

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL):

Policy, Procedures and Practices at UWC (#2)

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to provide a framework for the implementation of RPL procedures at the University of the Western Cape.

2. What is RPL?

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the formal acknowledgement of the knowledge and capabilities that people possess as a result of prior learning. The process of RPL acknowledges that this learning may have occurred through formal, informal or non-formal means – through study, work or other life experiences.

RPL is the practice through which learning in the workplace, in the community, in organizational and cultural activities, is assessed for access and accreditation purposes.

RPL rests on the assumption that socially useful learning is not reserved for formal learning institutions. It assumes that valuable knowledge is produced by human beings in many different contexts, and that such knowledge can be articulated, assessed and recognized.

3. Varieties of RPL

- 3.1 In a sense, mature age exemption (with different criteria for exemption at ages 23, 34 and 45) is a form of RPL, but RPL proper entails the demonstration of learning achievement, e.g. through the presentation of a relevant academic record and/or portfolio of evidence of learning.
- 3.2 The practice of providing access to university through the mechanism of Senate discretion to applicants who are freshly out of school and do not have matriculation exemption is also a limited form of RPL. It involves the assessment of students' suitability for access and may require certain limitations or additions to curricula students may follow.
- 3.3 Access to postgraduate studies through Senate discretion is common practice at many universities. It usually entails candidates producing evidence of learning achievement through work and/or other experience.

- 3.4 *Credit transfer*: This is the formal recognition of credits attained for learning in other formal contexts such as another higher education institution. It may also include accredited courses provided by professional bodies, voluntary associations, enterprises, private educational institutions, trade unions, government agencies and/or other providers recognized by the university.
- 3.5 Recognition of *academic readiness for purposes of access* to a module or programme of study, regardless of how this readiness was achieved. This may be called *general credit*. For example, a person with a Masters in English may be admitted to a Masters in Linguistics without having formal qualifications in Linguistics. Or the person's knowledge acquired through informal or non-formal means may be proved to constitute academic readiness for the same Linguistics degree.
- 3.6 Recognition of *academic readiness for purposes of advanced standing*, which may involve exemption from parts of a programme of study (recognition that prior learning includes knowledge that is equivalent to knowledge that would be attained through formal learning in a proposed module of a programme of study).
- 3.7 Recognition of prior learning that lies outside the competences identified as comprising a particular UWC qualification. In such a case experiential learning would be at a requisite level in the qualification and receive credit without neatly substituting for a component of the learning programme. Such credit may be assigned against "open" modules, i.e. modules, usually elective, whose "content" is the experiential learning of the RPL candidate rather than a prepared "package" of knowledge delivered by the university. An example would be the awarding of credit at a particular level for "management skills and techniques" to a candidate with experience of managing NGOs. Recognition of such knowledge and learning may be part of the customizing of a learning pathway for an individual or group.

4. Contextual Preamble

International Context

RPL has been practised in some other countries such as the USA for several decades, but it is new to South Africa. There are two main reasons why RPL is burgeoning internationally. One relates to the emergence of the discourse of lifelong learning which calls for widening access to higher education for mature-age students, both because this contributes to personal and social development, and because rapid change in the "knowledge-based" society and economy requires regular upgrading of knowledge and skills. The other relates to the increasing recognition that universities do not have a monopoly over high-level knowledge production – that the modes and sites for such knowledge production are becoming increasingly diverse and/or integrated. The growing recognition that there are multiple literacies and that academic literacy should not necessarily be the only way of demonstrating competence is also part of this trend.

National Context

Numerous national policy documents advocate RPL as part of an over-arching vision of lifelong learning. This includes a commitment to widening access and improving institutional responsiveness to mature-age learners. National policy also advocates the integration of education and training, as well as flexible curricula and portability across institutions. The concept of competence-based education being promoted in national policy documents calls for a comprehensive revision of assessment practices, including the introduction of RPL.

RPL at UWC

UWC's mission statement declares its commitment to lifelong learning. The university's three-year rolling plan states that "Increased access to a diverse range of students will occur through alternative admissions, which will include testing for academic potential and recognition of prior learning." The university aims to be a pioneer "with regard to access by 'non-traditional students'". The rolling plan states that access will be facilitated through the design of customized learning pathways that meet the needs of diverse ranges of backgrounds, age groups, lifestyles and socio-economic circumstances". The university will endeavor to ensure that RPL is a strong feature of such learning pathways.

RPL is central to UWC's strategies for increasing student access and success at UWC.

UWC is embracing RPL because it is committed to equity and redress and to valuing diversity in modes of learning.

5. Principles

5.1 UWC's approach to RPL is "learning-centred". This means that it seeks a balance between the educational objectives and values of the university on the one hand, and of the learner(s) on the other, with the promotion and quality of learning being maintained as the primary focus.

5.2 RPL at UWC will adhere to sound assessment practices, i.e. fairness, validity, reliability, transparency and practicability.

5.3 In the case of RPL for core modules of a programme/qualification, strongly commensurate learning outcomes will be required. i.e. the learning outcomes demonstrated through RPL will closely resemble those envisaged for a module of study.

5.4 In the case of RPL for elective modules, learning outcomes need not match exactly.

5.5 All learning should be assessable in terms of content and level.

5.6 In accordance with SAQA regulation No. R452 of 1998, the award of a qualification at UWC “may be achieved in whole or in part through the recognition of prior learning” (Government Gazette Vol. 393, No. 18787.)

5.7 RPL assessment will take cognizance of different assessment methodologies and select those that are appropriate to the particular instance.

5.8 Successful RPL candidates will not be discriminated against once admitted to programmes offered by the university.

5.9 RPL may be applied at all levels of study.

6. Procedures and Practices

RPL will require the ongoing development of procedures and practices at the institutional, faculty and departmental levels. In the interim, these may be listed as follows.

6.1 The procedure for the assessment of prior learning as the basis for credit in a course or module offered by the University is determined by the faculties within the framework provided by UWC admissions and RPL policies and by Senate discretion guidelines.

6.2 RPL for access is carried out prior to enrolment. RPL for advanced standing may be carried out prior to or after enrolment.

6.3 *RPL for access to undergraduate studies*

RPL may be used to grant access to a degree programme without providing any credit towards a qualification. RPL may be used to ascertain whether the candidate has attained the equivalent of formal requirements for admissions such as matriculation exemption, or a grade 12 or FET certificate. RPL may include internal faculty evaluation of additional qualifications such as one- or two-year certificates attained through accredited professional bodies or private providers. The faculty must determine the status of the education provider with SAQA, the curriculum content of the qualification, the duration of the qualification, the assessment methodology and the NQF credit value of the qualification being evaluated.

RPL is the only route that is recognized by the university for access without a senior certificate.

Assessment for access will be based on assessment criteria that have been defined against those generic outcomes that are seen as constitutive of school-leaving competence (or competence at level 4 of the NQF). Thus the student would need to

demonstrate the appropriate level of literacy, numeracy, problem solving ability, general knowledge, and so forth. These explicit criteria will be made available to all those doing RPL assessment for this purpose.

6.4 *RPL for credit towards an undergraduate degree*

In the case of credit transfer, this includes the formal recognition of courses passed at other educational institutions as recognized by Senate in terms of rule A.7.

In the case of recognition of prior unaccredited learning, credit may be awarded for advanced standing if the candidate submits relevant evidence which is assessed by properly qualified university assessors and external moderators.

Assessment for advanced standing will only be undertaken where it can be rigorous and supportive of the individual student. In order to be rigorous, the assessment, whether done through examination or through a portfolio, must be based on assessment criteria that are derived from the outcomes of the curriculum component for which credit is to be awarded.

RPL for access to or advanced standing in a postgraduate qualification

According to Senate Discretion Rule A.4.3, Senate may admit a candidate who in its opinion has attained the appropriate level of competence, to post-graduate studies. When an application is made in terms of rule A.4, Faculties and Departments should follow the Senate guidelines, though they may tailor the procedures to suit their purposes. Admission remains the prerogative of Senate, and departments and faculties may not admit candidates on their own authority.

As in the case of RPL for access to or advanced standing in undergraduate studies, RPL for access or advanced standing in a postgraduate qualification must adhere to rigorous, criterion-referenced assessment practice.

6.5 *Inquiry prior to application*

Anyone wishing to ascertain the feasibility of making an RPL application should seek advice at the Division for Lifelong Learning. The DLL may then refer the candidate to a particular Faculty or Department.

6.6 *Application*

Anyone wishing to seek RPL will be required to make a formal RPL application to a relevant Faculty at an appropriate time.

6.7 *Clearly defined procedures for each stage in the RPL process*

Departments, faculties, programmes and other units in the university will develop clearly defined procedures for candidates in relation to their involvement in the stages of the RPL process: inquiry, application, initial counselling, ongoing mentoring and assistance in the compiling of a portfolio of evidence, submitting evidence for assessment, and appeal. The relevant academic and other units will

also make clear to prospective RPL candidates the university's requirements regarding payment of fees.

6.8 *Dissemination of information*

Information on the University's RPL policy and procedures will be made available through: Faculty prospectuses and programme/departmental brochures; the university brochure on Part-time and Continuing Education courses; the publication of university brochures and information sheets on RPL.

6.9 *Guidelines for staff and students*

The university, through the Division for Lifelong Learning, will provide guidelines for staff and students regarding the steps required in the RPL process.

6.10 *Staff development*

As part of staff development policy, the university will provide training and development opportunities to staff in relation to RPL, in particular with regard to counseling and mentoring, assessment and curriculum development.

6.11 *Implications of RPL for staff workload*

Because RPL is labour-intensive, the university will establish the implications of practising RPL for staff workload and make the necessary adjustments to current policy in this regard.

6.12 *Roles and functions of personnel involved in RPL*

The university will make arrangements regarding the roles and functions of centralized and faculty based units involved in RPL. Such arrangements will be subject to regular review.

Deans, Department Heads and Programme Leaders will, through consultation, define and allocate roles, functions and workloads for staff in RPL assessment, counselling, administration, public relations, marketing, networking, advocacy and staff development.

6.13 *Resources for RPL*

The university will calculate what resources are needed for the effective implementation of RPL, and will generate and allocate funds accordingly.

6.14 *RPL and partnerships*

The university will make RPL integral to collaboration and partnership with other HET institutions, with workplaces in government and the corporate sector, and with organized labour.

6.15 *RPL and curriculum*

Departments, faculties and programmes will explore the transformative potential of RPL in curriculum innovation and development through, for example, the creation of customized learning pathways as indicated in the 2000—2002 Three Year

Rolling Plan. Faculties will explore the possible integration of credit-bearing RPL/Education Planning modules into programmes.

6.16 *RPL and Credit-value*

Credit-value assigned through RPL should not be less than the credit-value that can be attained through completion of the smallest unit of curriculum in the university.

6.17 *Monitoring and evaluation*

The university, through collaboration between departments, faculties, programmes and the Division for Lifelong Learning, will ensure that the implementation of RPL at UWC is monitored and evaluated, so that RPL features in the Quality Assurance policy and procedures of the university.

7. Implementation and development of policy

The university, through the Division for Lifelong Learning, has developed a detailed project proposal to ensure the effective implementation and development of institutional RPL policy. This includes the following:

The introduction of RPL pilots to explore the potential of two approaches to RPL, which can be broadly characterized as the Academic Counselling, Mentoring and Assessment (ACMA) approach and the Education Planning Module (EPM) approach. Only the latter makes provision for including a credit-bearing RPL module as part of the curriculum. The former is primarily concerned with (a) establishing, through interviewing, counselling and testing, whether RPL applicants meet the academic requirements of a particular programme of study at the university and (b) providing ongoing support to students through mentoring. It is envisaged that recruitment for the ACMA pilot will commence in September 2000, with RPL being implemented in February 2001. Similar timelines are envisaged for the EPM pilot.

The development of marketing and recruitment strategies. These are already under way, with a focus on recruiting students from the fields of education, nursing and correctional services.

Staff Development activities. Workshops regarding RPL assessment and counselling training as well as implications of RPL modules for curriculum development are currently being planned for October 2000. The possibility of accredited training in RPL for those centrally involved in the RPL project is also being investigated.

Advocacy strategies and activities. In addition to staff development activities, which are viewed as a form of advocacy, planning is in process for the use of seminars, conferences, flyers, information sheets and a variety of other media including electronic discussion and user groups. The Lifelong Learning Resource Centre in the Division for Lifelong Learning will gather and make available relevant literature on the theory and practice of RPL.

Monitoring and evaluation through participatory action research. The DLL in collaboration with Pilot teams will design and co-ordinate action research-based monitoring and evaluation plans. The SAB RPL Task Group will act as the critical reference group for this research. The plans should be ready by November 2000.

Allocation of responsibilities regarding project management and co-ordination.

The university has already seconded Terry Volbrecht from the Arts Faculty to the Division for Lifelong Learning as manager and co-ordinator of the institutional RPL Project. Other staff in the DLL are also playing defined roles in project management, co-ordination and implementation.

Micro-planning including timelines, activities and products. The initial microplanning process was completed by the end of August 2000. Ongoing microplanning will respond to changes or unforeseen circumstances in the policy environment as these arise.

Budgeting and funding. In addition to university funds committed to the RPL Project, the DLL has also secured funding from JET and the Anglo-American Chairman's Fund, and there is a strong possibility of further funding from the Norwegian government. It is hoped that funding arrangements and budgeting for the first phase of the project will be finalized by the end of August.

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