair, flexible, valid and reliable.
- RPL information and support services should be actively promoted, easy to understand and recognise the diversity of learners.

Presently many universities in Australia use RPL as a means to either admit students to a course and/or to credit them in a course (Evans, 2000:151–154).

#### **1.2.4 RPL: a South African perspective**

The past apartheid policies did not acknowledge informal learning as a means of obtaining knowledge, and as a result millions of people did not have access to formal learning opportunities (Kistan, 2002:169–170). This resulted in many

challenges facing higher education in South Africa. The real challenge is to provide access to those adults whose career paths were blocked as their prior learning was not previously recognised (Kistan, 2002:169–170). The state of higher education in South Africa and the importance of practising RPL was pointed out by the then Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Unisa, Prof Barney Pityana, at the Annual Founders' Lecture in 2007 where he called on academics to examine why and how South African higher education had not attained its objectives and what could be done to rectify this (Pityana, 2007:4–8). According to the White Paper on Education and Training (1995:15), RPL will open doors of opportunity for people whose academic or career paths have been needlessly blocked because their prior knowledge (acquired informally or by work experience) has not been assessed and certified.

Cretchley and Castle (2001:491) explain that it was in the 1990s that most South African educators became aware of RPL. The introduction of RPL in South Africa has a strong social justice constituent based on redress of previous disadvantages. In this regard RPL is meant to support the transformation of the education and training system in South Africa. In keeping with the political movement since 1992, many labour organisations proposed alternative routes in the form of policies to revitalise, improve and change the face of education and training. Policymakers were largely guided and informed by overseas models of education and training. RPL was endorsed by the trade unionists, who saw it as a means for a large number of unqualified workers to be assessed (Cooper, 1998:143–157). The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) endorsed the concept of RPL in South Africa as the vehicle to redress the inequalities of apartheid. Thus the intention of developing an RPL policy was confirmed as follows (Department of Education, 1998:41):

*“We will develop a frame work for the recognition of prior learning(RPL), so that those who have been denied formal opportunities for learning and who have developed their knowledge and skills through self-study or work experience can be assessed, given credit where due and proceed to obtain a qualification without unnecessary duplication of effort, expense or wastage of time.”*

RPL has since been included in the South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as a strategy to recognise and accredit learning that has been acquired informally in the workplace. Due to the high priority given to RPL by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), three RPL processes are undertaken:

- The development of a national RPL policy.
- Implementation of RPL.
- Scoping of RPL pilots and projects.

With regard to the process of recognising prior learning in South Africa, the following steps are outlined as a guide for fair and systematic practice (SAQA, 2002:7):

- Discovering what the candidate knows and can do.
- Comparing the candidate's experience, knowledge and skills with the assessment criteria of a qualification.
- Assessing the candidate against these criteria.
- Crediting the candidate for the experience, knowledge and skills obtained through past informal, formal and non-formal learning.

Documents to assist with the implementation of RPL were published. In 2002 a national policy entitled *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the Context of the National Qualifications Framework* was published. This was followed by *The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning* in 2004. Several national policies and Acts pertaining to the practice of RPL were also drafted. These policies and Acts include the South African Qualifications Authority Act of 1996, the White Paper on Education and Training of 1995, the National Qualifications Framework, the Skills Development Act of 1998, the Higher Education Act of 1997, the National Plan for Higher Education of February 2001 and the Further Education and Training Act of 1998. All of these nationally steered efforts capture the importance of RPL in South Africa.

### **1.2.5 RPL at Unisa**

In January 2004, the former University of South Africa merged with Technikon SA and Vista University to form the new Unisa. Unisa, being a comprehensive,

flexible and accessible open distance learning institution, has a yearly constant enrolment of at least 250 000 students (Unisa, 2005(a):5). In its mission as a distance education provider, it is stated that Unisa wants to be accessible to all students, specifically those on the African continent, and the marginalised, by way of a barrier-free environment, while responding to the needs of the global market (Unisa, 2005(a):7). In this regard the implementation of an RPL policy would help Unisa to serve working adults that were previously disadvantaged by opening access to higher education by way of giving formal recognition to their prior learning. In its approach to RPL Unisa adopts both the credit-based model and a developmental model.

The Unisa RPL system has been in existence since 2003 (Kizito, 2006:130). The Unisa policy on RPL was approved by Senate on 18 May 2005 and approved by Council on 29 July 2005. Included in the policy document is the process for practising RPL principles underpinning the RPL process, criteria for a successful RPL strategy, the responsibilities of the candidates, assessors and RPL advisors with regard to implementing RPL and an explanation of the process itself outlining the various steps to be followed systematically (Unisa, 2005(b):1–3). The stakeholders include the academic staff, RPL academic advisors as well as the RPL candidates. The RPL methods of assessment include site visits, interviews, challenge exams, portfolios, assignments and projects.

Initially RPL offices were located on the Unisa Muckleneuk and Florida campuses, comprising 15 staff members. However, after the merger of Unisa with Technikon SA and Vista University, the RPL department relocated to the Unisa Sunnyside campus. Each of the five colleges is now serviced by one RPL academic advisor situated in that specific college.

### **1.2.6 Problems with the implementation of RPL**

The literature survey on RPL reveals problems experienced with the implementation of RPL. Some studies state that RPL has failed to deliver on its promises (Bowman et al., 2003:15–20), the common reason being a gap between the promise and rhetoric of RPL and actual reality (Cameron & Miller, 2004:3). There are a number of factors that contribute to RPL being ineffective. These include the following (Kizito, 2006:133; Garnett et al., 2004:15; Bowman et al., 2003:15–20; Castle et al., 2001:25–28):



- Often people are unaware of RPL and do not understand the principle of it. An added factor is the price tag attached to RPL. It is costly.
- The perception is that RPL is not worth it due to the substantial amount of paperwork attached to it. RPL is seen as labour intensive.
- There are inconsistencies in assessments.
- The institutions tend to be unprepared for RPL.
- Curricular and admission policies do not incorporate RPL learners.
- Learner support is lacking.
- RPL assessment is time consuming for both the assessor and the candidate.
- The candidate's experiential knowledge is mismatched to the prescribed academic knowledge.
- There is a lack of confidence in the assessment outcomes from RPL that are viewed as not of similar standing to those achieved through training.
- RPL advisors are not trained properly.
- There is a lack of support from academic staff.
- In some environments such as the UK, RPL is seen primarily as an instrument of recognition rather than a process of development.

The RPL academic advisors at Unisa often encounter problems with the time consumed by the RPL process itself. Even after attaining the results from the academic staff, the process of acquiring the necessary signatures and obtaining approval is time consuming. Inadequate staffing impacts on the amount of training given to academic staff, resulting in a lack of support from them. The RPL academic advisors are still trying to change the perception of RPL within the institution. RPL is often viewed as an easy option to obtain a degree if interpreted as a means of recognition only and not also as a process of development. Amalgamating the RPL process/system with the Unisa operations system has proven to be very difficult at times. These are but a few of the problems experienced by the RPL academic advisors in the proper administration of RPL at Unisa.

If RPL is not managed properly, it can destroy academic integrity and communicate the message of an “easy option” to students. As a process RPL involves a series of steps managed by people who plan, lead and organise; therefore it must be managed in all aspects. Management is important to ensure that the RPL process is:

- transparent and open.
- on par with international standards of assessment.

Smith (2003:74) asserts that the management of RPL involves the management of specialised RPL activities at institutional, candidate and agency levels. It also includes the management of the RPL assessment and accreditation processes and the management of the candidate's learning that occurs during and after the RPL process. Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002:17) argue that the management of policy should focus on "how to do it" as much as it focuses on "what to do". With regard to the RPL problems experienced at Unisa, it would imply a close interrogation of the Unisa RPL policy (Unisa, 2005(b)), not only focusing on what is done, but also how it is done. It would also imply revisiting the policy to ensure that the process itself is not so time consuming and to arrange for the allocation of adequate staff. To counteract implementation problems and ensure that RPL is practised effectively, it is important that gaps in the RPL policy be identified and possible solutions proposed on a continuous basis.

### **1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT**

The Unisa RPL policy has officially been implemented since 2005. It was therefore viable to investigate possible problems that the RPL academic advisors as well as the academic assessors experienced in conducting RPL, for the sake of formulating guidelines for good practice. In this regard the following main research question was formulated:

#### **What are the constituents of a recognition of prior learning (RPL) management model for Unisa?**

To answer the main research question the following sub questions were formulated and investigated first so that the answers to these sub questions could contribute to answering the main research question. The sub questions are as follows:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, instruments and processes when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?
- What are the experiences, successes and challenges experienced by the RPL academic advisors and the academic assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa?

- What guidelines can be developed for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa?

#### **1.4 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH**

The purpose of the research was to determine the problems experienced in implementing RPL at Unisa in order to develop guidelines for increased effectiveness of RPL practice. The following aims were formulated accordingly:

- To explore the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, instruments and processes when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa.
- To describe the experiences, successes and challenges experienced by the RPL academic advisors and the academic assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa.
- To develop guidelines for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa.

#### **1.5 MOTIVATION FOR THE RESEARCH**

Vithal and Jansen (2006:11) define a rationale for study as a clear and brief statement of how the researcher became interested in the proposed topic, showing why he or she believes the proposed study is worth doing.

Being one of the five RPL academic advisors employed by Unisa's RPL department, the researcher started to reflect on her own practice, focusing on problems that she was experiencing with her students. Often during a tea or lunch break the other RPL academic advisors would also voice their experience in implementing RPL. This began to informally reveal perceived problems with the policy and this was just the perspective of the RPL academic advisors. It was presumed that the academic assessors who were also responsible for implementing the RPL policy would also experience problems with the implementation. The researcher consulted literature on the problems experienced in implementing RPL in South Africa and abroad and discovered that the existing literature was limited. There was, however, a large body of literature on the history, origin and policy formation of RPL internationally and nationally. It was evident that a study on the problems encountered with the implementation of RPL would contribute to the knowledge base.

According to Vithal and Jansen (2006:13), the significance of any study is its contribution to improving practice, informing policy or enriching the knowledge base on the topic being investigated. This research on the management of RPL implementation at Unisa is focused on improving practice.

## **1.6 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

The term “methodology” refers to the rules and procedures in which scientific research should be conducted because it offers justification of the chosen way and a demonstration of its validity and reliability (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2005:159). According to Collins, Du Plooy, Grobbelaar, Puttergill, Terre Blanche, Van Eeden, Van Rensburg and Wigston (2000:11), the scientific research method means that researchers work independently of external influence or personal position in order to arrive at a conclusion based on evidence which can demonstrate to others and which they can also observe and measure (quantitatively) or evaluate for trustworthiness (qualitatively).

### **1.6.1 Research design**

To find answers to the issue of the management of RPL to improve effective practice, both a literature study and an empirical investigation were undertaken. The literature study on the implementation of RPL internationally and nationally served as a basis for conducting a context-specific empirical investigation.

For this study the empirical research design was exploratory within a qualitative framework. Qualitative research is concerned with the study of the object, namely humans, with unique and meaningful human situations or interactions (Berg, 2004:2). The purpose of exploratory research is to gain insight into a situation, phenomenon or community by investigating the “what” of the matter (Berg, 2004: 256). Exploratory research also helps determine what further research can be done about the problem matter. Seeing that the focus of the study was on determining the problems experienced by the RPL academic advisors and academic assessors in implementing the RPL policy, it involved questioning the participants to get in-depth answers. The characteristics of a qualitative research design were therefore best applicable to this investigation. By using the qualitative research design the research yielded in-depth answers as opposed to the more general features of quantitatively collected data.

Collins et al. (2000:11) suggest that within the qualitative approach humans are the primary data collecting instrument. Here, the qualitative researcher obtained the primary data by interviewing the participants who were involved in the RPL process itself.

### **1.6.2 Sampling strategy**

Within a qualitative research approach, samples are selected in a purposeful manner as the aim of this type of research is to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of study. Hoyle, Harris and Judd (2002:183) define sampling as a choice of elements from a population with the aim of ascertaining something about that population. For this study on the implementation of RPL at Unisa, the sample comprised Unisa academic assessors and RPL academic advisors and administrators. The participants were selected using the purposive sampling technique. In purposive sampling, according to De Vos et al. (2005:329), a researcher must first think critically about the parameters of the population and then choose the sample case accordingly to ensure the collecting of information-rich data. The sample for this study included twenty-six participants comprising twenty academic assessors, five RPL academic advisors and one RPL administrator. The research was conducted at the Unisa Florida campus and the Unisa Sunnyside campus as the academic assessors and the RPL academic advisors are based at these campuses.

### **1.6.3 Data collection**

In order for a researcher to collect data, the researcher needs to have an instrument to do so. Vithal and Jansen (2006:20) define data collection as a plan detailing a strategy for collecting data. To ensure trustworthiness and transferability, qualitative researchers make use of triangulation by involving the combination of various data collection methods (Borg & Gall, 1989:393). For the purpose of this study the researcher applied triangulation by employing participant observation, focus group interviewing, individual interviewing and the distribution of open-ended questionnaires as data collecting techniques. To understand the complexities of the situation direct participation on the part of the researcher is required (Patton, 2002:4). Participant observation requires that the researcher take part in the daily activities of the people being studied (Corbin & Strauss,

2008:29–30). In order to collect rich, detailed and dense qualitative data the researcher applied this method of data collection. The use of this method was particularly appropriate for this study as the researcher herself is an RPL academic advisor involved in the RPL process.

Focus group interviewing as structured group interviews consisting of six to ten individuals (Berg, 2004:123) was employed. A focus group interview was conducted with five RPL advisors and one RPL administrator. The use of focus group interviewing enabled the researcher to obtain a deep and detailed understanding of the research problem at hand and it allowed the participants to reveal, through interaction, their beliefs, attitudes, experiences and feelings that would not have been possible using questionnaires (Litoselliti, 2003:16). In line with Patton (2002:386), and apart from being cost effective, it was clear that focus group interviewing allowed for interactions between the participants, resulting in increased data quality.

Apart from the focus group interview, individual interviews were conducted with nine RPL academic assessors. The in-depth individual interview, often described as a focused, unstructured, open-ended interview, is more like a conversation, allowing the researcher to probe further to obtain rich data (Berg, 2004:75). Since some of the RPL academic assessors were independent contractors and thus not based on campus, it was difficult to conduct a focus group interview.

An interview guide covering two to three major issues with two to three sub-issues, all of an open-ended nature, was used (Appendix A). Reference to the interview guide ensured that all important aspects relating to the phenomenon of study were addressed during interviewing. The duration of each interview was between one and two hours and both the focus group interview and the individual interviews were transcribed.

In addition to the focus group and individual interviews, an open-ended questionnaire (Appendix B) was sent by email to ten RPL assessors and five RPL academic advisors. The use of the open-ended questionnaire enabled the researcher to obtain data from the RPL academic assessors and academic advisors who could not be interviewed.

#### 1.6.4 Data analysis

According to Berg (2004:37), data analysis involves researchers arranging the data in ways that help detect patterns or problems so as to explore associations that exist in the data. The strategy for data analysis included the following three steps:

- a) **Organising the data:** In line with Marshall and Rossman (2011:210), the data that were gathered was listed on note cards. This enabled a general clean-up of the data to make it more manageable and retrievable.
- b) **Coding the data:** In a questioning of and reflecting on the data, the researcher identified themes, recurring ideas and patterns of belief that emerged into categories and themes. As recommended by Marshall and Rossman (2011:212), coding schemes were applied to the emerging themes and categories.
- c) **Interpreting the data:** Often referred to as 'telling the story', the researcher interpreted what she had learned. This involved making sense of the findings, drawing conclusions, offering explanations and making inferences (Marshall&Rossman, 2011:214).

#### 1.6.5 Trustworthiness and transferability

Within quantitative research the worth of an investigation is determined by assessing the reliability and validity of the investigation (Patton, 2002:93). However, models used to evaluate quantitative research do not fit the details of qualitative research, and thus cannot be used for qualitative studies. As a result, reliability and validity are replaced by trustworthiness and transferability in assessing qualitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:39). With reference to trustworthiness as the quality of the research and its findings, Guba's model (1981:215–216) for assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative data was applied within this study. Accordingly, the four criteria of Guba's model, namely (a) truth value, (b) consistency, (c) neutrality and (d) applicability, are accounted for in this study. Marshall and Rossman (2011:40–41) indicate that these strategies increase the rigour of the study and the rigour of readers' assessment of the findings of the study. Within quantitative research, researchers are able to make

generalisations. However, this is not possible in qualitative research, resulting in generalisability/external validity being replaced by transferability (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:40–41). Transferability as the extent to which the findings can be applied to other groups or contexts (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:40) is accounted for in this study. The researcher is aware, however, that transferability is contingent on the next researcher's responsibility and efforts to arrange transferability to a similar context of investigation.

### **1.6.6 Ethical considerations**

Given the intrusive nature of qualitative methods and the highly private and interpersonal relationship between the researcher and participants, ethical issues in data collection and analysis must be considered (Patton, 2002:268). Within qualitative research there are four codes of ethics, namely informed consent, deception, accuracy, and privacy and confidentiality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005:144).

Patton (2002:405) maintains that interviews are interventions that affect people. Often interviewees reveal thoughts, feelings and experiences to the interviewer that they were not aware of themselves. Patton (2002:407) asserts that the possibility prevails of participants telling the interviewer things that they never intended to tell. Therefore obtaining the participants' informed consent and ensuring confidentiality is of paramount importance. The interviewer should also have an ethical framework when dealing with sensitive issues in the interview (Patton, 2002:406).

The participants in this study were informed of the purpose of the research and written permission was obtained from them. The participants' confidentiality and anonymity was explained to them with the assurance that it will be protected (Appendix C).

## **1.7 OPERATIONAL DEFINITIONS**

The most important concepts related to this research which need to be clarified are as follows:



- **Managing RPL**

In order to explain the management of RPL it is important to first define the concept of management. Management involves a wide range of activities in running a successful department, other than administration and leadership as traditionally defined (Bell & Bush, 2002:5). Management is a practical activity and operates on three levels: strategic, organisational and operational. For management to be effective these three levels must work in harmony. At best educational management is concerned with ascertaining aims and strategies; managing people, budgets, teaching and learning; making and implementing plans; and evaluating practice (Bell & Bush, 2002:3). Thus managing RPL involves the management of the RPL process with consideration of all the constituents to be managed to ensure effective practice.

- **Prior learning**

In general terms prior learning is understood as learning that has happened sometime in the past. The learning has been acquired by the learner and is kept inside, with the learner having no external evidence of acquiring it, albeit possessing adequate competencies (Day, 2002:1).

- **Recognition of prior learning**

The recognition of prior learning is about acknowledging and giving credit to what learners already know and can do even if this learning was acquired informally, non-formally or formally. Here the learning obtained from the learner's work experience is recognised and accredited in formal education. The learner's work experience is measured against the learning outcomes required for a specific qualification. The Department of Prior Learning executes the recognition of prior learning at Unisa.

- **University of South Africa**

Unisa is the largest open distance learning institute in South Africa and Africa. Since the 2005 merger with the former Technikon SA (TSA) and the Vista University Distance Education Campus (VUDEC) (Kizito, 2006:127), student numbers increased to 252 024 for the 2011 academic year (Unisa, 2011).

Unisa is focused on accommodating and providing learning opportunities to all students, including students previously disadvantaged. In this regard RPL at Unisa fulfils a crucial role to ensure that students' relevant prior learning with accompanying **competencies are acknowledged** for further development.

## 1.8 LAYOUT OF STUDY

The study is divided into six chapters.

- **Chapter 1:** In this chapter the context of the study, the problem statement, aim of the research and the motivation for conducting the research are presented. The research design is also explained and important concepts used in the study clarified.
- **Chapter 2:** The focus of chapter 2 is a literature review on RPL practised internationally. The origin of RPL is traced internationally and the viability of RPL is outlined. The importance of the effective management of RPL is examined by means of an in-depth description of how RPL is arranged, implemented and managed internationally. The chapter concludes with the problems experienced internationally with the practice of RPL.
- **Chapter 3:** The focus of this chapter is on a literature review that concerns RPL in developing countries/societies. The origin of RPL within developing societies is described and an outline is provided of the viability of RPL for the development of the individual. An in-depth description of how RPL is arranged, implemented and managed in developing societies is given, along with an outline of the problems experienced in practising RPL within contextual terms.
- **Chapter 4:** This chapter comprises a discussion of the research methodology employed in the study. The research design and research methodology used to address the research questions are described.
- **Chapter 5:** The focal point of this chapter is to report on the research findings of the empirical investigation. In that regard data collected and interpreted are discussed.

- **Chapter 6:** This chapter includes a summary of the literature and empirical findings of the study and the research is evaluated in terms of implications for future research. Conclusions are drawn and recommendations made for improvement of the context studied.

## **1.9 CONCLUSION**

This chapter presented a review of the context of the study, as well as of the content of selected literature that the researcher deemed relevant to the study. As an important tool for empowering people by bringing them into the education realm, the discipline of RPL needs to be further researched. Even though the chapter highlights the transformative function of RPL in the South African higher education sector and its ability to provide access to learning for the mature and previously disadvantaged students, RPL practitioners/academics/researchers cannot ignore the gap between policy and RPL (Cameron & Miller, 2004:3). In order to bridge this gap RPL practitioners/academics/researchers need to examine in closer detail the actual practice of RPL. Successfully identifying the barriers to the execution of RPL will subsequently have a positive spin-off on managing its implementation.

# **CHAPTER 2**

## **RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

RPL has a range of acronyms used by different people in different countries. As pointed out in par. 1.2.3.1 in the USA it is referred to as accreditation of prior learning assessment (APL); in the UK it is known as the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), although sometimes referred to as the recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL), whilst in Canada it is known as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR). However, in South Africa and Australia it is known as the recognition of prior learning (RPL) (Day, 2002:ix-x).

Internationally the origin of RPL can be traced to the early 1970s in America (Keeton, 2000:31). Thereafter interest in RPL escalated during the 1980s in France, Canada and Australia, in 1992 in New Zealand and in 1994 in South Africa (Evans, 1994:5). Similar to South Africa, internationally RPL is used as a vehicle to redress social injustice by giving mature and marginalised students access to higher education. The RPL process and techniques vary between institutions and countries (Challis, 1993:31-35).

In this chapter the researcher focused on RPL in developed countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK and Australia, as these countries are in the international lead when it comes to the development of RPL. RPL has been implemented, monitored and researched extensively over the years in the above countries. This chapter outlines the origin, implementation, benefits, scope and management of RPL internationally. It concludes with the problems experienced in managing RPL internationally.

### **2.2 THE ORIGIN OF RPL INTERNATIONALLY**

#### **2.2.1 The United States of America**

From the early 1970s America pioneered the field in the recognition and assessment of prior learning (Evans, 1994:5). The 1970s saw a large number of

mature students wanting to study at universities and colleges but without having to study what they already knew through work experience. Educational institutions now felt the pressure of re-examining their teaching methods, curricula and admission requirements (Keeton, 2000:31). APL was institutionalised in the US, with the passing of The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (known informally as the GI Bill) when the war veterans after World War II sought entry into colleges and universities (Gamson, 1989:12). In response to this colleges joined together to form the College Entrance Examination Board (CEEB) to accommodate these 'non-traditional students'. The Carnegie Corporation of New York together with the CEEB set up the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (CNTS), which conducted further studies on these students and how best they could be helped (Keeton, 2000:32). Acting on the recommendations of the CEEB an organisation called Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning (CAEL) was founded in America in 1974. It was a project that involved 27 colleges and universities (Keeton, 2000:34). Its main function was to investigate and validate the assessment techniques of measuring the learning that these non-traditional students had already acquired. The outcome was the establishment of a set of quality standards for APL that has presently informed the way RPL is designed and implemented in other countries as well. The standards are classified into two categories. The first is concerned with the assessment process and the other with the administrative process (Whitaker, 1989:9–18). With regard to the assessment process the criteria are as follows:

1. Credit should be awarded only for learning and not experience.
2. The credit awarded must be comparable to a college-level course.
3. The assessment must be based on the knowledge of the learning process and be regarded as an important part of learning and not separate from it.
4. Appropriate subject matter must be used in determining the credit award and competence level. Assessment is an academic expertise and must be done by faculty members or credentialing experts.
5. Credit must be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded.

The criteria for the administrative process are listed as follows:

1. When credit is awarded, it should be monitored by a transcript entry to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.

2. All parties involved in the assessment process should have access to policies, procedures and criteria applied to the assessment process. This includes the provision for appeal.
3. The fees charged for the assessment must not be based on the number of credits awarded but on the services performed in the process.
4. There must be adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions performed by all in the assessment of learning.
5. The assessment programmes should be continually revised, reviewed and monitored to accommodate the changes in the needs being served.

The CAEL project has today become the foundation for assessing prior learning and is now known as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) (Zucker, Johnson & Flint, 1999:2). The CAEL project explored how higher education could better serve the adult learner and maintained that the adults should be acknowledged by colleges and universities for what they have learned. CAEL focused on the policies of accrediting organisations and higher education institutions that limited mature learners access to higher education (Gamson, 1989:174). As a leading promoter of RPL CAEL is currently affiliated with over 1 700 colleges and universities that offer APL (Taylor & Clemans, 2000:266). CAEL offers training and support to colleges and universities in designing and implementing APL.

In the USA, APL is more likely used by adults to obtain college credit within a degree and to gain entry to a degree/diploma, avoiding the prerequisite requirements for enrolment in that course (Dyson & Keating, 2005:51).

### **2.2.2 The United Kingdom**

APEL was introduced in the UK as a mechanism to widen access to education and higher education (Scholten & Teuwsen, 2001:42). According to Storan (2000: 37), the development of APEL in the UK can be traced to the early 1980s. However, Nyatanga (1993:892–893) argues that the original idea of APEL started in the UK in about 1836 and was only formalised in March 1986. During this early pilot phase of APEL the UK looked to the USA for support and guidance and with encouragement and added support from CAEL, the British openly embraced APEL (Evans, 1992:9–12). With the formalisation of the credit system

in the UK, APEL became more widely accepted (Nyatanga et al., 1998:4). As America had CAEL, the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA) aided the implementation of APEL in the UK and further established the Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CATS) Registry in 1986 (Nyatanga et al., 1998:5–6). Now students could obtain academic credit for experiential learning in degrees at bachelor and master's levels (Evans, 1994:14–15). In 1986 the government established the UK National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) which brought added attention to APEL and gave it more credibility as well (Challis, 1993:3).

In 1986 the Rowntree Foundation provided funding for the establishment of the Learning from Experience Trust (LET) to help nurture the development of APEL (Evans, 2000:17). The Trust aimed at removing the barriers between formal education and the world of work/life by focusing on awarding academic credit in undergraduate degrees (Evans, 2000:17–18). In 1997 the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) called on all institutions of higher education to apply APEL. The government has now funded the Trust to conduct an inquiry into the APEL activities in the system (Evans, 2000:28). Through the CNAA, the Trust was able to establish APEL as a valid and reliable feature in UK higher education institutions (Evans, 1994:13–15). Today the Trust has become one of the UK's leading authorities on APEL (LET, 2005:1).

### **2.2.3 Canada**

In Canada RPL is commonly referred to as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) (Blower, 2000:84). It began in the 1980s in the college system at post-secondary level. Here credit was granted for learning obtained outside of the educational institution. PLAR was first implemented in the Nursing Diploma (1980), Dental Assisting (1981) and Early Childhood Education (1983) at Red River College of Applied Arts, Science and Technology in Winnipeg, Manitoba (Blower, 2000:84). According to Blower (2000:84), other Ontario colleges, such as the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) and Mohawk College, also implemented PLAR in the early 1980s.

Canada does not have a national education system. It has ten provinces and three territories, with each province having their own education system (Dyson & Keating, 2005:43). The first province in Canada to implement PLAR was Quebec.

As a recommendation by the Jean Commission of Education, Quebec then introduced a PLAR system in the mid-1980s at secondary and college level (Blower, 2000:84–86). This scheme was funded by the Canadian Department of Manpower and Immigration. It concentrated on the development of a PLAR framework, the development of a system to support the implementation of PLAR, and research and development directed towards assisting and advising colleges, promoting communication between colleges and improving the relationship between college programmes and labour market needs (Dyson & Keating, 2005:43).

According to Werquin (2010:32), from 1982 thereafter, Quebec developed a PLAR-type approach in educational institutions where learners could obtain credits for non-academic learning. The formation of a PLAR network realised in 1989 in Ontario. In 1992, there was a PLAR secretariat with facilitators working on a full-time basis (Werquin, 2010:32). In British Columbia, in 1993 the PLAR standards and a PLAR guide were launched in institutions of post-secondary education. Thereafter a PLAR provincial policy was developed in 1994 in Newfoundland and Labrador. Manitoba and Prince Edward Island received funding for PLAR in 1995 and 2002, respectively (Werquin, 2010:32–33). In 2003 colleges in Quebec received funding for PLAR.

Since 1993 pockets of PLAR activity developed in the various provinces of Canada, with the province of British Columbia having the best PLAR implementation strategy. With its policy guideline and standards for colleges, institutes and universities, British Columbia has successfully ensured that 26 post-secondary institutions now support PLAR (Blower, 2000:86). The Centre for Curriculum, Transfer and Technology, founded by British Columbia, now coordinates and supports the development of PLAR across the province. Today the Canadian Association for Prior Learning Assessment (CAPLA), a non-profit organisation that has been in operation since 1994, is dedicated to PLAR. It is a network of advisors, practitioners and assessors of PLAR that can be found in every province of Canada (Beaudin, 2008:71).



## 2.2.4 Australia

Since the 1990s RPL has become the cornerstone of Australia's approach to lifelong learning (Knight, 2006:3). RPL was introduced in Australia to serve as a mechanism for social inclusion. Its function was to provide access to formal education for those people who traditionally did not participate in post-compulsory education and training by allowing them to get recognition for their work and life skills gained (Cameron & Miller, 2004:1).

In 1996 the former National Board of Employment, Education and Training (NBEET) concluded that lifelong learning had a strong connection with RPL and advised that all Australian education and training sectors assist in the development of lifelong learning skills (OECD, 2007(b):47). The adult and community sector further supported NBEET in their belief that all learning was important and capable of gaining credit for irrespective of where, when and how it was obtained. Thereafter, the Ministerial Council for Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) promoted the development of a national set of principles and guidelines for RPL.

In 1995 MCEETYA established the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The function of the AQF was to support the major reforms in vocational education and training (VET) in the late 1980s and early 1990s and to create an integrated system of national qualifications (OECD, 2007(b):64). In 2004 the Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board (AQFAB) developed a set of *National Principles and Operational Guidelines* for RPL in Australia. This document provides advice at national level on RPL and guides the four sectors of post-compulsory education and training on the development of RPL policies and procedures (OECD, 2007(b):47). The AQF sets out the qualification standards that RPL is based on to ensure credibility and provides guidelines to support the implementation of RPL with the aim of encouraging a national consistency of RPL practice across sectors and jurisdictions (AQFAB, 2007:91). Within the national VET sector the AQF is responsible for the continuous upgrading of the skills and knowledge required in the workplace and for establishing RPL (OECD, 2007(b):52).

Research conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Werquin, 2010:10–18) reveals that the birth of RPL was often driven by the social, economic and political needs of the respective countries. Often RPL was used as a mechanism to redress the injustices caused by past education policies in countries where people were marginalised. To date demands by the labour market have strengthened the need for RPL.

## **2.3 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RPL INTERNATIONALLY**

### **2.3.1 The United States of America**

The implementation of APL in the USA is peculiar as the USA do not have a national APL policy but do have a range of APL practices (Dyson & Keating, 2005:52). According to research done by CAEL (Collins, 2006:2–3) in 2006, PLA includes methods such as:

- **Portfolio assessment** – A typical portfolio would consist of essays and documents supporting the candidates' knowledge in the specific field. Students write a narrative or autobiographical sketch of themselves focusing on their learning experience. Evidence can be either direct, indirect or a combination of both (Simosko, 1988:29–30). Upon submission by the student the portfolio is submitted to the academic staff or assessors who are the experts in that field of knowledge. They then determine the competence level of the student and the credit awarded (Geysler, 2001:31–33).
- **Interviews** – Simosko (1988:39) asserts that interviews can take three different forms. The first is an oral examination which is more structured and assesses the students' skills and knowledge directly. The second is less structured and is used to supplement other forms of assessment, while the third is used to validate documents provided by the student.
- **Product assessment** – Assessors use the end product created by students to evaluate the students' skills and knowledge.
- **Performance assessment** – This form of assessment involves the student performing live for the assessment team. Here the act of doing, the actual process itself, is assessed.
- **Assessment of writing** – The students' direct written work is assessed.

- **Challenge exams provided by the institution** – Often these are final exams written by all students.
- **College Level Examination Program (CLEP) Exams** – These are standardised exams that assess the candidates' knowledge and skills gained through non-college experience (Geysler, 2001:33).

In addition, Whitaker (1989:2–4) suggests two other kinds of models that can assist in assessing APL. He differentiates between learning that is unplanned and occurs due to life and work experiences (referred to as non-sponsored learning) and learning that is structured and occurs under the guidance of an educational institution (referred to as sponsored experiential learning). The procedure for the assessment of non-sponsored learning (the current APL model used by the Americans) consists of the following steps in the sequence as is described by Nyatanga et al. (1998:8):

- **Identification** – Students describe their learning according to the institution's curriculum and assessment procedures. The idea is to gauge the college-level learning that has occurred through prior experience.
- **Articulation** – Students must relate their prior learning to the objectives of the course they wish to study. They must contemplate what they learned in practice, what the gaps are in their learning and the way forward.
- **Documentation** – At this stage students provide evidence of the learning that has occurred.
- **Measurement** – This occurs when the evidence is submitted. The assessors will determine the level of competence achieved.
- **Evaluation** – The assessor decides on the number of credits to be awarded. The institution itself determines the criteria for awarding the credit.
- **Transcription** – This is an administrative function that involves preparing a useful record of the results.

Cabell and Hickerson (1988:146) propose three models that institutions can use to issue credits:

- **The college course model** – This involves students matching their knowledge to specific college courses, using the course syllabi to guide them.
- **The learning components model** – Students accumulate their knowledge and skills in a particular academic discipline.

- **The block credit model** – Students are requested to compare their college-level learning to the knowledge obtained by someone who has just graduated from college and is employed in that particular field.

The procedure for the assessment of sponsored learning entails (Cabell & Hickerson, 1988:147):

- Articulation
- Planning
- Evaluation
- Documentation
- Measurement
- Transcription

According to Day (2002:55), the USA favours a more developmental approach towards APL, while the UK uses the credit exchange approach. The developmental approach focuses on the process and the assessment and accreditation of prior experiential learning, unlike the credit exchange model which is concerned with products, the achievements of competencies and the accreditation of prior certified learning (Day, 2002:vii; par. 1.2.2). However, a recent international study conducted by CAPLA reveals that the USA is moving from the developmental approach to the credit exchange one, resulting in the development of a more complementary approach towards assessment (Day, 2002:vii).

The section below sets out the systematic steps followed in the application of the APL procedure used within the Credit for Life-Long Learning Program (CLLP). The CLLP enables adults to gain college-level credit for learning obtained through work experience. The programme acknowledges the fact that learning does occur outside the traditional classroom. It uses a portfolio approach towards assessment (Day, 2002:61). The steps are as follows:

1. Students interested in credit for prior learning approach CLLP officials.
2. Students are given the necessary advice.
3. Students begin the CLLP:
  - experience-based Education Department (EBE) 100 Portfolio Development Course (11 weeks)
  - cover letter
  - chronological record
  - life history
  - goals paper
  - narrative of learning
  - documentation
4. Students develop a portfolio.
5. EBE course completed and portfolio reviewed by EBE department.
6. Portfolio then approved for evaluation.
7. Student pays evaluation fee.
8. Portfolios distributed to faculty assessors.
9. Evaluation process:
  - review of portfolio
  - student conference
  - additional demonstration/learning
10. Student notified of credit award or denial.
11. Credit recorded on transcript.

### **2.3.2 The United Kingdom**

In the UK, apart from giving students access into educational institutions, APEL is also used by students to gain exemptions from modules within a programme. Most colleges and universities have incorporated APEL in their credit and accumulation and transfer (CATs) schemes (Day, 2002:62). APEL has been developed within the context of the UK National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ). NVQs are placed on the Qualifications and Credit Framework (QCF) and are concerned with outcomes rather than the learning process. Areas of competence are defined in the QCF. In order to qualify for APEL, students need to demonstrate that their experience matches the required skills, knowledge and understanding

required for competence in that specific occupational area (Day, 2002:2). Thus the UK adopts the credit exchange model. The credit-based modular system pertains to a situation where the level and volume of learning to be undertaken is assigned a credit value. An honours degree consists of 360 credits with students studying 120 credits in a year. Each unit/module may have differing numbers of credits, depending on the university, and each unit/module clearly describes the learning that should have occurred for the learner to obtain credit. Based on the learners' work experience students apply for credit in specific units. In the UK students can only apply for 50% of the total credits in a qualification (Fowler, Maisch & Calabro, 2009:21).

The process of APEL involves the following seven stages (Challis, 1993:34):

### **Stage 1 – Initial counselling**

The student is assigned a counsellor who has knowledge of APEL principles and practices. The task of the counsellor is to advise, inform, guide and provide feedback to the student. Considering that APEL is designed around the individual learner, it is a service that is client centred and, more importantly, confidential. The student needs to trust that the counsellor will not divulge any confidential information. Students are also counselled on whether the APEL route is suitable for them or not and advised on the range of options available to them.

### **Stage 2 – Recognising and identifying skills**

This phase involves the counsellor helping students identify skills that they could get recognition for. The process involves identifying the learning that has occurred against the academic criteria and establishing the value in the future planning process.

### **Stage 3 – Creating statements of competence**

This entails the learner, together with the counsellor, examining the statements of competence as set out by the NVQ framework. It is important for the learner to understand what the statements of competence are so that the relevant evidence can be gathered. Learners assess their experience against a checklist of outcomes (designed by the college). This enables learners to see if APEL is the most appropriate route to follow and how far they can progress academically.

#### **Stage 4 – Gathering and documentation of evidence**

After claiming to possess prior knowledge, the learner now has to collect evidence in support of this claim. The learner is made aware of the assessment criteria and how it will relate to the compilation of the portfolio. Documentation of evidence may take the form of a portfolio or checklist of skills to be met. The checklist is merely used to identify learning gained through experience rather than a statement of academic achievement. In comparison the portfolio is lengthier, consisting of certificates, case studies, photographs, testimonials and reports to support the claim (Challis, 1993:54). The portfolio consists of a standard curriculum vitae, a statement of the skills claimed that match the learning outcomes, and a compilation of evidence supporting the claims, and should be concluded by a plan of action for further learning. The evidence can be direct or indirect. Direct evidence is anything that learners can claim and authenticate as being their own product, created by them, e.g. tapes, drawings, artefacts, etc. Indirect evidence takes on the form of, amongst other things, letters or newspaper articles about the learner, testimonials or references from employers and certificates obtained from prior learning. Portfolios often consist of a combination of both indirect and direct evidence.

#### **Stage 5 – Assessment of evidence**

Once the portfolio has been completed it is submitted for final assessment. The assessor, who is the expert in that field, assesses the evidence against the selected set of criteria that the student needs to master in order to claim competence. Assessment occurs at two different stages in the APEL process. The first stage of assessment relates to when the counsellor advises the student on the compilation of the portfolio and when the counsellor also checks the portfolio for completeness prior to submission. The second stage of assessment occurs when the actual portfolio is submitted to the assessor or academic staff. The assessment process is not a once-off process as students are given feedback by the assessor on how to improve the portfolio if required. Further suggestions are given on the type of additional evidence required. The assessor has to be a trained certified assessor in the relevant field and has to assess the evidence ensuring that the principles of assessment are adhered to. Essentially the assessor has to ensure that the evidence submitted is valid, reliable, sufficient, current and authentic (Evans, 1992:86–87). Challis (1993:72–74) lists a range of assessment

methods that are currently used by assessors to evaluate the competence of the learner. These assessment methods consist of a written test, a skills test, observation and oral questioning. The assessor must ensure that the principles of good assessment are adhered to when assessing the evidence. According to Evans (1992:86–87), the principles of good assessment consist of authenticity, directness, breadth, quality and currency.

### **Stage 6 – Accreditation**

Accreditation, usually in the form of certification, is the final stage of the APEL process. Recognition or formal credit is given to the learner. Once the portfolio has been assessed and the learner found competent, the assessor's judgement is moderated by an external agency. The accrediting/awarding body will thereafter issue the credit.

Below is an example of the APEL procedure used at the Northern School of Nursing and Midwifery (Day, 2002:63). What is especially clear from the procedure used in this case is the occurrence of different stages of assessment so as to assist the prospective applicant of APEL to be successful eventually in gaining the applicable credits. The steps applied are as follows:

1. Information concerning access.
2. Candidate requests for access.
3. Claim pack sent out to candidate.
4. Claim completed by candidate and returned to designated adviser.
5. Evidence submitted by candidate and examined by adviser against set criteria.
6. If candidate does not meet the set criteria, further advice is given to the candidate.
7. If the candidate has met the set criteria, the portfolio is submitted to Claim Approval Board (CAB).
- 8a. If agreed at CAB, the results are ratified by the exam board.
- 8b. If not accredited by CAB, further recommendations are made to the APEL Advisor.
9. Statement of attainment is issued.



### 2.3.3 Canada

PLAR is a systematic process applied in Canada that involves the identification, documentation, assessment and recognition of prior learning. The common methods used to recognise and formally assess prior learning include portfolios, challenge exams (written or oral), projects, assignments, performance observations, role playing, skills demonstrations, product assessments, case studies, standardised tests and programme review (Dyson & Keating, 2005:48–50). Assessors need to adhere to the principles of good assessment at all times (CAPLA, 2002:4). It is important to note that a variety of methods are used throughout Canada to assess prior learning as the PLAR policies vary between provinces. Most universities have personnel dedicated to the PLAR activities at the institution. Some universities use credit challenges and the portfolio assessment to award credit for non-formal and informal learning towards a degree (Beaudin, 2008:72).

According to Werquin (2010:47), the most widespread method is the “challenge”. This is where the learners decide to write the exam instead of doing the entire course. The examination is no longer than three hours. Canada also uses the portfolio method. It is merely an organised collection of headings for checking the learner’s prior knowledge, skills and competencies. Research reveals that over half the learners (54%) use the “challenge” option, followed by the learning portfolio (23%) and the demonstration portfolio (23%) (Werquin, 2010:49). In Saskatchewan and British Columbia, the various institutions assess PLAR in their own way, while in Manitoba, PLAR for adults is organised by adult learning centres. Assessment methods employed at these centres include case studies, tests, interviews, oral examinations, examination panel assessments, oral presentations, portfolios, narrative accounts and personal diaries, including the “challenge” option (Werquin, 2010:49–51).

The method of assessment can be either a combination of different assessment methods or it can be only one form of assessment such as an interview/oral exam, the submission of evidence files, standardised examinations, demonstrations, or product assessment research. Canada employs a more complementary approach towards the PLAR practice than a developmental or credit exchange approach (Day, 2002:64) with evidence of prior learning often contained in a portfolio. When

assessing the portfolio, the assessor has to ensure that the evidence submitted is valid, sufficient, authentic and current (Day, 2002:65).

The PLAR procedure consists of three stages, namely (Werquin, 2010:26):

- Information and counselling with pre-assessment training.
- Identification and checking of learning outcomes.
- Reports to candidates and possible appeals.

Below is an example of the PLAR procedure in Canada. It is drawn from the practice of the Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology (SIAST), which conducts the PLAR using a ten-stage model (Werquin, 2010:49).

1. Direct consultation.
2. Application.
3. Audit meeting.
4. Developing an action plan.
5. Payment of registration fees for a course or block assessment.
6. Preparation for assessment by the student.
7. SIAST assistance with the “challenge” process.
8. Evaluation by the assessor.
9. Submission of results to the registration services.
10. Notification of candidates.

### **2.3.4 Australia**

In Australia RPL is used by learners in two ways (AQFAB, 2004:93–94):

- To gain access to a course or qualification. A student may gain entry to a course using RPL without having completed the prerequisites for entry based on formal education and training.
- To obtain credit in a course or qualification, allowing the learner to move closer to completing that course or qualification.

The number of credits that learners may obtain through RPL is restricted in Australia (Werquin, 2010:17). The Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)

stipulates how competencies can be attained. This includes any combination of formal and informal training and education, work experiences or general life experience (Dyson & Keating, 2005:6).

The AQTF requires that providers of RPL, whether public or private providers, provide information to students on RPL before enrolment. The RPL providers must also ensure that they have an RPL process in place before student enrolment. RPL staff are also required to be trained in assessment, which is an important component of RPL. When assessing, the assessor must ensure that the evidence is authentic, valid, reliable, current and sufficient (Dyson & Keating, 2005:6). In Australia a variety of organisations conduct the RPL assessments. Individuals at these organisations involved in RPL include lecturers and instructors, subject matter experts, the RPL coordinators, workplace assessors, programme coordinators and programme directors. They are all responsible for developing, conducting, marking and moderating assessment activities (OECD, 2007(b):75). Each organisation develops its own policy and procedures for the RPL assessments.

The assessment methods are determined by the assessment bodies (Werquin, 2010:48). Methods of assessment include reflective papers, journals, examples of the student's work taken from the workplace and testimonials of learning (AQFAB, 2004:94). Although Australia uses a variety of assessment methods, the four most prevalent ones are (OECD, 2007(b):76):

- **Interviews** – The assessor and student discuss the modules for which the student is claiming recognition of prior learning. The discussion revolves around the student's prior learning and how it meets the learning objectives in subjects. The student is given advice on the types of evidence required. The student then collects the evidence and prepares a formal application for RPL.
- **Portfolios** – Candidates provide evidence in support of their claim for RPL. They have to demonstrate how they have met the learning objectives and the competency standards.
- **Observation of a demonstration of skill** – The assessor visits the students' place of work and observes the candidate performing tasks which the student is claiming for RPL.

- **Challenge tests** – Students are asked to demonstrate a particular competency for which they are claiming credit by writing the same exam taken by students in formal classes, or oral tests, or formal interviews.

The implementation of RPL differs between countries. The OECD study revealed that the most common method of assessment used by many countries is the learning portfolio (Werquin, 2010:48–52). However, it is important to note that all assessments are based on the principles of good assessment.

## **2.4 THE BENEFITS OF RPL**

By engaging in RPL students benefit in the following ways (Blower, 2010; Brigham & Klein-Collins, 2010; CICIC, 2010; Fowler et al., 2009; Adam, 2008; Dyson & Keating, 2005:56; Day, 2002; Watt & Bloom, 2001; Sheckley, 1988:175):

- The RPL process helps adults to understand the limits of their knowledge and be more open to new ideas.
- RPL encourages students to pursue their studies as well as increases their self-esteem, motivation and self-confidence.
- It increases access to education and training.
- RPL can assist learners to move through qualification levels.
- RPL learners will have greater access to job mobility and employment.
- RPL can improve access to education when formal qualifications are not well understood.
- It enables students to recognise and identify their informal learning. It can be used as a vehicle for older students to access higher education.
- It helps learners develop coherent educational objectives.
- RPL is an advantageous strategy for disadvantaged and marginalised people who previously did not have access to higher education. It assists with career development.
- RPL saves time and resources for the students and the institution as the students' learning is not duplicated by relearning what they already know. Thus students are able to complete their qualification in a shorter period of time.
- By receiving the RPL credit, students are motivated to continue with their studies and complete their studies.

- By preparing the evidence for RPL, learners develop independent study skills.
- RPL boosts entrance to qualifications. It is also less costly for students as RPL costs less than what the fees are for traditional modules.
- It helps develop lifelong learning skills in students by recognising and valuing what they know.
- Research indicates that RPL also improves learner confidence, self-esteem and motivation to learn.
- RPL can create opportunities for learners to change jobs.

By practising RPL, educational institutions benefit in the following ways (Blower, 2010; CICIC, 2010; Fowler et al., 2009; Adam, 2008; Day, 2002; Watt & Bloom, 2001):

- Adam (2008:27) proposes that higher education institutions will be able to promote the concept of lifelong learning by conducting RPL.
- For the institution itself RPL increases student recruitment and retention rates, and provides an important link between educational institutions and communities, businesses and industry.
- It also provides opportunities for staff development within institutions.
- The 2006 study conducted by CAEL reveals that the RPL students achieved better academic success. These students had higher graduation rates and better persistence compared to non-RPL students. CAEL found that 56% of students who received RPL credit completed their degree within seven years. Thus, RPL improves institutions' output rates.
- By providing flexible learning opportunities, RPL attracts a wider range of students. It attracts mature and more experienced learners to higher education.
- Practising RPL assists institutions to place learners at appropriate levels within educational programmes.
- RPL can be used as a marketing tool to attract mature learners to education.
- With regard to academia, RPL encourages curriculum innovation as new methods for assessment are developed.
- The practising of RPL brings together academic and vocational education and training. The introduction of RPL in universities ensures a change of focus in these institutions with regard to the production of knowledge and

the way a qualification is earned and recognised. In this regard, however, universities have to form relationships with employers, citizens and professional bodies to ensure that relevant competencies are conveyed to learners. Furthermore, RPL helps remove the gap between academic and professional recognition (Adam, 2008:36–40).

- The RPL practice provides lifelong learning opportunities.
- RPL allows formal learning to occur in a variety of settings.
- It opens opportunities to bring the world of work and learning together.

The employer benefits in the following ways from RPL practice (CICIC, 2010; UOPX Writer Network, 2010; Fowler et al., 2009; Day, 2002; Watt & Bloom, 2001; ANTA National Staff Development Committee, 1996:61):

- RPL has the potential to motivate and retain staff whilst providing opportunities for staff development.
- RPL will increase the worth of the company by employees enhancing their qualifications.
- RPL is a reliable way to assess and match the needs of the workplace to the employee's skills.
- RPL serves as a catalyst for the design of in-house training.
- It creates an opportunity to increase productivity.
- By engaging in RPL, corporations benefit as they get to educate their employees and retain them.
- Education makes the employees more receptive to change and the development of new ideas in the company.
- RPL offers employers the opportunity to convert the investments they made in training programmes into credit for their employees.
- By gaining access to education, adults increase their skills and in turn increase their chance of employability, which means more money and a better scope for community development.
- Seeing that RPL can accelerate the path to a qualification, employees will spend less time away from the organisation.
- Companies can use RPL as a diagnostic tool to identify training needs.
- RPL can help to determine if individuals need additional training.
- RPL can reduce costs by identifying training needs.

RPL can be advantageous to both the organisation (employer) and the individual (employee). It enables the organisation to do a skills audit of its employees and to determine areas for skills improvement. The individuals themselves benefit from not having to learn work that they already know and have done. It also gives these individuals access to formal learning (Pouliquen, 2007:13). RPL is a useful mechanism to validate learning that has occurred informally and to use this learning in a meaningful way to eventually enhance the quality of life.

## **2.5 THE SCOPE OF RPL**

### **2.5.1 The United States of America**

In the USA CAEL conducted surveys in 1991 and 1996 on the different forms of APL services rendered to adults in higher education. The results of the survey indicated that the number of accredited institutions offering APL has significantly increased from 1991 (Keeton, 2000:38). The survey also revealed that 49% of all the institutions examined offered APL. Of the examined group, 97% issued credits for undergraduate courses and a rather small portion for postgraduate degrees (Collins, 2006:2–3). However, a more recent survey conducted by CAEL in 2006 revealed that most institutions offer APL for lower division courses rather than graduate courses (Collins, 2007:2). With CAEL's ongoing commitment to the development of APL, the various states in the USA are now developing state-wide policies on APL (Glancey, 2007:5). CAEL has also launched an online centre for assessing prior learning to kick start the development of APL on a national level (UOPX Writer Network, 2010:2).

### **2.5.2 The United Kingdom**

According to a survey conducted by LET in 2000, the majority of UK universities have policies on APEL, but only a few have implemented them. In the UK APEL is awarded in the following subjects: Education, Business, Law, Psychology, Health and Social Sciences, Humanities, Design and Architecture (Adams, 2008:29). Currently most UK universities limit APEL applications to 50% of the total subjects in the course. The remaining 50% of the modules need to be studied through the institution in the traditional manner (Chisholm & Davis, 2007:46).

A 2008 study conducted by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and funded by the Joint Systems Committee on the status of the actual practice of APEL in the UK has revealed the following (NIACE, 2008:4–6):

- The number of learners requesting APEL credits in higher education institutions is increasing year by year.
- Higher education institutions differ internally and externally in their approach to APEL; thus the way APEL is supported and implemented is inconsistent.
- There is good practice of APEL within the voluntary and community sector organisations.
- The introduction of information communication technology in higher education institutions to support APEL can improve the APEL process for staff and learners.
- A new credit and qualifications framework developed in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales provides a structure for APEL in each UK country. It is basically a system of awarding and assigning credit to learning achieved in any environment, thus increasing the impact of APEL.
- There is clear interest in APEL within work-based learning (WBL) approaches. It has been seen as an important process in its own right.

### **2.5.3 Canada**

Within Canada PLAR is done at national and provincial level, both in secondary and post-secondary education, but more significantly in the college system (Blower, 2000:83). According to Werquin (2010:63), PLAR involvement at post-secondary level is low. A 2004 study on PLAR conducted at the University of New Brunswick from 1998 to 2004 revealed that out of 210 candidates in nursing science, art, computer science and education, 66,2% were women. However, the Bachelor of Arts candidates increased between 2003 and 2004. In Alberta, there have been few candidates for PLAR-type credits. At Athabasca University, 200 students were awarded PLAR credits. In Saskatchewan in 1999 there were 559 course “challenges” (Werquin, 2010:63). This study demonstrates the demand placed on higher education institutions for RPL and also highlights the need for RPL to be incorporated in state policies.

Although PLAR was initially exclusively associated with higher education in Canada, it has made inroads into the workplace. Organisations like the Canadian



Career Development Foundation now use PLAR as a process for employing counsellors in their work with adults (Kennedy, 2006:2). CAPLA and the First Nations Technical Institute (FNTI) host annual PLAR events for national and international practitioners, scholars, researchers and government stakeholders (Conrad, 2008:95). In Ontario, the Royal Military College in Kingston convened a meeting in March 2008 of the post-secondary Canadian Virtual University (CVU) practitioners to examine issues of PLAR. In Alberta, the Alberta Council on Admission and Transfer (ACAT) has been developing a provincial framework for PLAR. At the same time, the provinces of British Columbia and Ontario are working on a provincial framework for PLAR (Conrad, 2008:93).

#### **2.5.4 Australia**

The growth of RPL in Australia can to some extent be measured due to a ruling passed by the AQTF. It has been made mandatory for national VET providers to offer RPL to students before, or when they enrol in a course. If the RPL assessment is successful, it is recorded in the national VET statistics which implies that only RPL that occurs upon enrolment and that is successful is recorded. The national aggregate figure for successful RPL in Australia is about 4% (Hargreaves, 2006:4). Although RPL has grown steadily between 1995 and 1999, the rate for RPL upon enrolment declined slightly to 3,6% in 2004 (Hargreaves, 2006:5; Bowman et al., 2003:65).

Developments in the field of RPL have occurred in the following Australian states (MSA, 2008:1–5):

- **Tasmania** – There is a community of practice for registered training organisations that focus on improving RPL practice in Tasmania by concentrating on good practice and professional development. The technical and further education (TAFE) organisation based in Tasmania runs a skills recognition centre that takes learners through the process of evidence gathering for RPL. This centre also supports employees through the RPL process.
- **Queensland** – The new approach to RPL of the government of Queensland is called the Skills First approach. It is a plan aimed at streamlining the skills assessment processes and ensuring that the assessment is practical, efficient and relevant.

- **Victoria** – The RPL projects in Victoria are run by various TAFE institutes. The Victoria University’s TAFE division has established an RPL experts network that examines current RPL procedures and establishes best practice. The William Angliss Institute of TAFE has also established a skills recognition unit to help mature-age learners to re-enter the hospitality and tourism workforce and to help existing workers gain higher qualifications.
- **Western Australia (WA)** – WA has two major projects. The first is the fast-track RPL project that involves a series of RPL schemes directed at different trades. The second project is called Transforming the Trade and is aimed at transferring current institution-based assessment into the workplace.
- **New South Wales (NSW)** – NSW is engaged in four projects. The professional development project focuses on upgrading the skills of trainers and assessors, while the promotion project promotes best practice and concentrates on establishing conversations between assessors. The virtual RPL (online) project is a website promoting RPL. Lastly, the skills express project focuses on skills shortage areas followed by gap training.
- **Australian Capital Territory (ACT)** – From 2006 to 2009 the Australian government and the ACT government jointly funded an RPL project called the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) RPL project to simplify the RPL process.

As demonstrated by these discussions, the various countries are engaged in small but comprehensive and significant RPL activities. These activities are either initiated by the government, higher educational institutions, non-governmental organisations or private providers in these countries. The OECD report suggests that partnerships between the education and training systems and the world of work can help enshrine RPL in legislation (Werquin, 2010:46).

## **2.6 THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING RPL**

RPL, being a form of assessment, requires proper management just as any other form of assessment. It is important to note that the management of assessment in higher education has not received as much attention in educational research as has the assessment methods and practices. Literature on the management of assessment is sparse (Yorke, 1998:101). The researcher concurs with Yorke

(1998:101) that the effective management of assessment is crucial for the survival of institutions of higher education, given the fact that these institutions deal with students who have expectations that are dealt with in a framework in which the institutions themselves have a system for appeals and complaints.

To ensure effective management of assessment, Yorke (1998:108) proposes three conditions that must be met. These three conditions pertain to the purposes of assessment, the strategy for assessment and the operational functioning of assessment.

### **2.6.1 Purposes of assessment**

The three main purposes of assessment include assisting with the learning activities, establishing what learning has transpired and providing proof relating to the successes of the programme. In terms of RPL at Unisa this would imply that the RPL department at Unisa clearly interrogates and defines the purpose of RPL at Unisa, examines the extent to which RPL has been utilised at Unisa, monitors and evaluates the practice of RPL, and establishes how successfully it has been functioning.

### **2.6.2 Strategy for assessment**

A strategy for assessment consists of a policy for the practice of the assessment and a plan for the management of that practice as well as a policy for quality assurance (Yorke, 1998:109). Currently Unisa has an RPL policy in place (Unisa, 2005(b)). The policy outlines the steps involved in conducting RPL at Unisa and the stakeholders involved. However, the RPL department is in the process of developing a policy for ensuring quality assurance and effective management of RPL.

### **2.6.3 Operationalisation**

Operationalisation is concerned with the actual implementation of the RPL policy which implies the conversion of the policy into action (Yorke, 1998:109). During the implementation phase of an RPL programme defects in the actual policy are exposed; hence the purpose of management in this regard would be to identify the problems and provide contingency plans to deal with these problems. The issue of the operationalisation of RPL at Unisa has to be further investigated for

the sake of continuously increasing the effectiveness of implementation to ensure a successful RPL practice.

## **2.7 THE MANAGEMENT OF RPL INTERNATIONALLY**

### **2.7.1 The United States of America**

The USA does not have a national APL policy. This means that individual colleges and states have their own APL policies and practices (Dyson & Keating, 2005:51). CAEL has taken on the responsibility of ensuring that APL is valid, reliable and feasible for adults and since 1974 has worked towards laying the foundations for assessing prior learning. Apart from holding conferences and workshops on APL, CAEL has its own publication entitled the *New Directions in Experiential Learning* series. It also has a consulting service for colleges and universities (Keeton, 2000:41). By conducting its own surveys, CAEL is able to gather detailed information on institutions offering APL, how it is offered and what the policies and procedures are that are employed by these institutions in administering APL (Zucker et al., 1999:2).

According to Dyson and Keating (2005:52), the American higher education system awards students' credit hours. Fifteen hours of classroom instruction is equivalent to one credit hour. Most colleges do have a limit on the amount of credit that can be obtained through APL. In this regard APL is normally limited to 30 hours' accreditation for consideration within a specific course (Dyson & Keating, 2005:52).

### **2.7.2 The United Kingdom**

In the UK there is no national credit accumulation and transfer system for APEL practice, but various frameworks that manage APEL (OECD, 2007(a):53). Previously the NQF provided a framework for the implementation of APEL. However, currently the newly devised QCF in England, Wales and Northern England, which is a more diverse, broader, inclusive and flexible framework, has paved the way for the improvement of APEL. The QCF offers APEL to learners supported by specifications and procedures; however, each individual higher education institution needs to set up opportunities for APEL within its own organisational arrangements (OECD, 2007(a):76).

The Welsh Assembly for the Department of Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills developed the Credit and Qualification Framework for Wales (CQFW), which also embraces APEL. The Northern Ireland Department for Employment and Learning has developed a credit framework called the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS), which recognises all types of learning irrespective of how it was acquired.

In acknowledging the importance of APEL, the University of Ulster in Northern Ireland has introduced an APEL module called “Accreditation of Prior Learning: Experiences, practices and lifelong learning (with Key Skills Recognition)” (UU, 2008:1–3).

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), which was launched in December 2001, also helps in promoting APEL in the UK, but especially in Scotland itself (OECD, 2007(a):53). As a result considerable growth in APEL has been experienced in Scotland. For example, the Glasgow Caledonian University has an informative website (<http://gcal.ac.uk/APELIntro.htm>) to help staff and learners get a better understanding of APEL.

### **2.7.3 Canada**

The government in Canada plays no direct part in PLAR in the country. The provinces are autonomous in that regard. Most of the Canadian higher education institutions therefore have their own, autonomous policies and procedures regarding the implementation of PLAR. However, the amount of credit awarded through PLAR is capped and more especially so in Ontario where the PLAR system is rather multifaceted (Werquin, 2010:26). In the province of Saskatchewan, a “Challenge for Credit Policy” is used by the University of Saskatchewan to address PLAR needs. The University of Regina in Saskatchewan has established a recognition policy and recognition has accordingly been inculcated in many academic departments and whole faculties. In British Columbia, the approach used to award credit through PLAR differs from the approaches of other universities in the surrounding area. Universities have the power to award credits at their discretion. Credits are expressed as a number of nominal hours. In the universities situated in the provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, one credit is worth between 60 and 80 hours. At these universities a one-time

credit is equivalent to 15 contact hours. At secondary and college levels PLAR activities are carried out by external providers but operate under a legal and regulatory framework, whereas universities operate as autonomous institutions (Werquin, 2010:38).

Due to provincial autonomy and with regard to the PLAR information centres, Canada has no national or provincial arrangements for providing information on PLAR practice. PLAR information should be obtained from different websites. The provinces of New Brunswick, British Columbia and Manitoba have established such websites. In Saskatchewan, the Ministry of Advanced Education, Employment and Labour is accountable for directing PLAR efforts and the distribution of PLAR information. Manitoba as the Canadian province with the most advanced PLAR practice in the country has 44 centres for PLAR. Canada also has many intergovernmental and non-governmental initiatives to assist with PLAR in the country. The projects/programmes include the Halifax Prior Learning Assessment Centre, the Canadian Virtual University, Prince Edward Island's Learning at Work, the Atlantic Consortium of Provincial Governments which assists with the assessment of learning outcomes, the Conference Board of Canada, CAPLA, the Manitoba Prior Learning Assessment Network, and the Canadian Institute for Recognizing Learning (CIRL) (Werquin, 2010:47).

#### **2.7.4 Australia**

A national qualifications framework was identified as a key element in developing an effective RPL system in Australia (Werquin, 2010:22–23). RPL immediately gained legitimacy when it was placed within a transparent, broader NQF. In June 2004 the AQFAB authorised the National Principles and Operational Guidelines for the RPL document. This guideline document guides the four sectors of education and training in Australia that practise RPL, namely the senior secondary school, the adult and community education, the VET and the higher education sectors. These non-prescriptive guidelines and principles in essence aid organisations and individuals in implementing RPL. RPL implementation assistance pertains mainly to an understanding of RPL uses, unpacking RPL methodologies, developing RPL policies and promoting a greater awareness of the importance of RPL across the education and training sectors (Hargreaves, 2006:7). According to the Australian Constitution, the various states and territories

are responsible for education and training within their borders (OECD, 2007(b):47). For example, the Department of Employment and Training in Queensland has created an integrated framework to increase RPL access, RPL funding and RPL quality.

As stated previously, the NQF is an important component in developing RPL. Situating RPL within the national qualifications framework aids the management of RPL and adds validity and authenticity to the concept. It also provides transparency as all stakeholders are aware of the learning, recognition and qualification possibilities associated with RPL (Werquin, 2010:23).

## **2.8 PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED IN MANAGING RPL INTERNATIONALLY**

### **2.8.1 The United States of America**

As APL is tailored to the individual, it is viewed as time consuming and expensive by institutions of higher education. Dyson and Keating (2005:53) have identified resistance to APL in academic institutions in the USA. In general academics are not accommodating of the notion that adults can learn through work-related experience what normal university students learn through intensive formal study of at least four years' full-time attendance at a higher education institution. Further complaints relate to the fact that to some extent APL forces academics to examine the production of knowledge. The question that is raised relates to the extent to which higher education institutions can be seen as the major, or only, sites for the production of knowledge. In this regard the barriers to the implementation of APL exist at systems level, institutional level and individual level (Dyson & Keating, 2005:59).

There are problems in documenting knowledge for the APL candidates as it is difficult to provide evidence and validate prior learning on a systematic basis (Dyson & Keating, 2005:53). A lack of outcomes-based curricula in the USA makes it difficult for students to prepare their APL application (Dyson & Keating, 2005:54). An apparent problem is the reluctance of students to undertake APL portfolio assessments. This is due to the fact that for portfolio assessments students are required to submit a narrative of their work experience and since

they have not done written formal work for a long period of time, if at all, they become scared and intimidated by such an assignment (Dyson & Keating, 2005:56).

## **2.8.2 The United Kingdom**

The main problems experienced with implementing APEL in the UK relate to the following (Fowler et al., 2009; Adam, 2008; NIACE, 2008; Murphy, 2004; LET, 2000):

- Staff at higher education institutions do not have a general awareness of the benefits and use of APEL. APEL is therefore often misinterpreted and treated with scepticism.
- Due to scepticism related to a lack of knowledge of its value with regard to lifelong learning and life empowerment, only a few higher education institutions and staff are enthusiastic about offering APEL to learners.
- Students feel isolated by the APEL process as staff are not supportive of APEL due to a lack of awareness of its practice and value.
- Not all institutions offer structured support for APEL, which makes a systematic application of the APEL process for the sake of effectiveness difficult.
- Academics view APEL as an easy option and thus are reluctant to implement it.
- In order to evaluate an APEL application, it needs to be compared to the learning outcomes of the formal qualification. To date most institutions have failed to express such learning outcomes, as the process of expressing it is time consuming and challenging. Only once the learning outcomes have become a standard way of expressing the curriculum can APEL be implemented smoothly.
- There is a common misunderstanding of the status and nature of APEL among academics.
- In general APEL systems are time consuming, convoluted, bureaucratic and expensive to manage.
- Implementing the APEL process is costly since APEL students need more guidance and support than mainstream/traditional students.
- Students know very little about APEL, its possibilities and its accessibility.



- The fact that there is no common term for APEL in higher education institutions in the UK, this has resulted in staff not being able to process APEL confidently, thus diminishing the impact that APEL can have.
- There is a general lack of coherence and an inconsistency in the way APEL is processed.
- Due to the cost of the APEL process, limited support is given to APEL learners.
- There is no linking of APEL systems between higher education institutions.
- Higher education institutions experience problems in getting learners to understand the APEL process, resulting in a time-consuming support process where learners have to be guided thoroughly.
- Although some higher education institutions may have APEL policies in place, there is still a gap between policy and practice.
- With regard to assessment of APEL the lack of grading and the lack of uniformity are regarded as some major weaknesses of APEL in the UK.
- As a procedural problem, the present system of APEL in higher education institutions does not allow for a transfer of approved APEL claims between courses within the same college.
- Most higher education institutions lack the resources for implementing APEL.

### **2.8.3 Canada**

In a report published in 2001 the following barriers to PLAR were identified (Watt & Bloom, 2001:28–30):

- Credits obtained through PLAR cannot be transferred among organisations, institutions and provinces.
- The PLAR process is less effective due to the absence of a national standard.
- PLAR requires time, resources and expertise which is not readily available.
- The lack of proper assessment practices impacts on the quality assurance of PLAR.
- There is lack of information on the benefits and processes of PLAR.
- Most universities lack a formal policy supporting PLAR.
- PLAR has been found to be too costly and requires a large amount of time. This was confirmed by the Saskatchewan Background Report for OECD (2006:31) that identified the amount of time required to complete the PLAR process as a major barrier. Students have revealed that the PLAR process

is more time consuming and difficult to achieve than to study the course traditionally through the institution.

Other barriers mentioned in a report by CAPLA (2002:9–10) include:

- No awareness of PLAR in the community.
- The lack of affordable and easily available PLAR services.
- The fact that PLAR is time consuming.
- Educational institutions lack a basic knowledge of the practice of PLAR.
- The lack of PLAR support in institutions.
- Systemic barriers include the lack of consistent PLAR terminology and principles of practice.
- The lack of an understanding of PLAR coupled with inconsistent PLAR practice in institutions.
- The lack of trained PLAR practitioners/advisors.

Dyson and Keating (2005:45) reported that the intake rate of PLAR is slow due to the lack of record keeping which has a significant impact on intake, the lack of PLAR awareness by the public, the little significance placed on PLAR by government and the fact that PLAR practice is not cost-effective. Additionally, they listed the following as barriers to the implementation of PLAR (Dyson & Keating, 2005:45):

- Practitioners felt that PLAR would weaken the quality of education.
- It would cost too much to develop and implement the PLAR process.
- There is no proper funding for PLAR.
- The lack of a national education system in Canada restricts the prospect of PLAR.

#### **2.8.4 Australia**

In a study on the possibilities of RPL with regard to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the participants identified the following factors as barriers in its implementation (ANTA National Staff Development Committee, 1996:86–106):

- There is a lack of an awareness of RPL possibilities and a lack of accessible information regarding RPL.

- People at management level do not have a good understanding of the RPL process, methods, requirements and benefits.
- Students do not have financial support for RPL applications.
- The RPL assessors have a poor understanding of the RPL process and a lack of RPL training results in assessors using inappropriate assessment methods, thus disadvantaging the student. The implication is that applicants are sometimes over assessed.
- Although institutions of higher learning are open to the idea of RPL, they deter students from applying as in most cases they do not have qualified staff to advise the RPL students.
- The cost of RPL is another inhibiting factor. Often it is cheaper for the student to do the entire course than to apply for RPL. The institutions' standard tuition fees are far less than the actual RPL assessment fees. This deters students from applying for RPL.
- The cost of staff time to conduct RPL is a significant barrier.
- There is a lack of adequate support and guidance for potential applicants. Students with low literacy skills often feel stressed at completing their application as their written language is not on par with the institutions' standard of communication.
- Institutions do not have a procedures manual in place for RPL that also outlines and informs the students of the appeals process.
- The RPL facilitators and assessors are not given proper training on how to support the RPL applicants who have special needs.
- There are insufficient numbers of qualified RPL staff skilled in assisting in counselling, advice and career guidance.
- Students are not given information on how to identify and document their skills.
- The RPL process is extremely time consuming.
- Institutions do not make a proper distinction between RPL and other recognition processes. As a result RPL is often viewed as a mass access mechanism, thus limiting its potential to help students progress in their qualifications.

A final report published by Pouliquen (2007:2–5) pointed to the possibility that RPL may not be so widely used in the European countries due to the challenges

it poses to the organisations as well as the individuals. There is no consistency in the way RPL is practised within different departments in the same institution. This could be because the applicable institution does not have a wide, overall policy on RPL. There is also a lack of publicity about RPL as people are unaware of its potential. The report also identified the RPL process as being too demanding, time consuming and costly.

## **2.9 CONCLUSION**

From the late 1970s governments and trade unions internationally started concentrating on the development of policies that focused on employability, job security and productivity (Evans, 2000:15). The result was that in various countries often a sequence of events led to the evolution of two strategic policies, namely the development of education and training programmes and public policies that are aimed at widening access to education to arrange for participation in lifelong learning possibilities (Evans, 2000:15). This resulted in RPL serving as a mechanism for executing these two policies pertaining to education and training as steered by a lifelong learning goal. Against the background of continuous change that also impacts on the higher education system, universities are forced to recognise that education is no longer the domain of the young. The implementation of RPL in its various forms in the UK, Canada, the USA and Australia enables mature and even older learners flexible entry and access to higher education possibilities.

# **CHAPTER 3**

## **RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES/SOCIETIES**

### **3. 1INTRODUCTION**

Although RPL has its roots in the USA, it has also spread to various other developed countries like the UK, France, Australia, Canada, Sweden and Scandinavia (Harris, 2006:1–29; chapter 2). On the African continent RPL emerged from the different historical contexts of the various countries. Just as RPL was used as a mechanism to deal with the backlog in New Zealand's Aboriginal education, in South Africa the government is using it to bridge the education gap created by apartheid policies (Harris, 2006:1–29).

In order to decrease the poverty levels on the African continent most African governments acknowledge the need for capacity building, continuing education and lifelong learning. However, in order to improve their education and training systems and widen participation in education, governments need to develop a proper national framework for the implementation of the policies to be successful. African governments now see the NQF as an essential mechanism for transforming their education and training systems. Australia currently offers the best example of RPL. Situated within the AQF, RPL is successfully administered in certain Australian states and territories (Knight, 2006:3–4; chapter 2). The international success of RPL has had a snowball effect on Africa. In Africa, international conventions and agreements have focused on the importance of developing an NQF to facilitate RPL (Singh, 2008:10).

For the purposes of this study it is beneficial to distinguish between developed and developing countries. When describing developed countries, terms such as rich, advanced, high income and industrial are used (Adams, 2002:5). The developed countries are technologically more advanced. They also have an educated labour force and a more developed economy. Included in this category are countries like the USA, Canada, the countries of the European Union, the UK, France, Germany, Australia and New Zealand (Adams, 2002:7).

Developing countries are countries that, with regard to their economies have been gradually growing and are slowly reaching the status of the developed countries. These countries lack proper education systems and are supported by poor infrastructure (Adams, 2002:7). Countries in Africa and Latin America, as well as Vietnam, to name a few, are characteristic of developing countries (Adams, 2002:7).

Very few countries in Africa have implemented RPL. In some developing countries like the Seychelles, Mauritius, South Africa and Namibia the process of implementing RPL has begun and evaluation on it is continuing (Sims, 2010:3). This chapter focuses on the development of RPL in the Seychelles, Mauritius, South Africa and Namibia. The chapter traces the origin of RPL in these developing countries as well as the way in which RPL is implemented. The benefits and challenges of RPL are also outlined. The chapter concludes with an examination of the management of RPL and its scope within the South African context.

## **3.2 THE ORIGIN OF RPL IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES**

While the previous chapter traced the origin of RPL in developed societies, the impact that RPL has had on developing societies cannot be ignored. This section explores the background and origin of RPL within the context of developing societies. The focus is therefore on RPL in Mauritius, Namibia and the Seychelles as these countries have implemented RPL extensively thus far (Sims, 2010:3). Against the background of a developing society perspective, the chapter includes the implementation of RPL within the South African context.

### **3.2.1 Mauritius**

The Mauritius Qualifications Authority (MQA) was set up in 1988 and became operational as from 08 May 2002. The Scottish Qualifications Authority thereafter advised the MQA on the development of a Mauritius qualifications framework. The NQF was then developed by a project steering committee under the leadership of the Ministry of Training, Skills Development and Productivity (Singh, 2008:12).

In order to reintegrate unemployed people into the labour force, combat structural unemployment and help close the skills gap, the MQA had to put in place

specific education and training policies (Allgoo, 2007:3). The MQA worked in conjunction with the Commonwealth of Learning, the Institute for Lifelong Learning of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and L'Académie de La Réunion. They formulated a policy on RPL, followed by guidelines for the RPL process. These guidelines were meant for the applicants, facilitators and assessors. They also established a set of criteria for the registration of assessors and the RPL application form. The formulation of the policy on RPL was benchmarked against international standards and was based on a pilot project conducted in 2008. The RPL policy provides guidance to all stakeholders in helping learners progress through the RPL process within the NQF (MQA, 2009:2).

As is the case in other countries, Mauritius saw RPL as a mechanism for social inclusion. The MQA views RPL as a critical aspect of the implementation of the NQF (Allgoo, 2007:10). The MQA works closely with the National Accreditation and Equivalence Council in overseeing the recognition of vocational qualifications and all aspects of quality of accreditation (Singh, 2008:13).

The MQA defines RPL as a process that takes into consideration a learner's prior learning and experience as well as the learner's existing knowledge and skills. It involves the evaluation of the existing skills, knowledge and experience against a set formal qualification (Government Online Centre, 2010:1). Learning is acknowledged, regardless of how, when and where it was acquired when it meets the outcomes of the qualification. In Mauritius RPL is seen as a form of assessment that takes into consideration the learners' context.

The MQA is responsible for the following (MQA, 2008:4):

- Developing, implementing and maintaining the NQF.
- Recognising and evaluating qualifications.
- Recognising prior learning.
- Ensuring that registered qualifications are internationally comparable.
- Ensuring that training institutions comply with the provisions for registration and accreditation.
- Enhancing good practices.
- Safeguarding the public interest in quality education and training.

### **3.2.2 Seychelles**

RPL was introduced in the Seychelles as part of its government's strategy to create a knowledge-based society and promote lifelong learning. Previously people could not continue their formal education due to socio-economic related problems such as lack of sufficient access and lack of finances, but they continued to work and to learn through their work (SQA, 2008(a):1). The government realised that people could obtain qualifications based on their work-related experience. Efforts were made to open access to individuals so that they are given the opportunity to further their education (SQA, 2008(a):1).

RPL is a relatively new concept in the Seychelles. However, there is some evidence of RPL more than three decades ago in the vocational and occupational trades. Recently RPL has been used to upgrade qualifications in the health sector, for example in Environmental Health and Health Information (SQA, 2008(a):1).

A new body called the Seychelles Qualifications Authority (SQA) was set up in 2006 to deal with issues relating to all qualifications within the Seychelles. Some of its functions include (SQA, 2008(b):1):

- Developing and implementing an NQF.
- Promoting the quality and standard of education and training through a system of accreditation, validation and quality assurance.
- Establishing criteria for and monitoring the process of recognition of competencies acquired outside of formal education and training.
- Maintaining a database on all providers within education and training.
- Promoting international recognition of local qualifications.

In May 2008, the SQA released a draft policy guideline on RPL in the Seychelles (SQA, 2008(a):1). The policy commences with an overview of RPL, followed by the RPL application procedures and the RPL process. It also highlights the role of the various stakeholders.

### **3.2.3 Namibia**

The Namibia Qualifications Authority (NQA) was established in 2005 by the Namibia Qualifications Authority Act No 29 of 1996. The NQA holds sacred the



principle of recognising people's learning irrespective of when, how and where it was obtained. The NQA is responsible for the following (NQA, 2011:2):

- Defining standards in all sectors where education and training take place.
- Promoting quality through the accreditation of education and training of Namibian providers and their courses.
- Establishing policy and procedures for the evaluation and accreditation of qualifications.
- Establishing policy and procedures for accrediting providers of courses aimed at national standards.

In order to promote quality education and training in Namibia, the NQA uses the NQF (NQA, 2011:3). The NQF is used as a mechanism to promote and enhance lifelong learning in Namibia. Some of the purposes of the NQF include (NQA, 2011:5):

- Recognising all learning and all qualifications in the country.
- Helping to redress the past in terms of disadvantaged learners through RPL.
- Awareness of the individual's right for access to lifelong learning through different means to achieve success.
- Improving Namibia's education and training systems in the regional, continental and international communities.
- Giving people greater assurance of the quality of education, training and assessment in Namibia.

The Namibian qualifications framework differs from the South African one in that it is limited in scope because it deals with vocational qualifications and does not include all levels. The South African NQF on the other hand is more comprehensive in nature as it incorporates both academic and vocational types of qualification (Singh, 2008:15). The NQF in Namibia is made up of ten levels and has seven qualification types ranging from certificates to doctoral degrees (Singh, 2008:16). Open distance learning (ODL) programmes are catered for in the Namibian public sector through four institutions, namely the National Institute for Educational Development (NIED), the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning at the Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN-COLL), the Centre for External Studies at the University of Namibia (UNAM-CES) and the Namibian College of

Open Learning (NAMCOL). These ODL institutions are publicly funded and work in collaboration with the Ministry of Education. They have established a national trust, known as the Namibian Open Learning Network Trust (NOLNet) through which they carry out their activities (Afunde, 2010:2).

### **3.2.4 South Africa**

The birth of RPL in South Africa lies in the interaction between the country's historical, social, economic and political forces. It is against this background that RPL has been developed. The concept of RPL began in the early 1990s in South Africa (Mayet, 2006:1). This was during the time of negotiations between the trade union movement and its partners about the education system and industrial training (Mayet, 2006:1).

In order to assist with redressing the injustices inherited from apartheid, the South African government instituted RPL. In this regard RPL has been used in South Africa as a mechanism for equity, social redress and to build a more inclusive education system for South Africa (Mayet, 2006:1). During apartheid, education and training systems were differentiated along racial lines, resulting in people being denied access to education. Levelling the playing fields in this regard is a major challenge for the post-apartheid government.

The De Lange Report, which was published 1981, was an investigation into education by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). This report highlighted the need to link formal and non-formal education, and promoted the convergence of academic and vocational education (Mayet, 2006:2). It laid the foundation for a new education and training ideology. A further two reports entitled *HSRC/NTB1 Investigation into the training of artisans in the RSA* and the *HSRC/NTB Investigation into skills training in the RSA* released in 1984 and 1989, respectively, criticised apartheid training and recommended that the apprenticeship system be changed. The impact of these reports was phenomenal and they are considered to be one of the key building blocks of the NQF (Mayet, 2006:1).

It was anticipated that RPL would help provide ease of access to education and training for those who were left out of the formal system in the past. This idea was also promoted by COSATU in the early 1990s. The Ford and W.K. Kellogg

Foundations were the first to support and fund RPL in higher education in South Africa (Mayet, 2006:2). In 1995 the Joint Education Trust (JET) established a project called the Workers' Higher Education Project (WHEP) to assist in the promotion and implementation of RPL in universities and technikons (Mayet, 2006:2). CAEL also assisted in this project by training RPL assessors and RPL advisors. It further advised on materials development, advocacy and research.

In 1994 South Africa had its first democratic elections. The post-1994 government was tasked with creating equal opportunities for all South Africans as well as preparing South Africa for economic competitiveness globally. In order to start this, the first democratic government passed the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act in 1995 and thereafter established the SAQA Board in 1996 (Heyns, 2004:2). This in turn provided the structure for the development and implementation of the NQF. The NQF was designed to help the education system in South Africa to communicate, collaborate and coordinate itself and to serve as a comprehensive scaffolding for organising and accrediting all accredited qualifications in the country. Some of the key objectives of the NQF are to hasten the redress of past discrimination in education, training and development opportunities and to facilitate access to education and training. SAQA was tasked with the responsibility of managing the NQF (SAQA, 2009:1).

Since 1994 a series of higher education Acts have been passed and policies have been formulated that led to the incorporation of RPL in the South African education and training system. The higher education Acts and policies include (Heyns, 2004:2):

- The South African Qualifications Authority Act No. 58 of 1995
- The Skills Development Act No. 97 of 1998
- The Higher Education Act No. 101 of 1997
- The Education White Paper number 3 of 1997
- The Further Education and Training Act No. 98 of 1998
- The South African Qualifications Authority's National Standards Bodies Regulations (number 482 of March 1998)
- The draft New Academic Policy for Programmes and Qualifications in Higher Education (CHE, 2001)

Currently the implementation of RPL in South Africa is informed by the following two documents: RPL in the context of the South African NQF, and Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL, published by SAQA in 2002 and 2004 respectively.

The concept of RPL emerged in most African countries as a mechanism to address social injustice. In the past people were denied access to education, resulting in a huge gap between the poor and the affluent. Apart from opening learning pathways for people, RPL has the potential to improve the overall economic performances of poor countries due to a more capacitated labour force.

### **3.3 THE IMPLEMENTATION OF RPL IN DEVELOPING ENVIRONMENTS**

The implementation of RPL is not prescriptive and is guided by the context in which it is applied. Just as RPL has various functions, so too does it vary in its approach. This section considers the implementation of RPL in Mauritius, Namibia, Seychelles and South Africa, which are classified as developing societies.

#### **3.3.1 Mauritius**

In Mauritius the RPL candidate is assessed against the unit standards and qualifications endorsed by the MQA as set out in the NQF. As stated in par. 3.2.1, one of the functions of the MQA is to facilitate RPL. According to Allgoo (2007:11), the process of RPL has been a focal point in Mauritius. The MQA does not view the RPL process as a straightforward one of 'translation' between candidates' prior learning and the learning outcomes against which they are being assessed. It is imperative that before assessing candidates for RPL, they be made aware of what their existing knowledge is and the extent to which they know what they know, and be able to express what they know and can do (Allgoo, 2007:11).

According to the RPL policy formulated by the MQA (2009), the RPL process entails three phases, namely pre-screening, facilitation and assessment. The RPL process requires facilitators, advisors and assessors. The MQA clearly defines and contextualises the role of each. The process is as follows (Ehlers, 2007:1):

### **3.3.1.1 Pre-screening process**

The pre-screening process ensures that the candidate is given the necessary support in terms of advice and counselling. The candidate is informed of the application process, the stages within the RPL process and the portfolio development. The MQA is responsible for determining if candidates qualify for RPL and if they have chosen the correct qualification (MQA, 2009:3).

### **3.3.1.2 Facilitation process**

The MQA employs a number of trained RPL facilitators to help the candidates in developing their portfolios of evidence and guiding them with regard to the RPL assessment. The portfolio is a collection of evidence that proves that applicants have the skills and knowledge in the outcomes of competency in which they are seeking RPL (MQA, 2009:4). Candidates need to provide sufficient evidence of their knowledge and skills by submitting relevant documents and/or materials (Ehlers, 2007:2).

The evidence can be submitted in the following ways (Ehlers, 2007:3):

- Formal statements of results
- Sample of work produced
- Performance appraisal reports
- References from current or previous employers
- Job descriptions
- Details of formal training, seminars, conferences and workshops attended which are relevant to the RPL application
- Certificates of participation/achievements/awards/letters of recommendation
- Video tapes, tape recordings and/or photographs of work activities
- Specific details of work and/or participation in projects
- Written testimonials from managers or colleagues

The RPL facilitator is appointed by the MQA. The task of the facilitator is to demonstrate to the candidate the different ways of building the portfolio. The facilitator also helps the candidate present the information/evidence in a clear and methodical manner. The facilitator spends a minimum of ten hours with the candidate during this process. The candidate is thereafter guided towards the

assessment of RPL at the assessment centre once he/she has met the requirements. The portfolio is then sent to the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate and the RPL candidate is requested by the Syndicate to pay an assessment fee (MQA, 2009:5).

### **3.3.1.3 Assessment process**

The RPL assessor compares the candidate's portfolio of evidence against the learning outcomes of the qualification being applied for. The MQA ensures that all RPL assessors are registered and properly trained. This is important for the successful implementation of RPL. The other responsibilities of the assessor include (MQA, 2009:4):

- Ensuring that the principles of assessment are adhered to.
- Recording the assessment results.
- Providing detailed feedback to the applicant.
- Ensuring that assessment procedures are recorded correctly and all parties are advised.
- Abiding by the assessment instructions provided by the assessment centre.
- Ensuring that the evidence provided is sufficient.
- Using the appropriate assessment techniques.

The RPL assessment centres are recognised awarding bodies in Mauritius. After the RPL candidate has met with the Mauritius Examinations Syndicate, the results are forwarded to the MQA. The RPL assessment centre issues successful candidates with either a part or full qualification at the end of the process. Candidates also have the right to an appeal. The appeal is made to the MQA if the candidate is not satisfied with the results within 15 days of having been notified of the results of assessment (MQA, 2009:4).

### **3.3.2 Seychelles**

The document entitled "Draft policy guidelines on the recognition of prior **learning**" **released** by SQA in 2008 provides guidelines on the RPL process in the Seychelles. The process is as follows (SQA, 2008 (a):7):

### **3.3.2.1 Application**

Using a specific RPL form the candidate applies to the SQA for RPL. He/she is contacted by an initiator at the SQA to arrange for an interview or a workplace visit. The initiator will also provide support and advice on the type of evidence and the collection of this evidence. The evidence will be presented in the form of a portfolio containing relevant documents that should include:

- Certificates attained including exam results, transcripts, course outline or content, duration of the course
- Licences acquired
- Records from clients for service rendered
- Evidence of years of service
- Samples of work done
- Signed records from workplace showing different activities performed
- References and testimonials

### **3.3.2.2 Pre-screening**

This involves a meeting between the initiator and the candidate. At this meeting the initiator determines the validity and the level of award of the certificate obtained by the candidate for the possibility of credit transfer. At this meeting the comprehensiveness of the portfolio is checked and the applicability of the documentation assessed. The initiator also determines the specific requirements of the applicant such as, for example, special needs, disabilities or learning difficulties. Once the portfolio has been evaluated the initiator makes a recommendation to the SQA for the acceptance or the rejection of the application.

### **3.3.2.3 Pre-assessment**

The SQA appoints a specialist coordinator in the area/field of the qualification. The coordinator evaluates the portfolio and makes a recommendation to the SQA for the acceptance or rejection of the application. The coordinator looks for evidence that is authentic, current, relevant and sufficient.

### **3.3.2.4 Determination of standards**

The coordinator identifies the unit standards of the qualification against which the competency of the candidate will be evaluated.

### **3.3.2.5 Evaluation for possible credit transfer**

The coordinator evaluates the certificate attained against unit standards of the qualification.

### **3.3.2.6 Planning and organisation of the RPL session**

The coordinator appoints assessors registered by the SQA and by the relevant professional bodies to assess the competency of the candidate. It is the duty of the coordinator to set a date for the assessment of each competency in accordance with the SQA calendar and availability of the facilities and resources provider.

### **3.3.2.7 Assessment of the competencies**

The coordinator appoints a panel of assessors registered by the SQA and by the relevant professional bodies to assess the competency of the candidate. The assessment could be in the form of a practical with oral questioning, or a written test or other forms of assessment such as the compilation of a portfolio of evidence and a site visit. The panel makes a recommendation to the SQA for the recognition or rejection of the competencies of the candidate.

### **3.3.2.8 Moderation**

The coordinator can either do the moderation or appoint moderators from the SQA and/or from relevant professional bodies. The task of the moderator is to verify the assessment to ensure fairness and equity in the process.

### **3.3.2.9 Recommendation**

The candidate receives feedback within three working weeks of completion of the assessment in the form of an assessment feedback sheet. This sheet contains the marks, areas for improvement and recommendation for recognition which will indicate that the candidate is either competent or not.

### **3.3.2.10 Appeal**

The candidate has the right to appeal. This must be done 14 days after written notice is given. The appeal is then reviewed by a panel approved by the SQA. The results of the appeal are communicated to the candidate within 21 days.



### **3.3.3 Namibia**

Seeing that Namibia does not have an official policy on RPL and that NAMCOL has conducted RPL extensively, the focus is on the implementation of RPL at this specific college. NAMCOL is a parastatal educational institute supported by the Namibian government (Afunde, 2010:1).

The key objective of NAMCOL is to help people who did not attend formal schooling to further their education while still working. Their aim is to widen access to education for all Namibians. In order to achieve this, NAMCOL developed a policy framework to provide guidelines for the use of an RPL policy and started to implement RPL from 2008. In this instance RPL was used as a mechanism to give adult learners entry into formal programmes offered at the college (Afunde, 2010:1). The process of assessing RPL at NAMCOL involves the following (Afunde, 2010:3):

1. The candidate applies for RPL using an RPL application form.
2. The application is screened by the RPL facilitator in the student's presence.
3. A pre-assessment meeting follows, where candidates are informed of how to prepare for the assessment. This is conducted by the RPL facilitator who advises the student on the collection of evidence, portfolio development and the assessment approaches. Candidates are given portfolio guidelines to assist in the construction of the portfolio of evidence.
4. The candidate submits the portfolio, which is assessed by the assessment panel.
5. Candidates are given written feedback.
6. The appeal process may be initiated.

### **3.3.4 South Africa**

In South Africa there are two instances where candidates can apply for RPL. They can apply for RPL credits within a qualification. Alternatively, they can apply for RPL to gain entry/access into a qualification, also known as advance standing. The former type of qualification is a unit-standard-based qualification, where credits are given towards specific unit standards in the qualification. Unit standards are nationally agreed descriptions of the results of learning. Candidates have to demonstrate that through their work-related experience they have met

the learning outcomes of the specific module (SAQA, 2004:53). The latter type of qualification pertains to candidates applying for access to a higher qualification programme based on their work-related experience. Their work-related experience is then measured against the prerequisites of that higher qualification. Often their work-related experience would be measured against the learning outcomes of the degree/diploma that the traditional student is required to have completed in order to gain entry into the higher qualification programme (SAQA, 2004:53).

In the document *Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of the Recognition of Prior Learning*, SAQA (2004) states that the value of a policy is determined by the success of implementation. It is therefore imperative that the RPL policy stipulates clear procedures for the implementation of RPL. SAQA provides an outline of the process of a generic RPL. The process is as follows (SAQA, 2004:32):

1. The candidate applies for RPL.
2. The facilitator for RPL meets the candidate to conduct the pre-screening and to ascertain at this initial stage whether the application is viable or not.
3. If it is not viable, the candidate is shown an alternate pathway. However, if the application is found viable, the process moves on to the pre-assessment stage. The pre-assessment stage involves the facilitator preparing the candidate for the assessment. This is carried out by focusing on portfolio development and related workshops, and/or one-on-one advising on assessment approaches, tools and mechanisms. Guidance is given on the collecting of evidence, which the candidate then does. The assessor, facilitator and candidate thereafter develop the assessment plan. The facilitator/assessor also discusses the review unit standard(s) and requirements, the type and sources of evidence, the assessment tools to be used in this assessment and the dates and times of assessment with the candidate.
4. The candidate goes through the assessment stage. This entails a practical assessment. There are a variety of assessment methods that can be used.
5. The evidence is judged by the assessor.
6. This is followed by the moderation stage. This involves the evaluation of the entire process, including the moderation of the assessment instruments, methodologies and the assessment results.

7. The candidate is given feedback during which the candidate is either awarded the credit or the credit is declined. If the credit is declined, the candidate has the right to an appeal.

In this generic model the provider decides on the most appropriate assessment methodology and instruments.

To summarise the policy of SAQA on RPL, the following procedures are stipulated (SAQA, 2002:7):

- Identifying what the candidate knows and can do.
- Matching the candidate's skills, knowledge and experience to the specific requirements and outcomes of the specific qualification.
- Assessing the candidate against the standards of the specific qualification.
- Crediting the candidate for prior learning obtained through formal, informal and non-formal learning that occurred in the past.

With regard to the forms of evidence for prior learning acquired, SAQA recommends the following (SAQA, 2002:56):

- Certificates from previous education and training courses
- Licences to practice
- Professional registration
- Products of any nature, such as art portfolios, publications, etc.
- Samples of completed work
- Résumés and performance appraisals
- References from current and past employers, supervisors and colleagues
- Testimonials from persons holding relevant qualifications in the area being assessed
- Photographs of completed work certified by a referee

Where candidates are unable to produce the evidence according to these examples, other assessment methods can be used for RPL (SAQA, 2002:57). The assessor can use some of these methods for authentication of evidence produced. The assessment methods include (SAQA, 2002:57):

- Interviews
- Debates

- Presentations
- Performance testing
- Examination
- Oral examination
- Essays
- Examples of work done, or performed, or designed
- Portfolios
- Book reviews
- Special projects
- Reports, critiques, articles

SAQA calls for the principles of good assessment to be applied in the design and implementation of all assessment methods and procedures. The principles of good assessment include fairness, validity, reliability and practicability (SAQA, 2002:24).

With regard to the implementation of RPL, the role played by each stakeholder cannot be underestimated. Given the variety of assessment instruments and methods used in the RPL process, the RPL candidates need the support and guidance of the RPL facilitators. It is imperative that the assessment methods and instruments correlate with the candidates' context.

### **3.4 THE BENEFITS OF RPL**

From the research published on RPL in Mauritius, the Seychelles, Namibia and South Africa, the following benefits of RPL have been identified (Sims, 2010:2; Singh, 2008:31; Allgoo, 2007:15; Ehlers, 2007:2):

- RPL is a powerful tool to bring people into the training system by giving them access to formal systems of further education or training.
- It motivates people to learn and helps shorten the period of study.
- RPL helps upgrade and sustain people's skills, thus assisting in maintaining and enhancing a skilled workforce for the specific society.
- RPL assists in creating opportunities for further employment.
- It improves people's career prospects.
- It reduces the cost of training of people.

- It empowers the population in that their acquired skills are recognised and it creates the chance for acquiring further skills.
- RPL attracts investors to position the applicable society in the global village.
- RPL boosts the self-esteem of retrenched workers by helping them gain formal qualifications that can aid in re-employment.
- It encourages and capacitates people to participate in learning pathways.
- RPL contributes to the development of an open, accessible and integrated education and training system.
- Specific enterprises and the comprehensive labour market benefit as RPL increases the overall skill levels of the labour force.
- It allows enterprises to structure training appropriately.
- RPL serves as a mechanism for staff selection and recruitment within organisations.
- It has the capacity to improve employee retention and reduce recruitment and training costs.
- RPL reduces the amount of time needed to complete a qualification and therefore requiring less time away from the workplace.
- It increases motivation and interest in the workplace on the part of the employee in that the employee is able to see the relationship between on-the-job experience and their formal study.
- RPL programmes aim to broaden the social base in higher education in that mature learners now gain access to higher education.
- It supports capacity-building initiatives.
- RPL has the ability to enhance academic practice in education.
- RPL has the potential to break down the traditional barriers to education and training.
- It saves time and money by avoiding duplication of learning.
- RPL has the ability to promote a positive learning culture.

In countries with a history of inequality and repression, RPL has been used as a mechanism of social redress. It has the capacity to widen access to education for those adults who were excluded from education. In doing this, RPL can help countries achieve social reconstruction and improve their economic capacity to compete successfully in the global market (Sims, 2010:4).

## **3.5 THE SCOPE OF RPL**

This section examines the current practice of RPL in Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa.

### **3.5.1 Mauritius**

The Institute for Lifelong Learning of UNESCO and the MQA conducted a pilot project on RPL for unemployed workers from the sugar and textile sectors in Mauritius (Ehlers, 2007:1). These workers were retrained for work in the tourism industry in Mauritius under the Empowerment Program. In Mauritius the tourism industry has been identified as the fastest growing economic sector (Ehlers, 2007:1). In order to meet the demands of tourists the Mauritian government had to ensure that the people working in the tourism industry had the right skills and were competent enough to provide the very best service. Workers made redundant from the sugar and textile industries were retrained by providing them with the necessary skills to be employed in the tourism and hospitality industry. Many of these redundant workers had no formal qualifications. The MQA assessed the prior learning experiences of these redundant workers through RPL, thus helping them get the necessary qualifications to enter the tourism and hospitality industry (Ehlers, 2007:1).

Stakeholders involved in the pilot project for RPL in Mauritius included the Ministry of Education and Human Resources (MOE&HR), representatives of industry, the Ministry of Labour, the Industrial Relations and Employment Society, non-government organisations and training providers such as the Industrial and Vocational Training Board (IVTB). The Commonwealth of Learning (COL) and the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning supported the project by developing a policy and processes for identifying, assessing and validating RPL. They developed guidelines for facilitators and assessors, tools for the assessment of RPL, and methodologies and educational materials for the effective implementation of RPL (Ehlers, 2007:1).

The MQA officially launched an RPL programme on 4 June 2009. This programme was focused on the tourism, construction, plumbing and printing sectors. Candidates in these sectors are now able to claim RPL against specific qualifications (MQA, 2009:6) as depicted in table 3.1:

**Table 3.1:** RPL arrangements in the tourism, construction, plumbing and printing sectors of Mauritius

Sector	Qualifications at National Trade Certificate (Level 3) (NTC 3)	Qualifications at National Trade Certificate (Level 2) (NTC 2)
Plumbing	1. Plumbing and pipefitting	
Tourism	1. Food production 2. Housekeeping 3. Pastry 4. Restaurant and bar service 5. Front office	1. Restaurant and bar service 2. Front office 3. Leisure and entertainment 4. Pastry 5. Food production 6. Housekeeping 7. Tourism studies out bound 8. Tourism studies in bound
Construction	1. Masonry and concrete work 2. Building maintenance	
Printing	1. Pre-press 2. Plate making and machine printing 3. Print finishing and book binding	

On 26 August 2010 the MQA awarded 41 RPL candidates their qualification/partial qualification in the sectors specified in table 3.1. According to the Government Information Service (2010), the MQA aims to expand the RPL programme to include five other sectors, namely adult literacy, agriculture, automotive mechanics, electrical installation works, and spray painting and panel beating.

### 3.5.2 Namibia

In Namibia, RPL is being piloted by NAMCOL. Candidates applying for RPL for access into the NAMCOL programmes must be at least 23 years of age with at least 5 years' working experience (Singh, 2008:22).

In 2009, NAMCOL admitted the first group of 15 learners into the Certificate Programme of Education for Development (CED). The intake of these 15 learners

was arranged through RPL initiatives (Afunde, 2010:4). The CED is a two-year distance education programme for adult educators and community workers. Candidates had to submit a portfolio of evidence. After the assessment of their prior learning, only 8 of the total of 15 learners qualified to be admitted into the CED programme (Afunde, 2010:4).

### 3.5.3 South Africa

In South Africa RPL is practised in the higher education and training (HET), the further education and training (FET) and the general education and training (GET) bands and in adult basic education and training (ABET). RPL is also practised in formal institutions of learning in South Africa, at workplace-based education and training centres and by small private single-purpose providers (Blom, Parker & Keevy, 2007:47). Various RPL models are used in South Africa (Mayet, 2006:2). In the Free State, for example, an RPL centre was established to provide RPL services to three education institutions in the province. Unisa, as the country's distance education institution, established an RPL centre in 2004 (Blom, 2004:63). In July 2002, at a workshop held in Durban the following statistics, as depicted in table 3.2, were revealed regarding the state of implementation of RPL in the technikon sector (Blom et al., 2007:7):

**Table 3.2:** State of RPL implementation in the technikon sector, 2002

Name of institution	RPL policy	RPL implementation
TSA	Yes	Yes
Peninsula Technikon (Pentech)	Yes	Yes
Cape Technikon (CapeTech)	Yes	Yes, but ad hoc
Pretoria Technikon	Yes	No, development of procedures and access/bridging courses
Port Elizabeth Technikon	Yes	Yes
Free State Technikon	Yes	Yes, part of the Free State Higher Education and Training Trust
Durban Institute of Technology	No	No
Technikon Witwatersrand	No	No



Eastern Cape Technikon	Yes	No
Border Technikon	No	No
Mangosuthu Technikon	No	Yes, in the Department of Nature Conservation since 1991
Technikon North-West	No, draft	No
Technikon Northern Gauteng	No, draft	No

(Blom et al., 2007:7–8)

In March 2003, the technikons were asked to submit their RPL implementation plans to the Committee of Technikon Principals (CTP). These plans had to reflect the details of cost, staffing, proposed timelines, capacity building, proposed pilots in each institution and institution-wide implementation plans. The report by Blom et al. (2007:8) also revealed that RPL implementation in the technikon sector far exceeded that of the university sector.

With regard to the implementation of RPL in the sector education and training authorities (SETAs) in South Africa, the following SETAs were actively involved (Blom et al., 2007:9):

- In the Metal and Engineering Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority (MERSETA) an RPL pilot project was undertaken in the New Tyre Chamber in 2002.
- The Construction Education and Training Authority (CETA) conducted a three-year development project in RPL. This project was supported by the European Union. It was aimed at bricklayers, carpenters, painters, plasterers, tilers and plumbers.
- The Free State Higher Education Consortium (FSHEC) was involved in three sub-projects, namely RPL, entrance testing and bridging, and foundation programmes. These projects offered a centralised RPL service to people in order to widen the participation of learners who wanted to enter higher education.
- The South African Insurance Sector implemented RPL with the intention of upgrading the qualification levels of current financial advisers and insurance brokers. The first round of RPL efforts was conducted in 2004 and 80% of 11 000 financial advisors achieved the credits.

Mayet (2006:1) points out, however, that many organisations and institutions are battling with the development of RPL arrangements in the country. Challenges pertain to the development of viable plans, systems and policies, the implementation of RPL and the readiness of the institution for RPL. Regardless of these challenges, research has revealed the following pockets of excellence with regard to arrangements for realising RPL. These arrangements and activities were carried out prior to 2005 by organisations and the Department of Education in South Africa and included the following (Mayet, 2006:4; SAIDE, 2002:1–2):

- The SETA for construction in South Africa received funding from the European Union to institute a large RPL process across the country. This SETA held an international RPL conference in this regard.
- Other SETAs also started to develop RPL toolkits and RPL support processes.
- The Department of Education started a teacher upgrading programme that included RPL. Up-skilling programmes that included RPL were also conducted in the legal and policing sectors.
- Two international conferences on RPL were hosted by JET.
- JET also helped develop models for RPL practices.

In 1995, JET started the WHEP. The purpose of the project was to initiate and fund new RPL projects in the workplace and in higher education. Since then WHEP has been involved in a series of RPL projects, published papers on RPL and held seminars on RPL to promote activities in that regard. In October 2000 JET hosted a national conference on RPL and experiential learning in South Africa (SAIDE, 2002:3).

All of these initiatives resulted in a steady increase in the investment in RPL since the last part of 2005. The focus on education and skills development presupposes an inclusion of RPL activities. The government developed new programmes to help education and training providers address skills development and more emphasis has been placed on recognising prior learning to develop a skilled nation (Mayet, 2006:6). Currently, national initiatives like the Accelerated and Shared Growth Initiative of South Africa (ASGISA) and the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills (JIPSA), in collaboration with the Department of Education and the Department of Labour, are focusing on skills development of the young and unemployed (Mayet, 2006:6).

## **3.6 A FRAMEWORK FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF RPL IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES**

The NQF is viewed by many governments as a key instrument in improving education and training systems and can help governments deal with the challenges and problems of the education system (Singh, 2008:9).

### **3.6.1 Mauritius**

The NQF is used in Mauritius to promote RPL (Allgoo, 2007:10). In Mauritius the MQA set up the NQF, which was used to condense the existing qualifications and thereby allow for recognition of qualifications (MQA, 2007:11). It provides a set of benchmarks against which learning can be assessed (Singh, 2008:11). The NQF consists of ten levels and it extends from the Certificate of Primary Education to a doctorate. There are level descriptors at each level that list the learning outcomes that candidates need to meet. The NQF encourages lifelong learning through RPL (MQA, 2007:11).

The Mauritius Qualifications Authority Act of 2001 led to the formation of the MQA which became operational on 08 May 2002 in the training sector of Mauritius (MQA, 2007:10). The objectives of the MQA are (MQA, 2007:10):

- (a) To develop, implement and maintain an NQF.
- (b) To ensure compliance with provisions for registration and accreditation of training institutions.
- (c) To ensure that standards and registered qualifications are internationally comparable.

The MQA is responsible for implementing RPL at a national level in Mauritius.

### **3.6.2 Seychelles**

The SQA is responsible for the monitoring and coordination of RPL in the Seychelles. It also advertises the process of RPL to potential candidates and is in charge of raising the awareness of possibilities offered by RPL. Should RPL count for more than 25% of a qualification, the SQA oversees the implementation of RPL. With such cases the SQA appoints the assessors, quality assures the process and keeps a formal record of the learning of the candidates (SQA, 2008(a):5).

Should RPL be less than 25% of a qualification, RPL is implemented and the candidate evaluated by the external provider. However, the process is quality assured by the SQA. In this instance the provider and/or the service area or industry provides the resources and facilities required for the assessment. The provider and service area or industry are remunerated for this service by the SQA (SQA, 2008(a):5).

### **3.6.3 Namibia**

The NQA conducts all vocational education and training provided in Namibia including RPL. It is legally responsible for the development and maintenance of the NQF (NQA, 2011:1). RPL at NAMCOL is implemented and managed within the framework of the following national legislation (Afunde, 2010:2):

- Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution
- Education Act No 16 of 2001
- The National Qualifications Framework
- The Namibian College of Open Learning Act No 1 of 1997

### **3.6.4 South Africa**

South Africa is one of the few African countries that has a well-developed framework for the management and implementation of RPL. SAQA is a juristic body that is appointed by the Minister of Education. The role of SAQA is to help propagate and oversee the objectives of the NQF, manage the further development of the NQF and coordinate the sub-frameworks (SAQA, 2006(a):1).

The NQF is a framework within which the South African qualifications are integrated, with the aim of amalgamating education and training. Apart from creating an integrated national framework for learning achievements, it is a framework aimed at encouraging the concept of lifelong learning by facilitating access to and progression within education, training and career paths (NQF, 2011:2). Specifically with regard to RPL, the NQF accelerates the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment in South Africa (SAQA, 2002:8).

To facilitate the management and implementation of RPL in South Africa, SAQA developed a national RPL policy, namely *The Recognition of Prior Learning in*

*the Context of the South African National Qualifications Framework* (SAQA, 2002:8). The document is in essence a broad strategic framework for the implementation of RPL. This document informs RPL by RPL practitioners in South Africa and includes the following (SAQA, 2002:9):

- The underlying principles and philosophy underpinning assessment and the RPL
- The core criteria for quality assurance of assessment and RPL
- The strategic framework for implementation of RPL

In 2004, SAQA released a further guidelines document, *The Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* (SAQA, 2004:2). The document aids in the implementation of RPL at the level of the education and training provider. The aid provided to RPL providers involves (SAQA, 2004:3):

- The audit of their current practice
- The development of a plan
- Capacity building of resources and staff
- The design and moderation of appropriate assessment instruments and tools
- Quality management systems and procedures
- The establishment of a research base for the betterment of practice

These two documents produced by SAQA ensure that the implementation and management of RPL is consistent in South Africa.

An overall qualifications framework is a necessary component for the successful integration of a country's education and training system. This has been demonstrated by the application of RPL practices in developing countries such as Mauritius, South Africa, Seychelles and Namibia. Singh (2005:18) points to the fact that due to successes experienced with RPL practice in these developing countries, other southern African countries like the Central African Republic (CAR), Malawi and Oman are in the process of formulating a framework for the developing and implementation of RPL practice.

### **3.7 PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED WITH THE MANAGEMENT OF RPL IN DEVELOPING SOCIETIES**

The problems experienced in managing RPL in developing countries seem to be similar to those experienced in developed countries (par. 2.8). Comprehensively considered, the following problems in managing RPL have been identified (Tanzarella, 2011:2; Afunde, 2010:6; Sims, 2010:3; Singh, 2008:29; Mayet, 2006:2; SAQA, 2004:69):

- There is a lack of professionalism in RPL.
- There are problems with the identification and documentation of RPL.
- Process models such as documentary proof, information, guidance and counselling, and quality assurance need to be developed satisfactorily.
- Guidelines do not provide for quality assurance in RPL.
- There are no diagnostic tests that help learners establish their own standards and help place them accurately on the educational and training ladder.
- Assessment takes place at an informal level and is therefore difficult to monitor.
- RPL is too costly for the individual and for the system due to the costs involved in developing information and guidance to implement the practice, training and employing assessors and facilitators, and arranging for auditors and awarding bodies.
- There is no formal procedure for recognising and formalising indigenous learning.
- There is no support from management and executives.
- The issue of language is a limiting factor for second-language speakers as RPL courses are offered in English.
- RPL has struggled with the image of being an 'easy option' as considered by many academics.
- The administration of the RPL process is extensive and practitioner overload is cited as a major problem.
- The RPL process is complex with extensive bureaucratic arrangements.
- People are not aware of the option to pursue RPL possibilities due to the lack of initiatives.
- There is a lack of buy-in from all role players in the RPL process.

- RPL candidates lack adequate support when gathering evidence.
- The terminology of RPL practice is jargon laden.
- RPL assessment procedures and tools are not learner centred. The assessment instruments must cater for the different prior learning experiences that candidates may have had.
- RPL candidates are often unsure of what to expect from the process and what will be expected from them.
- Most qualifications are not developed in accordance with outcomes-based education principles and this makes it very difficult for students to be assessed when it comes to RPL.
- Most assessors are not registered to assess RPL applications.
- Delays are experienced in the accreditation of education and training providers.

Very few developing countries have widespread experience of RPL possibilities and little attention has been given to RPL practices that can assist these countries with economic development (Sims, 2010:3). It seems that the weaker the financial system, the more extensive the challenges experienced with the RPL initiatives. By being aware of the possibilities and considering the different options for RPL, RPL providers can develop a more informed RPL policy for the improvement of RPL practice.

### **3.8 CONCLUSION**

RPL has the potential to create an education and training system that is open, accessible, inclusive and integrated. More importantly, it is the foundation for lifelong learning policies for governments to establish a qualified workforce (MQA, 2009:1). For RPL initiatives, countries need to have a qualification framework that is linked to occupational standards that can assist in combating the challenges facing RPL. The development of NQFs originated in developed countries such as the UK, Australia and New Zealand. NQFs are, however, gradually being introduced in Asia, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa (Singh, 2008:12). Mauritius, South Africa and Namibia are among the countries in the southern hemisphere with relatively the most developed educational infrastructures and RPL learning practices (Sims, 2010:4).

Apart from having an established NQF and occupational standards, the success of RPL is also dependent on making people aware of RPL practices. In this regard extensive commitment from government and employers is needed to contribute to an RPL process that is less expensive and less time consuming and that has sources of support to help practitioners facilitate candidates through the process. This would imply minimum bureaucracy and sufficient resources to administer the system (Sims, 2010:3).



# **CHAPTER 4**

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The use of qualitative research methodologies as a method of investigating disciplines in the social sciences has become very popular (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:1). Qualitative research is used to understand and explore the meaning that people or groups give to a social problem (Creswell, 2009:4). It explores the 'whys' and 'hows' of a social experience (Jepson, Mandava, Ring & Ritchie, 2010:3). With regard to questioning as a data collection instrument, qualitative research is distinct from quantitative methods as it is framed in words rather than numbers and uses open-ended questions to gather information. This is in contrast to the quantitative method, which employs closed questions (Creswell, 2009:3). In this regard qualitative research enables the researcher to obtain information on certain elusive issues as well as on the 'human' side of an issue (Guest, Mack, MacQueen, Namey & Woodsong, 2005:1–2).

With this chapter the research design of the study is substantiated and discussed by elaborating on the sampling and data collection methods employed. The chapter also provides an overview of how the data were managed and analysed, and concludes by addressing the issues of ethics and trustworthiness in qualitative research.

### **4.2 RESEARCH DESIGN**

According to Johnson and Christensen (2004:29), the research paradigm is the approach that the researcher uses when thinking about and doing research. The research design therefore represents the actual plan that researchers use to execute their research (Mouton & Marais, 1990:193). There are three research designs: quantitative research, qualitative research and mixed methods research (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:29).

Quantitative research involves the collection of numerical data. It is a method whereby the researcher tests the theory and hypotheses with data (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:30–31). Numerical data is analysed in order to predict, explain

or control a phenomenon (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006:9). The qualitative research design, on the other hand, is concerned with understanding people in their social settings and obtaining an in-depth understanding of what is happening, why it is happening and how it is perceived by the participants (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2006:14). Johnson and Christensen (2004: 48) define mixed methods research as the mixing of quantitative and qualitative research methods and approaches. The researcher uses the qualitative research design for one phase of the study and the quantitative research design for the other (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:48). The nature of this study's focus on an understanding of RPL services and the problems experienced by RPL academic advisors and academic assessors in implementing the RPL policy necessitated that the research design be a qualitative one.

An advantage of qualitative research is the use of open-ended questionnaires. This allows the participants the opportunity to respond in their own words and not be confined to choosing their answers from fixed responses as in quantitative research (Guest et al., 2005:4). Qualitative research also gives the researcher an opportunity to probe the participants, asking 'how' and 'why' questions for a deeper understanding by obtaining rich and dense (thick) data (Guest et al., 2005:4). For that reason the researcher conducted focus group and individual interviewing to utilise the opportunity to pose 'why' and 'how' questions in order to collect relevant data.

Qualitative inquiry can be classified into three types: exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research. Descriptive research is concerned with providing an accurate description of the status of the situation. The focus is not on establishing the cause-and-effect relationship but on describing the variables in the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:347). Explanatory research involves the testing of theories that explains how and why a phenomenon functions as it does (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:349). It seeks to establish the evidence for the cause-and-effect relationship. Exploratory research is used when the researcher's primary goal is to identify and define problems while providing possible solutions (Hanrahan, 2010:43). With exploratory research the researcher often employs the 'why' question to generate ideas about a phenomenon. Exploratory research may also be the first stage in a series of the study (Neuman, 2011:33) and as

Hanrahan (2010:26) asserts, is a common method in research as it is more cost effective and less time consuming. Due to its features of generating ideas in order to understand, the exploratory research method was found to be best suited for this study as the aim of the study was to determine the problems experienced in implementing RPL at Unisa and to develop guidelines for increased effectiveness of RPL practice.

The characteristics of qualitative research include the following (Creswell, 2009:61, 175–176):

- Qualitative research is conducted in participants' natural settings by directly observing and talking to the participants within their context. With regard to this study, information from the participants was gathered by the researcher who visited the participants on site. Interviews were carried out in the participants' offices at Unisa.
- With a qualitative research design the researcher is the key instrument when collecting data in that he or she is the actual person who collects the data. With this study the researcher conducted focus group and individual interviews and engaged in participant observation.
- Instead of relying on one single source only, qualitative researchers use multiple methods to collect data such as observation, interviews and documents. For the purposes of this investigation the researcher conducted interviews, engaged in participant observation and distributed open-ended questionnaires as data collecting techniques.
- Throughout the entire qualitative research process, researchers focus on the participant's view of the problem/issue rather than the view supported by the researchers themselves.
- With a qualitative research design the research process is emergent in that the initial plan of the research is not fixed, but can change when the researcher begins to collect the data.
- Data analysis involves an inductive process since qualitative researchers construct their themes from the bottom up. The process involves the researcher working with the data to establish a comprehensive set of themes. In order to establish the themes for this investigation, the researcher organised, coded and interpreted the data.

- Qualitative researchers use theory in their study in various ways. One function of theory is to use it as a broad explanation for attitudes and behaviours. The issue under study is often viewed through a theoretical lens that in turn informs the methods of inquiry as well as the instruments used and the final write up. In chapters 2 and 3 of this study the origin, viability, arrangement, implementation, management and the challenges of RPL internationally and in developing societies were closely examined. This served as a point of departure for the empirical investigation.
- With the qualitative research design, researchers make an interpretation of what they see, hear and understand. This interpretation is informed by their own background, context, history and prior learning. This form of interpretive inquiry facilitates the development of multiple views of the problem under study.
- Qualitative researchers try to establish a holistic account of the problem under study. This involves the researcher focusing on the multiple perspectives and identifying the many issues involved in the situation. In order to establish the problems experienced in implementing RPL at Unisa, the researcher interviewed several advisors and assessors of the RPL programme to obtain their opinions on the problems at hand.

Considering the different characteristics relevant to a qualitative research design, it became clear that this design was the most suitable in order to find answers to the postulated research question pertaining to increased effectiveness in the application of RPL practice.

### **4.3 SAMPLING STRATEGY**

In order to understand the characteristics of a larger group (population) researchers applying a qualitative research design study the characteristics of a subset (sample) to be able to make statements about the population that are based on the sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:197). Sampling refers to the drawing of a sample from a population (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:197) and sampling techniques range from random to non-random sampling. The random sampling techniques used in a quantitative investigation consist of simple random sampling, systematic sampling, stratified random sampling and cluster

random sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:204–213). Non-random sampling techniques used in a qualitative research design consist of convenience sampling, quota sampling, purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:214–216). Purposive sampling is one of the most common sampling strategies applied with a qualitative research design (Guest et al., 2005:5).

The non-random sampling method was used in this study. The researcher engaged in purposive sampling where the participants were selected because they met a specific criterion. In purposive sampling the researcher specifies the characteristics of the population and chooses individuals who meet those characteristics (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:214). This form of sampling was most appropriate for this study as it enabled the researcher to identify and select participants that adhered to the specific criterion of involvement in RPL practice at Unisa. The assessors and advisors had to have at least three years' experience in RPL practice within the Unisa environment.

The sample for this study consisted of twenty-six participants comprising twenty RPL academic assessors, five RPL academic advisors and one RPL administrator. These participants had all been involved in RPL practice at Unisa for at least three years.

The research was conducted on the Unisa Sunnyside campus as well as the Unisa Florida campus. The RPL academic staff and assessors were situated on these two campuses.

#### **4.4 DATA COLLECTION**

Neuman (2011:8) defines data as the empirical evidence that the researcher gathers according to the specific rules of the research design in order to be able to answer the stated research question. In quantitative research the data is expressed as numbers, whilst in qualitative research the data is expressed as words.

Triangulation involves the use of multiple data-gathering techniques (normally three) to cross-check information and conclusions in an investigation of the same phenomenon (Berg, 2004:5; Johnson & Christensen, 2004:250). Triangulation

allows the researcher to create a more complex picture of the phenomenon being studied. There are four types of triangulation (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005:41):

- Data source triangulation, which involves the use of multiple information sources.
- Methods triangulation, which involves the use of multiple research methodologies.
- Researcher triangulation, which involves the participation of a variety of researchers in the same study.
- Theory triangulation, which implies multiple theoretical perspectives to provide new insight.

With this investigation on RPL practice the researcher employed methods triangulation. The researcher collected data using participant observation, focus group interviewing, individual interviewing and the distribution of open-ended questionnaires.

#### **4.4.1 Methods of data collection**

The methods of data collection as the physical techniques used by the researcher to obtain data should be considered carefully in order to collect relevant data to solve the research problem (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:162). The specific tools used to collect the data represent the data collection instruments (Guest et al., 2005:115). In general the most common data collection instruments are tests, questionnaires, individual and focus group interviewing, observation and secondary data analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:162). With regard to this study on RPL practice the researcher used the following data collection instruments:

##### **4.4.1.1 Participant observation**

Participant observation as a qualitative research method is used to determine and understand the point of view held by the population of the study (Guest et al., 2005:13). To arrange for such an understanding the researcher gathers data by observing and/or participating in the daily activities of the population of the study (Guest et al., 2005:117). Participant observation occurs in the setting that is relevant to the research questions and that involves the researcher going out

to the participants instead of the participants coming to the researcher (Guest et al., 2005:13). Participant observation was fairly easy for the researcher as she works as an RPL academic advisor at Unisa.

In occupying the role of an observer the researcher remains an outsider, only observing and documenting what is happening. When the researcher also takes on the role of a participant, this involves taking part in the actual activity of the population and at the same time documenting observations made (Guest et al., 2005:19). With regard to this study the researcher was both a participant and an observer.

The advantages of participant observation relate to the following (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:140–141; Woods, 2006:9; Guest et al., 2005:14, 23; Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005:206):

- It allows researchers to hear, see and experience reality as practised by the participants.
- By being immersed in the setting researchers get the opportunity to learn from their own experience.
- It gives researchers access to the same people, places and to relevant documents.
- It allows researchers to confirm what they already know.
- It gives researchers the opportunity to discover more facts that were unknown when designing the study.
- It helps researchers understand the physical, social, cultural and economic contexts in which study participants live.

Contemplating these advantages of participant observation, the researcher deemed it constructive to use this method to collect relevant data in order to solve the research problem.

When in the field researchers make objective notes about what they see. Often notes are written in a field notebook. Any interaction and informal conversation between the researcher and members of the study population are recorded in the field notes in detail (Guest et al., 2005:13). Field notes could include relevant events and how people behaved and reacted. For this study the researcher

documented the conversations held with participants during and after work hours, during meetings and during lunch and coffee breaks. After recording the notes each day the researcher expanded on the notes to make them more narrative (Guest et al., 2005:14).

Participant observation is normally conducted at the beginning of the data collection period. It can be scheduled or it can occur at any time depending on what, who and where the researcher needs to observe (Guest et al., 2005:19). The duration depends on the activity and the population of the study. As the researcher is employed in the RPL section at Unisa, she was observing and participating in RPL practice all the time. These activities were purposefully executed for the duration of the study, which included five years of informal participant observation.

#### **4.4.1.2 Focus group interviewing**

Focus group interviewing as a popular qualitative research data collection method includes a meeting between the researcher and a small group of participants to discuss a focused topic (Guest et al., 2005:115). The sampling of a focus group is typically homogeneous and normally consists of about six people (Patton, 2002:236). For the purposes of this study the focus group participants involved in RPL practice at Unisa consisted of five RPL advisors and one RPL administrator. The focus group interview is usually conducted by the researcher as interviewer (Guest et al., 2005:116), which was relevant for this study.

The researcher decided to use focus group interviewing as a data collection method for the following reasons (Guest et al., 2005:51–53; Patton, 2002:386–387):

- Due to its cost-effective quality, the researcher knew that she would be able to obtain a large amount of information in a short period.
- Due to the opportunity of personal contact with the participants, the researcher was able to probe certain issues.
- Due to constant interaction between the participants, group dynamics stimulated conversation among participants which yielded rich data that enhanced the quality of findings.



- The researcher wanted to obtain a wide range of views/perspectives about the topic under study.
- Focus group dynamics have the potential to elicit in-depth responses.

The process of focus group interviewing entails the interviewer leading the discussion by asking the participants a series of open-ended questions (Guest et al., 2005:116). This is done by referring to an interview schedule as a framework for the inclusion of relevant topics that need to be addressed during the interview (Patton, 2002:344).

When conducting a focus group interview it is crucial to have an interview guide as it helps keep the interviewer focused on the issue being discussed and does not allow for side tracking to occur as the participants interact (Patton, 2002:344). With this investigation into RPL practice the interview guide consisted of nine questions that were formulated after careful examination of the literature on international and national RPL practice (Appendix A).

The duration of a typical interview is between one and two hours (Patton, 2002: 385). The duration of the focus group interview for this study was one and a half hours. The focus group interview was held in the boardroom of the RPL office on the Unisa premises. Due to the intrusive nature of interviewing, the researcher obtained ethical clearance from the participants by means of a consent form (Appendix C; Patton, 2002:405). Prior to participation through interviewing, the researcher and the participants perused the content of the consent form together. This was done by the researcher reading out loud to the participants, followed by participants signing the consent form.

Data from a focus group interview usually includes a tape recording, a transcript of the recording, notes from the discussion and notes from the debriefing session held after the focus group interview (Guest et al., 2005:52). The focus group interview conducted in this investigation was recorded and immediately transcribed.

#### **4.4.1.3 In-depth interviews**

Denzin and Lincoln (2000:645) cite individual interviewing as one of the most common and powerful methods used by researchers to understand human beings.

The individual interview is a qualitative technique used by the researcher to illicit in-depth information from the participant on the research topic (Guest et al., 2005:29). It is usually conducted face to face. With this type of interview the interviewer is considered the student and the participant the expert. The process involves the researcher asking the participant for expert information with reference to an interview guide/schedule. The participant is given the opportunity to respond, with the researcher probing for further information (Guest et al., 2005:29). The researcher conducted individual interviews with nine RPL assessors.

By using individual interviews as a data collection method the researcher was able to obtain rich, in-depth information from the participants. This enabled her to interact with the participants, thus gaining insight into the non-verbal communication of their points of view (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:183). The flexibility of this approach gave the researcher the freedom and opportunity to probe for further responses from the participants (Hanrahan, 2010:27). Apart from the opportunity to collect in-depth information from information-rich participants, the RPL assessors were situated on different campuses, which meant that individual interviewing was the most suitable option.

During the individual interviews the researcher referred to an interview guide (par. 4.4.1.2; Appendix A) for conformity and to ensure that all relevant aspects pertaining to the phenomenon of study were addressed. The interviews were conducted in the office of each participant. According to Johnson and Christensen (2004:183), the average individual interview lasts from thirty minutes to one hour. All of the individual interviews conducted in this investigation into RPL practice lasted between thirty minutes and one hour. The individual interviews were recorded and immediately transcribed. To ensure that the interviews were conducted in an ethical manner, participants were informed about the nature of and reason for the investigation. Their willing consent was confirmed by the signing of the consent forms (Appendix C). Participants were continuously reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any stage during the investigation.

#### **4.4.1.4 Open-ended questionnaires**

As a self-report data collection instrument (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:164), the open-ended questionnaire is used by the researcher to obtain the thoughts, feelings and opinions of information-rich participants. The open-ended questionnaire is used mainly when interviewing is not convenient. Although the use of the questionnaire as a data collection instrument is not restricted to a particular research method (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:164), closed questions where the participants are given fixed possible answers to choose from are associated with quantitative research, whereas open-ended questions where participants are able to give any answer in the form of a narrative are related to qualitative research (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:286).

The way in which the open-ended questionnaire is compiled is informed by the researcher's research objectives and relates to the interview schedule. Johnson and Christensen (2004:288) point out that open-ended questionnaires are often used in exploratory research.

For this study on RPL practice an open-ended questionnaire was emailed to those RPL advisors and assessors who could not be interviewed. These participants could not accommodate the researcher due to time constraints, while others were away at conferences or hosting workshops at Unisa regional offices. With the designing of the open-ended questionnaire (Appendix B) and with cognisance of the interview schedule, the researcher ensured that the questions reflected her research objectives, that natural and familiar language was used and that all possibilities of leading or double-barrelled questions were avoided (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:165–166). The use of open-ended questions enabled the participants to express themselves in detail without any restrictions (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:165–168), enabling the researcher to obtain dense data.

The questionnaire and a consent form (Appendix C) were emailed to 16 RPL assessors and 5 RPL academic advisors. Of a total of 21 questionnaires sent, 15 questionnaires were returned, namely 10 questionnaires from RPL assessors and 5 from RPL academic advisors.

## **4.5 DATA MANAGEMENT**

According to Miles and Huberman (1994:45), there is no dividing line between data management and data analysis. Given the rich, thick nature of qualitative data, the researcher needs to have an efficient data management system in place. Data needs to be managed in an organised and systematic way, seeing that it influences data analysis (Guest et al., 2005:86). Once researchers commence with the process of data collection, the question of how to organise and store the data arises.

Although there are various qualitative software programs that researchers could use to manage their data (Gorman & Clayton, 2005:223), for the purposes of this study the researcher chose not to use any of these, but to receptively engage and interact directly with the data by being the data manager herself.

Data collected through participant observation was reordered daily in the researcher's diary. The diary was kept in a locked filing cabinet at all times, and only the researcher had access to it. As said in paragraphs 4.4.1.2 and 4.4.1.3, the management of the data entailed a tape recording of the focus group interview and individual interviews and thereafter transcription by the researcher herself. The taped recordings were also locked in the filing cabinet. The transcribed interviews were stored on computer using a numbering system for easy identification. The consent forms collected from the participants prior to the interviews were also kept in the filing cabinet, together with the completed questionnaires. For the sake of confidentiality and in line with what is suggested in literature (Creswell, 2009:91), all raw data will be destroyed after six months of successfully completing the study.

## **4.6 DATA ANALYSIS**

The aim of qualitative data analysis is to arrive at findings after examining the relationships and themes in the data itself (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:207). It is the process of extracting meaning from raw, inexpressive data. Since qualitative research has the potential to produce a mass of complex data that can be messy and ambiguous, the process of data analysis is crucial in reconstructing the data in a more meaningful way. The process involves the sorting out and sifting of

data whilst searching for patterns and classes (Jorgensen, 1989:107). It begins with the researcher describing the data, followed by analysing and lastly interpreting the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:207). As a means of converting data into findings Patton (2002:432) asserts that there is no definite formula for the process of data analysis. However, an analytically basic process for data analysis relates to the phases of organising the data, becoming immersed in the data, coding the data, generating categories and themes and interpreting the data through analytic memos (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:209). Each of these phases of data analysis consists of data reduction and interpretation. In order to analyse the data for this study on RPL practice the researcher followed the analytic procedure consisting of five phases as described by Marshall and Rossman (2011:209).

#### **4.6.1 Organising the data**

Organising the data comprised a general cleaning up of the data to make it more manageable (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:210). This involved transcribing all the individual interviews and the focus group interview and recording notes during participant observation (par. 4.4.1.2 and 4.4.1.3).

#### **4.6.2 Becoming immersed in the data**

Researchers need to engage with the data constantly in order to become familiarised with it (Patton, 2002:440). This involves reading and rereading the data to assign codes and identify themes (Marshall & Rossman 2011:211). Being immersed in the data allows the researcher to become more aware of the life world of the participants (Burnard, 1991:462). For this investigation the researcher made constant notes while numerously rereading all transcripts, notes from participant observation and answers from the questionnaires.

#### **4.6.3 Coding the data**

Coding is a fundamental part of the analytical procedure as it enables the researcher to identify themes and patterns (Hanrahan, 2010:32). Johnson and Christensen (2004:502–503) define coding as a process of marking parts, chunks, segments, phrases, sentences and whole paragraphs of the data using descriptive words. Essentially a code is a tag or a label that is used to give meaning to a

segment of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994:56). By coding, the researcher is able to condense a large amount of data into simpler more manageable data sets for data analysis (Hanrahan, 2010:32). In this current study, the researcher engaged in a process of sorting and defining the data and vice versa, thus creating an organisational framework. This initial process of coding, known as open coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:214), enabled the researcher to inductively create major codes generated directly from the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:508).

#### **4.6.4 Generating categories and themes**

Once the open coding was completed the researcher grouped the codes according to categories of commonality. The open codes were clustered into four to five emerging themes. These themes were used to link the underlying meanings together in the different categories, those found within the categories and those that cut across categories (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004:107). The researcher identified verbatim quotes from the data to illustrate important findings. In this regard various quotes are functionally included in the different themes.

#### **4.6.5 Interpreting the data**

The final phase of data analysis involves the writing up of qualitative data. This involves researchers telling the story of what they have learned from their study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:219). The interpretation of data entails explaining the meaning of the identified themes and linkages and making sense of the findings by explaining their significance, making inferences and drawing conclusions (Patton, 2002:480). The emerged themes reflect the major findings of the research and are therefore normally used as headings in the write up of the research (Creswell, 2009:189).

With regard to this study on RPL practice the researcher linked the empirical findings to the literature findings and determined comparisons and differences. Verbatim quotes from the empirical investigation were used to support the researcher's arguments. With reference to the fact that data as research findings can be displayed in narrative format, as matrices, as graphs, as flow charts or as mind maps (Glesne, 1999:141), the findings of this study are displayed in a narrative format.

Marshall and Rossman (2011:208) propose that data collection and data analysis be done simultaneously so that the researcher can check the relevancy of the data and ask more relevant questions if need be. They therefore recommend that the researcher start analysing collected data very early in the research process. They also emphasise the importance of keeping the research question in mind when analysing and finally interpreting the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:219). The researcher did this in her study on RPL practice.

## 4.7 TRUSTWORTHINESS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The concepts of validity and reliability are examined in quantitative research to establish the worth of an investigation, while qualitative researchers use the concept of trustworthiness (Shenton, 2004:63). In order to establish the trustworthiness of a study Guba proposes four criteria that need to be considered (Guba, 1981:77):

- Credibility (as an analogue to internal validity)
- Transferability (as an analogue to external validity/generalisability)
- Dependability (as an analogue to reliability)
- Confirmability (as an analogue to objectivity)

### 4.7.1 Credibility

Credibility is concerned with the following question: Did the study measure what it was supposed to measure (Shenton, 2004:64)? When determining the credibility of a study the researcher needs to consider what was done during data collection, how the data were analysed and how it was presented to the reader (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989:70). Guba and Lincoln (1986:18–19) propose the following techniques for enhancing credibility:

- **Prolonged engagement and persistent observation:** The researcher needs to have been in the setting for a long period, observing the participants. In order to gain an understanding of the phenomenon, the researcher needs to spend sufficient time in the context and prolonged engagement is necessary for sufficient observation (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989:73). Through persistent observation the researcher is able to obtain a good understanding to assess the quality of the data.

For this study, the researcher was engaged in the setting as she is employed as an RPL advisor. She therefore had access to the site and to the participants at all times. This equipped the researcher with knowledge of the setting and enabled her to foster relationships with the participants based on honesty and openness.

- **Triangulation:** This involves the cross-checking of data, by different sources and research methods and also by different researchers. Triangulation across sources pertains to using several types of informants to obtain the evidence, while triangulation across methods involves the researcher using different methods to obtain the data (Wallendorf & Belk, 1989:74).

For this investigation the research sample consisted of RPL assessors, RPL advisors and RPL administrative staff. The researcher obtained data by distributing open-ended questionnaires and observing and interviewing the participants personally.

- **Peer debriefing and peer scrutiny of the research project:** This entails researchers discussing their findings with like-minded researchers, provided these researchers are not involved in the particular project. The peers are given the opportunity to critique the research process and suggest improvements and in this way contribute to increased credibility.

With regard to this study on RPL practice the researcher consistently discussed the research process, data collection methods and findings with her line manager and supervisor. The line manager obtained her doctorate in the field of RPL. The researcher's colleagues were also consistently consulted to voice their opinions of the research process in terms of focus and data collection approaches.

- **Member checks:** This pertains to the importance of researchers sharing the data and their analysis of the data with the participants. With regard to this study on RPL practice the researcher verified with the participants whether the transcripts were a true reflection of what transpired in the interviews. The same applied to the research findings.



- **Examination of previous research findings:** It is important that researchers verify their findings with research conducted in the past on the topic of study. For this study, the researcher did a thorough literature search prior to developing the interview guide and open-ended questionnaire.

### **4.7.2 Transferability**

Transferability is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to another context (Shenton, 2004:69). For the purposes of this study the researcher has described the research process in detail and has given a thick description of the collected data. This will enable other researchers to check if the findings of this particular study can be applied elsewhere (Guba & Lincoln, 1986:19). The researcher discussed the research findings in detail and illustrated important findings with verbatim quotations from the interviews and open-ended questionnaires. Research findings from the empirical investigation were integrated with the literature findings.

### **4.7.3 Dependability**

The issue of dependability relates to ensuring that the replication of a study in a similar context using a similar sample would provide the same findings (Shenton, 2004:71). In order to ensure this Shenton (2004:71) proposes that the research report stipulate the processes in detail so that another researcher can repeat the study.

With regard to this study, the researcher has described in detail the research design and its implementation and the way in which data were gathered and analysed. The study also fulfils the requirement of authentication because the researcher documented the research process in a logical and traceable way.

### **4.7.4 Confirmability**

Confirmability confirms the authenticity of the research findings as a true reflection of the participants' responses and views and not the researcher's bias and perspectives (Shenton, 2004:72). Confirmability is established using triangulation across researchers and methods, reflexive journals and auditing.

For this study the researcher employed the technique of triangulation with regard to data collection methods. Data was collected through participant observation, open-ended questionnaires and individual and focus group interviews.

Kvale (1996:229) emphasises that although the terms “reliability”, “validity”, “objectivity” and “generalisability” are regarded as the *holy trinity* for quantitative research, the soundness of a qualitative study can be equally efficiently measured using the techniques of trustworthiness.

## 4.8 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Research ethics relates to the relationship between the researcher and the people they study. Guest et al. (2005:8) argue that any researcher conducting research with people needs to undergo formal ethics training. By conforming to the standards of research ethics researchers establish a base of trust between them and the participants, ensuring that participant needs are considered (Guest et al, 2005:8). Research ethics demands that the well-being of the participant be placed before the needs of the researcher. Guest et al. (2005:8) also maintain that the research question is of secondary importance when compared to the concerns of the participant.

Three core principles representing the basis for an ethical conducting of research relate to the following (Marshall & Rossman, 2011:47):

- **Respect for persons:** Respect for persons requires that the researcher respect the participants’ autonomy, privacy and their right to participate or not. This implies the participants’ right to withdraw from the study whenever they want to. It also protects participants from being forced to participate in the study because it stresses that participation is voluntary throughout the study. Respect for persons means that the researcher has to obtain the participants’ consent and has to ensure that confidentiality is maintained throughout the study.
- **Beneficence:** Beneficence calls for the researcher to ensure that the participants are not harmed by participating in the study. When designing the study the researcher has to ensure that the risks are minimised and the benefits are maximised. The researcher should also ensure that conflicts of

interest are managed appropriately and that the results of the study are made available to the participants.

- **Justice:** The principle of justice requires that the people who participate in the study benefit from it.

#### **4.8.1 Informed consent**

Informed consent is an important tool to ensure that the principle of respect for persons is applied during the research. Johnson and Christensen (2004:102) point to the value of informed consent in that participants have the opportunity to decide in a conscious way whether they want to participate in the study. This they do by concertedly considering the purpose of the study, the procedures and risks involved in participation and the benefits and limitations of the study as communicated to them by the researcher. Most researchers use forms to administer the process of informed consent. These forms usually also address the issue of confidentiality and anonymity.

For this study, the researcher used an informed consent form (Appendix C) that addressed the following issues (Guest et al., 2005:10):

- The purpose of the research.
- The arrangement of confidentiality and anonymity.
- The possibility of publication of the research.
- Signatures of participants.

As discussed in par. 4.4.1.3 all ethical considerations and procedures relating to informed consent were adhered to.

#### **4.8.2 Confidentiality and anonymity**

In order to earn the trust of the participants it is important for the researcher to address the issue of confidentiality and anonymity. Johnson and Christensen (2004:112) define anonymity as keeping the identity of the participant from everyone, including the researcher. Confidentiality is defined as not ever revealing the identity of the participants to anyone outside of the research group (Johnson & Christensen, 2004:112).

Ways of ensuring confidentiality and anonymity include (Guest et al., 2005:31–32):

- Not disclosing the names of the participants.
- Storing all signed consent forms in a locked cupboard.
- Storing all recorded interviews in a locked cupboard.
- Destroying taped recordings once interviews are transcribed.
- Not revealing any personal information in the research report.

With regard to this investigation and as discussed in par. 4.8.1 the researcher dealt with all of the above issues either in the consent form or verbally to the participants prior to conducting the interviews.

Ethical challenges in qualitative research are concerned with informed consent and confidentiality as mechanisms to protect participants from possible harm in the study. Qualitative researchers therefore need to ensure that their research design and research conduct takes serious cognisance of ethical issues.

## **4.9 CONCLUSION**

With reference to Creswell (2009:3) and as was clear from this chapter, the research design represents the plans and procedures for research. There are three types of research design to choose from, namely qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research approaches. The choice of research design depends on the nature of the research problem and a good research design clearly outlines the need for a specific design. In this chapter an explanation was given of the research sample and the data collection methods and management of the data analysis procedures were discussed, preparing the setting for a discussion of the research findings.

# CHAPTER 5

## FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the analysis and interpretation of the data collected with the aim of establishing the constituents important for RPL and thus contribute to an improvement of the implementation of RPL at Unisa. By reporting on the findings of the empirical investigation chapter 5 also provides answers to the sub questions outlined in chapter 1 (par. 1.3).

The sub questions explored with this study are:

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, instruments and processes when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?
- What are the experiences, successes and challenges experienced by the RPL academic advisors and the academic assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa?
- What guidelines can be developed for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa?

The findings in respect of the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, instruments and processes when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa are discussed in paragraphs 5.4.1 and 5.4.2. Similarly, the findings with regard to the experiences, successes and challenges experienced by the RPL academic advisors and the academic assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa, and guidelines for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa, are addressed in paragraphs 5.4.3, 5.4.4, 5.4.5 and 5.5, respectively.

### 5.2 RESEARCH METHODS IN BRIEF

This study was a qualitative study in which data were collected through participant observation, focus group interviewing, open-ended questionnaires and in-depth individual interviewing. The use of participant observation as a data collection method in this study was particularly appropriate and advantageous as the researcher herself is employed in the field researched (par. 1.5). The purpose of

the individual and focus group interviews of RPL administrator, advisors and assessors was to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the RPL methodology. All of these data collection methods enabled the researcher to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the RPL instruments and processes. The interviews were also functional to describe the experiences, successes and challenges experienced by the RPL academic advisors and assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa and thus to develop guidelines for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa (par. 4.4.1.2 and 4.4.1.3). The use of the open-ended questionnaires enabled the researcher to elicit responses from those assessors who were unable to be interviewed in person (par. 4.4.1.4).

### **5.3 THE FUNCTIONING OF RPL AT UNISA**

RPL was introduced at Unisa to help students gain access to higher education using their work-related experience. This experience is assessed so that students can obtain credits within a specific degree or diploma. Apart from gaining access and being awarded subject credits, students without a matric qualification were allowed to enrol for the pre-access programme offered by the RPL department. The aim of the pre-access programme was to prepare those students for higher education studies who did not have a matric qualification but who wanted to study at Unisa. Once the student had completed the pre-access programme, they were then able to apply for the access course as done by a traditional student. The pre-access programme has since been suspended.

The RPL academic advisor prepares the RPL student for the assessment, which is conducted by the RPL academic assessors who are academic staff at Unisa. It is the task of the RPL academic advisor to advise, mentor and help the RPL student. The advisor also helps the student compile and gather the necessary evidence required for the assessment. The assessor then assesses students' skills and knowledge against a set of learning outcomes. Once the assessment has been conducted the advisor prepares the necessary paperwork for authorisation of the credit.

Prior to the decentralisation of the RPL department, the RPL office was situated on the Unisa Florida campus. The staff consisted of the RPL manager, five RPL academic advisors and one RPL administrator. At the end of 2010 the RPL

department was decentralised to the colleges. The RPL manager and administrator were located on the Unisa Sunnyside campus. The five academic advisors were decentralised to their respective colleges, except for one academic advisor who was also situated at the Sunnyside campus. The college to which the academic advisor based at the Sunnyside campus has been assigned does not have the physical space to accommodate that specific academic advisor.

The participants in this study consisted of twenty RPL academic assessors, five RPL academic advisors and one RPL administrator (par. 4.3). These participants were selected purposively as participants in this study had to have at least three years' experience in RPL at Unisa. Of the twenty-six participants, twelve were female.

## **5.4 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

With reference to the main research question (par. 1.3), major themes were used to distinguish between the six themes that emerged as relevant to the constituents of effective implementation of an RPL programme. These sub-themes are discussed next and findings are authenticated by verbatim excerpts from the interviews and open-ended questionnaires. In order to identify the responses and to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, they are numbered P1 to P26.

### **5.4.1 Identifiable strengths of the RPL methodology, instruments and process**

The strengths in terms of RPL methodology, instruments and process are discussed individually below.

#### **5.4.1.1 Strengths of the RPL methodology**

The RPL department keeps a paper trail of its dealings with the academics and students. Participant P22 stated that the strength of the RPL methodology lies in the fact that "*it is a very well documented and quality controlled process*". Furthermore the methodology is "*open to scrutiny in that anyone can trace what has happened to an application throughout its life from beginning to end*" (P3).

A further strength of the methodology is the close relationship that the RPL academic advisor has with the RPL student and the RPL academic assessor. Particularly in distance education it is important for students to be in constant contact with the academic staff. The RPL academic advisor provides regular feedback to the student and the student has contact with a real person. The pre-assessment meeting is very meaningful as it helps the students feel at ease as they are able to put a face to a name and establish a point of contact. Through a good relationship with the RPL academic assessors, the RPL academic advisors can easily follow up on a particular file, thus ensuring a quicker turnaround time of the files (*"The pre-assessment meeting between us and the students is very important as we are the point of contact for the student"* P3).

The allocation of a specific RPL academic advisor to a specific college has been very advantageous, as pointed out by participant P15 as follows: *"One of the big benefits of the system that we have put in place is that here is an academic advisor for each college...I have seen the advantages of that."* When asked about the main advantages of a designated academic advisor for each college, it was clear that these related to the fact that the academic advisors were approachable and eager to assist the academic assessors. For that reason the RPL academic advisors repeatedly, throughout the interviews, commented on *"how well it works sitting in the colleges"* (P12).

#### **5.4.1.2 Strengths of the RPL instruments**

The instruments used for assessing the students' competence are very adaptable and can therefore be used for all students in any part of the world. Sometimes, however, a particular instrument may not be sufficient to determine the competency of the student and often the RPL academic assessors have to combine various instruments. This can assist the RPL academic assessor to determine the student's level of expertise more accurately. Participant P20 found that when she *"combined an interview with the portfolio for access to masters and doctorates, it's a very good tool"*. Her experience had taught her that students are able to express themselves better when speaking than writing. Often the RPL students have English as a second language and thus experience severe writing difficulties.



RPL academic assessors within the Faculty of Engineering visit their students on site and also request that their students submit portfolios. With a site visit academic assessors “*are able to see what the student is actually doing*” (P4). This can be combined with an interview on site. Certain RPL academic assessors indicated their preference for using the interview as an instrument to determine applicant competencies as they believed that one-on-one contact with the student helped them determine if the student was telling the truth regarding acquired skills. According to participant P14, “*the student cannot hide what he does not know*”. Similarly, participant P5 argued that with an interview “*you can be able to see whether somebody knows the stuff or not*”.

The challenge exam as an instrument for determining obtained competencies also has its strengths, specifically with regard to determining acquired abilities that relate to calculation skills. In this regard participant P26 pointed out that RPL academic assessors have used it to determine “*arithmetical, statistical, taxation, accounting competencies*” and that these competencies were determined “*under exam conditions so that you can practically check calculation ability and understanding*”. It also helps the RPL academic assessors to check if the student has the necessary theoretical knowledge of the subject. With regard to financial obligations it was clear that the challenge exam is far cheaper than the normal registration for a subject. Participant P17 emphasised as follows: “*An important advantage of challenge exams for us and for the student is that it costs less money*” than to register traditionally for the module. Apart from saving money students also save on time when they are successful in the challenge exam.

Most of the academic assessors showed a preference for the use of the portfolio as an instrument to assess RPL. The use of the portfolio to gauge students’ competencies proved to be very successful particularly within the pre-access programme. Participant P19 referred to the portfolio as “*a unique assessment tool*” that allows the students to reflect on their development. When students are compiling the portfolio it gives them the opportunity “*to think about their life and their strengths*” (P19). For this reason the College of Human Sciences at Unisa prefers to use the portfolio instead of the challenge exam for determining student competencies within the RPL programme because of the enabling value of the

instrument for students to position themselves within the total scheme of relevant competencies required.

#### **5.4.1.3 Strengths of the RPL process**

An identifiable strength of the RPL process is the supportive and cooperative nature of the RPL academic advisors. Having a highly competent RPL academic advisor liaising with the RPL academic assessors has made the RPL process function effectively. Participant P26 explained as follows: “*We have a good RPL person that is in charge so that helps a lot...she makes it very easy.*” When prompted about how it made things easy, the participant clarified that this referred to the support obtained from the academic advisors during the entire process.

An important strength of the RPL process is the fact that the process is administratively well documented by the RPL academic advisors. According to participant P25, the “*admin processes are very well thought through...very well documented*”. The well-documented process pertains to the RPL department having a manual in place that can be followed by any of the RPL academic advisors at any given time. Apart from consistency and maintaining an appropriate standard with RPL practice, this process can be audited, as the RPL department keeps a paper trail throughout the various stages of the process. Participant P2 confirmed that “*the process allows for good record keeping*” which contributes to substance and authenticity. This is evident from the fact that the administrative process allows for the capturing of all RPL applications on a central database. The RPL academic advisors have access to each other’s databases at any given time, which standardises the process and “*makes it easy to track a student’s progress*” (P6), contributing to effectiveness in dealing with each individual student promptly.

The RPL department has documented the RPL process in a procedures manual. This reader-friendly manual can be followed easily by the academic staff and the RPL academic advisors. The RPL academic assessors further complemented the RPL academic advisors with their efficiency in assisting the academic assessors with RPL queries.

## **5.4.2 Identifiable weaknesses of the RPL methodology, instruments and process**

The weaknesses of the RPL methodology, instruments and process are discussed individually below.

### **5.4.2.1 Weaknesses of the RPL methodology**

The weaknesses of the RPL methodology relate to the tracking of RPL files and the delay in obtaining the necessary signatures. Once the RPL files are sent to the RPL academic assessors for screening, the RPL academic advisors have difficulty in getting the files back. Often they have to physically leave their workstations to track the files still in the possession of the RPL academic assessors. The RPL academic advisors saw this as a serious waste of valuable time because *“coordination becomes a problem when advisors have to leave their workstations and chase the screening”* (P8). This problem is further exacerbated by the lack of administrative assistants who could perform the function of tracking files.

Feedback to students is often delayed as the procedure to obtain the necessary signatures is a time-consuming process. The various reports have to first be signed by the RPL academic assessor and then by the head of department (HOD). This causes delays in that *“a file has to go to several lecturers, thus delaying student feedback and further registration”* (P1).

### **5.4.2.2 Weaknesses of the RPL instruments**

The interviews for assessing students' competencies were found to favour students who lived in the vicinity of the RPL academic assessors. Students who live in other provinces are unable to attend as the university does not reimburse them for the travelling expenses. Often students are very uncomfortable with the telephonic interviews due to their impersonal nature. Participant P3 therefore argued that *“it is not fair to expect students at a distance education institution to come for physical interviews”*, to which participant P12 added that *“the lecturers are not all well prepared to conduct the interviews”*. For all of these reasons using the interview as an instrument to determine obtained competencies could disadvantage the student. This is especially relevant in determining acquired

competencies in practical subjects where the interview is not a very reliable instrument because it is difficult to assess practical knowledge over the telephone. The interview is, however, suitable for testing theoretical knowledge.

An inherent weakness of the challenge exam to determine acquired competencies is that it does not test the student's practical knowledge. Academic advisors affirmed that *"more often these exams cover more theory than practical knowledge"* (P14) and are thus *"not the true reflection of applicants' potential"* (P10). In this regard the RPL student is treated no differently from the traditional student who has registered for the module. The RPL student is in fact given much less time to prepare for the exam compared to the traditional student. For that reason the challenge exam *"does not examine prior knowledge"* (P3), but only serves *"to delay the process"* (P25) for the RPL student. Often the RPL students have to wait from six to twelve months to be accommodated in the exam cycles. This does not reflect a student-centred approach to empowering students to finish their studies quicker.

The portfolio is very comprehensive and thus time consuming to read and for that reason RPL academic assessors preferred the option of a challenge exam instead. The RPL academic advisors noticed that the *"lecturers were too lazy to read them, so they are often avoided"* (P3). Furthermore the construction of a portfolio of evidence proves to be difficult for students at times. As it involves a lot of work and a long time to compile, students often submit it well beyond the due date. Participant P6 admitted that *"students are given a deadline to submit their portfolios and in most cases some submit late and even a year later and it delays the process"*.

#### **5.4.2.3 Weaknesses of the RPL process**

Participants agreed that the RPL process at Unisa is still struggling to be accommodated effectively into overall Unisa functioning. Participant P25 argued that the *"RPL process itself collapses"* when it has to fit into the rigid Unisa structure. This is due to there being *"no administrative support"* (P6) for carrying out the RPL process and the RPL department not being given access to the necessary Unisa systems and computers to perform their tasks. Participant P14

captured the general feeling amongst participants by stating: *“I think that admin breaks down when we hit the inflexible system at Unisa.”*

The RPL process was described as *“taking too long”* (P3) and being *“very time consuming”* (P11). A main reason for this tedious process is the lengthy paperwork and the number of signatures that are required before the application can be finalised. In this regard participant P14 explained as follows: *“Too time consuming since the files go from one department to another and lecturers have to wait for an HOD/COD to eventually sign off. If the HOD/COD is not available, the file is held up for days or weeks within a department.”* A further weakness of the RPL process relates to the misplacement of files due to their constant movement between the advisors and assessors which results in the fact that *“the files are lost or misplaced in the process”* (P2). This seemed to be a problem experienced by most of the RPL academic advisors.

A much-mentioned weakness of the RPL process and methodology is that it is time consuming and requires copious amounts of paperwork to be completed before the student is given the credit. The RPL staff also commented on how the challenge exam further disadvantages the RPL students in that it tests the students' theoretical knowledge and not their practical knowledge.

#### **5.4.3 Experiences of the RPL academic advisors and assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa**

The findings in terms of the RPL experiences by the academic advisors and assessors consisted of positive and negative experiences. The major positive experiences related to the following:

- RPL has in general a strong base, but especially in the College of Law as acknowledged by participant P6 as follows: *“RPL has a strong base at the College of Law.”* Participant P6 emphasised that RPL has been openly welcomed and firmly established in that college.
- RPL has helped establish a link between the world of work and the world of study. This idea was expressed by participant P8 as follows: *“RPL allows the student to demonstrate the practice of investigation and to use experience obtained at work to obtain parts of a qualification.”*

- The RPL programme has helped open doors for students who previously were denied access to higher education. This has confirmed Unisa's status of accomplishing its objectives as an ODL institution that focuses on providing a service to all students on the African continent, including the ones that were previously disadvantaged. Participant 25's response was reflective of this: "*RPL at Unisa opens all avenues for students to get through the course or the subject.*"
- Participants saw RPL practice "*as being excellent*" (P20) and "*tremendous*" (P18) and were "*quite satisfied with the methods*" (P16).
- The RPL assessors drew a comparison between RPL assessment and the formative assessment used in traditional Unisa practices. They came to the conclusion that the RPL assessment is superior, as stated by participant P11: "*In my opinion it is much better in many ways compared with the formative assessment.*" When prompted about what exactly was much better, the participant clarified that RPL can test the students' knowledge obtained from their work experience and not only knowledge that is theoretically inclined.

From the interviews and open-ended questionnaires it was evident that there were also negative aspects about RPL practice experienced by the RPL participants. The main negative experiences related to the following:

- There is "*a lack of buy in*" (P14) by some Unisa academics in supporting RPL. Some Unisa academics view the RPL option as a negative option, arguing that the RPL student is often given a credit without having the theoretical knowledge of the subject. The academics argue that this is unfair to the traditional student who submits assignments and studies the subject as a year or semester module. For that reason academics discourage students "*to circumvent the system*" (P14) by applying for RPL credits in the different degrees and thus finish quicker than the traditional Unisa student. As a result of these actions of some academics, RPL is "*not given the recognition it deserves*" (P9) by the various colleges at Unisa.
- Due to the tediousness of the RPL process, participant RPL assessors suggested that the "*RPL process be streamlined*" (P7) as "*it is very time consuming*" (P24). During the long procedure required for the necessary

signatures, “*students become impatient*” (P24) waiting for the outcome of their RPL application.

- Instead of marketing RPL, the RPL academic advisors spend a great deal of time completing the necessary paperwork. Complaints were raised about the “*extensive use of paper documents*” (P13) in the RPL process itself. Excessive paperwork is required throughout the RPL process, “*from the time a student applies for RPL until the credit is finally loaded on the system*” (P13).
- RPL practice does not receive the status it should as an independent department that contributes to meeting the justified needs of students. Instead, RPL is being “*stifled by being placed in an administration directorate*” (P4). Since 2006 RPL has had to “*conform to an archaic, bureaucratic Unisa system*” (P3) that is not flexible to accommodate RPL practice effectively and cater for student needs sufficiently.
- By wrongly categorising RPL initiatives in an administrative department, the RPL department has forfeited some of its status as an academically inclined service provider to students. This has resulted in a situation in which RPL “*has lost credibility with the academics at Unisa*” (P25).
- Academics and students demonstrate a “*lack of awareness of the RPL process and procedures*” (P1). This results in a lack of awareness of the potential value of RPL practice in terms of contributing to an appropriately skilled labour force as required by the labour market.

#### **5.4.4 Successes experienced in the implementation of RPL at Unisa**

From the empirical investigation five sub-themes were identified in describing the successes experienced in the implementation of RPL at Unisa. These five sub-themes are discussed next.

##### **5.4.4.1 Student progress, access and crediting**

During the interviews the RPL academic advisors referred to the functionality of the pre-access programme which gave students access to study at Unisa. The pre-access programme was initiated by the RPL department to help those students who wanted to study at Unisa but had not completed matric at school. The success of the pre-access programme was confirmed by participant P6 as

follows: *“We have students who have started on their degrees who came through this wonderful programme.”* Unisa, however, took a decision to terminate the pre-access programme in June 2010. The reason for this was that the pre-access programme was on an NQF level 4 and at university level courses can only be offered to students that are on an NQF level 5 and higher.

Participants agreed that the success of RPL engagement is confirmed when students obtain credits for their work experience. As stated by participant P14: *“Every credit/exemption granted is an RPL success.”* The opportunity of being able to obtain a credit through RPL gives students further options to complete their degrees/diplomas and empower them with the possibility of being formally acknowledged for the competencies they possess.

The success of RPL is further evidenced when students are assessed for their work-related experience and given access into higher education programmes to eventually obtain higher education qualifications. Participant P25 explained this success as follows: *“Real success means that we could really assess the potential that we saw in these students and give them a way into a higher qualification.”* Furthermore, students who have gained access to higher education qualifications through the RPL programme are more motivated and eager to complete their master’s and doctoral qualifications than traditional students. Participant P24 explained this as follows: *“These students are highly motivated... are the better students...complete their masters and doctorates...have passed certain things with distinction.”* When probed about the reason for this better motivation of RPL students, the participant clarified that RPL students were already exposed to the work environment and were therefore familiar with the importance of gaining the required qualifications in order to make progress in the labour market.

It was clear from the interviews that gaining access to a higher education qualification, or gaining credit within a qualification, motivates students and enables them to progress in their studies. This implies that ultimately RPL facilitates students’ progress in their studies and their ultimate chances for social and economic mobility in life. This point of view was substantiated by participant P21’s comment: *“I want to allow progression, which I think is a wonderful new development as an opportunity for economic mobility.”*



#### **5.4.4.2 Efficient administration process**

The RPL department has formally documented its administrative process in an RPL manual that is adhered to by all RPL academic advisors. According to the RPL academic advisors, their *“admin processes as documented are pretty sound” as they have “put a lot of thought into the admin process”* (P22). The manual outlines a generic administrative process that can be followed by any RPL academic advisor from any college at any given time. The administrative process outlines the RPL procedure to be followed by RPL academic advisors as well as RPL assessors. The RPL department has a database of all the students who have gone through the RPL process. The students’ personal details as well as the outcome of the assessment are captured on this database.

#### **5.4.4.3 Harmonious relationships**

In order to determine if the RPL student should be awarded access to a higher qualification or be granted a credit, the RPL assessors have to intensively engage with the students. This means moving beyond the information given in the application form. Often during the RPL process the RPL assessors have to communicate with students, either telephonically or visit them in person. This leads to the development of an appreciative professional relationship between the two stakeholders. Participant P25 explained this relationship as follows: *“I think that we are personally involved with a lot of students...and once the process is finished they walk away from it being really grateful and satisfied.”* For this reason participant assessors valued this personalised relationship with the RPL students which is based on eminent professionalism as a huge success of RPL practice at Unisa.

Apart from RPL having the capacity to establish a successful relationship between the students and the RPL assessors, it also helps the RPL academic advisors to establish harmonious relationships with the RPL academic assessors. According to participant P23, *“initially the old Unisa staff were incredibly suspicious of the RPL process”* but the RPL academic advisors were able to break through this barrier and eventually established a *“relationship of trust”* (P23) with the RPL assessors. This paradigm shift has significantly benefited the progress of RPL practice at Unisa. The assessors now have *“more empathy for the students”* and are *“more flexible in their assessment methods”* (P25). Overall the RPL

academic advisors have found the assessors to be more approachable and accommodating. The established relationship of trust between the RPL academic advisors and RPL assessors has resulted in assessors *“increasing the turnaround time for the RPL assessments”* (P23). Participant P23 confirmed the improvement in turnaround time for dealing with the RPL files by pointing out that the RPL files were *“returned within two days’ time”* as opposed to previously being *“returned after two weeks or even two months”*.

#### **5.4.4.4 Methods of assessment**

Successes in the assessment methods used in the RPL process relate to the value of flexibility and magnitude of participation. By using flexible methods of assessment such as a portfolio of evidence, a telephonic interview and a challenge exam, students from all around the world can apply for RPL at Unisa. Participant P20 remarked on the global reach of the methods of assessment as being *“pretty relevant because we can reach students all over the world”*. Due to the variety of choice of RPL assessment method, participant P23 argued that the RPL process forces one *“to examine the broader picture and not just [plough] through marking of the examinations”*. It was clear that ‘broader picture’ meant the issue of assessment at Unisa.

Most of the participants defined the success of RPL as that point in time when the student has been awarded the credit or given access to the study of a higher education course. Students, who are given the credits applied for, are able to complete their qualifications in a shorter period. By obtaining credits in this manner students feel motivated to complete their studies. With regard to assessment the RPL department is also very proud of the database it has established which captures the details of the students’ RPL applications. The different instruments used in the RPL assessment itself and the flexibility and versatility of these instruments pertains to a typical ODL environment such as Unisa.

#### **5.4.5 Challenges experienced in the implementation of RPL at Unisa**

Although significant successes are experienced in the implementation of RPL at Unisa, some major challenges remain. From an analysis and interpretation of the data collected via interviewing and open-ended questionnaires, nine sub-

themes emerged as challenges faced by the staff implementing RPL practice at Unisa. These nine sub-themes are discussed next.

#### **5.4.5.1 Lack of administrative support**

The RPL academic advisors have repeatedly verbalised their request for administrative support in executing their duties. These requests have, however, been repeatedly declined by management. According to participant P22, “*there is no provision made for admin assistants because upper management doesn’t understand that there is a need*”. Having no administrative support the RPL academic advisors are unable to devote sufficient time to the academic-related aspects of RPL practice as the administrative work takes up too much of their time. In that regard lack of administrative support also lengthens the RPL process.

Although management eventually granted the RPL department administrative assistance, this was for a period of two years only and, according to Unisa HR policy, the two-year contract could not be renewed. This implies that the RPL department has to retrain new administrative assistants every two years. The RPL department cannot be granted permanent administrative assistance because, according to Unisa HR policy, “*you are only allowed an administrative assistant if you have a P6 or a P5 grading*” (P20). The grading system relates to the different post levels of staff depending on their job function and requirements. The HR policy at Unisa ensures that only staff on a P6 or P5 grade level are entitled to administrative assistance. Presently all the RPL academic advisors are on a P8 grading and for that reason “*it will not be possible under the current HR policy to employ someone permanently*” (P20).

Within the colleges, RPL academic advisors are not able to cope with the large number of applications. As stated by participant P20 “*we have basically reached our capacity*”. Each college is served by one RPL academic advisor only and due to the growing number of applications, these individual RPL academic advisors do not have the time to train new lecturers, or to promote RPL, or to recruit new students for RPL consideration. Some RPL academic advisors have identified the tuition committee meeting held by the various schools as an ideal opportunity to market RPL in their respective colleges. Unfortunately they are unable to attend these meetings frequently due to their respective workloads, intensified

by an increase in RPL applications and lack of administrative support to deal with these applications.

#### **5.4.5.2 Lack of support and commitment from the cadres of management, academic staff and non-academic staff**

Although some RPL academic advisors market RPL by managing to attend the tuition committee meetings despite their heavy workloads, Unisa lecturers are not promoting RPL among their students. One of the main reasons for this is that the lecturers themselves are not familiar with RPL practices and processes. This was confirmed by the following statement by participant P4 who was an academic: *“That was the only thing that made me reluctant even to make students go through it because I don’t know how it’s going to go...it has to do with me not understanding it and the rules and how it works.”* Related to this lack of knowledge of RPL implementation and functioning, some RPL academic assessors have complained of not receiving adequate training from the RPL department in dealing with an RPL application. Due to this lack of training they opt to give the student a challenge exam as an assessment method. They consider the challenge exam as a more conservative option.

The RPL academic advisors also pointed out how important it is that the staff responsible for RPL registrations be competent in RPL practices and that they should have sufficient knowledge about RPL possibilities as they are the initial points of contact with the students. In this regard participant P16 emphasised that *“not everybody knows about the possibilities of the RPL process and students who could have benefitted from RPL register for irrelevant courses and only know afterwards about RPL at Unisa”*. Participant P18 provided the following solution: *“Maybe our starting point is to educate people at the lowest level that have direct [first] contact with the student to kind of help us make people aware of what RPL is.”* Other participants pointed to the impossibility of such an opportunistic solution due to management’s relentless refusal to allow for the creation of positions for more RPL academic advisors. This confirms that the exhausting workloads for the remaining RPL staff will continue.

Prior to the merger of Unisa, TSA and Vudec, the TSA staff were keen on implementing RPL, whereas the Unisa academics still needed to be convinced

of the potential of RPL. With regard to the receptiveness of Unisa staff for RPL implementation, participant P14 proclaimed as follows: *"I don't think there has been sufficient buy in on their part."* The new Unisa academic staff remain reluctant to issue RPL credits. They are found to be *"rather suspicious of just giving away a credit"* (P25). Instead the Unisa academic staff feel students do not deserve the credit if they have not studied for it in the traditional manner. Hence, the academic staff prefer to give the RPL student a challenge exam instead, which, according to the academe, would represent more realistic evidence of the candidate's true competencies.

The RPL academic advisors have identified problems with the instruments which the RPL academic assessors use to assess students. As was mentioned, RPL participants were of the opinion that *"lecturers are too lazy to assess a huge portfolio so they avoid it completely as an assessment instrument"* (P20) and instead they give the student the option of writing a challenge exam. A weakness of the challenge exam option is that it delays the RPL process as the RPL student has to wait until the end of the year to write during the official examination period when the traditional students write their examinations. A further weakness of the challenge exam is that *"it does not test prior learning"* (P18). Most often RPL students fail the challenge exams as these exams are more theory based. Furthermore, should the students fail the challenge exam, they are *"not given a second chance, but have to register as traditional students"* (P18).

During the course of the interviews the RPL academic assessors admitted to having a negative attitude towards RPL as they found it to be *"a tedious process that only gives us extra work with far too much paperwork involved"* (P15). On the other hand the RPL academic advisors complained that the RPL academic assessors delayed the RPL process by taking too much time to assess the files. According to the RPL academic advisors, more than two weeks is too long a period for the academic assessors to keep a student's file because it only slows the whole process.

The RPL academic advisors further elaborated on recurring problems that they encountered with the different colleges at Unisa. One college, for example, only offers challenge exams to the RPL students and this often ends with the students failing. Students are not allowed any other form of assessment in this college.

According to participant P6, *“this has been an age long problem”*. At another college students are not allowed to apply for RPL crediting in second- and third-level subjects. According to participant P6, the students at that particular college *“are only allowed the first level subjects and it’s almost 99% guaranteed that the file comes back a challenge exam”*. For participant P20 such an approach *“is not fair to the students”* who have the necessary work-related experience with related competencies acquired. Participants agreed that this unfair college-specific approach was *“a horrible barrier”* (P10) for the effective implementation of RPL practice.

RPL enables students who ordinarily would not have been able to gain access to study at a higher education institution the opportunity to qualify for study at Unisa. As was mentioned, the pre-access programme that was run by the RPL department enabled those students who wanted to study but did not have a matric qualification the chance to obtain this qualification and thereafter enrol at Unisa. Management’s decision to terminate the programme was for participant P22 *“a very good example of a lack of understanding from Management”*. Participant P14 interpreted management’s termination of the pre-access programme as a reluctance to invest money in RPL practice. Participant P14 explained as follows: *“The institution higher up feels that RPL costs money and is not particularly interested in expanding it and giving access to more students.”* It was evident from the empirical investigation that the management of Unisa does not clearly understand the importance of RPL practice and is therefore reluctant to support its development optimally.

The frustration experienced by the RPL department has been further exacerbated by management positioning the RPL department in the Directorate of Student Administrations and Registrations (DSAR). The stifling effect of this decision has already been mentioned. Participant P18 confirmed as follows: *“RPL is being stifled by being based under an administrative director.”* The positioning of RPL within an administrative directorate was understood by participants as indicating the directorate’s misunderstanding of the purpose of RPL, which resulted in RPL being categorised to conform to the system of the administrative directorate. And in this regard participant P5 emphasised that the director’s decisions on RPL practice stem *“from a lack of understanding more than anything else”*. What was

clear from the interviews was that the specific needs and functions required by the RPL department are overlooked as the university tends to evaluate the RPL function in terms of the money it can generate for Unisa. The RPL department does not generate enough money as the fees for the RPL application and for the different assessments are fairly low. If the RPL department raises their fees, they would lose students as it then becomes cheaper for the students to enrol in the traditional manner.

Presently the manager of the RPL department has been relieved of her position and all the RPL academic advisors are required to report to the administrative director. This implies that the RPL department is currently being managed by somebody who does not have the appropriate RPL knowledge to manage such a department. Another hampering effect is that the RPL department has been very *“poorly managed by the top management of this directorate”* (P20). Participants agreed that the placing of RPL in an administrative directorate resulted in a situation in which *“the RPL department has lost credibility with the academics”* (P18) of the various colleges. The perception in general is created amongst the academe of *“RPL not having any academic integrity”* (P18). For that reason the RPL academic advisors have reported their greatest frustration as being *“that of poor management”* (P6). It seems as if the perception prevails that the RPL academic advisors are *“merely admin workers who have no academic input but are rather file deliverers and collectors”* (P13). All of these issues relate to the repositioning and management of RPL as an administrative entity which has resulted in the RPL team being led by *“somebody who has absolutely no background in RPL”* (P20).

#### **5.4.5.3 Inadequacy of the Unisa system to accommodate the RPL process**

Against the background of the RPL department positioned in an administrative-related environment, the department has experienced severe difficulties in executing its job function. Since 2006 it has had to fit into *“a rigid and an inflexible Unisa system”* (P5). One example of this rigidity is that when registering RPL students for the challenge exam, the RPL department is only able to do so when the Unisa *“registration staff has created an RPL code and opened the code”* (P 17). This, however, is only done a week or two prior to the commencement of

the formal examination period. Thus if a student applied for RPL in January and was granted the option of a challenge exam, that student will only receive confirmation of their registration for the exam two weeks prior to the exam. The RPL department can only send proof of the registration to the student once the examination code has been opened. This impacts negatively on RPL practice and its student-centred approach and effective communication in that *“in the interim the RPL student doesn’t have any idea if they are registered or not”* (P23).

Another aspect associated with the inadequacy of accommodating RPL students at Unisa is that the RPL student writes the same exam as the traditional student, but without any of the assistance and guidance given to traditional students through submitting assignments and receiving feedback on the assessment. When RPL students write the challenge exam, their exam booklets are assigned a different code, meaning that they write the same paper as the traditional student but under a different code. However, this code is still not recognised by the Unisa examinations department and as a result the examinations department is unable to track lost RPL examination papers. The RPL academic advisors have to physically look for these papers in the examinations department. As stated by participant P10, the papers are obtained by *“basically camping out in the exams department and threatening them”*. This results in extreme delays as was pointed out by participant P10, who added that she *“had a case that the student wrote last October ...we are in July [of the next year]”* and still no results were available as the examination paper was lost and could not be traced. The student was notified about this unfortunate event and asked to rewrite the challenge exam in the next examination cycle, which was in October of the following year. Participant P10 explained the negative impact of such an event on RPL practice at Unisa as follows: *“This reflects very poorly on us...and discredits our entire process... it’s one case like that that also spreads the word through the entire University that RPL is clueless.”*

The RPL academic advisors also complained of communication with students being unconstructive and relationships being negatively affected in that students’ annoyance and frustration with the system make them lose perspective so that they *“verbally threatened the line managers all the way up to the principal”* (P22). It was clear from the interviews that RPL as a new assessment initiative to grant



students access to higher education courses has been forced to conform to the Unisa structures and systems that have been in place for the last 40 years. The rigidity of these constraints on effectiveness, which resulted in not responding in a timely and efficient way to dynamic developments, was evident.

#### **5.4.5.4 The time-consuming process to issue RPL credit**

Once the academic assessor has assessed the student and issued an appropriate outcome, a report is completed by the academic assessor with the necessary signature from the academic assessor's HOD. The report is then presented by the RPL academic advisor to Senate for their approval. Upon approval the credit is loaded on the student's academic record on the Unisa Student System. The recording of the student's credit on the system is often slowed down as the credit cannot be recorded unless all the applicable documents, such as a matriculation exemption certificate, are available.

The function which is used by the Unisa Exemption Department (function F166) to confirm matric certificates and which should be accessed in order to load a credit gained is hampered because matric certificates are often not available. Participant P20 explained that "*there is unfortunately no useful RPL function where a credit can be loaded without checking the matric qualification*" regardless of the fact that many RPL students are older students who did not complete matric or have lost their certificates. This means that these students have to wait months in order for the Department of Education to trace their certificates. The RPL academic advisors have pointed out that they have requested this RPL function for "*4 years but nobody has seen their way clear to write that function*" (P18).

The RPL academic assessors also indicated that the RPL process is very time consuming with regard to obtaining the necessary signatures and "*a little bit too lengthy*" (P15). As multiple signatures are required before the RPL academic assessors can submit the completed paperwork to the RPL academic advisors, the whole process "*takes a long, long time, too long*" (P23). For this reason some RPL academic assessors advise their students not to apply for RPL as it would take longer than registering for the modules in a traditional way and acquiring accreditation in a traditional manner. An academic assessor explained the situation

as follows: *“I find that the student has completed the diploma and now is waiting for a longer period for the process to be completed where if they go through the course work when they graduate they don’t have a problem”* (P4).

#### **5.4.5.5 Lack of communication/consultation**

The RPL academic advisor who was in charge of the pre-access programme reflected on the hardships she endured in starting and implementing the programme. She pointed out that she had put in a huge effort *“to build up pre-access”* and that she had to manage without any administrative support, which resulted in *“a constant battle to get students registered, to get marks on the system”* (P19). She had often worked long hours overtime to compensate for the lack of support. Regardless of all her efforts, however, Management took the decision to terminate the pre-access programme *“without consultation with the RPL department”* (P19). Once the decision was taken the colleges were immediately informed while the RPL department was only later informed about the new arrangements. Participant P19 expressed her discontent with the decision and with the manner in which the decision was conveyed because *“what was very disappointing was that I was never consulted about the process and everyone knew about the fact that they were going to stop the pre-access except me”* (P19).

Communication about the repositioning of the RPL department in the DSAR and the arrangements with regard to who the RPL academic advisors would report to were not conveyed clearly and properly. A telephone list was circulated by the director’s secretary that indicated the new positions and lines of reporting, which for participant P18 represented *“management by means of a telephone list”*.

The RPL academic assessors also complained of not being given feedback on the final outcome of a student’s application for RPL crediting. Sometimes a student applies for more than one credit which results in the student’s file going through the tedious process of being handled by different academic departments and thus different officials. The consequence is very often confusion in that a final report on the student’s RPL application is not communicated effectively to all the relevant RPL officials. In this regard participant P3 reported as follows about the end result scenarios with an RPL student: *“You may be responsible for one*

*subject and it goes through a whole process, so the time when it leaves your desk, you don't know what has happened to the student."*

#### **5.4.5.6 Lack of basic office equipment and space**

Prior to being decentralised to the different colleges at Unisa and placed under the auspices of the DSAR, the RPL department was situated on the Unisa Florida campus. The RPL department at that time was fully resourced with its own lockable cupboards for confidential information, a photocopier, a boardroom for RPL projects and for group consultations. All RPL academic advisors had their own offices for individual student consultations. Due to the fact that all assessment materials must be kept in storage for a period of five years, the RPL department had a large storage space for their student portfolios. As these files and portfolios contained confidential information, they could not be scanned and placed on the system and storage was therefore very important.

After the RPL department was unbundled, with each RPL academic advisor being placed in a college and the rest of the department being moved to the Unisa Sunnyside campus where the DSAR is based, obtaining resources proved to be a challenge for the RPL academic advisors. One RPL academic advisor based at the Mucklenuck campus reported that she had *"to walk up three flights of stairs"* (P9) each time she needed to use the photocopier. She also commented on having to drive to the Unisa Sunnyside building in order to send a fax. This would take *"one or two hours"* (P9) out of her day.

RPL staff who were dispatched to the Sunnyside building were placed in an open plan office arrangement with the rest of the registration staff. This means that personal consultations with students are inhibited. Students are hesitant to openly talk to the RPL academic advisors because *"it is very difficult to hold a very confidential one-on-one interview so as to build trust with the RPL student"*. Often the RPL academic advisors have to book the boardroom in advance for consultations, which impacts on students who are walk-ins. Apart from the lack of privacy to conduct face-to-face personal consultations with students, the RPL academic advisors are not able to conduct telephone conversations either because *"even a telephone conversation you are aware of 60 other sets of ears listening to you discussing your students' private aspirations...it just doesn't function"*

(P19). Participant P20 concurred by pointing out that some students have in the past specifically requested “*to meet in a more private office*” where people cannot see or hear them.

As a consequence of the open plan arrangement and due to limited space on the level occupied by the RPL staff, the files and portfolios have been removed from the optiplan cupboards and are stored in boxes in the basement of the new building. This results in anyone possibly gaining access to the RPL students’ files. Furthermore, should the RPL academic advisors need a file, they have to look in the basement, which takes hours and requires the help of more than one person and thus becomes “*totally unethical*” (P20). When prompted about what was meant by unethical, the participants clarified that this related to the exposure of the students’ confidential information.

Associated with the lack of office space are problems with a lack of basic office equipment and the absence of professionalism in issuing this equipment. Prior to the relocation of the RPL department to the administrative DSAR, the RPL department had its own budget for stationery and other office supplies. Since the relocation office resources are obtained through the DSAR. Obtaining such resources appears to include extreme requisitioning efforts which RPL officials experienced as frustrating. In this regard participant P2 was of the opinion: “*It is very frustrating getting resources in this place...and it is very, very difficult for the quotation to be signed...with pens and other stuff it is a nightmare.*”

With regard to the “nightmare” of obtaining stationery, RPL academic advisors complained about the lack of trust and professionalism in that they are required to send “*motivations to the director’s secretary for new pens and printing paper*” (P20). This they interpreted as “*not being trusted as professionals*” (P21). Lack of professionalism was further revealed in the fact that RPL staff are expected to show the finished pen refills should they require new ones. This issue of not being treated as a professional was constantly raised during the interviews and participants agreed on “*not being seen as a professional but being seen as a functionary*” (P20), which influenced general morale and job satisfaction negatively amongst RPL staff.

In addition to lack of office space and the frustration of obtaining needed stationery, the proper functioning of RPL staff is also hampered by delays in promptly linking newly appointed staff to institutional systems crucial for work performance. In this regard participant P14 pointed out that it took four months to arrange for her access to the Student System of Unisa. General consensus prevailed amongst participants that they struggle to create an environment conducive to effective functioning. In this regard participant P22 stated as follows: *“It’s a common idea that you need to fight to be able to do your job.”* As a result some RPL academic advisors resigned due to the ongoing struggle they faced in carrying out their tasks effectively.

#### **5.4.5.7 Feelings of insecurity**

The RPL academic advisors raised the issue of feeling unsure about the permanency of their specific positions. With regard to job uncertainty participant P21 explained as follows: *“You are never certain about your job because you are in this position but maybe you will go to another one soon”* (P21). The RPL team is unsure as to where they belong or what they should do. This impacts negatively on long-term career planning and task fulfilment, which in turn affects their approach to work and their relationship with the students.

Against the background of the initial merger of Unisa, Vudec and TSA with the resulting restructuring efforts, feelings of insecurity were created by communications which implied the possibility of temporariness of current positions. In this regard participant P12 pointed out that she was told that the *“job descriptions will change at some point and you [RPL staff] all are very lucky not to be redundant...luckily we [Management] could fit you all in still”* (P12). Similarly and due to restructuring actions which caused the termination of the pre-access programme, participant P19 was informed to *“either go to this College or otherwise your job becomes redundant”*.

#### **5.4.5.8 Staff appraisal**

The job descriptions of the RPL academic advisors and those of the registration staff of the DSAR differ vastly; however, the RPL department is appraised against the same key performance areas (KPA) set out by the DSAR. Differences in job description pertain to the generic nature of the job description for the registration

staff as opposed to the more academically inclined and specialised character of the job description of RPL staff. Participant P14 explained that RPL staff members are required to be academic specialists in that “*RPL academic specialists need to be specialists generally in the region or the field they are working in*” (P14). From the interviews with RPL participants they clearly felt that there was a general perception that Unisa wanted to make all RPL positions generic; however, the RPL academic advisors argued that should that happen, Unisa would lose people with specific expertise which is crucial for proper RPL practice.

#### **5.4.5.9 Poor presentation of RPL files**

The RPL academic assessors commented on the inefficiencies with regard to the development and arrangement of the RPL files. From the interviews and open-ended questionnaires it was clear that the students do not submit all the necessary information as they do not consult the university’s calendar prior to developing their applications for RPL crediting. This results in unnecessary extra work for the RPL academic assessors, who have to peruse through extensive additional paperwork to search for relevant student information. Participants agreed that student files need to be rearranged and they need to be developed according to clear prescriptions and clear checklists to ensure that all relevant information is included. Participant P26 concurred that the arrangement of the RPL student’s file based on clear prescriptions for collation “*will assist in terms of getting what we want*”.

## **5.5 GUIDELINES FOR THE EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF RPL AT UNISA**

In considering the challenges faced by the RPL department at Unisa, the following guidelines are provided to improve the implementation of RPL practice at Unisa.

### **5.5.1 Provision of RPL training for academic and non-academic Unisa staff**

RPL has the capacity to open doors to education for previously disadvantaged students. The Unisa academic and non-academic community needs to be made aware of and educated on the objective of RPL practice, the process of RPL application at Unisa and how to proceed with an RPL application from a student.

The RPL department has to ensure that the students are aware of the services offered by the RPL department. As the academic and in many cases the non-academic staff are the first point of contact with the students, it has been suggested and already stated that the RPL team should educate “*those that have direct contact with students*” (P25). Such education should be based on an introduction to the functioning of RPL practice and the task responsibilities of RPL staff. For participant P10 this pertained to informing the University on what the RPL department is doing. In participant P10’s own words: “*In a way I think we need to inform people, teach people of what we are doing.*” Apart from arranging departmental training within the various colleges and departments of colleges, the RPL academic advisors also need to train and educate the academic staff by means of a one-on-one approach. Participant P2 commented that “*academics need to understand the process more clearly*”. What was suggested as crucial is that all new staff members should immediately undergo RPL training.

### **5.5.2 Improvements in the marketing of RPL**

RPL academic advisors were of the opinion that RPL is not being marketed properly at Unisa. The students are largely unaware of the option of RPL that is available to them. More rigorous marketing efforts need to be applied because the way the RPL department “*is trying to market the RPL is not enough*” (P6). Against the background of Unisa advertising its services on television, participant P10 suggested that “*the RPL services be made part of those adverts*”.

Regardless of time constraints and heavy workloads (par. 5.4.5.2 and 5.5.4) RPL academic advisors should attend the tuition committee meetings held in their respective colleges. These advisors serve as the face of RPL and in making their presence known at tuition committee meetings they can promote RPL within the colleges. As suggested by participant P5, “*the RPL office needs to be more visible in the departments*”.

### **5.5.3 The management of support to academic and non-academic RPL staff at Unisa**

The academic and non-academic staff at Unisa need to be made aware of the emancipatory function of RPL and thus promote RPL. At a strategic level and with reference to the Information Performance Management System (IPMS) which

is used to assess staff annually, RPL should form 5 to 10% of the teaching KPA of the academic staff. This will ensure that RPL is seen as a priority by academic staff and not ignored “*as they [academic staff] get rewarded for that*” (P24). In conjunction and as an alternative, the academic staff should be encouraged to assess the RPL portfolios by means of a financial incentive. Participant P8 suggested that “*if academics were paid R300 per a portfolio they assess they might reconsider*”. This would also ensure that the academic assessors would move away from the tendency to only issue the challenge exam option to students.

If the academic staff within the different colleges are eager to promote RPL, this will cause a snowball reaction and permeate through to the deans of the various colleges and eventually to management. Apart from remuneration for portfolio assessment, another possible way of obtaining support from the academic staff is active and concerted engagement with the academe by the RPL academic advisors. This would imply developing a relationship with the academic staff and demonstrating to them that their input is vital for the success of the RPL process. Participant P19 drew on her experience with her assessor and explained that due to the close relationship they shared the assessor would often “*return the files quickly or if he was going on holiday he would take the files with him*”. This positive attitude and constructive arrangement alleviated the time-consuming aspect of the RPL process.

In order to convince the Unisa community of the importance of their support for RPL practice, the RPL department needs to demonstrate quantitatively how many students they have assisted, qualitatively how they have assisted these students and, with regard to scope and functioning, how many students are presently in the system with the exact position of each student in the system. Participants agreed that the RPL department should develop a trace system for tracing all students who applied for RPL and establishing the progress of each of these students within the Unisa system. Apart from the value of such a database for the student’s well-being, participant P16 pointed to the positive impact of a tracing system as evidence of the stature of RPL practice at Unisa. Participant P16 explained as follows: “*We must develop a database to prove that we are really succeeding in what we are doing...to show them [management and the academe] that we are doing a really important job...maybe they would stop treating us like*



*they are treating us now.*” If such a trace system could contribute to the possibility of the concept of RPL being incorporated into the objectives of the University, the Unisa community would support RPL practice. This would more easily occur if management became a proponent of RPL practice.

#### **5.5.4 Streamlining the RPL process**

The RPL academic assessors identified the RPL process as being too tedious and time consuming and they suggested that it was necessary to “*speed it up*” (P4). One way of “speeding up” the RPL process is to reduce the number of RPL forms involved and to make these forms more user friendly. This, according to participant P4, “*would certainly speed up the process*” (P4). The RPL academic assessors also suggested that RPL academic advisors include all the relevant RPL forms upon delivery of the file as the RPL assessors repeatedly have to fill in different forms at the various stages. This would impact positively on time management and reduce the excessive workloads of the RPL academic assessors. Apart from a reduction in the number of forms used, the process could be refined further if “*forms are sent electronically*” to the RPL academic assessors.

Part of the delay in processing an RPL application pertains to the difficulty in obtaining the applicable signatures from the academic staff. After the academic has assessed the file, the HOD still needs to approve the assessment. Due to their many responsibilities and out-of-office obligations, RPL files remain for a lengthy period at the office of the HOD. This was confirmed by participant P11 who pointed out that the signing of the files is “*a huge problem as the lecturers are quite quick in assessing and then it sits on the HOD’s desk for weeks before it is signed*”. However, the participant RPL academic advisors questioned the need for HOD approval of each RPL assessment, as they argued that none of the examination scripts marked by the academics are signed by the HOD and that RPL files should be treated similarly.

To counteract the time that is wasted while waiting for the HOD’s signature, and due to the sophistication of information technology, participant P26 proposed that the RPL department “*send the files electronically*” to the RPL academic assessors. This would imply that the RPL academic assessors can respond to

files sent electronically from any location. This in turn would make more time available for obtaining relevant signatures without an excessive amount of time being spent on the whole process. With regard to the value of disseminating RPL files electronically, participant P8 further pointed to the bulkiness of files resulting in situations where RPL academic assessors sometimes “*loose things from the files*” in the routing process. The suggestion was made that the files be scanned and then sent to the RPL academic assessors. This would “*assist tremendously in terms of efficiency of handling your files*” (P8). Whether electronically or by the traditional way of file dissemination, to improve the turnaround time of dealing with the RPL files, the RPL department should meet regularly with the academic departments to discuss RPL-related issues.

### **5.5.5 Repositioning of the RPL department**

It was clear from the interviews and open-ended questionnaires that the RPL department has been placed incorrectly in the DSAR and therefore needs to be strategically removed to be in a position to provide sound service to RPL students. Participant P17 confirmed that the RPL department approached the Registrar four years ago with the request to reinstate the RPL department as an independent functioning entity. Being an independent functioning entity would not only result in the “*profile of the RPL department [being] raised within Unisa*” (P17), but would also ensure that the RPL department gained the “*academic and professional credibility*” (P17) which they deserve.

### **5.5.6 The RPL department needs in general**

With consideration of everything that was addressed in the interviews and open-ended questionnaires with regard to the implementation of RPL at Unisa, the following needs were identified to ensure sound RPL practice at Unisa that provides qualitative and effective services to RPL candidates:

- In order to be efficient the RPL department should be resourced with proper office facilities and equipment (“*provide office resources*” P6).
- RPL academic assessors would be able to provide improved service if the authenticity of the information supplied by the RPL candidate were verified prior to sending the files for assessment (“*I think the RPL department has to verify on our behalf because ourselves as lecturers we are very busy*” P8).

- RPL staff need to be empowered with complete access to the Unisa Student System in order to deal with files professionally and in an informed manner (*“access to systems and functions on computers”* P6).
- A course/module on the correct way of applying for RPL should be developed. Prospective RPL candidates should attend this module/course prior to compiling an RPL application or submitting an RPL portfolio of evidence. (*“Before a student sends an RPL file I think they should undergo training, there are those RPL courses that are offered...those students must attend them...I think it should be compulsory”* P4).
- For the RPL department to be effective they need to be trusted and granted the opportunity to function independently (*“Be trusted to be able to manage things”* (P3), *“be trusted to manage systems and functions on computers”* P3).
- No person can function effectively with a workload that is too cumbersome. Sufficient administrative support would enable RPL staff to provide the quality of service which prospective RPL candidates at Unisa deserve (*“be given administrative support”* P6).
- Apart from sufficient administrative staff to deal with administration-related matters, the task of RPL staff would be substantially enhanced if they had sufficient time for executing their tasks. Against the background of overburdened staff due to limited appointments, more appointments would ensure quality service provisioning to students (*“Get more staff”* P17).

## **5.6 CONCLUSION**

The findings of the empirical investigation were reported on in this chapter. From the qualitative data analysed, the strengths in the RPL methodology lie in the fact that the RPL process is well documented and that harmonious relationships prevail between the RPL academic advisors, the RPL students and the RPL academic assessors. Responses from the participants demonstrated a preference for the use of portfolios, interviews, challenge exams and site visits as instruments to assess acquired competencies. RPL academic assessors commented on the need to combine the various instruments, depending on the module for which the student is applying for RPL credit. With regard to the factors that contribute to the strength of the RPL process, the participants

acknowledged that the accommodating and supportive demeanour of the RPL department ensured that the RPL process was implemented properly.

Although there were identifiable strengths in the RPL methodology, instruments and processes, numerous weaknesses were also recognised. The RPL process in itself was found to be very long and tiresome. Due to this long process the RPL files often get lost and students have to wait a long time before getting feedback. The issue of obtaining several signatures for crediting also contributes to the tediousness of the process. In this regard the RPL process proves to be a thorny issue for the RPL academic advisors as well as the RPL academic assessors. A further weakness of the RPL process is the lack of administrative support for the RPL department. The RPL department reported this to be a major challenge in the execution of RPL at Unisa.

In determining the successes experienced in the implementation of RPL at Unisa the findings reveal that RPL has helped students gain access to education as well as obtain credits within their diplomas/degrees. It has helped reduce the duration of their studies. On the other hand, the three major challenges are the lack of administrative support, the lack of management, academic and non-academic staff support and commitment, and the time-consuming process of RPL.

When participants were asked to reflect on how the implementation of RPL at Unisa could be improved, the three suggestions made were the adequate marketing of RPL, the repositioning of the RPL department and the shortening of the RPL process so that it is less time consuming.

# CHAPTER 6

## SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

RPL has the capacity to increase the number of adult learners and thus increase the skills levels of any country. This in turn impacts on the economy of that country (Tudor, 1991:202). In line with Trowler (1996:25), however, RPL still has identifiable problems such as conceptual confusion and uncertainty about its nature and practice. Issues relating to proper assessment strategies and sufficient resources to execute assessment also tend to be a problem. The proper training and development of RPL staff and the cost involved in providing viable RPL practices are also still experienced as a pertinent challenge (Trowler, 1996:25). With regard to conceptual confusion, RPL is referred to by a vast number of acronyms (par. 1.2.3.1 and 2.1) and uncertainty about what RPL is and how it functions. The uncertainty is also due to people not being trained in RPL. The assessment of RPL can be time consuming and this presents a major problem to people buying into the concept (par. 1.2.6).

This study investigated the problems experienced in implementing RPL at Unisa in order to formulate guidelines for more effective RPL practice (par. 1.4). In order to answer the main research question the following three subquestions were asked within a qualitative research framework (par. 1.3):

- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology, instruments and processes when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?
- What are the experiences, successes and challenges experienced by the RPL academic advisors and the academic assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa?
- What guidelines can be developed for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa?

Data were obtained through open-ended questionnaires, participant observation, focus group interviewing and individual interviewing (par. 1.6.3). The sample consisted of 26 participants who were involved in RPL (par. 1.6.2).

The rest of the chapter consists of a summary of the conducted study, conclusions drawn and recommendations made.

## **6.2 SUMMARY**

The main aim of this study was to establish the constituents of an RPL management model for Unisa (par. 1.3). The researcher chose a sample size of twenty-six participants, as all the participants were involved in the RPL process. The participants consisted of five RPL academic advisors, one RPL administrator and twenty RPL academic assessors (par. 1.6.2). The researcher used the purposive sampling technique in selecting the participants (par. 1.6.2). This exploratory study was carried out within a qualitative framework. In order to answer the main research question three sub questions were formulated and the answers to the sub questions articulated into the following:

### **6.2.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the RPL methodology, instruments and process at Unisa**

From the data collected the strengths of the RPL methodology are that it is a well-documented process that can be clearly followed from beginning to the end (par. 5.4.1.1). This process is further enhanced by the close relationship between the RPL students, advisors and assessors (par. 5.4.1.1). Furthermore, the positioning of the RPL academic advisors in the respective colleges has been an added advantage as the RPL academic advisors have easy access to the RPL academic assessors (par. 5.4.1.1).

With regard to the weaknesses of the RPL methodology there seems to be a problem in the tracing of the files. The RPL academic advisors reported on the tedious process of having to put pressure on the academic assessors for the RPL files (par. 5.4.2.1). This problem is further exacerbated by the lack of administrative support. An added weakness is the lengthy time that is required to obtain the necessary signatures on the RPL reports (par. 5.4.2.2). As a result feedback to the RPL student is delayed (par. 5.4.2.2). According to Beaudin (2008:73), many higher education institutions cite a lack of funding as reason for poor tools, resources and administrative support for RPL (par. 2.8.2).

The RPL process makes use of various instruments and this added advantage makes RPL more accessible to students worldwide (par. 2.4, and 5.4.1.3). The academic assessors often combine different instruments to assess students, depending on the students' work environment (par. 5.4.1.3). The three most popular instruments used by the RPL academic assessors are the challenge exam, site visit and portfolios. The challenge exam is favoured by students as it costs less than traditional subject registration. Beaudin (2008:74) asserts that portfolios are most often used in the colleges in Canada as a means of assessment. Similarly, Day (2002:25) confirms that the portfolio is also the assessment instrument of choice for the United States. The advantage of a portfolio is that it allows the student to introspect, thus developing their self-confidence and self-awareness (Day, 2002:5).

Although the mentioned instruments have their strengths, the weaknesses were also elaborated upon during this study (par. 5.4.2). The interviews disadvantage RPL students who live far away from the university, as the university does not compensate them for travel expenses to the campus. The students' practical knowledge cannot be suitably assessed using the interview (par. 5.4.2.2). Similarly, the challenge exam only assesses the students' theoretical knowledge and not their practical knowledge (par. 5.4.2.2). Students are also given less time to prepare for the challenge exam (par. 5.4.2.2). With regard to the portfolio the RPL academic assessors find it time consuming to assess while the students find it difficult to compile (par. 5.4.2.2). Students have difficulty determining what to include in the portfolio (Day, 2002:74).

The strengths of the RPL process have been identified as the development of a well-documented procedures manual. This manual can be followed by any one of the RPL academic advisors at any given time (par. 5.4.1.3). The RPL academic assessors also stated that an added strength is the approachable, supportive and cooperative nature of the RPL academic advisors (par. 5.4.1.3). The weaknesses of the RPL process are that there is no administrative support and the process is time consuming due to the lengthy paperwork (par. 5.4.2.3).

## **6.2.2 Experiences, successes and challenges experienced by RPL academic advisors and assessors in the implementation of RPL at Unisa**

In terms of the RPL academic assessors' and advisors' experiences, there were positive and negatives responses. By implementing RPL at Unisa they have established a link between the world of study and the world of work (par. 2.4, 3.4 and 5.4.3). In this manner RPL promotes networking between academics and the employers (Adam, 2008:42). Sutherland (2006:234) contends that RPL benefits individuals and companies in the long run. According to Sandberg and Andersson (2010:1), lifelong and life-wide learning are promoted by RPL. RPL also opens doors for previously disadvantaged students who were previously denied access to education (par. 2.4 and 5.4.3). Adam (2008:36) further states that RPL allows the mature and generally excluded minorities to return to education. The findings of the OECD report (2009:10) reveal that RPL has been used in South Africa as a mechanism to redress the discrimination of the previously marginalised groups. The RPL academic assessors view RPL as a better method of assessment compared to the traditional formative assessment used at the university (par. 5.4.3).

With regard to the negative experiences, there is a lack of support from the academic staff (par. 2.8.1 and 5.4.3). According to the OECD (2009:12) report, the uptake of RPL in the institutions of learning is low (par. 2.8.3 and 3.7). The academics are sceptical about the role and function of RPL and do not readily promote it among their students (par. 2.8.1 and 2.8.2). Bergan (2008:87) also found the main challenge at a global level to be that of developing positive attitudes towards RPL (par. 2.8.2). At college level RPL at Unisa has not been given due recognition (par. 5.4.3). The academics lack awareness of RPL process and procedures (par. 2.8.2, 2.8.3 and 2.8.4). According to Flowers and Hawke (2000:158), RPL challenges the academics' notions about the production of knowledge since they view the university as the site for the production of knowledge. Sutherland (2006:245) proposes that the issue of knowledge production may serve as a barrier to the implementation of RPL at universities. Pitman (2009:227) also concurs that universities have been the guardians and the producers of knowledge. RPL challenges this notion, suggesting that knowledge can be produced in the work environment as well (Flowers & Hawke,



2000:158). RPL also has the capacity to challenge curriculum innovation at universities (Day, 2002:5).

RPL has been criticised as being too time consuming (par. 5.4.3). The issue of time has also been reflected upon by Valk and Saluveer (2008:65) who describe it as a time consuming activity (par. 2.8.2, 2.8.3, 2.8.4 and 3.7). An issue of further dissatisfaction is the extensive paperwork involved in the RPL process (par. 2.8.2 and 5.4.3). Sutherland (2006:250) also reports on staff having insufficient time to deal with RPL applications due to their large workload.

The success of RPL lies in the fact that it allows previously disadvantaged students access to education (par. 2.4, 3.4 and 5.4.4.1). According to Adam (2008:36), RPL allows mature and socially excluded minorities access to education. Furthermore, students who have the necessary work-related knowledge and experience can also apply for RPL credits within a course. Hamer (2010:101) concedes that RPL can be a vital tool to bring people into the education system. Based on their prior knowledge students can also apply for access to higher education qualifications (par. 5.4.4.1). Evidence suggests that students who have gained access are motivated and more eager to complete their studies (par. 5.4.4.1). Adam (2008:36) and Day (2002:5) cite this as a major benefit of RPL. The use of various methods in the assessment of RPL ensures that students can apply for RPL worldwide (par. 2.4). For the RPL department at Unisa a major success is their well-documented procedures and administrative manual (par. 5.4.4.2).

With regard to the challenges experienced by the RPL academic assessors and advisors, a main concern was the lack of administrative staff (par. 5.4.5.1) and the lack of support and commitment from the cadres of management, academic staff and non-academic staff (par. 2.8.1, 2.8.2, 3.7 and 5.4.5.2). Beaudin (2008:73) contends that many institutions have shown resistance to RPL, citing a lack of funding as a reason. This is also echoed by Sutherland (2006:240) who found that universities are still facing challenges in the financing of RPL. The RPL department cited the repositioning of the department in a directorate in which it does not belong as an added challenge (par. 5.4.5.2). As a result of this positioning, the RPL department has had problems with staff appraisal (par. 5.4.5.8), proper resourcing, staff equipment and office space (par. 2.8.3 and

5.4.5.6). Sutherland (2006:240) also noted the lack of resources as a major challenge to the implementation of RPL. Adam (2008:65) asserts that the successful implementation of RPL requires additional resources.

The manner in which the changes were communicated to the RPL academic advisors led to feelings of job insecurity (par. 5.4.5.7). The RPL academic advisors commented upon the lack of consultation and communication between top management and the RPL department (par. 5.4.5.5). The existing Unisa system cannot accommodate the processes employed in the RPL department, resulting in a daily challenging of the system for the RPL academic advisors (par. 5.4.5.3). A further challenge mentioned by the RPL academic assessors and advisors was the time-consuming process of RPL (par. 2.8.2, 2.8.3, 2.8.4, 3.7 and 5.4.5.4). Adam (2008:41) also cites the time-consuming process of RPL as an obstacle to the success of RPL, as it increases demands on the academic staff. Sutherland (2006:245) highlights expertise, qualification structures and methods of teaching and assessment as barriers to the implementation of RPL.

### **6.2.3 Guidelines for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa**

In terms of improving the implementation of RPL, both the RPL academic advisors and assessors stressed the importance of staff training (par. 5.5.1). In his guidelines for RPL practice, Day (2002:13) proposes that all the people involved in the assessment of RPL receive proper training. According to Sutherland (2006:250), staff need to be encouraged to see RPL as part of their academic work. A suggestion was made by the participants in this study to market RPL properly (par. 5.5.2). Hamer (2010:112) states that widely promoting RPL will increase interest in it. Day (2002:13) also calls for RPL to be accessible to people.

The management, non-academic and academic staff of Unisa need to support RPL at Unisa (par. 5.5.3). Sutherland (2006:240) suggests that one person in a position of authority should be chosen to champion RPL. The RPL process also needs to be streamlined (par. 5.5.4). The RPL academic advisors called for the proper repositioning of the RPL department (par. 5.5.5), for administrative support and for additional staff (par. 5.5.6). A request was made for the RPL offices to be given the necessary resources to carry out their jobs (par. 5.5.6). Day (2002:13) asserts that in order for the RPL process to be efficient it must

make use of the best resources. The RPL department of Unisa has asked for access to the necessary systems and functions on computers (par. 5.5.6). Sutherland (2006:249) calls for institutions to develop the necessary institutional capacity to help implement RPL. Lastly, the RPL academic assessors suggested that prior to submitting an RPL application students should attend an RPL course to ensure that they are fully aware of what is required when submitting their application (par. 5.5.6).

### **6.3 CONCLUSIONS**

Regarding the strengths and weaknesses of RPL methodology, instruments and processes, the participants reflected on the well-documented and quality controlled process of RPL (par. 5.4.1.1). In addition, the RPL department boasts a procedures manual (par. 5.4.1.3). An added strength is the close relationship between the academic advisors and the academic assessors (par. 5.4.1.3). The fact that each college was assigned a specific RPL academic advisor was seen as an area of strength. The RPL instruments used to conduct the assessment were found to be adaptable to various situations and are able to reach students worldwide (par. 5.4.1.2).

In terms of the weaknesses the participants cited the RPL process as being time consuming (par. 2.8.4 and 5.4.2.1). This was further exacerbated by the lack of administrative support (par. 5.4.2.1) and the delays in obtaining the necessary signatures in processing the RPL application. The interview as an instrument was found to disadvantage students as it does not consider students who live some distance from the university (par. 5.4.2.2). The challenge exam was found to test theoretical knowledge and not the students' practical work experience (par. 5.4.2.2). The participants also commented on the lengthy paperwork required in the RPL process (par. 2.8.2 and 5.4.2.3). Due to the complicated process involving the movement of files to and from the RPL department, the RPL academic advisors reported on the misplacement of files during this process (par. 5.4.2.3).

The experiences of the RPL academic advisors and the academic assessors were both positive and negative (par. 5.4.3). The fact that RPL enabled previously disadvantaged students access to higher education was seen in a positive light

(par. 2.4 and 5.4.3). RPL has also helped establish a link between the world of work and study (par. 2.4 and 5.4.3). RPL students are overall more motivated to complete their studies. With regard to the negative experiences the RPL academic advisors reported on the repositioning of the RPL department in an inappropriate directorate (par. 5.4.3). This has only served to further handicap the functioning of the RPL department. The participants commented on the lack of awareness of the RPL processes and procedures among the academic staff (par. 5.4.3). The challenges experienced include the lack of administrative support and a lack of support from top management and the academic staff (par. 2.8.1 and 5.4.5.1). The RPL department also reported on the lack of resources to carry out their jobs (par. 2.8.3) and the lack of communication between management and the RPL department (par. 5.4.5.5).

In terms of providing guidelines for the effective implementation of RPL, the RPL academic advisors argued for the repositioning of the RPL department as an independent entity (par. 5.5.5). They also suggested that RPL be marketed properly so that the academic staff and students are made aware of RPL and its potential (par. 5.5.2). The academic staff need to be given training in the procedures for dealing with an RPL application (par. 5.5.1). The RPL process needs to be streamlined so that it is not time consuming (par. 5.5.4). Administrative assistants need to be provided to the RPL department. The RPL department has to be resourced with proper office facilities and equipment (par. 5.5.6). The RPL academic advisors need to be given access to the necessary systems and functions on computer (par. 5.5.6). In order to function more effectively the RPL department has further requested additional staff to help deal with the large number of RPL applications (par. 5.5.6).

## **6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS**

The following recommendations are offered to assist the RPL academic assessors and advisors to increase the effectiveness of the implementation of RPL:

- **RPL instruments**

To ensure that the student is not disadvantaged by the instrument used in the assessment, the RPL academic assessors need to combine various instruments when assessing a student. The use of the challenge exam as

an instrument should be terminated, since the challenge exam tests the students' theoretical knowledge and not practical knowledge (par. 5.4.2.2), and thus defeats the purpose of RPL. During the exam period, the RPL department should be assigned its own examination code. The RPL academic assessors need to conduct a portfolio development workshop for students prior to the submission of their portfolios so that students will learn how to construct their portfolios.

- **The RPL process**

The university needs to accommodate the RPL process in its systems by giving the RPL department access to the necessary functions and systems. The RPL department should be given administrative support. To deal with the time-consuming nature of the RPL process, the signatures should only be limited to the RPL academic assessor. This would increase the turnaround time for feedback. The RPL files should be scanned and the electronic copy should be sent to the RPL academic assessors. Doing this would prevent the loss of files. In terms of the lengthy paperwork, the RPL manager should revisit the use of numerous forms and reports and limit them to the most important ones. The RPL department should develop a portfolio development module that all prospective RPL students should undergo to help students construct their portfolios effectively.

- **Marketing of RPL**

The RPL department needs to go on a drive to educate the Unisa community and the students on RPL as the community is largely unaware of the potential of RPL in higher education. The RPL academic assessors should be made aware of the purpose of RPL and how to conduct it. The registration staff should be informed properly by means of a workshop on how to identify an RPL student and how to assist them further. The development of staff capacity within the colleges to deal with RPL will improve the success of RPL implementation (Sutherland, 2006:250). The RPL manager should market RPL among the respective deans of the colleges who would in turn filter it to the academics. Sutherland (2006:249) suggests that RPL requires the commitment of institutional leadership. The RPL process needs to be streamlined in terms of the paperwork and the lengthy process. The RPL

academic assessors commented on the RPL files contributing to work overload. Thus in streamlining the process the RPL academic assessors can deal with more RPL applications. Lastly, the RPL department needs to be removed from the existing directorate in which it has been placed as it is unable to function properly. The RPL department needs to work on a plan to integrate RPL with other support services offered by the University.

- **Communication/consultation and feelings of job insecurity**

The RPL manager should formally raise the issue of job insecurity with management and insist that this be investigated. If necessary, the union could also assist.

- **Basic equipment and space**

The RPL academic advisors placed in the colleges should be given access to the college equipment in order to carry out their job functions efficiently. The RPL manager needs to raise this with the deans. The RPL files placed in the basement on Sunnyside campus should be scanned for easy access. Sutherland (2006:251) proposes that adequate provision of the necessary resources can further improve the implementation of RPL.

- **Repositioning of RPL**

The RPL department needs to be repositioned in the Unisa structure as an entity by itself. In doing so the RPL department can regain its academic integrity. This will also ensure that the KPAs the staff are appraised against are appropriate for their specialised job function. The feelings of insecurity raised by the RPL staff (par. 5.4.5.7) would also be addressed once the department is repositioned. Sutherland (2006:250) found that the lack of the necessary infrastructure to support RPL contributes to the challenges in RPL implementation.

- **Presentation of RPL files**

The RPL academic advisors need to liaise with the RPL academic assessors to decide on how the advisors can assist with the presentation of the RPL files; the RPL academic assessors commented on the poor presentation of the RPL files. This will improve the turnaround time for dealing with the RPL

files and will contribute to a more effective strategy in handling RPL applications.

## **6.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY**

The following suggestions are made for further research:

- Research should be conducted on the development of quality assurance mechanisms for RPL and on the implementation of RPL at other universities in South Africa. This should be measured against the implementation of RPL at Unisa all for the sake of improving RPL practice at Unisa.
- Once the suggested recommendations have been implemented the RPL department should again apply this investigation to monitor progress. The department should continuously consider suggestions for improved practice.
- Research should be conducted on the success of RPL in institutions of higher learning in South Africa so that the viability of RPL can be measured. Sandberg and Andersson (2010:3) argue that there is a lack of critical research on RPL in higher education.
- Research should be conducted on the particular role that RPL can play in the promotion of lifelong learning. This can help the country determine if RPL is serving its function as a mechanism for redress.

## **6.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Firstly, the findings of this study cannot be generalised due to the fact that it was a qualitative investigation focused on better understanding the RPL process at Unisa. Secondly, considering that the research was only conducted in one institution of higher learning, it cannot be representative of all institutions of higher learning. The RPL field is quite and this study is but a very tiny aspect of that field. In terms of the literature review conducted in chapter 3 the researcher was restricted as there are a limited number of published reports and articles on RPL in South Africa. Lastly, as the researcher (interviewer) is employed in the RPL field and has worked with many of the RPL academic assessors, this may have impacted on the integrity of responses from the RPL academic assessors. The RPL academic assessors could have been afraid of expanding on the problems they have experienced with the RPL department itself.

## **6.7 CONCLUSION**

This study investigated the constituents of an effective model for the provision of RPL at Unisa. The recommendations made suggest possible ways to improve the implementation of RPL at Unisa. The idea of repositioning of the RPL department as a separate entity has been welcomed by the RPL academic advisors. If this were done, the other challenges such as poor management and lack of basic equipment and space may be resolved. However, the University also needs to develop the institutional capacity to implement RPL effectively because RPL is vital in contributing to a competent labour force and content citizenry.S



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# **APPENDIX A**

## **INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR THE INDIVIDUAL AND FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS**

1. What are the strengths and weakness of the methodology when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?
2. What are the strengths and weakness of the instruments when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?
3. What are the strengths and weakness of the processes when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?
4. How relevant are the current RPL assessment procedures? If not, how should the assessment be conducted?
5. Please describe your experience with regard to the implementation of RPL at Unisa.
6. In your experience, what are the barriers in implementing the RPL process?
7. What are the successes and challenges experienced by you in the implementation of RPL at Unisa?
8. What guidelines can be developed for the effective implementation of RPL at Unisa?
9. What needs to be done to ensure an efficient and effective RPL assessment and thus an effective functioning of RPL?



# APPENDIX B

## OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONNAIRE FOR THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) ASSESSORS

Please complete the following questions:

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the assessment instruments (challenge exams, portfolios, interviews, etc) when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?

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2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the processes (collection, returning and distribution of the files, completion of assessment reports and signatures) when taking students through the RPL process at Unisa?

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5. In your experience, what are the successes and challenges (barriers) in practising RPL at Unisa?

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6. What further guidelines can be developed to increase the effectiveness of the implementation of RPL at Unisa?

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7. Total number of years as an RPL assessor: \_\_\_\_\_

I thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Kind regards

Lisa Janakk

# APPENDIX C

## CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Dear colleague

My name is Lisa Janakk. I am a master's student in the College of Human Sciences at the University of South Africa. My supervisor is Dr HM Van der Merwe who can be contacted at the University on 012 429 4807 with regard to any matters pertaining to my research.

I would appreciate it if I could interview you or if you could please complete the attached questionnaire so that I can obtain data for my research. My research seeks to explore the challenges experienced in implementing the recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy at UNISA and to provide recommendations for improvement.

Research agreement between researcher and participant:

- I undertake not to disclose your name.
- All the information will be treated confidentially.
- When reporting on the findings I will use other names where appropriate (e.g. coded/disguised names of participants/respondents).
- The information will be stored in a locked room at all times which only I have access to and which will be destroyed six months after successful completion of the study.
- You are free not to participate in this research.

The above information has been explained to me and I understand it. My name will not be disclosed. I allow my information to be used in a confidential manner that will not harm me and my private life in any way and I am also aware that the thesis might be published in the future.

_____	_____	_____
Signature of participant	Place	Date
_____	_____	_____
Signature of witness	Place	Date