The implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in Higher Education and Training: Institutionalising RPL

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Introduction

Policy frameworks for RPL in South Africa

- NQF (1995)
- SAQA (2013)
Literature Review

Themes:

perceptions; experiences; challenges and opportunities; policy, principles, and practices; lessons learned; power and social inclusion; accreditation and validation of prior learning
This particular study

• reflect on experiences associated with the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
• create awareness about critical factors that account for successful RPL implementation, as well as the challenges encountered
• provides a framework for the evaluation of RPL activities in a Higher Education Institution (HEI).
Informed by the **tenets of legitimacy theory**, the paper considers:

- managerial agency in advocating RPL,
- set of constituting beliefs about RPL,
- constitutive pressures
- Procedural and structural legitimacy
- Personal legitimacy
- Cognitive legitimacy
LEGITIMACY THEORY

• Legitimacy reflects embeddedness in a system of institutional beliefs and action scripts; (vision and mission statements; strategic and action plans; policies) organisation becomes self replicating; depends on investment in collective mobilisation.

• To what extent is RPL embedded in the institutions’ strategic and action plans?
Other descriptions of legitimacy

• “array of established cultural accounts that provide explanations for an organisation’s existence”.

• “organisations are legitimate when they are understandable, rather than when they are desirable”.

• “Legitimacy is the process whereby an organisation justifies to a peer or super-ordinate system its right to exist”.
Strategic legitimacy

• Legitimacy is purposive and calculated
• Managerial control and managerial agency (advocacy)
Institutional legitimacy

• Legitimacy is a set of constitutive beliefs: theoretical or philosophical orientations (technical, developmental, transformational) that give focus and direct activities; RPL models (Credit, block, competency).

• Constitutive pressures: RPL system’s responsiveness to constitutive pressures:
Procedural legitimacy

embracing socially accepted techniques and procedures; proper means and procedures that are given a positive moral value; discrete routines.

Structural legitimacy

• structural characteristics; stably replicated procedures; focuses on the organisational features that arise when entire systems of activity recur consistently over time.

• Emphasise collective structuration (Faculty RPL committees and IRPLC, reporting templates, process maps, location/situation) of entire field of RPL practice
Personal legitimacy

- key figures, champions, chairs, experts, reputation, profile

Cognitive legitimacy

- Acceptance of the unit as necessary and inevitable based on comprehensibility (understandability) and taken-for-granted.
- Coherent and understandable accounts
- Viability of explanations
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

• To describe ways of institutionalising RPL informed by the tenets of the legitimacy theory.

• To evaluate the extent to which RPL is institutionalised in a higher Education Institution.

• To highlight niches for intervention in the institutionalisation of RPL within the institution.
Data Collection

Documents:

• RPL policy;
• Strategic Plan;
• Faculty Teaching and Learning Committees (FTLC) quarterly reports (whether RPL activities and issues are reported on by Departments and Faculties);
• RPL workshop evaluation reports (20 participants)
DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis:

extracted themes were slotted into pre-determined categories derived from the theoretical framework
Findings

*(Procedural and structural legitimacy issues) from reports and evaluations*

- Admission’s office is missing in the RPL process map
- The use of an RPL application form approved by senate
- RPL should be included in the faculty standing orders
- RPL policy is silent on the turn-around time. The suggestion is to build a time line in the RPL process map.
- An RPL office or officer for the speedy processing of RPL applications
- Information on RPL fees should be disseminated by the CFO to all faculties and departments
- Problems with HESA refusing to recognise RPL candidates assessed for access into the Institution’s programmes. The workshop delegates felt that there is a need for engagements between the institution and HESA regarding RPL for access purposes
Cognitive legitimacy

- A lot of what was said I either knew or did not share sentiments with
- Most questions we had about RPL are being answered
- The workshop enabled me to get a clearer picture on what RPL really is
- I have gained a lot of information regarding the RPL process and the various models of RPL (though not included in the RPL policy)
**Constitutive Beliefs about RPL**

Theoretical or philosophical orientations (technical, developmental, transformational) that give focus and direct activities; RPL models (Credit, block, competency).

**Constitutive Pressures**

Articulation pressures from neighbouring institutions in our catchment areas (FET Colleges and Agricultural colleges: Fine Arts and Diploma and Advanced Diploma programmes) (L5 and L6 qualifications)

Senate at its last meeting requested the faculty to revisit its blanket ‘exemption’ practice for applicant with a Diploma in Agriculture. It was found that many of the applicants obtained these qualifications over 10 years ago and questioned the NQF levels of the modules and could therefore pose teaching and learning challenges in future. A submission based on the revised Faculty policy with respect to the above will have to be submitted to SENATE

- RPL would be done in this case to establish **currency of the knowledge of the candidates** where the holders old qualifications.
Personal legitimacy

- key figures, champions, chairs, experts, reputation, profile

Institutionally, there is absence of a dedicated RPL officer or RPL practitioner. Though the policy talks about RPL advisors, RPL assessors, and RPL moderators, there is however, absence of these personnel.

Strategic legitimacy view

- Legitimacy is *purposive* and *calculated*.
- Managerial *control* and managerial *agency*

The institutional RPL policy makes reference to the Faculty Managers’ involvement with RPL in the faculties. However, there is no mention as to how RPL is to be promoted and advocated by other Managers and Units.
References


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