Reflecting on RPL initiatives in higher education: what lessons can be learnt from the past decade?

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The early RPL work

Background to the 3 authors’ involvement in RPL 1999-2005

• Ms Buchler employed at Joint Education Trust (JET) where the Kellogg & Ford Foundations provided funding for the Workers Higher Education Project, which sought to pilot alternative access routes (including RPL) into HE for adults; included in Committee of Technikon Principals team that developed RPL policy for the Technikon sector in 2001/2; assisted SAQA with development of draft national RPL policy (to public comment phase) in 2001/2

• Prof Gawe was part of JET’s RPL reference group, and also part of CTP team; responsible for overseeing drafting of DUT’s early RPL policy

• Ms Prinsloo was also part of JET’s RPL reference group and the CTP team that conceptualised and drafted the CTP RPL Policy; responsible for implementing a project that focused on the social integration and reskilling of military veterans (and which included a RPL component)
Early JET RPL work

Some of the early JET work (1997-2003) included:

- Teacher education and adult education at Wits and then Natal University
- Agriculture in partnership with Sapekoe Tea Estate, then University of the North, and then Technikon Southern Africa
- Business leadership development at the University of the Free State
- Nursing education at then Peninsula Technikon
- Exploratory work to establish a regional RPL centre with the eastern seaboard Association of Tertiary Institutions (esATI) in KZN
- 2 RPL training conferences in 2000 and 2003
- Apart from action research within pilot projects, comparative research was undertaken into RPL practices and implementation (national overview surveys and case studies), as well as adult learner friendly programmes (case studies)
- Advocacy and lobbying
- Use of international experts (USA, Canada) to assist in local capacity development
- Study tours to USA and Canada
Development of CTP RPL policy for the Technikon sector

• The JET work excited the Committee of Technikon Principals and a working group was established in 2001 to develop a RPL policy for the Technikon sector

• CTP and JET also developed an online RPL and Assessor training course aimed at Technikon sector academics

• The process of developing a sector wide RPL policy partially informed the development of the draft SAQA policy
Principles that underpinned this early work

• Recognition that valuable forms of knowledge are produced outside of formal institutions of higher education and the early work sought to affirm and accredit the learning obtained from these diverse sites

• Address the transformative effects and implications of RPL in terms of both
  – institutional restructuring and re-engineering of the curriculum (including implementation of RPL practices and processes)
  – Increased feelings of self-worth in RPL applicants

• Address the critical need to achieve a more highly skilled and flexible workforce by means of RPL and use it as an important mechanism in support of equity and redress
Some strategies and practices of the early work

• Ensuring adequate support and guidance for adults wanting to undertake RPL
  – In the CTP policy, a generic (but flexible) pre-assessment module was designed
  – In the JET work, various courses were provided in the pilot sites, usually focusing on structured portfolio development processes

• Systems were put in place to train assessors and moderators (this was even before the development of the unit standards)

• Multiple assessment methods (including portfolios, challenge tests and observation) were encouraged, ensuring fit between method and content area/application

• Capacity building of academics included an orientation to working with ‘returning’ adults
Reflecting on the successes and limitations of the early work and their respective contexts

Some of the limitations of the ‘early’ work included:

• Over-reliance on ‘champions’

• Not engaging sufficiently with institutional academic structures outside of programmes and (sometimes) Deans and higher

• Some suspicion of RPL by academics and university management:
  – some saw it as lacking rigour, and that RPL credits could not be equivalent to learning obtained at an (their) institution
  – Asking HEIs to think about a regional approach to RPL proved very difficult

• Getting the RPL and assessor course accredited; debates around the level at which an HE RPL and assessor training course should be pitched

• Unisa Assessor Training Course excludes RPL
Reflecting on the successes and limitations of the early work and their respective contexts (2)

Successes

- Both the pilot projects and the CTP process laid the groundwork for future RPL policy development and implementation in HE.
- In particular, both strands of work tried to be as inclusive as possible, and created an initial core of ‘capacitated’ champions many of whom moved into positions where they could ‘grow’ RPL practice in their own (or other) institutions – this expanded the networks of RPL practitioners.
- The work in teacher education laid the basis for a larger scale implementation of RPL within the NPDE (which, although problematic, did over a longer period of time lead to creative, quality, larger-scale implementation of RPL in a few HEIs).
- While some of the pilot projects focused mainly on RPL for access, some did expand their practices to include RPL for credit.
Implementation of RPL in HE in 2001

According to the CTP RPL policy, in 2001:

- Sixteen institutions did not have any policy or processes in place
- Twelve had initiated a process, ranging from investigating existing admissions policies to initiating the development of an RPL policy
- Six institutions had a documented final or draft policy
- Two were implementing RPL: one in the absence of a documented institutional policy; the other following an institutionally approved policy.
Current implementation of RPL in HE

- Currently:
  - 22 HEIs have RPL policies, 1 does not (but the institution indicated that some staff members have an interest in RPL)
  - Of the 22 institutions that do have RPL policies in place, RPL implementation occurs as follows:
    - In 11 HEIs, all faculties implement RPL
    - In 4 institutions, 3 or more (but not all) faculties implement RPL
    - In 2 HEIs, 3 faculties implement RPL
    - In 2 HEIs, 2 faculties implement RPL
    - In 1 HEI, only 1 faculty (Education) implements RPL
    - In 1 university, only postgraduate RPL is practiced
    - And in 1 university, the Education Faculty implements RPL and there is an access process for potential students who do not have honours degrees

*(Based on snap survey conducted by SAQA in 2010, as no proper national data exists on the current ‘size and shape’ of RPL implementation in HEIs)*
Rethinking RPL in the current national processes of reconceptualising higher education in an expanded post-secondary education system

• DHET position on RPL within context of forthcoming Green Paper

• Relevance of the ‘old’ CTP RPL policy and assessor course to the SA Technology Network (network of UoTs) and comprehensives

• Is the 50% ‘residency’ clause really necessary, and should the continuing ‘mature age’ entrance requirements continue?

• National audit/review of RPL implementation (size and shape, good practices, understanding of the beneficiaries)
Systemic and quality assurance issues and implications for RPL

- 5% target set for adult and worker enrolments in *National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE)*
- NPHE targets should be encouraged and factored into DHET enrolment planning and subsidization – currently not monitored at all in terms of targets
- Articulation and career-pathing for RPL should feature in HEQF migration/articulation of curricula, especially from vocational/professional to academic programmes
- Race, class, gender and qualifications should be consciously monitored and proportion of RPL candidates factored into throughput data
- Responsiveness and rigour of RPL academic and administrative practices should be grounded in teaching and research development grants, and in staff development