

DEVELOPING APPROACHES TO THE ASSESSMENT OF PRIOR LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

Whilst most organisations, providers and individuals agree that the principle of recognising and crediting prior learning is a laudable one, it is proving to be difficult for would-be implementers to conceptualise and operationalise appropriate approaches to the assessment and recognition of prior learning.

For that reason, an extract from chapter 4 of the *Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL* (SAQA, 2004), where possible approaches to the development of assessment methodologies and instruments for RPL purposes are proposed, is used as the basis for this discussion. The example used in the *Criteria and Guidelines for the Implementation of RPL* is based on the understanding of the requirements of the Bachelor of Commerce: Tourism Management – NQF level 6 (SAQA ID number 7113)¹, but the approach proposed is generic and could be used for related and different fields of learning and contexts and for exit level outcomes qualifications (ELOAC), as well as qualifications based on unit standards (US). The essential elements of the approach include an in-depth understanding by the RPL practitioner of the breadth and depth of learning expected of a learner on successful attainment of a qualification, i.e. the ‘level descriptors’², the purposes of qualifications and the purposes of the assessment of applied competence, (foundational, practical and reflexive competence)³, which will be the basis for decisions about assessment approaches and instruments.

When initiating the development of assessment approaches and instruments to evaluate prior learning, the RPL practitioner(s) should start with the following three critical questions:

Why do we assess?

What do we assess?

How do we assess?

1. WHY DO WE ASSESS?

According to Whitaker (1989, p. 2) we assess ‘to identify the level of knowledge or skill that has been acquired’. In South Africa, we understand the ‘level of knowledge or skill’ to be ‘applied competence’ in accordance with the level, breadth and depth of learning expected to be achieved on successful completion of a learning intervention at a particular level of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). We therefore assess to determine whether the person claiming recognition and credits towards qualifications, have achieved the applied knowledge as described in the level descriptors, the purposes, the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of qualifications. In other words, unlike traditional forms of assessment (for example formal written examinations), which tend to measure the extent to which the content, i.e. the ‘input’ to the learning, has been mastered, the assessment of prior learning suggests that the ‘output’ (or the results of learning) must be measured. RPL assessment should therefore be of the extent to which a learner can prove applied competence, since it is assumed that if credits are claimed, that all the inputs to the learning have already taken place through non-formal or informal learning in contexts outside the institution (Heyns, Q-Africa conference, 2003)

¹ Obtainable from the website: www.saqa.org.za

² The level descriptor for NQF level 6 has not yet been finalized – the description included in this discussion is still draft.

³ Foundational competence: the demonstrated understanding of what the learner is doing and why
Practical competence: the ability to perform a set of tasks in an authentic contexts underpinned by foundational competence
Reflexive competence: the ability to integrate performance with understanding, so as to show the ability to adapt to changed circumstances appropriately and responsibly, and to explain the reasons behind an action (Criteria and Guidelines for assessment of unit standards and Qualifications – SAQA, 2001, p. 11)

The following diagram explains the notion of assessment based on the ‘inputs’ versus assessment based on the ‘outputs’ of learning:

Full-time learning programme

Recognition of Prior Learning

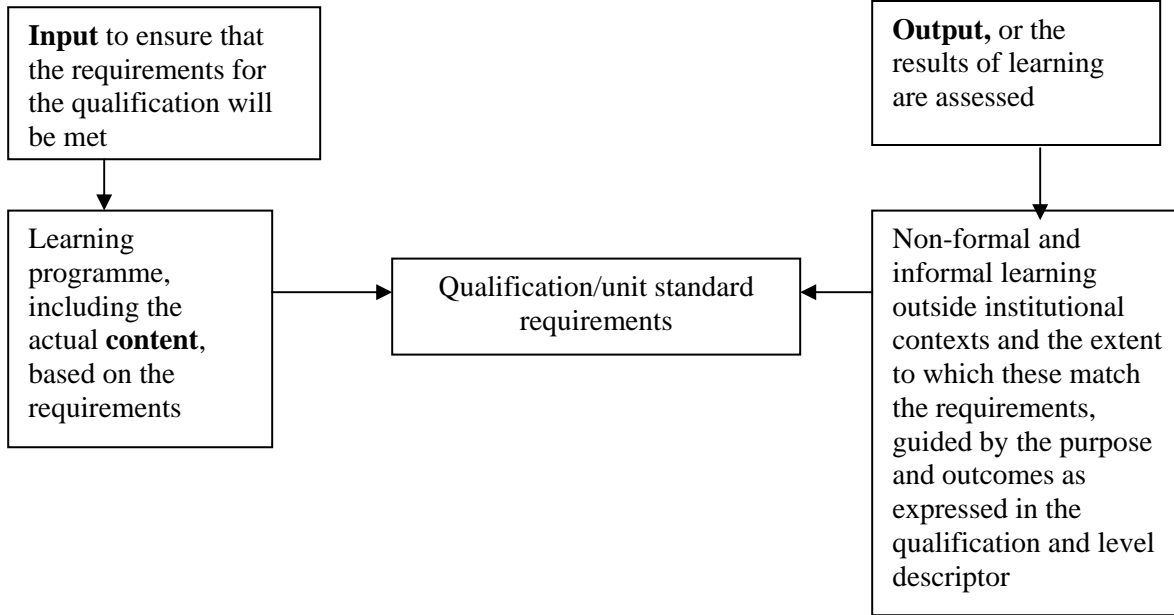


Figure 1: RPL assessment from an ‘output’ point of view (Heyns, 2003, Q-Africa conference)

This discussion takes us to the next question: ‘What do we assess?’, i.e. what do we mean by ‘applied competence’ within a particular context?

2. WHAT DO WE ASSESS?

3.

The applied knowledge for a particular qualification is described in the level descriptors, purpose, outcomes and assessment criteria of the qualification. The level descriptors provide the broadest description of the learning expected to be achieved at a specific level of the NQF, for example NQF level 6. The qualification used in this example is a ‘National First Degree’, pitched at an NQF level 6. The table (overleaf) details the requirements in terms of the level descriptors (CHE, 2001). This is followed by a summary of the purpose, as well as the outcomes (including the critical cross-field outcomes of the qualification) and assessment criteria for the Bachelor of Commerce: Tourism Management (www.sqa.org.za). These three aspects together, provide the basis for decisions on ‘what’ should be assessed to evaluate learning:

Table 1: Level descriptors for NQF level 6

Applied Competence	Autonomy of Learning
<i>Typically, a programme leading to the award of a qualification or unit standard at this level aims to develop learners who demonstrate:</i>	
<p>a. a well-rounded and systematic knowledge base in one or more disciplines/fields and a detailed knowledge of some specialist areas;</p> <p>b. an informed understanding of one or more discipline's/field's terms, rules, concepts, principles and theories; an ability to map new knowledge onto a given body of theory; an acceptance of a multiplicity of 'right' answers;</p> <p>c. effective selection and application of a discipline's/field's essential procedures, operations and techniques; an understanding of the central methods of enquiry in a discipline/field; a knowledge of at least one other discipline's/field's mode of enquiry;</p> <p>d. an ability to deal with unfamiliar concrete and abstract problems and issues using evidence-based solutions and theory-driven arguments;</p> <p>e. well-developed information retrieval skills; critical analysis and synthesis of quantitative and/or qualitative data; presentation skills following prescribed formats, using IT skills effectively;</p> <p>f. an ability to present and communicate information and opinions in well-structured arguments, showing an awareness of audience and using academic/professional discourse appropriately.</p>	<p>a capacity to operate in variable and unfamiliar learning contexts, requiring responsibility and initiative; a capacity to self-evaluate and identify and address own learning needs; an ability to interact effectively in a learning group.</p>

A careful consideration of the level, breadth and depth of learning required at a first degree level, hints at what should be assessed in the broadest sense to determine whether a candidate meets the requirements for credits on this level. These are summarized from the table above as follows:

- Detailed knowledge of the area of specialisation
- Familiarity with the area of specialisation's terms, rules, concepts and principles
- Application of the area of specialisation's procedures, operations and techniques
- The ability to apply knowledge in unfamiliar contexts
- IT and information retrieval skills
- Presentation and communication skills

Together with the level descriptors, the purpose of the qualification is used to define what is meant by 'applied competence' in this particular context. In addition, the purpose highlights the core of the qualification, which assists with the appropriate weighting of the assessment, i.e. the core of the qualification would clearly 'count more' than the 'elective' parts in terms of the assessment. The purpose of the Bachelor of Commerce: Tourism Management is as follows:

Table 2: Purpose of the qualification

<p>Purpose: The overall purpose of this qualification is to develop future managers and entrepreneurs in the tourism sphere that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Have a sound background in the economic and business sciences;○ Think and act within a strategic and systems framework;○ Have an in-depth knowledge of the operational and management aspects of the key components of tourism; and○ Have had practical and industry exposure to the key facets of tourism.

The third aspect that helps define ‘applied competence’ is the learning outcomes and associated assessment criteria, including the critical cross-field outcomes. The outcomes and assessment criteria for the Bachelor of Commerce: Tourism Management, are:

Table 3: Learning outcomes and assessment criteria

<p>Learning outcomes: After completion of the B Com (Tourism Management) programme the graduate will have the competence to operate and/or manage any of the key functional areas of a tourism business and be in a position to become an entrepreneur in the tourism sphere</p>
<p>Critical cross-field outcomes:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Identify and solve problems and make strategic and operational decisions using critical and creative thinking in the field of tourism management2. Work effectively with co-workers as members of a team, group organization and clients and community stakeholders3. Organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively within the norms and standards of the relevant industry4. Collect, analyse, organize and critically evaluate and utilize relevant information for planning and decision-making5. Communicate effectively within an organization as well as with external stakeholders using relevant visual, symbolic and/or language skills6. Use relevant technology effectively in operating and managing a tourism business7. Demonstrate a commitment to operate in a socially responsible and environmentally sustainable way8. Demonstrate an understanding of the tourism system and the inter-relationship and interdependency of its components
<p>Assessment criteria: The student must demonstrate his/her proficiency to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Deal effectively with the operational and managerial functions and strategic issues in the key sectors of the tourism industry○ Conduct a feasibility study, develop and implement a strategic and business plan for a tourism enterprise

When these three aspects are analysed together, the applied knowledge, which will be the basis for the development of assessment instruments, emerge. Consider the following table where these aspects are compared to check alignment and coverage:

	Level descriptors: applied competence (summarized)		Purpose of qualification: applied competence (summarized)		Learning outcomes: applied competence (summarized)
A	Knowledge base in one or more disciplines/fields	1	Sound knowledge of management and entrepreneurship	i.	Management and entrepreneurial abilities in the tourism sphere
B	Detailed knowledge of specialist areas	2	Sound background in economic and business sciences as it relates to the tourism sphere	ii.	Competence to operate and/or manage functional areas of a tourism business; Entrepreneurial abilities in the tourism sphere
C	Familiarity with the area of specialisation's terms, rules, concepts and principles	3	In-depth knowledge of operational and management aspects of key components of tourism	iii.	Organise and manage themselves and their activities responsibly and effectively within the norms and standards of the relevant industry
D	Application of the area of specialisation's procedures, operations and techniques	4	Think and act within a strategic and systems framework;	iv.	Demonstrate an understanding of the tourism system and the inter-relationship and interdependency of its components
E	The ability to apply knowledge in unfamiliar contexts	5	Practical and industry exposure to the key facets of tourism	v.	Identify and solve problems and make strategic and operational decisions using critical and creative thinking in the field of tourism management
F	IT and information retrieval skills			vi.	Collect, analyse, organize and critically evaluate and utilize relevant information for planning and decision-making; and Use relevant technology effectively in operating and managing a tourism business
G	Presentation and communication skills			vii.	Communicate effectively within an organization as well as with external stakeholders using relevant visual, symbolic and/or language skills; and Work effectively with co-workers as members of a team, group organization and clients and community stakeholders

Table 4: The alignment of the level descriptors, purpose and outcomes, and coverage of the requirements of the qualification

4. WHAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED?

To answer the question, ‘what should be assessed?’ to determine applied competence, the following emerged:

- The purpose and exit level outcome(s) highlight the core of the qualification, i.e. management and entrepreneurship. Assessment should therefore focus, in keeping with the level, breadth and depth of learning required for this level of qualification, on the ability to manage and the entrepreneurial skills of the candidate within the context of the tourism industry. The assessment of these aspects will carry the most weight in terms of the overall assessment.
- There are clear links with the broader descriptions of the results of learning, i.e. the level descriptors, the purpose, the outcomes and assessment criteria

In order to establish what should be assessed to determine whether the candidate meets the requirements for the qualification, the first question asked by the RPL practitioner could be:

How will we know that a person can manage key functional areas of a tourism business?

Some answers could be:

Management of a business include:

- *Consideration of market forces: feasibility studies; market research.*
- *Fiscal management: budgeting and planning.*
- *Business plan: strategic vision of now and the future, etc.*

The second question, asked by the practitioner in terms of this qualification could be:

How will we know that a person is in the position to become an entrepreneur in the tourism sphere?

Possible answers emerging from this question are:

Entrepreneurial abilities include:

- *The identification of a niche market*
- *The identification of the resources and tools required to start a business in the tourism sphere*
- *The development of marketing material and tools*
- *The implementation of a marketing strategy, etc.*

Once practitioners are clear on what would constitute, within the framework of the qualification, applied knowledge, decisions regarding assessment methods and instruments could be made. The following table takes this example further:

Table 5: Assessment, assessment instruments and links with the description of applied competence

What is to be assessed?	Possible assessment instruments	Possible links to the level descriptors, purpose, outcomes and assessment criteria
<p>The ability to manage, for example: Fiscal management; Drawing up a budget; Resource management; Business plan, etc.</p>	<p><u>Portfolio</u> of evidence containing authenticated documents proving competence in management; <u>Projects</u>, e.g. to draw up a business plan; <u>Assignments</u>, e.g. to indicate how resources will be managed; <u>Case studies</u>, e.g. how knowledge could be applied in unfamiliar contexts; <u>Challenge examination</u>, e.g. to assess underpinning theoretical knowledge of economic and business sciences.</p>	<p>Level descriptors: A, B, C, D, E</p>
		<p>Purpose of qualification: 1,2, 3, 4, 5</p>
		<p>Outcomes and assessment criteria: i., ii., iii., iv, vi.</p>
<p>Entrepreneurial abilities, for example: Identification of target market; The identification of resources and tools to start a business; The development of a marketing strategy; etc.</p>	<p>A major <u>research project</u> dealing with e.g.: ○ The identification of a target market ○ Feasibility study ○ Impact analysis ○ Resources required ○ A budget, etc. <u>Portfolio</u> of evidence containing authenticated documents proving competence in, e.g. a marketing strategy, etc. <u>Presentation</u> e.g. of a marketing plan; <u>Challenge examination</u>, e.g. to assess underpinning knowledge of marketing if appropriate</p>	<p>Level descriptors: A, B, C, D, E, F, G</p>
		<p>Purpose of the qualification: 1,2, 4, 5</p>
		<p>Outcomes and assessment criteria: i., ii, iv, vi, vii</p>
<p>Other requirements, e.g. Knowledge of the tourism sphere; IT usage and retrieval of information; Experiential learning in a tourism business</p>	<p><u>Challenge examination</u>, e.g. to assess knowledge of historical and/or cultural and natural sites suitable for tourism; <u>Industry-based certificates</u>, e.g. for IT skills; <u>Logbooks</u> e.g. for practical experience in a workplace; In a <u>portfolio</u> of evidence, <u>testimonials and references</u> in terms of work responsibilities. In a portfolio of evidence, <u>job descriptions, performance management</u> contracts and assessment, etc.</p>	

Once the practitioner has decided which assessment instruments to use, the level and extent of support that may be required by the candidates also becomes clear. A portfolio of evidence, for example, is a very common method used internationally for recognition of prior learning. However, putting together of a portfolio, is in itself a hard-won skill, particularly if it relates to reflecting on one's own practices. If a portfolio of evidence is the most appropriate form of assessment, then the necessary support to develop such a portfolio must be built into the support structures for applicants.

This approach will also facilitate inter-institutional and/or regional collaboration because the focus is on the outcome or results of learning. This in turn will greatly facilitate the articulation and transfer of credits intra- and inter-institutionally (Heyns, 2003).

To conclude:

RPL lends itself to a holistic, integrated approach to assessment. However, to develop such an approach requires an in-depth understanding of what constitutes 'applied competence' within a particular context. The level descriptors, purpose, outcomes and associated assessment criteria provide this information. Practitioners seldom have (or seek) an overview of the results of learning. Rather they tend to focus only on the particular domain for which they are responsible. This may result in highly resource-intensive assessment within clearly demarcated domains of learning, and does not facilitate the assessment of applied competence and makes the process very onerous, both for the assessor(s), as well as the candidate. The following steps therefore may facilitate the development of an integrated approach to the assessment of prior learning:

- Define and describe the criteria against which the learning will be assessed based on an in-depth understanding of the applied competence as expressed in the level descriptors, purposes, outcomes and associated assessment criteria of the qualification (and related qualifications)
- Develop appropriate assessment instruments to measure the extent to which the learning meets the criteria established.
- Weight the assessment, i.e. the core will clearly 'count more' than the supporting parts of the qualification
- Based on the weighting, decide on the minimum 'pass rate'
- Define and describe how the credits achieved will articulate with the qualification, and will be recorded
- Define and describe the learner support that may be required, for example 'how to develop a portfolio of evidence'

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