Recognition of prior learning (RPL): in search of a valid and sustainable mechanism for South Africa

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Introduction

- Research questions
- Conceptual framework
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- Findings
- Conference themes
Research questions

- Which mechanisms are needed to ensure that recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a valid and sustainable process for the awarding of credits in terms of formal unit standards and qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF)?
  - What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?
  - What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable RPL system?
Conceptual framework: elements of a sustainable system

- Quality criteria within a quality assurance framework
- An enabling policy environment
- Outcomes-based approach to determine ‘equivalence’ of learning
- Fit-for-purpose assessment approaches and methods
- Accountability, credibility ensured by the quality framework
- Structure, which gives legitimacy to the process
- Results of learning, as an expression of ‘applied competence’
- Appropriate evidence of learning for exemption and/or credits awarded
Research design

- Mixed method design
- ‘...it enables the researcher to simultaneously answer confirmatory and exploratory questions, and therefore verify and generate theory in the same study’ (Tashakorri and Teddlie, 2003)

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Sample

- Exploratory interviews:
  - Seven organisations (2X HE; 3X SETAs; a bank, a FET provider)
- Questionnaire:
  - 16 organisations (9X public HE; 3X private HE; 2X public FET; 2X private FET)
- Semi-structured interviews:
  - 2X HE; Dept of Labour; Matriculation Board
Findings: Contestations and legitimacy

- What are the characteristics of a valid, practical and effective RPL system?
- A quality assurance framework
  - Accountability: format and process
  - Supports validity and gives structure
  - Integrity of process and outcomes protected
  - Common benchmarks and quality criteria
  - Quality assurance measures: what is defensible?
  - Framing an enabling environment
- An enabling environment and institutional will
  - Principles and practice
  - Procedures and arrangements decided on
Findings: Emerging elements of an RPL system

- What elements are required for implementing a valid and sustainable system?
  - Clarity of focus
  - Ease of implementation, including administration and regulation
  - Orientation to adult learners

- Assessment instruments and methods
  - What should be assessed to determine applied competence, and how?
  - What learning is considered ‘equivalent’?
  - Assessing the results of learning and applied knowledge
  - A combination of assessment approaches and instruments

- Intellectual scrutiny
Conference theme: Quality assurance of RPL

- Quality assurance = trust
- Quality assurance of:
  - Validity and fairness of the process
  - Appropriateness of assessment methods (static/dynamic/combination)
  - Assessment instruments (scope/depth/breadth)
  - Standardisation is key where credits will be granted, especially in a massified system
Conference theme: Assessment

- Assessment should be of ‘applied competence’
  - Foundational, practical, reflexive competence
  - Integrated assessment, which allows an individual to demonstrate applied competence
  - The results of learning
  - Observable performance, as well as the thinking behind performance
Conference theme: Equivalence

- Equivalence is not ‘the same as...’
- Equivalence is about the cognitive level, according to the requirements, level and purpose of the credits sought
- Requires subject matter experts
- Requires very good assessment instruments
- Requires open-mindedness to discover new ways of expressing knowledge
Conclusion

- The nature of knowledge attained in different institutions and contexts, and the intolerance for other types of knowledge narrows the discourse around RPL.

- A new discourse needs to consider more than the socio-political. It needs to be
  - Grounded in educational practice (educationally justified?);
  - Pragmatic (what is do-able?);
  - Supported by a credible quality assurance framework (the integrity of the system?).