# CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPLEMENTING RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) POLICY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

By

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Thesis presented for the degree of

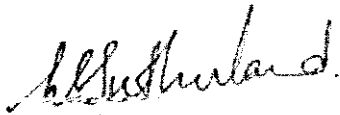## DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

In the Faculty of Education

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# DECLARATION

I declare that *Challenges and opportunities for implementing recognition of prior learning (RPL) policy in higher education* is my own work, except where indicated, and that it has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any university.

Signed:

Lee Sutherland

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**Dedication**
This work is dedicated to my late brother Mark Johan Pheiffer whose untimely death, while I was writing this thesis, has had such a profound impact on my life view.

# ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the responses of higher education to the national imperative to implement Recognition of Prior Learning. It makes use of a mixed methods mode of research to explore this phenomenon at three sites of higher education delivery in KwaZulu-Natal. The research investigates how these three institutions have responded to the imperative at an institutional level, in terms of policy development, organisational structures and philosophical approach. It also looks at academic staff perceptions of RPL policy and implementation and its successfulness in terms of the integration of RPL into the curriculum, the capacity of the curriculum to facilitate the assessment of RPL and the extent to which it has been implemented within the higher education system. It identifies the articulation of national policy on RPL as one of the factors that impacts on successful implementation. In so doing, barriers to the successful implementation of RPL are also identified and explored. These barriers include epistemological, material and systemic barriers. However, it also seeks to elicit the benefits that higher education sees in implementing RPL, both in terms of fulfilling the goals of higher education and in terms of the benefits for the national economic imperatives and the skills development initiative. Ultimately, the research attempts to establish the extent to which RPL has been institutionalised within the institutions in terms of a set of indicators as identified by the researcher.

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# LIST OF ACRONYMS

| AARP | Alternative Admissions Research Project |
| AQF | Australian Qualifications Framework |
| CHE | Council on Higher Education |
| CHED | Centre for Higher Education and Development (Durban Institute of Technology) |
| COSATU | Congress of South African Trade Unions |
| CTP | Committee of Technikon Principals |
| DIT | Durban Institute of Technology |
| DoE | Department of Education (national) |
| ETQA | Education and Training Quality Assuror |
| FETC | Further Education and Training Certificate |
| FSHFETT | Free State Higher and Further Education Training Trust |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| HEQC | Higher Education Quality Committee |
| HESA | Higher Education South Africa |
| JET | Joint Education Trust |
| KZN | KwaZulu-Natal |
| NAP | New Academic Policy |
| NGO | Non Government Organisation |
| NQF | National Qualifications Framework |
| NPDE | National Primary Diploma in Education |
| NPHE | National Plan for Higher Education |
| NSF | National Skills Fund |
| NVQ | National Vocational Qualifications |
| PLAR | Prior learning assessment and recognition |
| QQD | Qualitative-Quantitative Debate |
| RPL | Recognition of Prior Learning |
| SAQA | South African Qualifications Authority |
| SAUVCA | South African University Vice Chancellors Association |
| SED | School of Education and Development (University of KwaZulu-Natal) |
| SETA | Sector Education and Training Authority |
| UDW | University of Durban-Westville |
| UCT | University of Cape Town |
| UKZN | University of KwaZulu-Natal |
| UN | University of Natal |
| UNISA | University of South Africa |
| UZ | University of Zululand |

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# Chapter 1: Orientation to the study

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

RPL is currently, and commonly, defined in the South African context as the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements (SAQA 2002). A variety of national documents create the legislative framework for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and detail the national imperative to implement RPL policy in a range of different contexts, including among others, higher education. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995 (SAQA 1995) and the *Criteria and guidelines for the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* (SAQA 2004b) are just two of these.

## 1.2 ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM

RPL is a way of recognising what individuals already know and can do, based on the premise that people learn both inside and outside formal learning structures and this learning can be worthy of recognition and credit. Some of the underlying assumptions of implementing RPL policy include an acceptance that learning takes place in contexts other that formal institutions of learning, that such learning can be regarded as equivalent to the learning that takes place in formal educational contexts, and that it can be accredited and recognised for the purposes of acquiring qualifications (Luckett 1999).

RPL policy has its antecedents in a South African labour initiative which saw the need to address past inequities in a labour context (Luckett 1999; Gawe 1999), through the demands of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) that its members be given recognition for their years of work experience. This translated into a need for a lifelong learning framework for human resource development being put on the agenda of education and training (Luckett 1999).

Over the years, RPL has been implemented in a variety of contexts, in industrial environments as well as in Higher Education and Training (HET) sector, where the

feasibility of such implementation has been questioned by academics. What makes this study interesting is its context: RPL implementation in higher education. This issue is often contested, always contentious and ever thought provoking.

Implementing RPL policy at institutions of higher education is acknowledged as being a complex matter, the problems of which are not easily resolved. As early as 1999, academics in higher education were reporting an increased number of applications for RPL (Gawe 1999; Geyser 1999). A number of authors have pointed out the disappointing, and sometimes confusing, results produced by RPL initiatives to date (Michelson 1999) and its failure to 'take off' in South Africa (Luckett 1999).

Part of this disappointment and failure may lie in the fact that many academics and the institutions they represent, report that they and their institutions are not equipped to dealing with these requests for a variety of reasons. These include, *inter alia*, a lack of clearly articulated national policy, a lack of institutional infrastructure, lack of the necessary resources (including financial resources), lack of required expertise and particularly assessment expertise, and the difficulty of conceptualising RPL as an intervention that is suitable for institutions of higher education, a difficulty with the implementation of Outcomes Based Education (OBE) in higher education where much of the learning that takes place is not regarded as quantifiable in ways that support RPL. Furthermore, there are issues related to curricular unresponsiveness, a dominant epistemology in universities that does not accommodate RPL, and a lack of support structures for learners who enter the academy via the RPL route (Geyser 1999; Gawe 1999; Harris 1999).

At the same time, academics at institutions of higher education have highlighted the advantages and benefits that can be derived from the implementation of RPL for individuals, institutions and the economy (Geyser 1999). These include increased graduation rates, reduced educational wastage, improved curriculum development, reduction of duplication in an educational context, opening of access, meeting the needs of institutions for flexible learning provision and a quality education system.

## 1.3 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In response to the problems listed in the previous section, research is required to address the following research questions:

*What are the challenges and opportunities presented by the need to implement RPL policy, in line with the national imperative, in higher education?*

*How have the challenges and opportunities posed by RPL policy and its implementation been addressed in institutions of higher education? In other words, has RPL been successfully institutionalised?*

*How can the implementation of RPL policy at institutions of higher education add value to the national skills development and economic initiatives?*

## 1.4 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE RESEARCH

The following concepts need to be 'unpacked' or elucidated upon in order to approach the research in an enlightened manner and to add to the understanding of what is meant by RPL.

### 1.4.1 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

RPL is defined in a variety of places in this research, but for the purpose of discussion, the following definition, which combines both SAQA policy as well as various interpretations of this policy, will be used: RPL is the giving of credit to learning that has taken place in environments and situations outside of formal institutions, including through non-formal education, work and life experiences. The person can be awarded an entire qualification, or can be admitted to programmes without the minimum requirements, or can be 'fast-tracked' through a programme by condoning some if not all of the credits required for the learning programme.

There is, however, evidence of some variance in regard to the operational definitions of RPL which suggest that RPL is not as clearly defined as policy-makers would like to

think. Prinsloo and Buchler (2005) citing Gay and Wilson (1997) point out that different definitions and applications in terms of what constitutes RPL often weakens the link between recognition, experiential learning and formal qualifications. In the South African context this plays itself out in the tensions that exist between issues of access and those of RPL, which have synergies but are essentially different in terms of rationale and discourse.

### 1.4.2 Knowledge

Knowledge is understood as the product of learning. It is viewed as a socially constructed understanding of reality, which each person individually achieves. For the purposes of this study, knowledge is conceptualised as more than just a product; it is what Wheelahan, Newton and Miller (2003: 6) citing Northedge (2001: 308) claims to be constituted by "...flows of meaning within discourse communities and is 'produced between knowledgeable people when they communicate with each other'".

### 1.4.3 Outcomes Based Education

Outcomes Based Education (OBE) is an approach to education that depends upon the identification of predetermined outcomes by which performance judged. These outcomes are skills, knowledge and values that a learner can demonstrate. The RPL model developed by SAQA for South African education and training depends upon an OBE approach for its implementation. Boughey (2004: 8) states that, "In many respects, OBE, which requires educators to focus on what learners should be able to do as opposed to what they should know, is a philosophy (in that it is a way of thinking about learning), a set of classroom practices and a system that makes a national qualifications framework possible".

### 1.4.4 Curriculum

Curriculum cannot be narrowly defined as the syllabus of a learning programme; it is far wider in its scope and extent. Curriculum is the structured approach to learning developed to achieve a set of outcomes for a qualification. It provides guidelines, *inter alia*, for the

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sequence of learning, the content as the vehicle for achieving the outcomes, the teaching and learning strategies, the resource requirements and the assessment methods.

### 1.4.5 Epistemology

In the context of this discussion, epistemology refers to theories of knowledge, which, although not always explicitly stated, influence one's orientation in the teaching and learning situation. Zietsman (1996: 73) provides a rationale for considering the importance of epistemology in that "....your epistemology determines your view of the learner, how you develop instruction, how you organise your classroom. It does not say how to go about those actions: it pre-determines them".

### 1.4.6 Ontology

For the purpose of the research methodology, ontology relates to the way in which reality is viewed in a research study. Ontology is about the nature of reality in the research and what can be known about it (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999).

### 14.7 Perceptions

For the purposes of this research, the term perceptions relates to the way in which people understand and experience concepts and the application of these concepts in their daily lives and working environments. It is not understood in the narrow sense of a psychological concept or specifically in the context of empirical education.

### 1.4.8 Assessment

Assessment is described as the process of gathering and weighing evidence in order to establish whether learners have demonstrated the learning associated with outcomes specified in unit standards or qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

### 1.4.9 Moderation

Moderation is the process of ensuring that assessments that have been conducted in line with agreed practices and are fair, reliable and valid. It usually entails "...the appointment of a person, external to the teaching of a programme and who is from outside the institution, in the case of final-year examinations, to oversee the quality of the assessment process" (Murdoch & Grobbelaar 2004: 113).

### 1.4.10 Accreditation

There are various understandings of accreditation in different contexts. For the purpose of these discussions, accreditation is taken to mean the process of awarding credits and qualifications to learners (Pahad 1997).

### 1.4.11 Qualifications

Qualifications are the outcome of a learning programme where learners achieve a set of predetermined outcomes (specific outcomes as well as critical cross-field outcomes) that are nationally registered and recognised. Qualifications exist in the public domain and are not 'owned' by a provider of education and training. They are "the formal recognition and certification of learning achievement awarded by an accredited institution" (Department of Education 2004a: 7). Current regulations stipulate that a qualification may lead to a total of 120 or more credits on the NQF (SAQA 2004a).

### 1.4.12 Learning programmes

A learning programme is a purposeful and structured set of learning experiences that leads to a qualification (Department of Education 2004a). Learning programmes can also be defined as a group of specific outcomes and learning components structured in a way that will create a coherent learning and teaching programme for the achievement of a qualification. Learning programmes are the vehicle for achieving the qualification and will differ from institution to institution, while the qualification may remain the same.

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### 1.4.13 Level descriptors

Level descriptors provide the basis for differentiating the varying levels of complexity of qualifications on the framework (Department of Education 2004a). They describe learning at the various levels within the NQF in terms of the complexity and the autonomy of the learning that takes place for purposes of standardisation and comparison across qualifications.

### 1.4.14 Experiential learning

There are a variety of different interpretations of the terms experiential learning. Breier (2003) indicates that it can refer to a movement in adult education that has a number of sub-meanings. For the purposes of this study, the term refers to "the practice of learning from work or life experience" (Breier 2003:16) or informal learning.

### 1.4.15 Modularisation

The term modularisation relates to the way in which a curriculum is packaged in small, interchangeable building blocks of learning, defined in terms of the credits that they carry. It is a model of curriculum that is unitised rather than linear (Betts & Smith 1998).

### 1.5 AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The research aims to do the following:

- Undertake a literature study in areas related to the challenges and opportunities posed by RPL implementation in higher education.
- Conduct an empirical investigation into the challenges and opportunities posed by RPL implementation in higher education.
- Make recommendations regarding how best to address these challenges and opportunities.

### 1.6 VALUE OF THE RESEARCH

RPL is in its infancy in South Africa, and institutions of higher education have been grappling with the issues for a few years. This research will add value to the growing body of knowledge around RPL and its implementation. It will provide for a unique

perspective on the debates around RPL implementation by offering an in-depth study of RPL related issues in South Africa.

## 1.7    METHOD OF RESEARCH

### 1.7.1    Research methods

The research methods will include a literature survey and an empirical study of the phenomenon of RPL and its implementation in higher education. The empirical study will be accompanied by the collection of a qualitative set of data from which the quantitative data will be triangulated and verified.

### 1.7.2    Data collection and sampling method

The data collection phase will make use of three institutions of higher education delivery. It would be useful to make use of at least one university and one technikon in the data collection phase, in order to draw comparisons in terms of approach to RPL.

A structured questionnaire will be designed and piloted for the purposes of data collection.    The questionnaire will consist of between 30 and 40 closed questions (excluding biographical information) scored on a four point Likert scale, followed by a section of structured, open-ended questions.    It is proposed that at least 90 questionnaires will be collected from the selected institutions. The data will be analysed by means of a software programme (Sphinx Survey) and correlations will be analysed for the purposes of determining trends in terms of gender, experience in years, highest educational qualification and position within the institution.

### 1.7.3    Data verification

The data will be triangulated and verified by means of qualitative data collection methods that will include individual interviews with approximately six individual participants and an institutional survey with one participant per institution.

### 1.7.4 Data analysis

The various sets of data will be analysed using computer software and then synthesised into a coherent narrative that details the research findings.

### 1.8 CHAPTER OUTLINES

#### 1.8.1 Chapter 1

Chapter 1 will deal with the orientation of the research in terms of the analysis of the problem, the statement of the problem, the conceptual framework and the anticipated research methods.

#### 1.8.2 Chapter 2

Chapter 2 will deal with the literature review to provide the theoretical framework for the study.

#### 1.8.3 Chapter 3

Chapter 3 will deal with the research design and its methodology and will provide the justification for the selection of a particular paradigm of research.

#### 1.8.4 Chapter 4

Chapter 4 will deal with the presentation of the data largely from the institutional survey, but including other data sources.

#### 1.8.5 Chapter 5

Chapter 5 deals with the presentation of the data largely from the questionnaires, but including other data sources.

#### 1.8.6 Chapter 6

Chapter 6 will focus on the summary, findings and recommendations that arise from the findings.

### 1.8.7 List of sources

A list of sources will be included at the end.

### 1.9 SUMMARY

This chapter provides the introduction and orientation to this research. It includes an analysis of the problem, a statement of the problem including three research questions, a brief conceptual framework for the study (eludication of concepts), a discussion of the aims and value of the study, a brief description of the research methodology and finally, a brief outline of the various chapters and their contents.

# Chapter 2: Literature review

## 2.1 FRAMING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1.1 Introduction

Although RPL, as a concept, has been defined in the previous chapter, more needs to be said about RPL for the purposes of the literature review. RPL relates to the recognition of prior learning both for accreditation purposes and for integration into the curriculum. Breier (2003: 15) makes this distinction by referring to the first purpose of RPL as 'RPL' and to the second as 'rpl': "RPL refers to practices to identify and recognise adults' prior learning, which may be from formal, non-formal or informal (work and life) experience. ... In this thesis, I use the term 'rpl' with a small 'r' to refer to the practice of recognising prior learning in the pedagogic processes of the course itself". This research refers to both functions of RPL. Furthermore it locates the practice within that of adult education and therefore makes the clear distinction between RPL and access, which is generally an assessment of *potential* rather than an assessment of *prior* learning.

In addition, something needs to be said about RPL in relation to experiential learning in the way in which experiential learning is conceptualised by Kolb (1984) and others. RPL recognises experiential learning as the learning that occurs from work experiences or life experiences. For the purposes of this study, the integration of experiential learning into RPL practices excludes the practice of incorporating practical learning experiences into formal learning programmes in the way in which 'service learning', 'work-based learning' or 'work integrated learning' are now being conceptualised. It does however include learning that takes place in the course of a formal programme that is broadly based on some practical experience and is therefore integrated into the theory component of the learning.

### 2.1.2 Purpose of the literature review

The purpose of this literature review is to locate the research problem within an existing body of knowledge. In most research studies of this nature, the literature review is designed to do the following - regardless of the preferred research paradigm:

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- ❑ Create the theoretical perspective from which data will be collected.
- ❑ Demonstrate the underlying assumptions of the general research question.
- ❑ Set the research within a tradition of inquiry.
- ❑ Provide a context of related studies.
- ❑ *Guide the study theoretically.*
- ❑ Build the logical theoretical framework within which the research takes place.
- ❑ Demonstrate the capacity of the researcher to undertake the study.
- ❑ Move towards identifying the gaps that exist in the existing research and body of knowledge in the focus area (Fouche & Delport 2002).

For the purposes of this study, a review of the literature relating to the implementation of RPL in higher education, will include a discussion of both the official documentation (i.e. legislation and regulations as well as guidelines issued by SAQA) and writings about the various theoretical and research issues surrounding the implementation of RPL policy.

### 2.1.3 Focus area for the literature review

The focus area of the literature review is a discussion of the RPL policy and implementation in higher education. Although other barriers exist, the literature review will confine itself to the various epistemological, physical (related to human, financial and infrastructural resources) and systemic barriers or inhibitors to RPL that present themselves in the literature. It will also provide a summation of the reported benefits to be derived from implementing RPL in higher education, from both a higher education sector perspective as well as a national economic perspective.

The following section frames the research in terms of the legislative and regulatory framework in which it is located. It explores the imperatives that have been provided for the implementation of RPL in both a national context and, more specifically, in a higher education context. It should be noted that the legislative context is volatile and the summary that follows is deemed to be valid at the time of writing, and may be subject to change.

## 2.2 NATIONAL POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE CONTEXT FOR RPL

### 2.2.1 Introduction

Kraak (2000) points out that government policies on higher education and training have been fundamentally shaped by the analytical framework developed by Gibbons *et al.* (1994). Recommendations of the policies include a more open and responsive higher education and training system, with a concomitant emphasis on programmatic rather than disciplinary-based provision. The work of Gibbons *et al.* (1994) in regard to the change in the mode of knowledge production is discussed in greater deal later in this chapter.

Thomson (2005: 1) points out that the educational landscape has, since 1994, been characterised by "...disruption, policy overload, over-regulation and fragmented loci of authority". It is important to understand the context within which RPL policy was also introduced. The SAQA impact study makes specific reference to concerns that were expressed about "...legislative incoherence and the complexity of the various requirements" in relation to the implementation of RPL (SAQA 2004b: 53).

It is also important to trace the reasons why RPL became such a strong imperative for policy and implementation in higher education. Policy is often used as a change driver for making systemic changes. However, policy that is intended to introduce educational reform deals with issues of content and pedagogy, but it often neglects to explore the systemic implications that will result from the policy. This is proving to be true in the case of policy regarding broadening access and widening participation, through initiatives such as RPL.

Moore and Lewis (2005: 42) point out that organisational challenges such as divergent pedagogic and epistemic orientations, incompatible organisational cultures and in appropriate resourcing models, suggest that achieving organisational forms that will "...support the delivery of new curriculum forms is considerably more complex than policy makers might have imagined".

The imperative to introduce reform educational practices, including RPL, in South Africa has been dominated by four discourses; the socio-political, social justice, economic and educational discourses, all of which focus to some extent on the need to widen access to education. All of these discourses are interrelated and are certainly not discreet.

Firstly, the socio-political discourse focuses on the need to widen access for purposes of redressing imbalances that occurred in the system as a result of apartheid structures. This discourse is evident in National Commission on Higher Education Report (Department of Education 1996) and other documents that created the expectation of greater educational access and equity. SAQA's cautionary note is of importance however: "If RPL is seen to be a legislative directive, rather than a social responsibility and an opportunity to add value to educational practices, RPL could easily become the 'victim' instead of the 'agent' of transformation where, once the real (or perceived) socio-political imperative have been met, it is no longer practiced" (SAQA 2004a: 17).

Secondly, the discourse of social justice focuses on the need to balance the social equity scorecard by uplifting and promoting those who suffered in the past. This discourse promotes attempts at social re-engineering to create a more equitable society and is evident in debates about social upliftment.

The issue of social justice raises an issue in regard to the 'life expectancy' of RPL policy and implementation as a redress measure. Is RPL a short-term phenomenon that will gradually fade as the issues of redress and equity are addressed and balances are restored? The South African literature does not comment extensively in this regard, but the overseas literature (Candy 2000; Wheelahan, Newton & Miller 2003 and Starr-Glass 2002) would lead us to believe that RPL policy and implementation is still a necessity, even in well developed countries where issues of equity and redress do not enjoy such high priority as they do in South Africa.

Linked to RPL, Osman (2004) suggests the economic discourse by making reference to the economic imperatives that are required to enable adults to compete in the global economy. Smout (2004) asserts that governments are extending participation ratios in the belief that long-term national goals and economic development in modern knowledge economies are best served in this way. Reference is made in the literature to neo-liberal economic agendas that have dominated the discourse (Allais 2003; Moore & Lewis 2005).

The educational discourse speaks of the need to break down the boundaries between disciplines and disciplinary knowledge, and between the knowledge of the academy and knowledge of the real world, in ways that promote the development of individuals and groups through an educational agenda.

What follows is an attempt to track the antecedents of RPL policy and implementation as an imperative for higher education in terms of the legislative and regulatory requirements.

### 2.2.2 National imperatives for change and transformation in higher education

The Higher Education Act (Republic of South Africa 1997a) and the White Paper for Higher Education: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Republic of South Africa 1997b) provide the overall regulatory framework for higher education. The latter proclaims the national imperatives in higher education for change and transformation, in general. It also strongly supports RPL in terms of the "...development of criteria and mechanisms to recognise prior learning with a view to admitting non-traditional students to higher education institutions" (Republic of South Africa 1997b: 3). It promotes, *inter alia,* the following principles, which have relevance for RPL policy and implementation in higher education:

- Life-long learning.
- Learner mobility through articulation routes.
- The recognition of prior learning.
- Flexible learning systems.

□ Increased access for purposes of equity and social redress.

□ Responsiveness to social needs and the development of social responsibility.

The national response to the imperatives created by these principles, coupled with the moral imperative of redress of previous social imbalances and the need for rapid skills development, is an attempt to create a coherent, unitary and equitable, but diverse and differentiated system of education and training, in order to replace the previously elitist and divided system in operation.

Breier and Burness (2003) note that numerous government policy and discussion documents since 2000 have affirmed the importance of RPL within the context of broadening access to non-traditional students. What follows is an exposition of the various pieces of legislation that determine the course and direction of policy that impacts on higher education and its implementation of RPL and forms the backdrop for the study. Some of the current and existing regulatory and statutory requirements in higher education which will be discussed later in this chapter might be possible inhibitors to the implementation of RPL. The documentation identifies legislation and regulations that confirm the imperative for the education and training sector in general, and higher education in particular, to pursue the course of RPL.

Du Pré and Pretorius (2001: 12) provide a cautionary note that the regulatory legislation does not give clear, specific or concrete directives on matters such as access for candidates to higher education or for managing the RPL process: "They merely create an enabling environment for candidates to acquire access and form the legal framework within which higher education providers can design and deliver education / training programmes for candidates".

### 2.2.3   South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act

The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of 1995 (Republic of South Africa 1995) is considered among many educationalists to be one of the most momentous pieces of education-related legislation in recent times in South Africa. It is regarded as legislation that

touches on almost every aspect of education and training. In terms of this legislation "...the South African Qualifications Authority is responsible for providing intellectual and strategic leadership for the implementation of the National Qualifications Framework that satisfy the relevant criteria" (Department of Education 2004a: 8).

One of the key elements of the SAQA Act of 1995 is the way in which it eliminates the pre-existing and often artificial boundaries between education and training, by creating a single, unitary system for skills development. This paves the way for RPL implementation by diluting the often rigid boundaries which exist between theory and practice, making the notion of 'knowledge in practice' mandatory. While no direct mention was made of RPL at this early stage of policy development, it is clear that this legislation is fundamental to the implementation of RPL policy in South Africa.

The SAQA Act is an enabling act in that it provides the opportunity for the development and implementation of a National Qualifications Framework, on which all future South African qualifications will be registered, through the establishment of SAQA.

### 2.2.4 National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

The SAQA Act of 1995 provides for the establishment of a National Qualifications Framework, similar to the ones developed in New Zealand (New Zealand Qualifications Framework) and the United Kingdom (National Vocational Qualifications). The NQF registers qualifications, presented as learning programmes that are disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary, in an outcomes based format. The NQF also sets the scene for an education and training environment that enhances the upward mobility and progression of the population by ensuring the articulation of educational and training opportunities.

The NQF has been afforded a central role in the transformation agenda (SAQA 2004b). The stated objectives of the NQF are as follows and a number of these are linked to issues of RPL:

    ❑    Create an integrated national framework for learning achievements.

- Facilitate access to, and mobility and progression within, education, training and career paths.
- Enhance the quality of education and training.
- Accelerate the redress of past unfair discrimination in education, training and employment opportunities.
- Contribute to the full personal development of each learner and the social and economic development of the nation at large (SAQA 2004b).

### 2.2.5 Regulations under the SAQA Act

Various regulations have subsequently been published under the SAQA Act. All of these make mention of RPL and assist in providing the framework in which RPL is to operate in South Africa. These regulations include, *inter alia*, the following:

- *Criteria and guidelines for Education and Training Quality Assurors (ETQAs)* (SAQA 1998a).
- *Criteria and guidelines for providers* (SAQA 1998b).
- *Criteria and guidelines for assessment of NQF registered unit standards and qualifications* (SAQA 2001).

### 2.2.6 Revised Norms and standards for educators

While the *Norms and standards for educators* document, and many of the documents that follow might be or have been replaced in the passage of time, they have nevertheless all shaped the direction of RPL policy and implementation in South Africa. The revised version of the *Norms and standards for educators* provides guidance for teacher education reform in particular and mentions RPL by briefly stating that "...recognition of prior learning...provides for the mobility of learners between different programmes and places of work" (Department of Education 2000a: 30).

### 2.2.7 Report on the Shape and Size of Higher Education

The Report on the Shape and Size of Higher Education (Department of Education 2000b) attempted to stratify institutions into those that were intended to operate largely at the undergraduate level, with limited masters programmes and no doctoral research, and

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those that qualified to offer qualifications beyond masters and at doctoral level. Although RPL was accorded some importance in terms of the overall recommendation that RPL initiatives should be promoted in order to increase the intake of adult learners, RPL was nevertheless relegated to the first kind of institution (as described above) rather than the second kind.

### 2.2.8 The National Plan for Higher Education

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) was a follow-up to the document discussed in the previous section, and reaffirmed the previous position of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) in regard to RPL initiatives to increase the intake of adult learners (Department of Education 2001a). This document highlighted the imperative for institutions of higher education to demonstrate in their institutional plans, the strategies and steps they intended taking to increase their enrolments of students from two of the three groups designated for equity development, namely women and the disabled, by attracting workers and mature learners. Within this document, the Department of Education also made more explicit its position on access already outlined in the Education White Paper 3.

### 2.2.9 The Draft New Academic Policy

The New Academic Policy (NAP) (Department of Education 2001b) document has been superseded by the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF), which is in draft form. The NAP document provided direction to higher education in terms of the way in which qualifications should be structured. It also made far-reaching pronouncements about RPL. It acknowledged the difficulty of recognising 'other' forms of knowledge and made overt reference to higher education as having "…highly specialised, abstracted and formalised forms" (Department of Education 2001b: 104). It was hoped that the NAP would contribute to the implementation of the NPHE in ways that would influence the implementation of RPL through:

◻ Increasing participation rates by creating opportunities to access qualifications and articulation qualifications at entry points.

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- Increasing graduate output by creating a flexible qualifications framework and accommodating extended curriculum.
- Broadening the social base of students by supporting lower common admission requirements.

In an attempt to create opportunities for successful RPL implementation, the NAP proposed an articulation stream of qualifications that would allow for the change over from professional to academic qualifications and vice versa. It also made recommendations about more open, multi-mode delivery systems, multiple entry and exit points and intermediate exit qualifications for multi-year qualifications (Department of Education 2001b).

## 2.2.10 The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African Qualification Framework

SAQA (SAQA 2004a: 7) claims that *The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the South African Qualification Framework* (SAQA 2002) provides "...the core criteria for a holistic developmental model of RPL implementation". This document provides what SAQA regarded, at the time of developing the document, as the broad strategic framework for the implementation of RPL. However, by its own admission in later documentation, it does not "...expand sufficiently on those aspects which could help providers of education and training and their constituent ETQAs [Education and Training Quality Assurors] to implement RPL, particularly as they relate to the contexts impacting on a sector" (SAQA 2004a: 5).

## 2.2.11 Criteria and guidelines for the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning

At the time of writing, the *Criteria and guidelines for the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* (SAQA 2004a) is the most recent official publication to be issued by SAQA in regard to RPL. It is described in the preface as being "open-ended", "non-prescriptive" and a "living document" that allows for "...continual engagement with the aspects impacting on the implementation of RPL" (SAQA 2004a: 3). The preface

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implies that further important contextual issues will be incorporated into the document as they emerge through practice. The document identifies providers of education and training as the target audience of this publication.

This document claims to make a contribution to the critical debates on the transformation of assessment practices, not only of RPL, but also for teaching and learning practice in general (SAQA 2004a). It also claims to address the following in regard to RPL:

- ❏ Issues that will impact on the feasibility of implementation of RPL processes and assessment.
- ❏ Funding and the sources of funding.
- ❏ Curriculum development.
- ❏ Regional collaboration possibilities.

## 2.2.12 The Higher Education Qualifications Framework

One of the most recent pronouncements in regard to the structure of higher education is the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (HEQF) which re-affirms the role of RPL as a building block leading directly to a qualification (Department of Education 2004a). This document expressly states that "…institutions may recognise other forms of prior learning and achievement, in addition to qualifications, to determine the equivalence of admission requirements" (Department of Education 2004a: 15).

While providing this affirmation, the document does little to suggest any changes to the current admissions requirements and states that "…the current admissions requirements for higher education remain applicable" (Department of Education 2004a: 17). In addition, this document signals an end to the development of multiple exits for qualifications at the Certificate and Diploma levels, and as such, is contrary to the suggested development of an emancipatory curriculum that will assist RPL candidates in providing alternative entries and exits in higher education (Department of Education 2004a).

### 2.2.13 Criteria for institutional audits

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) has sent a clear signal to higher education, via the *Criteria for institutional audits* (Department of Education 2004c) about the importance of RPL policy and implementation in terms of its inclusion of RPL as the basis for one of its 19 criteria in the institutional audit framework (Department of Education 2004c: 15): "Criterion 14: The institution has an RPL policy, and effective procedures for recognising prior learning and assessing current competence". It elaborates that, in order to meet these criteria institutions will be expected to have the following:

- ❏ Institutional policy to support access through RPL measures.
- ❏ Effective procedures stipulated for RPL. This includes the identification, documentation, assessment, evaluation and transcription of prior learning against specified learning outcomes, so that articulation can take place.
- ❏ Assessment instruments designed for RPL implementation in accordance with the institution's policies on fair and transparent assessment (Department of Education 2004c).

In response to these legislative and regulatory imperatives, higher education, as a sector, has developed a number of overt and covert approaches to RPL policy and implementation. What follows is a discussion of some of the identified approaches taken by higher education to RPL policy and implementation.

## 2.3    IDENTIFIED APPROACHES TO RPL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

### 2.3.1    Introduction

There are three dominant models of RPL reported in the literature. In this section, these approaches to RPL are discussed in terms of the way in which they influence RPL policy and implementation in South Africa. This section of the literature review draws heavily on the work of Breier and Burness (2003) as their study provides a summation of the various approaches or perspectives on RPL as identified in local and international literature through extensive research in higher education in South Africa. However, the approaches to RPL as proposed by Breier and Burness (2003) are augmented by other

salient approaches that present themselves in the literature, particularly in the writing of Osman and Castle (2002; 2004).

Breier and Burness (2003) accept that the classifications of RPL are tentative and are in the opinion of the researcher, flawed to some extent. What follows is a discussion of the three dominant models identified by Breier and Burness (2003), Osman (2004) and Osman and Castle (2004) and others, along with a critique of how each contributes to the debates around RPL policy and implementation. Each model also has associated sub-perspectives.

### 2.3.2 Technical or market perspective

The technical model is also referred to by Osman and Castle (2004) as the *credit exchange* model and as the *human capital* perspective (Osman 2004). Knowledge is seen as neutral and uncontested and as a sort of commodity (Osman 2004). This is significantly different from the other models in that it requires no reflection on the part of the learner. The advantage of this model is that it is easy to administer (Osman & Castle 2004). Harris (2000) also refers to this as the *Procrustean* model in that it requires everyone to be tailored to fit into the system in a one-size-fits-all model of RPL.

This model is however a commonly applied model in higher education as it represents a "...pragmatic and systematic approach to the portability of prior learning. Furthermore, it does not threaten institutional autonomy, standards, or existing ways of organising curricula" (Osman & Castle 2002: 64). It is attractive to administrators as the process can be seen as a set of steps that are controllable and measurable, but it has made little contribution to equity and redress in education in South Africa (Osman 2004).

Most models of RPL, both national and international, are to some extent, based on an equivalency between the unique experience of a subject and existing course analogues and that such examinations are located within distinctive structures of learning (Starr-Glass 2002; Austin Galli & Diamantorous 2003; Starr-Glass & Schwartzbaum 2003) and

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that the greater the differences between these structures of learning, the more problematic the accreditation process (Starr-Glass & Schwartzbaum 2003).

Breier and Burness (2003) in their study found widespread evidence of the technical or credit exchange approach in which learning from informal experience is usually matched against pre-defined, specified outcomes using challenge tests, examinations and production of evidence. This finding is quite ironic in the light of the resistance that higher education has demonstrated to attempts to introduce an outcomes-based approach to education and training.

In an unexpected outcome and perhaps one that is unique to a South African context, Breier and Burness (2003) found evidence of a perspective of RPL that did not conform directly to any of the above-mentioned perspectives or approaches, but could be seen as a *pragmatism* that is aligned to the credit exchange model. The authors (2003) found evidence of an expedient, pragmatic or compliance-driven approach, where RPL was deemed 'compulsory', a necessary evil or a survival strategy. This perspective can be further divided into at least three sub-perspectives.

Firstly, there was evidence of a compliance approach to RPL implementation. This approach is adopted as a response to a legislative requirement where there is a general absence of commitment to the ideal, but a sense of a need to comply with or conform to these requirements. In such approaches, any changes are initially relatively superficial and result in limited change. However, such compliance might become a catalyst for change in the future (Breier & Burness 2003).

Secondly, there was evidence of RPL implementation being used as a survival strategy. While institutions are reluctant to admit to a strategic approach to RPL that will assist in ensuring the survival of the institution, there is no doubt that, this is both a motivating force and a perspective of RPL policy and implementation. Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003: 49) cite evidence to suggest that RPL, at the University of the Western Cape, was

facilitated, in part, "...by concern that the rapid decline in student numbers may threaten the 'survival of the institution'".

The third sub-perspective of the pragmatic approach focuses on shortening programmes and driving down costs by shortening study periods and thus enhancing economic participation of successful learners, as a result of such shortened duration of study.

### 2.3.3 Liberal humanist perspective

The liberal humanist perspective is another perspective identified by Breier and Burness (2003) as a perspective that fosters the induction of students into academic literacies, where the benefits are deemed to be personal self-discovery and self-development rather than accreditation. This model uses a process of critical reflection through which candidates challenge and question their own assumptions and values. It depends on a hierarchically structured and discipline-based understanding of knowledge (Osman 2004). This model challenges the way in which teaching is done, as well as the values attached to what is taught (Osman & Castle 2002). Related to this perspective are at least two sub-perspectives.

The first sub-perspective is developmental in focus. This model facilitates the granting of access to, or credit within, formal courses or qualifications through a commitment to reflection on past experience. It is subjective, personal and experiential in terms of its view of knowledge (Osman & Castle 2002).

The second and also unexpected approach identified by Breier and Burness (2003) was the "academy / learner-centred approach" that focussed on providing an entrée to study in a manner that supports a student, rather than focussing on prior learning. In the opinion of the researchers, this is a derivative of an approach to RPL, rather than a direct approach in that it does not apply the standard and generally accepted definitions of RPL.

### 2.3.4 Transformational perspective

The transformational approach to RPL policy and implementation is one that values RPL implementation as an agent of transformation and restructuring. Osman & Castle (2004: 130) suggest that "...it aims to reframe fundamental values and paradigms within institutions of learning by recognising and celebrating indigenous and alternative knowledges" In a sense it is the most radical model of RPL in that it foregrounds the politics of difference and the struggle over legitimate knowledge. Knowledge, power and inequality are firmly on the agenda (Osman 2004).

This also perhaps the most threatening model of RPL as it acknowledges that "...the academy is not only a site which defines and constructs knowledge but also one which examines and engages with knowledge created in other sites of practice" (Osman 2004: 142). It also challenges hegemonic or dominant discourses (Osman 2004). Within this transformative perspective are a number of sub-perspectives which all have bearing on the notion of RPL as a catalyst for transformation.

Closely linked to the transformational perspective is the perspective on RPL policy and implementation in which the notion of life-long learning is an essential element. Life-long learning, as a concept, captures the current historical shift that widens the focus of learning to include the entire lifespan, as well as multiple sites of learning in addition to formal educational institutions (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003).

Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003) argue that there is a possible way of integrating the call for African Renaissance (which is identified by the authors as a possible "social movement", but is also subtly presented by the authors as having an equity focus) and the emergent national democracy, into the emerging global economy, through RPL. However, they also argue that while South African policy documents are infused with the notion of life-long learning, "...there has to date been relatively little discussion on how it should be strategically linked to the African Renaissance" (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003: 48). Developing the idea that, in order to achieve social and economic liberation,

life-long learning is a liberating force, an intake of mature learners has implications for the curriculum and the way in which it is constructed, delivered and assessed.

The massification of higher education, as part of the transformative perspective, is identified as one of the "Big Three" themes in education (Geyser 2004: 140). The NAP (Department of Education 2001b: 27) claims that, in terms of increasing participation in higher education, "...issues around the massification of higher education and its assertion as a public good which develops citizens for participation in a democracy are clustered around the equity trajectory...The equity trajectory also involves addressing the issue of the role of local or indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, and of developing curricula which engage with local issues and problems".

There is also evidence of this approach in the work of Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003), who operate in the technikon sector, that suggests that creating a bridge for non-traditional learners and higher education institutions is central to "democractising access to knowledge" (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003: 47).

Although support for indigenous knowledge systems is not specifically identified in the Joint Education Trust (JET) report as an approach to RPL, the Council for Technikon Principals (CTP) demonstrated its intention to promote the support of indigenous knowledge systems as a perspective of RPL in its policy document on RPL (du Pré & Pretorius 2001). In its policy document, the CTP also raised issues concerning conventional understandings of formal knowledge: a perspective that is complementary to the support of indigenous knowledge systems.

The support for indigenous knowledge systems, as a perspective was not evident in the survey responses of higher education to the survey conducted by JET, but it is nevertheless a valid perspective of RPL. The authors of the CTP policy document on RPL policy and implementation confirm that "...RPL introduces new ways of affirming and valuing the indigenous knowledge systems embedded in our society and the cultural contexts in which they are situated" (du Pré & Pretorius 2001: 2).

Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003) affirm this perspective on RPL in their research. They argue that indigenous knowledge systems constitute one of the subjugated knowledges that has been suppressed by other, more dominant modes of knowledge production, and that some kind of mediation between this kind of knowledge and dominant knowledge production forms, should be undertaken.

The NAP (Department of Education 2001b: 27) also affirms the value of indigenous knowledge systems as part of the equity trajectory stating the need to address "...the issue of the role of local or indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, and of developing curricula which engage with local issues and problems".

Breier and Burness (2003: iv) found no evidence of the critical perspective as part of a transformational approach to RPL that sees it as "...a strategy for social redress and a means whereby marginalized groups can gain access to the academy and challenge the authority of hegemonic discourses". This perspective is advocated by writers like Luckett (1999), Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003) and Michelson (1999), who promote the notion of challenging the dominant discourses and unequal power relations that exist in traditionally structured universities.

Michelson (1999: 99) attempts to analyse the implementation of RPL in terms of theories of power "...because RPL requires that we think about power". This author describes RPL as a site at which "...social order is mediated, in which different groups, interests, and values are brought together with very unequal relationships of power and in which concrete social benefits - diplomas, degrees, employment credentials, access to education and employment - are awarded or denied". Because RPL is embedded in power relationships and value judgements, Michelson (1999) believes that RPL implementation has raised as many questions as it has been able to answer.

### 2.3.5 Concluding thoughts on the approaches to RPL

What emerges is a tendency of institutions (both universities and universities of technology) to adopt a hybrid perspective of RPL that suits a variety of different purposes and meets a variety of needs within institutions. The following table summarises the three approaches or models, and their different perspectives.

**Table 1: Summary of RPL models**

| Model | Related models | Sub-perspectives | Focus |
|---|---|---|---|
| Technical or market perspective | Credit exchange model (Osman 2004)<br><br>Instrumental model (Osman & Castle 2002)<br><br>Procrustean model (Harris 2000)<br><br>Human capital perspective (Osman 2004) | Pragmatism<br><br>Compliance<br><br>Survival strategy<br><br>Economic considerations | Facilitates the granting of credits by assessments and transfer of learning<br><br>Instrumental and assessment based<br><br>Asocial and apolitical<br><br>Knowledge as neutral<br><br>Knowledge as a commodity |
| Liberal humanist perspective | Developmental model<br><br>Academy / learner centred approach | Developmental<br><br>Academy / learner centred approach | Facilitates the granting of access to or credit within formal courses or qualifications through a commitment to reflection on past experience<br><br>Autobiographical<br><br>Individual empowerment |
| Transformational perspective | Lifelong learning as transformation | Lifelong learning (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003)<br><br>Massification (Geyser 2004)<br><br>Indigenous knowledge systems (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003)<br><br>Critical perspective (Luckett 1999; Michelson 1999) | Values RPL implementation as an agent of transformation and restructuring. |

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| **Liberal humanist perspective** | Developmental model<br><br>Academy / learner centred approach | Developmental<br><br>Academy / learner centred approach | Facilitates the granting of access to or credit within formal courses or qualifications through a commitment to reflection on past experience<br><br>Autobiographical<br><br>Individual empowerment |
| **Transformational perspective** | Lifelong learning as transformation | Lifelong learning (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003)<br><br>Massification (Geyser 2004)<br><br>Indigenous knowledge systems (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003)<br><br>Critical perspective (Luckett 1999; Michelson 1999) | Values RPL implementation as an agent of transformation and restructuring. |

It is clear from the discussions above that international categorisation of RPL has, to some extent, influenced policy and implementation of RPL in higher education in South Africa. It is thus important for this research to focus on these international trends, in order to gain a clear perspective of the South African context. What follows is a brief exposition of a selection of international trends that have influenced the development of RPL policy and implementation in South Africa.

## 2.4    INTERNATIONAL RPL TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

### 2.4.1    Introduction

The international literature on RPL policy and implementation, being the forerunner to the process in South Africa, has, to a large extent, shaped the direction and theory of RPL in South Africa. Osman (2004) points out a subtle difference in that international approaches to RPL are framed within a discourse of individual empowerment and individual growth, while in South Africa policy is philosophically framed within the discourse of access, equity and redress.

Wheelahan (2003: 1) writing in an Australian context, acknowledges the work done by South African in terms of the theoretical conceptualisation of RPL in saying that "...it is clear that South African has considered RPL more thoroughly than many other countries and that this is a consequence of the scope and scale of the task involved in rebuilding education and training, post-apartheid, based on principles of social justice, access, equity and redress".

Van Rooy (2002) points out that RPL has evolved in many other countries because of a mixture of demographic, economic and social factors. Policy makers have, nevertheless, incorporated a number of the focus areas, from various international contexts, into South African policy. Kistan (2002) suggests that elsewhere in the world, RPL is seen as a rather minor activity at best, but hardly as a major social imperative, as it is in South Africa where it is seen as vehicle for transformation and social redress.

The South African model of a NQF is based on the Australian and United Kingdom models of a similar framework. However, it is of interest that Prinsloo and Buchler (2005) note that in countries where there *is* a national qualifications framework RPL has *not* been as successful as in countries such as the United States and Canada, where there is no national qualifications framework.

It is also important to frame the discussions on RPL policy and implementation in terms of the ways in which they have been influenced by international trends and the various models of RPL that have evolved over the years. It is important that the implementation of RPL in South Africa learns from the lessons that have already taken place elsewhere. As it is not the intention of this literature review to discuss all international trends in RPL, the discussion will centre around those countries that have provided a greater influence on RPL policy and implementation in South Africa.

### 2.4.2 The United States and Canada

Citing extensive research, van Rooy (2002) states that RPL has been firmly established in the United States since the 1970s and that portfolio development and the challenge process are all recognised RPL practices in the USA. Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 6) point to this "...institutionalised commitment to life-long learning and increasing access to learning opportunities for adults". There is, however, a great deal of diversity in the application of RPL across the system.

In the United States, RPL is applied for purposes of advanced standing or certain levels of credit in courses and degree programmes (van Rooy 2002). A further feature of the American model is that a range of standardised assessments have been developed at a national level which reduces the need for individualised assessments (Prinsloo and Buchler 2005).

In Canada, RPL is referred to as Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). The available literature on the implementation of RPL, or PLAR, in Canada, for example, reveals that RPL is seen as a journey in the sense of being part of life-long learning

through educational opportunities that meet individual needs, as is also the case in the United States of America (Kistan 2002). Austin, Galli and Diamantorous (2003) make reference to the need for a competency-based prior learning assessment, particularly in the arena of professions and trades in Canada.

Canada's education system is completely provincial in terms of jurisdiction and thus the challenges facing Canada relate to transferability and portability of qualifications between provinces (du Pré & Pretorius 2001; Prinsloo & Buchler 2005). Prinsloo and Buchler (2005) also report that PLAR is mainly practiced in non-degree credit programmes in Canada.

The Canadian case study, as presented by du Pré and Pretorius (2001), provides a favourable view of RPL for South African implementation according to the key findings of a cross-Canadian study. This study reveals the following:

  □ RPL candidates had higher pass rates and graduation rates than traditional students.
  □ This higher pass rate resulted in increased confidence in their own knowledge and skills.
  □ The confidence that enhanced their chances of continuation of learning over the long term.

South Africa has adopted a similar focus on the importance and relevance of life-long learning to improving the skills and economic potential of its workforce, and this idea has been linked to RPL policy and implementation.

### 2.4.3 The United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom the promotion of recognising and valuing of learning from experience, has been around for some time (Kistan 2002). RPL is also known in the United Kingdom by the acronym APEL (Assessment of Prior and Experiential Learning). APEL is based on a qualifications framework that operates at the vocational level

(Prinsloo & Buchler 2005). As in the USA, there are diverse RPL practices across the system, with many institutions adopting their own approaches to RPL (van Rooy 2002).

### 2.4.4 Australia

Researchers report on a variety of initiatives to enable the recognition of prior learning in Australia. It is not within the scope of this study to do more than provide a brief overview of some of this research, which indicates that the extent of RPL practice in Australian is somewhat limited (Prinsloo & Buchler 2005; Flowers & Hawke 2000 and Wheelahan, Newton & Miller 2003).

The notion of life-long learning is closely coupled to recognising prior learning, particularly in the Australian context. Candy (2000) reports on a study, initiated in 1993 in Australia called "The enabling characteristics of undergraduate education". This study concluded that one of the implications of adopting lifelong learning for institutions of higher education was the need to have in place unambiguous guidelines concerning the recognition of both formal and informal prior learning (Candy 2000).

Taylor and Clemans (2000) report on an attempt by the Australian government to bring some form of consistency to the Australian model of RPL, by way of an Australian Research Council grant project aimed at drawing up research-based, nationally applicable protocols and procedures for RPL in education faculties in Australia.

Van Rooy (2002) claims that RPL in the Australian context is in its infancy, although it has some ten or more years' standing in the educational environment. Van Rooy (2002) reports that RPL is currently used in Australia for admission to a course and for advanced standing or credit in a course. The Australian model acknowledges the need for close collaboration between the providers of technical and further training and industry (van Rooy 2002).

The Australian model of implementing RPL, as described by Flowers and Hawke (2000) and summarised by du Pré and Pretorius (2001), provides for a somewhat sobering take

on RPL implementation with some implicit cautions for its implementation in South Africa. Du Pré and Pretorius (2001) point to three important areas in which problems have occurred in the implementation of RPL in Australia and of which cognisance should be taken:

- ❑ There is little evidence to suggest that RPL has significantly increased access to learning that leads to formal qualifications for disadvantaged groups and individuals.

- ❑ It has not led to any more synergy between traditional notions of academic knowledge and those who support the view that more experiential learning should be recognised by institutions.

- ❑ Competency-based training (an approach taken by the Australian model) has entrenched a rigid and narrow way of naming learning, while discouraging alternative ways of recognising other types of learning.

Flowers and Hawke (2000) also report that RPL in the Australian context shows evidence of gate-keeping and the same attempts to maintain traditional academic forms of knowledge that are evident in the South African literature on RPL. This is supported by the research of Wheelahan, Newton and Miller (2003) which shows that, although intended for this purpose, RPL has not acted as a mechanism for social inclusion in Australia: "We found that while recognition of prior learning (RPL) was one of the key objectives of the AQF [Australian Qualifications Framework] Advisory Board, and a key principle in the vocational education and training sector in Australia, that it has not yet delivered the policy goal of creating pathways to qualifications in the numbers originally envisaged".

These international trends have influenced the way in which RPL is implementation in South African higher education as a model of life-long learning. Lessons learnt in the international area also impact on the South African model of RPL being adopted.

## 2.5 OVERVIEW OF RPL POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

### 2.5.1 Introduction

In order to contextualise this research it is important to provide a brief overview of the current status of RPL policy and implementation in higher education, both nationally and regionally in KwaZulu-Natal, as reported in the literature. At a national level, South Africa first gave mention to issues of RPL in policy documents after the promulgation of the SAQA Act in 1995 (SAQA 1995). Following this, a number of national interventions are recorded in the literature, the most significant of which are those of JET (Breier & Osman 2000; Breier & Burness 2003).

The first part of this section of the literature review draws heavily on three recent reports on RPL implementation but includes and integrates data from other sources. For the purposes of this literature review, some attempts will be made to draw comparisons between the overall picture presented regarding RPL policy and implementation, as exemplified in the three reports.

The first of the three reports is a comprehensive study, commissioned by the Joint Education Trust (JET) and conducted by Breier and Burness (2003). In this study, the authors make extensive reference and comparison to the data obtained from a similar study done in 2000 (Breier & Osman 2000). The current study details the implementation of RPL by institutions of higher education (both universities and technikons, or universities of technology as they are now referred to) using the data obtained from questionnaires completed by the institutions and by a limited number of telephone interviews. Unfortunately, not all institutions responded to the questionnaire and as a result the data is incomplete.

The second report is a status report produced by the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) (Department of Education 2004b) for the purposes of reporting on the delegation of quality assurance responsibilities to individual institutions in terms of five areas, namely:

❏ Quality assurance systems for the management and delivery of short courses.

❏ Moderation of assessment arrangements.

❏ Provision of assessor training and the quality assurance thereof.

❏ Certification processes and the quality assurance thereof.

❏ Recognition of Prior Learning.

The third report is an impact study (SAQA 2004b) initiated and designed as a longitudinal study in 2003 and implemented in 2004 and subsequent years. The intention of this study is to assess the implementation of the NQF and the extent to which the objectives of the NQF have been met and is described by the researchers in their own words as "...a landmark study nationally and internationally" in terms of its approach and extent (SAQA 2004b:8). The study is described as a multiple-cycle impact study which is "open-ended and transparent" (SAQA 2004b: 11) and makes use of impact indicators, which have been categorised in order to facilitate the research process and to extract the necessary data.

One of the most significant measures for the extent of RPL implementation, of the impact study is the degree to which learning opportunities have improved as a result of the implementation of the NQF (SAQA 2004b). This indicator set includes admission practices and equity of access.

By their own admission, all three reports need to be approached with some caution, although more so in regard to the HEQC report (Department of Education 2004b) which is flawed for the following reasons:

❏ The criteria according to which institutions were required to report were not specified and therefore the data is scattered and inconsistent.

❏ The HEQC report is static in that many developments have taken place at institutions with regard to RPL subsequent to the data collection stage of the research.

❏ The data that was received by the HEQC from institutions was not verified with institutions following the data collection phase.

- There were a number of incomplete submissions that create gaps in the report and its conclusions.
- The data collection process and the subsequent analysis and reporting were essentially a paper-based exercise that did not include site visits or interviews.
- Related to the point above, the data collected was largely quantitative in nature and did not include a qualitative dimension that would have allowed for a more in depth understanding that would have done justice to the complexity and scope of the research.
- The analysis was done by a single person and thus may provide a one-sided or biased perspective on the research.
- The research was conducted in a very limited time frame and therefore errors of accuracy and oversight might have been possible.

The JET report has some of the same flaws in terms of the reliance on quantitative data, the absence of qualitative responses and the lack of verification. The limitations of the SAQA impact study relate to the purpose of the report in its first phase, which aims at establishing the reliability and validity of the impact indicators, rather than providing a comprehensive measurement of the indicators. However in the course of testing the indicators, some assessment is made of the extent to which the objectives of the NQF have been met.

The limitations of the SAQA impact study are self-defined by the researchers involved in the studies as follows:
- It is designed as a longitudinal study and, as such, the evaluative judgements on the attainment of the NQF objectives cannot be made for a number of years.
- The drawing of indicative conclusions is less important that the piloting of the indicators and the research design.
- The data used to measure the extent to which the objectives have been met has been exclusively quantitative in nature and does not have a qualitative research component that will enrich the data and its analysis.
- The study has produced indicative outcomes not definitive observations.

❑ The aims of the NQF are not being evaluated (SAQA 2004b).

Nevertheless, the study is still of considerable importance to policy-makers and researchers and will prove helpful in assessing the impact of the NQF in various sectors. Notwithstanding the limitations, these three reports provide the researcher with some valuable insights into the current state of RPL policy and implementation in higher education.

The second part of this section of the literature review deals with higher education's ideological and practical response to RPL as evidenced in the literature. It traces both the reported epistemological approach of higher education to the implementation of RPL, as well as the practical approach to implementation.

### 2.5.2 Sectoral differences

Although the gap between universities and former technikons[1] has been narrowed by the creation of universities of technology and comprehensive institutions, there are still sufficient differences in their approaches to RPL for the JET report (Breier & Burness 2003) to report on them differentially. The JET report draws a comparison between the two distinct sectors of higher education (the former technikon sector and the university sector) in terms of RPL policy and implementation. These differences are significant in terms of the selection of institutions for the purposes of this research, as will be discussed in Chapter 3.

In terms of the history of the two sectors, the Council for Technikon Principals (CTP) and the South African Association of University Vice Chancellors (SAUVCA) provided separate and distinct responses to RPL initiatives. While the technikon movement has embraced the concept of RPL, as evidenced in the CTP Founding Document on RPL and the policy statement on RPL (du Pré & Pretorius 2001), the university sector appears to have been somewhat reluctant to take a sectoral stance on RPL (South African University Vice Chancellors Association 2002).

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[1] Legislation passed in 2003 created universities of technology that replaced technikons.

### 2.5.3 Driving forces for RPL policy and implementation in higher education

Breier and Burness (2003) identify various driving forces that motivated the production of policy documents. The need to comply with government policies and regulations featured strongly, while some institutions indicated that the process was driven by student demand. Another identified driving force was a commitment to life-long learning. These 'drivers' impact on the ways in which RPL is implemented in institutions.

A significant difference was apparent between universities and former technikons in regard to these driving forces for RPL policy and implementation: the level of compliance at technikons appears higher than that at universities (Breier & Burness 2003). The desire to comply was not regarded by the authors as a measure of superficial reluctance to engage with policy, but rather of enthusiasm for the new policy directions (Breier & Burness 2003). The former technikons also reported less opposition to RPL from academics than the universities (Breier & Burness 2003).

Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003) argue from their own experience, that there is a greater resistance among academics at universities to RPL for advanced standing in a programme than for access to undergraduate studies. They posit that the possible reason for this is that "...universities are not yet ready to implement the idea of customised curricula which include RPL for advanced standing as an integral element" as required of programmes admitting students with advanced standing (Henricks & Volbrecht 2003: 53).

### 2.5.4 Philosophical and strategic approach

Breier and Burness (2003) report that a number of institutions have mentioned the need to widen access in their strategic plans. Commitment to RPL is also evidenced in number of institutions' policy formulation. They also report that there is limited recruitment of RPL students and most come into the institution through 'walk-ins' and open days (Breier & Burness 2003).

Institutions of higher education have responded to the call for RPL at a national level. Breiää and Burness (2003) report that a number of universities have changed their admission rules in order to accommodate RPL. Furthermore, mention is made of RPL in the strategic plans of a number of institutions, and most institutions have formulated policy on RPL (Breier & Burness 2003). Some institutions are actively marketing their RPL opportunities (Breier & Burness 2003).

Within both the former technikon and university sectors, candidates are sometimes identified by external agencies. For example, the provincial Department of Education identified teachers to enrol for the National Primary Diploma in Education (NPDE) (Breier & Burness 2003). At former technikons, RPL candidates are sometimes drawn from the ranks of the institution's own employees, who want to improve their qualifications (Breier & Burness 2003).

The SAQA impact study (SAQA 2004b) however notes that the NQF and RPL have been important mechanisms for access improvement, including in higher education, but there were concerns that this was still very limited and benefited informed people only.

Breier and Burness (2003) report that many of the RPL admissions are into professional programmes such as the health professions, through processes which include portfolio development, interviews, writing essays, auditioning and written assessments. They report that roughly 250 students were admitted to institutions through RPL in 2000 and this figure has risen to 459 in 2003 (Breier & Burness 2003). However, given the difficulties of accurately defining RPL, this figure should be treated with some caution.

### 2.5.5 Institutional structures

Breier and Burness (2003) report that institutions locate RPL processes and implementation within the following institutional structures and these are to some extent an indicator of their commitment to the implementation:

- Specific or dedicated offices.
- Tasking of units.
- Faculty based structures.
- Academic development units.
- Alternative admissions office.

The province of the Free State has a regional office for RPL to serve the needs of all the higher education institutions in the region. The setting up of this structure could be seen as an indicator of commitment to RPL implementation.

### 2.5.6 Policy development

In terms of policy development, Breier and Burness (2003) report that the higher education sector has taken the policy pronouncements related to RPL seriously and that considerable progress has been made in regard to policy formulation. For example, in 2000 none of the universities had completed policy documents on RPL in place, although three had drafted written policies, whereas by 2003, six institutions had completed policies and five had drafts (Breier & Burness: 2003). The report indicated that the former technikon sector has responded in a similar way.

However, the picture that emerges from the HEQC report is somewhat different (Department of Education 2004b). This report criticises the institutional implementation of RPL at a number of levels. Firstly, it states that in most universities RPL was a 'stand-alone' policy, rather than an aspect of a broader quality assurance policy. The HEQC also claims that while institutional policies on RPL provided statements on how universities defined RPL, there was scant evidence of RPL implementation, creating the impression that RPL was a fairly marginal activity in a number of universities (Department of

Education 2004b). The report also states that "...RPL is relatively new and untested in institutions" (Department of Education 2004b: 2).

In attempting to differentiate between universities and technikons, the report revealed that there is also little evidence within the universities of technology sector of RPL implementation, except at two institutions. There was also a tendency, as with universities, to decentralise the implementation and monitoring of RPL to faculties or departmental committees (Department of Education 2004b) in the universities of technology.

### 2.5.7 RPL admissions

The report by Breier and Burness (2003) indicates that students are being admitted to institutions of higher education through RPL in the following ways:

- ◻ Completion of portfolios combined with the Senate Discretionary Exemption route (UNISA).
- ◻ Completion of a module combined with the Senate Discretionary Exemption route (former University of Natal).
- ◻ Widening admissions policy (University of the Witwatersrand).
- ◻ Alternative admissions (Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP)) (University of Cape Town).
- ◻ For non-degree study purposes (former University of Natal).
- ◻ Bridging programmes (former University of Natal).

Most of the admissions made on the basis of RPL are into professional programmes, such as selected health science programmes (support services), engineering, computer science and building (Breier & Burness 2003). There is evidence that RPL is being offered across the higher education spectrum, except at doctoral level, but there is no evidence of whole qualifications by recognition of prior learning (Breier & Burness 2003).

### 2.5.8  Extent of implementation

It is necessary to ask the following questions: What developments have taken place in higher education since the inception of the various policy statements that laid the basis for RPL? Has RPL been institutionalised? It is interesting to note that many of the issues related to the difficulties of implementing RPL in higher education that were written about some six or more years ago, still continue to vex higher education in 2005 at the time of writing this thesis. It will be helpful to see whether the debates about RPL, its ethos, rationale and purpose, have in fact been translated into practical and workable processes that will meet the national imperative.

Given the considerable commitment to RPL implementation on the part of both universities and technikons (Breier & Burness 2003), and that this commitment has accelerated in the period of 2000 - 2003 (Breier & Burness 2003), is there a corresponding increase in the number of RPL candidates coming into universities and universities of technology? Breier and Burness (2003) indicate that it remains difficult to answer this question because of the limitations of the data available. Few institutions are keeping systematic records and a number of institutions did not participate in the data collection process that led to the final report. Margins of error therefore need to be allowed for.

One very interesting observation was made in the report. The data demonstrates that "...the extent of implementation is not necessarily tied to a formal RPL policy. University of Cape Town (UCT) has no formal policy on RPL, for example, but admits close to 100 students on an RPL basis per year, while the former Potchefstroom University, with a formal policy admitted 14 student this year [2003] and Venda, which also has a policy, has admitted 2" (Breier & Burness 2003: 54).

Although the data is somewhat problematic for the reasons that have already been mentioned, there does appear to be a quantifiable difference between universities and former technikons in this regard: technikons appear to be admitting considerably more students on an RPL basis.

The JET report (Breier & Burness 2003) records one example of a 'mass' RPL process, where students are being admitted to the NPDE. This initiative has accounted for some 1400 students coming into the system on the basis of RPL. (The former University of Natal was the only institution to provide information about their NPDE programme for the purposes of the JET report.) The process of such a mass implementation of RPL has been questioned as inconsistent with internationally recognised standards.

It is very difficult, if not impossible, to discuss higher education's response as a sector, to RPL policy and implementation, without discussing the inhibitors or barriers that are identified within the literature. What follows is a discussion of some of these reported barriers.

## 2.6 IDENTIFIED IDEOLOGICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL BARRIERS TO RPL IMPLEMENTATION

### 2.6.1 Introduction

The literature (both the official documentation as provided by SAQA and theoretical, research-based analyses of RPL) identifies various ideological, material and regulatory barriers to the implementation of RPL in higher education. It should be noted that, while there are other barriers to the implementation of RPL in higher education, such as those that are psychological barriers, this study confines itself to the three barriers mentioned.

SAQA asserts that Chapter 2 of *Criteria and guidelines for the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* (SAQA 2004a) addresses "...those issues that will have an impact on the feasibility of implementation of RPL processes and assessment" (SAQA 2003: 7). What follows is a summary and discussion of some of the difficulties and challenges, particularly for higher education. It should be noted that additional barriers are identified that relate to sectors other than higher education, such as the delay in the registration of competent assessors and delays in the accreditation of education and training providers are also identified (SAQA 2004a).

## 2.6.2 Resistance to educational reform

Much of the resistance to a reform discourse in education arises from the nature of higher education institutions and perceptions of the autonomy of the academy. This provides for high levels of capacity to resist introducing changes that will impact on the academy and challenge its value system. There is also substantial evidence to suggest that if educational reform goes against the value system of the academy, there is little chance of sustaining it (Moore 2005b). Further obstacles are low levels of understanding and credibility of pedagogic reform discourses in some higher education contexts (Moore 2005a). Policies are often domesticated or watered down, through subversion or reinterpretation, to suit the institutional context and the institution's own priorities (Moore 2005a).

Osman and Castle (2001) record, through the research of two case studies, the difficulties encountered in the process of articulating, assessing and accrediting students' prior learning. Osman and Castle (2001: 55) suggest that "... while there is rhetorical commitment to RPL, no policy or principles are specified for institutions, and so RPL depends largely on the political will, resources and capacity of higher education institutions for its development". They also point out that higher education institutions tend to restrict political will and adventurousness in terms of recognising learning from non-formal and informal contexts (Osman & Castle 2001).

## 2.6.3 Conflicting and competing pedagogical approaches

Osman and Castle (2001) indicate that RPL is particularly challenging for higher education because it seeks to reshape fundamental values, beliefs and paradigms for change in higher education. It "...forces the negotiations of two worlds - the world of experience and the work of academia" (Osman & Castle 2001: 59).

One of the problems with the implementation of RPL as envisaged by the SAQA Act (Republic of South Africa 1995) is that it is highly dependent on a performance-based assessment system where outcomes for learning are developed. Many institutions of higher education have, in theory, moved to OBE as necessitated by the SAQA Act and its

requirements, but have not implemented the approach in practice. The SAQA impact study (2004b: 47) notes that there is uncertainty about "...the depth to which the outcomes-based approach had penetrated practice and methodologies".

Furthermore, Breier (2001: 91) points out that the 'equivalence' approach to RPL (where there are clear outcomes that the learner is required to meet) that has been adopted by many institutions of higher education, is more in tune with this performance-based or OBE model of assessment.

An approach to RPL that requires the development of a competence-type portfolio in which candidates are encouraged to reflect on their experience and consider how it relates to the formal curricula, is more difficult to achieve (Breier 2001). Osman and Castle (2001: 55) see the value of this competence-based approach in that "...it stimulates personal reflection which contributes to personal and professional development". They raise a number of significant questions in the conclusion to their research, one of which is the question as to whether a reflective portfolio is an appropriate indicator of competence or not (Osman & Castle 2001).

### 2.6.4  Lack of curricula responsiveness and flexibility

Moore and Lewis's research (2005) indicates that curriculum adaptation in particular, is prompted not by policy, but rather by the changing intellectual interests of academics themselves. They go on to say that "...unless the intellectual capacity exists in the form of academics with systematic knowledge about the new domain, it is not possible to launch a credible curriculum which focuses on such a domain" (Moore & Lewis 2005: 43).

Moll (2005) claims that the notion of higher education responsiveness is something new and the author identifies different senses in which the term is used: economic, cultural, disciplinary and learning-related. Moll (2005) also claims that there is no well-developed theory of curriculum responsiveness available. In most instances curriculum responsiveness has been reduced to economic responsiveness (Gamble 2003).

Kistan (2002) points out that the entire curriculum framework and institutional landscape of higher education is being restructured to make it more relevant and responsive to the social and economic challenges of the twenty-first century. He adds that RPL can be considered to be a catalyst for change, particularly in the way in which institutions plan, design and approach their offerings. A systemic implication that has not been accounted for in national policy is the change from a low cost model of curriculum (teacher-centred) to a high cost model of curriculum that is learner-centred requiring huge amounts of individualisation (Moore 2005a).

A number of researchers point to the need for RPL to be accompanied by curriculum and assessment reform (Breier 1997; Harris 2000; Michelson 1996). If this is not the case, RPL policy remains conservative in implementation, recognising only the knowledge of those who have gained access to the discourses of the academy and formal education or those who are able to translate their knowledge into forms that are readable and acceptable to the formal context (Breier 2001).

Continuing in this vein, Luckett (1999) asserts that RPL policy, in its current form of implementation, challenges only the site of delivery (in a technicist paradigm); it does not challenge the actual construction of knowledge in a way that the critical theory paradigm would encourage for curriculum reform. She also suggests that, in this implementation, RPL is not far reaching enough to make a real impact on knowledge construction.

Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 3) argue that "...RPL in this paradigm seeks not only to facilitate access to standards and qualifications, but will also increasingly challenge the construction and content of qualifications to be more inclusive of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are produced in 'communities of practice' outside of the formal institutions of learning in society"[2].

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[2] The concept 'communities of practice' is used loosely by a number of writers in the literature, as it has become common usage. The concept originates from the work of Wenger (2005: 1) where communities of practice are described as "groups of people who share concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly". It is based on the notion of learning as a social phenomenon.

Harris (1999) refers to curriculum reform as a Trojan Horse model in terms of the way in which RPL becomes part of an inquiry into the social construction of knowledge and the curriculum rather than a mechanism for evaluating whether an individual's prior learning is equivalent to a pre-existing body of knowledge.

Osman and Castle (2001) suggest that implementing RPL requires a range of curricular offerings from which students can make selections. They (2001) point out that RPL requires flexible institutional structures that provide a range of entry and exit routes, as well as pathways through programmes. However, as stated earlier, the proposed HEQF (Department of Education 2004a) has, in effect, removed the provision of exits at certificate and diploma levels, thus taking away some of the flexibility of the curriculum structure. Furthermore, the current policy of the Department of Education (2005) does not provide for certificates and diplomas as exit levels for degree programmes.

Kistan (2002) also rightly asserts that if RPL is to be incorporated into institutional and programme frameworks across all institutions in a more systemic and focused way (and become part of the higher education quality assurance system) issues of articulation between institutions need to be addressed at a national level.

Harris (1999) notes that if the institutional culture does not value experience and the learning from experience, there is little hope for RPL. It is important to see RPL as a social practice which supports an engagement with institutional and curricula change. Institutions need to investigate what sorts of changes might be required within the institution in order to facilitate inclusive forms of RPL (Harris 1999).

### 2.6.5 The standards debate

A summary of the recent literature on the implementation of RPL in higher education in recent years relies heavily on the work of a few prolific researchers and writers who provide the essence of higher education's response to the implementation of RPL. Within the current writing produced by these researchers, a continuum develops from

conservatism (or epistemologically defensiveness) to a more liberal, enlightened approach. These can be broadly linked to the three dominant models of RPL, with the more conservative views being associated with the credit exchange model and the more liberal being associated with the transformational model.

One of the covert ways in which higher education has sought to undermine or delay the implementation of RPL is through engaging in debates about academic standards. This debate emerges among higher education practioners, and the doubts and concerns that are being raised about the possibility of compromising standards might, in fact, be a potential hindrance to the implementation of RPL policy in higher education.

While some attempts have been made in the three reports (HEQC, JET and SAQA) on which much of this chapter is based to deal with the ideological approach of higher education to RPL, no attention has been paid to the issue of higher education's claim to maintain standards, while at the same time widening access to higher education.

Osman and Castle (2002) have investigated the way in which RPL is regarded with some scepticism by academics and administrators, who see it as a 'soft option' in terms of being a relatively undemanding way of gaining credit by students. Kistan (2002: 172) cautions that some of the gate-keeping of higher education institutions in regard to RPL is a sincere investment in quality, while some of it is a defensiveness or a "...wish to retain social privilege and comfortable habits of mind" and he rightly asserts that it is important to tell the difference between the two.

Writing generally about the notion of universities as gate-keepers of elite institutions and privilege, Kotecha (2001) contends that this perception is not supported by the facts. She claims that universities realise that it is wholly in their interests to promote wider access to higher education if they are to meet their commitments to society and to the state.

Kistan (2002) reports that there is real scepticism about the intention and effect of RPL. Some see it as compromising professional judgement and responsibility that could create

academic and other problems, and can be misjudged to be "generous". However RPL cannot be a mass process, as this would undermine the worth of the process. RPL is neither a re-learning process nor a paper chase, but the provision of quality education, training and skills development - needs that will benefit adult learners in the workplace and the community (Kistan 2002).

'Epistemic defensiveness' (Moore 2005a) is often a defence of 'territory' and sometimes takes the form of pathologising students but making asserts about what they are unable to achieve in a learning environment. Osman and Castle (2002: 65), quoting Michelson (2000), describe this model as a "deficit or reactionary" model. Such defensiveness or reaction is more often than not veiled and covert rather than overt. It could be argued that much of the conservatism around the implementation of RPL is not deliberate or intentional, but rather unintentional and linked to the way in which we view knowledge and knowledge production.

In one such example of epistemic defensiveness or a reactionary model, Gawe (1999) questions *where* critical thinking is best developed, and in so doing implies that such thinking is the exclusive domain of institutions of higher education: "The proponents of RPL state that candidates are able to complete tertiary institution qualifications in less time, acquire high school equivalency credits and present themselves to prospective employers (McLevely & Peters 1993: 01; Burke 1995: 167; Jessup 1991: 67). Can it be, therefore, that it is not longer important for learners to develop critical thinking, which of course, does not happen overnight but is essential in higher education as well as in higher jobs? Faced with the accelerating demands of technological advancement, learning must be such that it builds habits of inquiry. However there seems to be a tacitly understood assumption that prior learning will have this. I am not sure it has. A young man who has worked as a 'tool boy' for ten years may not readily make predictions about what the trends in the motor industry will be. He may have ideas but these may not be formulated on clear thought processes but rather on instinct. Arguably critical training is needed to take intuitive knowledge beyond a 'gut-level' to levels of metacognitive awareness and critical thinking" (Gawe 1999: 25).

A number of covert assumptions, sometimes veiled as questions, express themselves in this brief extract: it assumes that the habit of inquiry routinely takes place in institutions of higher education, which is not always a truism. It also undervalues intuitive knowledge and assumes that it is only through critical training that metacognitive awareness can be achieved. It also exemplifies one viewpoint, of which Osman and Castle (2002) are highly critical; that knowledge derived from experience can merely provide illustration or application of theory, and can never be a basis for academic learning . Of further interest is the title of Gawe's article (1999) *"Arming ourselves for recognition of prior learning"*. Using a military metaphor suggests the intrinsic need that Gawe might feel to defend academia from the 'assault' of RPL as it battles to penetrate the corridors of learning!

Wheelahan (2003: 8) deals with this notion in a more subtle way by referring to the concept of 'graduateness' which can be described as "...the 'meta-thinking' or learning skills (with an emphasis on reflective practice) that people acquire which are contextualised in the occupations or professions in which they work or are destined to work. This underlines the importance of 'communities of practice' in which people learn and work."

These assumptions have far-reaching implications for the implementation of RPL in higher education and the claims that RPL can make within the sector. Much of the learning that takes place outside of formal institutions of higher education takes place at the intuitive level, without the formal inculcation of the habit of inquiry and without the holy cow of critical training. Essentially, what is also reflected in this thinking is evidence of two different types of knowledge as will be discussed in the following section.

### 2.6.6 Mediating between two different types of knowledge

Various researchers make reference to the reality of different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing (SAUVCA 2002; Luckett 1999; Breier 2001; Breier & Burness 2003; Osman & Castle 2002; Harris 1999). The SAQA impact study (SAQA 2004b: 32) also

makes reference to the belief that there are two epistemologically different modes of learning (one related to education and the other to training) that are shared by a number of stakeholders consulted for purposes of the study.

Breier (2001: 90) refers to the difference between the two kinds of knowledge as "the great divide" or the divide between knowledge associated with formal educational institutions and knowledge acquired informally. One of the difficulties of implementing RPL stems from this divide. How do institutions match the formal learning with the informal learning of work experience or life experience?

Osman and Castle (2002: 63) claim that "...RPL, by its very nature, straddles apparent opposites. It forces a confrontation between two worlds which hold different perspectives on the question of experience - the world of academia, which values theory as a resource in knowledge creation, and the world of work which values knowledge and skills which lend themselves to practical application...working in RPL is made more difficult by a tendency to dichotomise the world of work and the world of academia".

Michelson (1999) furthers this debate when asserting that someone must define 'legitimate' knowledge or knowledge that 'counts'. This author also identifies how people in positions of epistemological authority are used to assuming that the way *they* talk about something is *the* way to talk about it (Michelson 1999). She suggests that epistemological access can be achieved through inviting a sharing of epistemological authority.

Wheelahan, Newton and Miller (2003: 2) pursue this same line of thought. In attempting to answer the question why is it so difficult to accredit learning that happens outside of the academy, they identify a systemic problem: "The problem lies with systems of post-compulsory education and training...which create and validate knowledge and certify individuals as members of knowledge communities (through issuing qualifications) by the extent to which they internalise and conform to values, norms and ways of thinking validated as 'legitimate knowledge' by institutions and powerful stakeholders". To sum

up, Wheelahan (2003: 3) says of the Australian situation "...that the implementation of RPL is very low, and that the main beneficiaries have been those from socio-economic backgrounds who have experience in, and success in, post-compulsory education and training.

Du Pré and Pretorius (2001: 2) believe that "...ideally, higher education wishes to facilitate a discourse of equivalence between the different forms of knowledge, allowing a mutually beneficial process of contestation and enrichment to inform a truly South African process". Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003) relate this contestation specifically to RPL by suggesting that RPL recognises the complementarity and the contestation or disjunction between different modes of learning and knowledge production.

They further argue that RPL strategies can extend the meaning of 'bridging the gap'. This is a concept they equate with "...what needs to be done to help a certain kind of school-leaver to gain successful access to HET [Higher Education and Training] from a position in the schooling system where the requisite knowledge and skills have not been put in place" (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003: 47). 'Bridging the gap' can "...include the mediating of difference between diverse modes or systems of knowledge production, including Indigenous Knowledge Systems and between formal, non-formal and informal modes of learning" (Hendricks & Volbrecht 2003: 48).

Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003: 48) extend this argument regarding the dominance of traditional epistemologies to analysis of and reference to "subjugated knowledge", which is a "...whole set of knowledges that have been defined as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, knowledges that are low on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of recognition or scientificity". Relating to RPL specifically, Hendricks and Volbrecht (2003: 48) argue that the RPL policy development and implementation would necessitate "...mediating between a range of dominant and subjugated knowledges". In terms of three case studies provided on RPL implementation, Michelson (1999: 101) asserts that knowledge that conforms to mainstream knowledge is

rewarded, while the marginalised knowledge of "…those who live figuratively and often literally far from the centres of epistemological authority" is not.

To conclude the argument, Michelson (1999) claims that if the rigid distinctions between skilled and unskilled work, between literacy and illiteracy, between First World and Third World privilege is maintained, the epistemological relationships of apartheid will be preserved.

### 2.6.7 Traditional epistemology of higher education

Osman and Castle (2001) claim that the implementation of RPL policy requires an institutional culture that values learning derived from experience. Traditional university epistemology does not do so. In terms of the implementation of RPL, higher education institutions will have to acknowledge that "…it is no longer clear that universities, as currently (or foreseeably) constructed are best able to generate and manipulate…new forms of socially distributed knowledge…Knowledge is no longer privileged, in the sense that its reproduction is restricted to an academic (and social?) caste" (Osman & Castle 2001: 59).

Kistan (2002: 171-172) points out that "…while material barriers to accessing HE [Higher Education] in South Africa have been firmly (sic) extensively documented, many questions are raised in relation to epistemological barriers. Nationally, we have not addressed issues relating to how knowledge obtained from outside of formal HE institutions can be equivalent to knowledge gained in the workplace, in communities, in organisations and in various sites of struggle".

Brickley (1994: 20) contends that the empirical discourse dominant in universities has resulted in the emphasis on a celebration of obtaining the truth. The traditional epistemology of universities, in particular, also celebrates 'accuracy' and strives for 'objectivity' that is achieved through a 'scientific' approach to studying within a discipline. This emphasis on 'truth' has further implications for higher education.

One of the great difficulties about challenging dominant constructs of knowledge has been the insistence that academics have arrived at their conclusions through the application of so called scientific and objective methods, and therefore suggest that they are not open to being challenged or disputed. The application of these scientific methods forms part of an epistemology that underlies what Muller and Taylor (1993: 321) refer to as the "authoritarian canonization", where "syllabus plus textbook equals curriculum".

Writing particularly about the epistemological approach of historical studies in particular, Sutherland (2000) emphasises that positivist and empirical discourses of traditional epistemology fail to acknowledge the constructivist movements in education. These movements suggest that all knowledge is socially constructed and therefore, concepts like truth are not universal absolutes, but are, instead, relative and personal. In a constructivist tradition, Candy (1991 in Zietsman 1996: 72) states: "We know reality only by acting on it. This means that knowledge is neither a copy nor a mirror of reality, but the forms and content of knowledge are constructed by the one who experiences it".

There is a growing body of research that points out that the way in which knowledge is constructed and defined (epistemology) in institutions of higher education, is counter-productive to recognising prior learning (Breier 2001; Luckett 1999; Kistan 2002). Knowledge 'constructed' in institutions of higher education often emerges as the dominant knowledge form in an unequal power relationship between the two forms of knowledge. This knowledge is often the 'scientific' kind that holds itself up as the paragon of 'objectivity' and 'universal truth' (Luckett 1999), making it very difficult for any other knowledge systems to wrestle power away from the dominant epistemological discourse. Harris (1999: 40) notes that "...those whose [intellectual] capital fitted the cognitive, individualised western notions of Higher Education within which we were working" are privileged by the RPL system.

Osman (2004: 143) asserts that "RPL has the potential to divide the academic community between those who welcome the destabilisation of traditional knowledge boundaries and those who fear it for weakening the university and the specialist role of the pedagogue".

In a similar vein, Michelson (1999: 102) claims that we need to "...refuse to take 'authorised' knowledge as a given...to acknowledge that we don't always know what is worth knowing".

### 2.6.8    Exclusionary practices

A number of researchers point to the ways in which the very target audience of the RPL agenda is excluded from the processes (Prinsloo & Buchler 2005; Wheelahan, Newton & Miller 2003). The last mentioned authors (2003) show that in the Australian context, students from non-English speaking backgrounds, indigenous students, unemployed students and students from regional areas, are less likely to receive RPL than students from major cities, those who are in mid-career, older, work fulltime and are in professional occupations. They continue by citing Fields (2002) in saying that "while life-long learning can create new opportunities for people and plan an emancipatory role, it can also 'serve to legitimate inequality'" (Wheelahan, Newton & Miller 2003: 4).

The discussion thus far, has focussed largely on the theoretical responses of higher education to RPL implementation and policy. What follows is a summation of some of the identified physical and material barriers to the implementation of RPL as reported on in the literature.

## 2.7    RESOURCE BARRIERS TO RPL IMPLEMENTATION

### 2.7.1    Introduction

The literature points to various barriers to the implementation of RPL that are related to resources. Osman and Castle (2001) refer to the challenge of meeting the needs of RPL implementation in a "...dispiriting environment of cost cutting and rationalisation". What follows is a discussion of some of these barriers as presented in the literature.

### 2.7.2    Lack of institutional infrastructure for implementation

The RPL imperative poses challenges to every aspect of higher education: "The mission statement, the admission policy, curriculum, the programmes, the timetable, the assessment procedure, the staff, the learners, the mode of delivery and the environment

are all affected by the RPL policy" (Kistan 2002: 170). Breier and Burness' work (2003) also notes the concerns of two historically advantaged institutions about their apparent lack of capacity and knowledge about RPL processes.

The costs of implementing RPL also pose themselves as a barrier to RPL. Breier and Burness (2003) provide some breakdown of the anticipated costs of RPL, indicating that the exercise is resource-intensive. They make the point that unless there are funding incentives for implementing RPL, institutions of higher education will not be in a financial position to implement RPL to its full extent (Breier & Burness 2003).

Parsons (1998: 1) feels that the "...most significant systemic changes are produced by the impact of factors external to the immediate system, factors such as funding formulas, technological innovations, government policy directives or quality assurance schemes". However, Muller (2001) cited in Moore and Lewis (2005: 43), notes that exogenous pressures for change are limited in their effect on institutions by endogenous factors at work within the institution.

### 2.7.3 Influence of historical conditions on resources

Kistan (2002: 169) makes a significant point in recording that the ability and capacity of the higher education sector to deal successfully with current policy goals and initiatives is uneven and is partly shaped by historical conditions. He sup      ports what he believes to be the lack of response from higher education in regard to RPL, by referring to the NPHE (Department of Education 2001a). RPL has "...largely been ignored by institutions, despite requests that they indicate in their institutional plans the strategies and steps they intend taking to address this goal" (Kistan 2002: 170).

### 2.7.4 Lack of adequate academic development and support within institutions

Osman and Castle (2001) believe that RPL should be coupled with flexible, responsive and creative teaching practices. It is noted that students who are admitted on the basis of RPL, might require additional support in terms of academic skills (Breier & Burness 2003). Harris (1999) suggests that the lack of acquired academic discourse or ability to write within distinct genres was a potentially exclusive factor. Interestingly, the Department of Education document on enrolment planning indicates that while the numbers of students enrolled are growing, including the numbers of disadvantaged students, there is no resultant increase in the number of teaching staff to augment a system that is admitting increasing numbers of under-prepared students (Department of Education 2004d: 10).

### 2.7.5 Lack of administrative systems within institutions

SAQA points out that administrative systems are currently required to accommodate credit transfers, in relation to subjects and modules, rather than related to outcomes and that this is problematic (SAQA 2004a). Wheelahan, Newton and Miller (2003) make a clear distinction between RPL and credit transfer. For credits to be transferable between institutions, they need to relate to outcomes rather than modules or credits. In order to achieve this, level descriptors can be used to provide generic descriptors of the learning expected at the various levels (SAQA 2004a). Kistan (2002) points out that while RPL is a policy imperative for higher education, it nevertheless poses a huge administrative dilemma for institutions.

### 2.8 SYSTEMIC BARRIERS TO RPL IMPLEMENTATION

### 2.8.1 Introduction

Although policy imperatives seldom provide for the systemic implications of implementation (Moore 2005a), the literature is prolific in identifying some of the systemic barriers that challenge the implementation of RPL in higher education. What follows is a discussion of some of these.

### 2.8.2 Merging institutions

A perceived barrier to RPL is indirectly related to both the systemic barriers and the lack of institutional infrastructure, namely mergers. A number of institutions, both universities and former technikons, indicated in the JET report (Breier & Burness 2003) that mergers between institutions were potential barriers to implementing RPL (Breier & Burness 2003). The merging of institutions appears to have moved the issue of RPL further down the agenda of the merged institution for a variety of reasons, including a disjuncture in resource allocation.

### 2.8.3 Incongruity between policy and reality

SAQA points out that there is a need to develop a systemic approach to RPL implementation that allows for institutional autonomy and contextual practice, while at the same time protects the integrity of qualifications and the award of credits (SAQA 2004a: 3).

The incongruity between policy and reality is pointed out in a number of places in the literature, but in none so direct as in the writing of Badat (1999: 3): "Policy goals, signals and references to possible mechanisms of transformation do not in themselves constitute detailed, thoughtful and iterative plans of implementation which take into account changes in the macro economic and fiscal environment, capacities of HE institutions, available human and financial resources and so forth". Moore and Lewis (2005: 47) support this notion that "...there is much in our contemporary context to suggest that the greatest threat to ambitious, well-intentioned policies is the execution of such policies without a clear-sighted and commensurately resources capacity development plan".

### 2.8.4 Lack of clear articulation of national policy

There are a number of identified shortcomings in national policy articulation and the provision of the necessary guidelines for implementation. By its own admission, SAQA indicates that its policy has, to date, been inadequately articulated (SAQA 2004a). Furthermore, Breier and Burness (2003: 31) report that there is general confusion in institutions of higher education (universities and technikons) about the legal status of

RPL. There are also conflicting ideas about whether RPL is 'compulsory' or not. The SAQA impact study (SAQA 2004b) makes reference to concerns about the legislative incoherence of national strategies.

Confusion also exists regarding the subsidy status of RPL candidates (Breier & Burness 2003). There is however some optimism among higher education practioners, who suggest that this difficulty might be overcome by the new funding formula, which is based firmly on graduation rates rather than intake numbers (Breier & Burness 2003).

### 2.8.5 Existing regulatory and statutory directives

There are a number of visible and invisible barriers to implementing RPL. Existing regulatory and statutory directives, particularly those relating to access, admissions and funding, also contribute to a disenabling environment for the implementation of RPL. In some instances these directives are competing and even contradictory.

SAQA points out that the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption is increasingly being used to admit non-traditional students to higher education (SAQA 2003). This may be regarded as a form of RPL but a National Senior Certificate is still required.

SAQA has recognised that some of the current regulations regarding higher education, particularly with regard to entry into higher education, might be at odds with RPL principles (SAQA 2003). SAQA identifies important possible inhibitors of implementation (SAQA 2003), two of which are the current regulatory and statutory requirements regarding the matriculation with endorsement as a prerequisite to entry to higher education and the 50% residency clause which limits the amount of study that can be accredited by prior learning including credit transfers from other institutions, to not more than 50% of the total qualification being awarded by the institution.

There is some debate as to what should be retained as an admission requirement in the light of the emergence of the Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) as a qualification that ensures access to higher education (SAQA 2004a). The question that

needs to be raised is whether or not it is realistic to expect the FETC to act as both a school exit qualification *and* a test for preparedness for higher education?

One of the most recent definitive documents on qualifications and programmes in higher education, the Higher Education Qualifications Framework (Department of Education 2004a) does little to resolve the apparent contradictions that exist in terms of policy and implementation of RPL, but rather perpetuates the current admissions requirements and the dilemma remains unresolved. In addition, the document does little to advance the implementation of RPL in higher education by omitting any reference to life experience.

Kistan (2002) suggests to the need for alternative entry requirements for adult learners and the engagement with appropriate statutory and non-statutory bodies in South Africa in this regard, as one of several issues that confront higher education in regard to RPL.

### 2.8.6 Lack of suitable qualifications

The lack of qualifications that have been developed in accordance with OBE principles has been identified by SAQA as a potential barrier to the implementation of RPL (SAQA 2004a). These principles include multiple entry and exit levels, multiple exit points in multiple year qualifications and a modularised model of curriculum. Scott (1995) cited in Kraak (2000: 9) identifies the shift from courses to credits with mechanisms that offer points of entry and exit without "...slavish regard to the academic symmetry of the whole".

### 2.8.7 Fluctuating enrolment patterns

While there is evidence in the literature to suggest that student enrolments declined for a period in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there is now evidence to suggest that "...the higher education system has grown more rapidly than the available resources" (Department of Education 2004d: 3). The headcount enrolment for both contact and distance education increased from 587 000 in 2000 to 718 000 in 2003 (Department of Education 2005). This document also indicates that the Department of Education will, in

the years 2005 to 2007, engage in a system-wide student enrolment planning exercise (Department of Education 2005).

These fluctuating enrolment patterns will impact on the implementation of RPL in higher education. Van Rooy (2002: 79) raises the following important questions: "Should RPL learners be guaranteed places on higher education programmes? If there were no assurance of acceptance, many potential learners might question the investment of their time and money in RPL applications. Conversely, guaranteeing enrolment based on RPL could be seen as discriminatory by secondary school graduates." Lötter (2001: 43) raises a similar issue when he states that "...if institutions want to 'play it safe' in terms of selecting the 'best risk' students - and some are certainly in a position to do so - they could merely select those whose school-leaving performance fall in the top range scores".

### 2.8.8 Access and admission criteria at universities

In terms of the Higher Education Act 1997 (Republic of South Africa 1997a) the decision to admit a learner to higher education study is the right and responsibility of the higher education institution concerned. Section 74 of the Act, as amended, sets out the criteria and rules under which complete and conditional exemption may be granted. There are regulations related to the twenty-five categories of complete or conditional exemption with 12 relating to complete exemption and 13 to conditional exemption (Amoore 2001b). The administration of this admissions policy is undertaken on behalf of universities by the Matriculation Board of South African Universities Vice Chancellor's Association (SAUVCA). The current role of the Matriculation Board and perceptions that this body acts as gate-keeping structure (Kotecha 2001) requires some examination.

By the admission of one of the senior Matriculation Board members, "the regulations providing for Matriculation endorsement ... are not simple", although they have made a systematic attempt to simplify the regulations in the past five years (Amoore 2001b: 27). In order to register for a degree at a public university in South Africa, the potential student needs to be in possession of a Senior Certificate with one of the following:

□ Matriculation endorsement.

- ❑ Certificate of complete or conditional matriculation exemption.
- ❑ Awarded graduate status.

Senate Discretional Conditional Exemption is one of the twenty-five forms of exemption (Amoore 2001a) and allows the university to admit students who do not meet the statutory admission requirements, if, by a selection process, the person has demonstrated that he or she is suitable for admission to undergraduate study. The Senate Discretionary Exemption Certificate allows for departures from the regulations in individual cases (Amoore 2001b). A certificate of conditional exemption is issued by the Matriculation Board under the Joint Statute of the Universities. Under Senate Discretional Conditional Exemption, the student may only be admitted to the institution making application for such.

In addition, universities are allowed to set additional admissions requirements for specific programmes over and above the minimum requirements and this has become established practice in many of the professional degrees. The New Academic Policy (NAP) points out that some universities have recently instituted institution-specific entrance tests for prospective students, the results of which assist administrators in alternative admissions and placement decisions (Department of Education 2001b). However, the HEQF states that "...a higher education institution's admissions policy and practice is expected to advance the objectives of the Higher Education Act (Republic of South Africa 1997a) and the NQF and should be consistent with this policy [the HEQF]" (Department of Education 2004a: 15).

Morrow (2004) points out that the closing of teacher's training colleges will impact adversely on the supply of teachers to the system because, in the past, the non-matriculation admission requirements for Colleges of Education enabled students to train as primary school teachers even if their school results were below those required for admission to universities.

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A further illustration of the problem is the differing admission requirements for universities and universities of technology is found in the case of the Bachelor of Education qualification that can be achieved at both universities and universities of technology. The universities however require matriculation endorsement for admission, which the technikons do not and accept holders of Senior Certificates.

To sum up, there appears to be a labyrinth of access and admissions routes that potential students may seek in order to gain access to undergraduate study in higher education. What becomes apparent is that this labyrinth, which has evolved over the years in response to changing environmental conditions, is sometimes at odds with the imperatives of RPL policy and implementation.

### 2.8.9 Access and admission criteria at universities of technology

At present there are differences between the admission requirements for universities of technology and those of universities. A potential student applying to a university of technology requires only a Senior Certificate in order to be eligible, although additional requirements may be set by the institution for admission to specific programmes.

The NAP raises the problem of alignment and articulation between the different components of the higher education sector, where the admissions requirements for universities of technology are at a lower level to those of universities (Department of Education, 2001b). The NAP sought to overcome this difficulty by the introduction of a means of articulation between programmes that "...provides a 'curriculum space' for additional learning to be completed prior to further progression on the framework" (Department of Education 2001b: 98). In addition, a Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) has been planned that will provide for a common statutory minimum admissions requirement for higher education in the future.

It should be noted that there are a number of stakeholders who have 'authority' in the arena of access and admissions. While the Department of Education is a key stakeholder, SAQA is also empowered to make proposals in regard to the way in which qualifications

are structured on the NQF. SAQA's recommendation about minimum requirements for admissions is a pass in a common FETC, as SAQA regards the exemption requirement on the Senior Certificate as an obstacle to widening access (Department of Education 2001b).

## 2.8.10 Inadequacy of the current schooling system

The NAP (Department of Education 2001b) makes reference to yet another misfit between policy and reality by pointing out that, during the 1990s, "...exceptions to this admissions policy were allowed and the number of students admitted by exception is now on the increase due to the misfit between policy, the government's strong equity agenda and the reality that the number of students exiting the schooling system with matriculation endorsement or exemption is on the decline" (Department of Education 2001b: 97).

The declining enrolments in public higher education in the late 1990s and early in the 2000s is also outlined by Badat (1999: 6) where he shows that the largest headcount enrolment declines have occurred in historically black universities. Although enrolments have once again started to rise and sometimes at alarming rates, the issue of an inadequate schooling system still remains a challenge for higher education in regard to implementing RPL.

The National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) also makes mention of the mismatch between the output of the schooling system and the entry requirements for higher education (Department of Education 2001a). The Department of Education notes in this document that, in 2000, only 20 000 school-leavers obtained a higher grade Senior Certificate pass in mathematics. The Senior Certificate and matriculation policy could not deliver sufficient numbers of potential higher education candidates that the country requires (Department of Education 2001b). This issue is also raised by SAUVCA (Kotecha 2001) and is further mentioned by SAQA in its FETC discussion document (SAQA 2001), where it demonstrates that approximately 6% of the 1999 Grade 12 candidates gained a Senior Certificate with exemption. What is clear is that "...a largely

dysfunctional public schooling system is unable in the short-term to deliver school-leavers who are prepared for higher education study" (Department of Education 2001b: 100).

The authors of the NAP raise a further important issue in regard to this inadequacy. To what extent should the burden of this disarticulation in the public education system be borne by the higher education sector? (Department of Education 2001b). Many in higher education would argue that higher education institutions should not be expected to 'lower their standards' in order to continue accommodating inadequately prepared students in an attempt to boost enrolments, and that the problem should be addressed by the Further Education and Training sector.

Kotecha (2001: 2) refers to the poor articulation of the school system with higher education as "…another structural fault line". She talks of the need for universities to be more active in "managing the supply chain" by ensuring that schools, teachers and students are in tune with higher education trends, and by making articulation agreements meaningful.

### 2.8.11 Current understandings of RPL in relation to admissions

The very definition of RPL in SAQA documentation appears to be at odds with current access and admissions policies and procedures. This means that "…using matriculation with endorsement / exemption, may become only a guideline and not the definitive reason for refusal or admittance to a programme" (Heyns 2003 in SAQA 2004a). This notion is supported by universities who indicated that the matriculation endorsement should remain as a "coarse sieve" and a guideline for university admission (Amoore 2001a: 9).

## 2.8.12 Current enrolment practices in higher education

Current practices in higher education, which are often determined institutionally, that are in conflict with RPL policy are:

- Admission of students over the age of 23 (mature age exemption) through the route of faculties and not as part of the general admissions procedures.
- Recruitment of predominantly school-leavers to higher education.
- Students without the option of mature age exemption (i.e. learners who have perhaps only completed grade 11 or lower) having no means of admission to suitable programmes.
- Learners who are admitted without the minimum requirements not being eligible for access to any bachelor's degree programme unless they have passed at least four subjects at the Senior Certificate level.
- Learners not being eligible to be awarded a degree even when the learner has completed the programme of study (SAQA 2004a).

Despite the existence of the Senate Discretionary Conditional Exemption that allows for these requirements to be wavered for non-traditional students (SAQA 2004a) in certain circumstances (i.e. without exemption but still requiring at least a National Senior Certificate), these requirements will, to some extent, impede the implementation of RPL policy in the short term.

It is important to note that RPL policy is not suggesting that there should be no entry requirements, but rather that the entry requirements should allow for non-formal and informal sources of learning and not only refer to formally certificated learning (SAQA 2004a).

## 2.8.13 Enrolment trends and oversubscription

A number of institutions reported in the JET report that their programmes were also oversubscribed by traditional students, and that there were insufficient places for students to be admitted on the basis of RPL (Breier & Burness 2003). This oversubscription means that there are more applications than places and poses the question, "...on what

grounds could the institution accept an RPL'ed applicant above another applicant who had the necessary formal qualifications?"(Breier & Burness 2003: 82).

A further contradiction between policy and practice can be found in the attempts made by the Department of Education in 2004 and 2005 to cap institutions in terms of the number of students they admitted to their institutions (Department of Education 2005). Based on an apparent fiscal deficit, this intervention is in direct conflict with the imperative provided by numerous pieces of legislation, as already discussed in the legislative framework for RPL, that encourages, and even demands, a widening of access to higher education.

## 2.8.14 Current regulations regarding the award of qualifications in higher education

An obstacle that limits the full implementation of RPL is located in the regulations of the Matriculation Board that requires the completion of a matriculation certificate as a prerequisite for the awarding of a post-matriculation qualification (SAQA 2004a). The current practice among institutions is to apply for exemption from the Matriculation Board once the RPL student has successfully completed the first year of tertiary study.

A further possible inhibitor related to the awarding of qualifications, to implementation identified by SAQA documentation, is the 50% residency clause which allows for only 50% of any learning to be transferred from one institution to another as one of the regulations of the Matriculation Board (SAQA 2004a). This regulation, although necessitated by the movement of students between institutions, now has an impact on RPL practices. It means that an RPL candidate must complete at least 50% of a programme with an institution regardless of whether the credits granted exceed 50% of the requirements for the programme (SAQA 2004a).

SAQA (2004a) provide a number of possible reasons why the 50% residency clause is being retained, including that higher education might doubt the academic skills of

candidates accessing education and training via non-traditional routes and that institutions might fear a drop in standards.

### 2.8.15 Current subsidy structure

SAQA has already identified the lack of a clear subsidy structure for RPL, both in terms of public and private providers (SAQA 2004a). Furthering this debate, Libhaber (2005: 1) suggests that the newly proposed funding formula is based on a differentiating and complex model that emphasises throughput and success, in which there is "a disincentive to enrol disadvantaged students or expand the number of enrolments". The rationale is to take in fewer and better students to ensure outputs and success. "This means competing for fee-paying students (as the subsidy does not cover institutional costs) and top-achieving students (who might have better chances of graduating, and in a shorter period of time)" (Libhaber 2005: 2). Libhaber (2005) argues that fees in this regard are being used as a form of gate-keeping and a new form of exclusion.

### 2.8.16 Fees for RPL

The national RPL policy states that fees for the delivery and administration of assessment and RPL services should not create barriers for candidates (SAQA 2002). High start up costs, cost recovery and a common fee for RPL are some of the issues that need to be addressed to prevent this becoming a barrier to the implementation of RPL and fees should not be associated with the sale of qualifications (SAQA 2004a).

### 2.8.17 Adaptive capacity of institutions

Moore (2005b) and Moore and Lewis (2005) write extensively about what they term the 'adaptive capacity' of institutions of higher education to change and transform, and this is indirectly linked to what in which new policies such as RPL, are institutionalised with the organisation. Quoting Donnellon (1994) Moore and Lewis (2005) draw the distinction between bureaucratic and post-bureaucratic organisational types. In the former organisational type responsibility is segmented to sub-units with responsibility only for its own function, while in the latter, everyone within the organisation takes responsibility for the success of the whole. They believe that the key to moving towards an adaptive

organisation (which can by implication institutionalise policies) is to move to a post-bureaucratic organisational form.

## 2.9 RPL AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

### 2.9.1 Introduction

RPL policy and its implementation are closely linked to issues of curriculum and curriculum development. The way in which curriculum is developed will assist or hinder the advancement of RPL. Harris (1999: 38) asserts that "...RPL practices have a large propensity to reproduce the discursive characteristics of the context of implementation and these may not support optimal social inclusion. We conclude that RPL has to be seen as part of an enquiry into curricula / standards". Wheelahan, Newton and Miller (2003: 5) make reference to the "'hidden curriculum' that rewards those for whom the values, concepts and ways of thinking and acting are congruent, and conversely, punish those who, as a consequence of their social background and patterns of opportunity, do not intuitively understand, speak and reproduce the sanctioned discourse".

SAQA documentation on the development and implementation of RPL and the quality assurance requirements for its systems and services, acknowledges the centrality of curriculum development in the implementation of RPL (SAQA 2002; SAQA 2004a). As Breier and Burness (2003: 7) point out, there is an appeal for an approach to RPL that challenges "...the construction and content of qualifications to be more inclusive of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are produced in communities of practice outside of the formal institutions of learning in society".

Following the findings of Starr-Glass and Schwartzbaum (2003) that the greater the differences in equivalence between the two structures (learning acquired by means of experiential learning and formal institutional learning), the more problematic the assessment becomes. The SAQA impact study indicated that the continuing education-training divide is a significant barrier to portability (SAQA 2004b). Hence there is a need for closer alignment between the two structures through the development of appropriate curriculum.

The various debates about the different types of knowledge discussed earlier have a direct bearing on RPL policy and implementation. In reality, there are two different kinds of knowledge and two different ways of knowing (Breier & Burness 2003). This means that once non-traditional learners gain access to institutions, they are further disempowered, because "...teaching methodologies and curriculum offerings remain critically located within traditional knowledge boundaries" (Kistan 2002: 172).

D'Andrea, Gosling and Scott (2002) cited in Moore and Lewis (2005) observed in their work on system-level policy goals which have a bearing on curriculum, that there is little evidence of any recognition of the curriculum, delivery and assessment implications of key access goals (including access for non-traditional students).

Harris (1999: 40) claims that RPL cannot simply be "...bolted on to existing curricula especially if it is to be optimally socially inclusive...RPL is an exercise in epistemology and pedagogy and co-implicated in the power relationships embedded in these things". Furthermore, some of the questions that should be asked are: How is knowledge understood? Who defines what counts as knowledge? What macro power relations are at work?

"The consideration of RPL requires a new commitment by higher education institutions to rethink some accepted meanings of higher education learning and particularly of higher educations programmes" (van Rooy 2002: 75). He continues that RPL "places more emphasis on learning than on the process of delivery of that learning" (van Rooy 2002: 76).

Michelson (1999) links RPL to curriculum development by asserting that higher education needs to problematise what is 'outside' and 'inside' formal knowledge structures and it needs to give people a say in defining curriculum. In this way "...the authoritative 'gaze of power' becomes a mutual critique of what is known, what is taught, what is needed, what is 'socially useful knowledge'" (Michelson 1999: 102).

### 2.9.2 Policy imperatives related to curriculum development

RPL policy implementation has been broadly linked to curriculum development in terms of its capacity to enable the implementation of RPL. This link has been created by the official publications of SAQA: *The Criteria and guidelines for the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning* (SAQA 2004a) which claims that assessment systems, not only for RPL, but also for teaching and learning practice in general, need to be transformed. "The broader purpose [of debate about transformation] is to develop assessment systems and practices that are more responsive to the needs of learners, curricula and contexts" (SAQA 2004a: 5).

The recurriculation of qualifications, as required by SAQA in 2000, led to the majority of qualifications in higher education being based on exit level outcomes, or whole qualifications as opposed to being based on unit standards. This format is somewhat limiting for the implementation of RPL in that modules that make up the whole qualifications are often content-based rather than output driven (SAQA 2004b: 19).

### 2.9.3 Perceived impact of RPL on curriculum design

The JET report (Breier and Burness 2003) investigated the impact of RPL on curriculum design and found that respondents from the former technikons indicated that RPL had contributed substantially to the move towards a modular model of curriculum. They also report on a significant difference in the approaches of universities and former technikons respectively to issues of curriculum development and its relation to RPL. This suggests that, with a few noted exceptions, the impact was limited at the university level.

One respondent from the university sector, did however indicate that prior experience had been explicitly built into the course design and teaching modes had been modified to accommodate the fact that learners' prior experience may not have been in predominantly reading and writing modes (Breier & Burness 2003). Assessment practices at the same institution had also been modified to accommodate the intake of students from non-traditional routes.

There was also evidence in the JET (Breier & Burness 2003) to suggest that RPL impacted positively on the development of curriculum in the fact that one university indicated that a particular curriculum had shifted from a deficit model of curriculum to one that identified the specific competencies of the learners. Furthermore, it was reported at the same institution that academics had become more aware of issues of articulation when developing curricula (Breier & Burness 2003).

With some caution, one respondent in the JET report stated that while RPL has a strong impact on programmes and programme development, the impact is "...incremental and not easily specified" (Breier & Burness 2003: 51). At a systemic level there appears to have been little attempt to quantify the impact that RPL has had on the development of curriculum.

### 2.9.4   RPL and modularisation

Van Rooy (2002) asserts that modularisation is one of the prerequisites for RPL to operate effectively. The study by Breier and Burness (2003: 63) reveals that institutions have, in fact, used RPL to promote life-long learning by maximising "...choice for learners in terms of the organisation of qualifications and the desired mode of instruction...and multiple entry and exit points". Furthermore, modularisation has aided mature learners by providing greater flexibility in gaining access and by enrolling for particular modules as opposed to whole programmes (Breier & Burness 2003). Across the sector, modularisation was seen by a number of institutions to be the most appropriate means of facilitating the RPL process (Breier & Burness 2003).

The use of modularisation and a credit-based system to accommodate the implementation of RPL, can be seen to be an exemplar of the technical or market perspective or model of RPL (Breier & Burness 2003). It is also a model that is competency-driven and therefore "...accords with the outcomes based trend in education" (Breier & Burness 2003: 52). Thus, the literature review reveals that the implementation can, does, and should have, an impact on curriculum development in higher education.

## 2.10 RPL AND ITS ARTICULATION WITH NATIONAL ECONOMIC IMPERATIVES

### 2.10.1 Introduction

While the SAQA impact study shows that RPL is completely central to the goals of access and redress and that there is widespread support for RPL policy and implementation (SAQA 2004b), RPL has also been marketed to higher education and the nation in general, as just one strategy for achieving the outcomes of the national economic imperatives. Various international and national factors have had an impact on the national economic imperatives and the way in which RPL is operationalised.

What follows is a discussion of these factors as revealed through the literature, as well as the tension that exists between the dual imperatives of equity and development. Finally, further debates in the literature as to national economic benefits that can be derived from RPL through interventions made by higher education are presented.

### 2.10.2 Benefits of RPL for institutions of higher education

There are numerous benefits as described in the literature, that institutions can derive from the successful implementation of RPL, some of which are directly related to costs, while others not. SAQA (2004a: 16) makes the point that institutions should "...look at the cost associated with the development of RPL services against the background of the transformation imperatives of the new education and training system".

These benefits of RPL implementation include:

- Attracting new and experienced learners to the institution.
- Increasing student recruitment and retention rates.
- Developing new curriculum and pedagogy as a result of new developments in the workplace.
- Building capacity among staff to gain new insights into different and non-dominant cultures of knowledge.
- Building meaningful links with communities through the development of appropriate curricula.

□ Improving staff understandings of academic coherence and equivalence (SAQA 2004).

### 2.10.3 Factors that impact on national economic imperatives

Various factors have had an impact on RPL policy and implementation as a strategy for achieving national economic imperatives - each of which will be discussed briefly in the subsections that follow.

*(1)    The life-long learning and national economic imperative*

There is little doubt in the literature that RPL policy and implementation was highly influenced by international trends, particularly in Australia, toward the promotion of life-long learning as a strategy for achieving increased access and participation in higher education and for achieving the economic imperative of up-skilling the current workforce.

The strategy of encouraging life-long learning for the purpose of skills development clearly has implications for the curriculum of higher education qualifications as reflected in various policy documents. The NAP document emphatically insists that the new HEQF should encourage such lifelong learning by "...catering for flexible, more open, multi-mode delivery systems and by making provision for the recognition of prior learning, for multiple entry and exit points and for the intermediate exit qualifications from multi-year qualifications" (Department of Education 2001b: 39).

*(2)    Globalisation and its national economic imperatives*

Globalisation is identified by researchers as one of the so-called "Big Three" themes in higher education (Geyser 2004: 140), along with massification and internationalisation. Globalisation and the emergence of a 'knowledge society' (to be discussed in the next section) have had a profound impact on higher education and its practice, including the area of RPL. The NAP document describes globalisation as the term used "...to signal the restructuring of capitalism on a global scale that began in the mid-70s" (Department of Education 2001b: 10). This document goes on to explain that a global economy

developed as a result of an unprecedented development of information and communication technologies which put knowledge at the centre of the new economy.

One of the ways in which globalisation has impacted on higher education is by changing the relationship between society and institutions of higher education which are required to be highly responsive to the needs of both society and the economy at an operational level in terms of 'knowledge products', the employability of their graduates and their contribution to national economic development (Department of Education 2001b).

Koorts (2000) articulates a commonly-held belief among academics in higher education, that global and economic trends influence the social imperative, thus warning that if institutions of higher education sacrifice their core values to market imperatives, they will lose much of their utility as education institutions.

A further development which some see as a response to globalisation, is the creation of a national qualification framework that will make more explicit the outcomes and products of education, including higher education, while at the same time making the meaning of qualifications more transparent and explicit. "The expectation is that this will make it easier for higher education stakeholders (especially employers and students) to identify the nature and level of qualifications, to compare them and to identify more easily their articulation possibilities, both within and across national boundaries" (Department of Education 2001b: 11). The development of the South African NQF enables higher education to provide a rigorous approach to the articulation between and across qualifications, although, in practice, this implementation has been limited and scattered.

*(3)    The knowledge society and national economic imperatives*
What has resulted from globalisation has become known as the 'knowledge society' which allows for the generation of a product or service, or even a productive process in such a way that adds value to the economy (Department of Education 2001b). This knowledge society also allows for the application of knowledge to local contexts and problems, where higher education has the important role of providing society with

individuals trained to respond to the demands of knowledge-based occupations. There is further evidence of the nationally driven demand on higher education to be responsive at an epistemological level where "closed knowledge systems" based on traditional disciplines are replaced by more "open knowledge systems" based on consumer demand and external social interests (Department of Education 1996: 6). Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 6) locate this "...global agenda in a knowledge-based society" to the discourse of the 'global public good'. Wheelahan, Newton and Miller (2003: 5) citing Northedge (2001: 308) define disciplines as "...an example of a discourse community of a particularly systematic and committed kind".

Further to this debate is the following viewpoint that "...the demands made by globalisation on higher education institutions, however, go beyond the development of cognitive skills and competences in future knowledge workers. Higher education is also asked to prepare people for a work environment characterised by the replacement of hierarchical relations by team work, self-employment and contract work, which in turn demand greater flexibility, adaptability and risk-taking on the part of workers" (Department of Education 2001b: 10). Moore and Lewis (2005: 39) state the imperative for higher education to engage with globalisation in this way: "Higher education is seen as a means of helping to integrate South Africa into the global economy on the one hand, and as a vehicle for correcting social and economic imbalances inherited from apartheid on the other".

The impact of globalisation and the development of the knowledge society have had a spin-off effect for various practices of higher education, including RPL. RPL is, partly, seen as a strategy that will assist higher education in fending off its former non-egalitarian stance by widening access, increasing graduating rates, while at the same time reducing the duration of study for those candidates who have already learnt through experience. However, the imperative to engage in the global economy is offset against the imperative to provide a strategy for redress of previous systemic prejudices under apartheid (Department of Education 2001b: 10).

## 2.10.4 Dual imperatives of equity and development

The issue of balancing the agenda of equity with that of development is a vexing one that continues to permeate debates on RPL. There are numerous references in the policy-making literature in higher education to the tension that exists between the dual imperatives of development and the need to engage in the global economy on the one hand, and equity in terms of the way in which higher education has come to be seen as a means of social redress and equity on the other. A summation of the primary references to these tensions in the literature is discussed below.

### (1)    The NAP document and the NPHE

The authors of the NAP document (Department of Education 2001b) claim that the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE) (Department of Education 2001a: 27) "...fails to hold the two goals [equity and development] in balance, and presumably for pragmatic reasons, seems to opt for prioritising the efficiency (and development) goal in the short-term because the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the system is in doubt". The NAP claims that equity goals of increased participation are only attainable in the medium to long-term (Department of Education 2001b). At the same time, the NPHE demands "...a broadening of the social base of students, increased participation in higher education and the offering of academic programmes" (Department of Education 2001b: 27).

### (2)    CHE documents

The tension between equity and development has had a profound influence on policy-making in South Africa as explained by Badat (1999: 4), Chairperson of the CHE: "For political reasons it is crucial to pursue both equity and development goals. The way to resolve the equity-development paradox is to recognise the competing, yet important, claims of both equity (redress of social structural inequalities) and development (socio-economic, political...and human resource development to affect this). Further, the challenge of higher education is to find policies and strategies which, in the context of existing conditions, can satisfy both imperatives, can balance equality goals and development goals". Reference is also made to the need for increased levels of

participation in higher education, the importance of the transformation agenda and the new funding framework - all issues that impact on this tension and the challenges of RPL implementation in higher education (Badat 1999).

*(3)    Education White Paper on Higher Education*

The tension between the dual imperatives of development and equity are also evident in the *Education White Paper on Higher Education*: "The South African economy is confronted with the formidable challenge of integrating itself into the competitive arena of international production and finance … Simultaneously, the nation is confronted with the challenge of reconstructing social and economic relations to eradicate and redress the inequitable patterns of ownership, wealth and social and economic practices that were shaped by segregation and apartheid" (Republic of South Africa 1997b Section 1.9, 1.10).

*(4)    Writings on research*

Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 6) also make reference to this tension: "At the heart of this engagement [with the international RPL community] is a fundamental contradiction between 'public good' issues as defined to promote South Africa's developmental agenda and the increasing marketisation of the global economy… A further contradiction exists, we would argue, at the global level: between this marketisation and what are being defined as 'global public goods', such as development, broadly speaking and defined".

## 2.10.5 Addressing economic imperatives

What is the capacity of RPL policy and implementation to articulate with national economic policy in terms of the need to establish a skilled workforce that is economically active and able to promote growth? The need to address economic imperatives is concomitant with a view of higher education described by the NAP document as "…a more instrumentalist view of higher education which emphasises the need to contribute to a nation's economic productivity, for example by producing employable graduates or globally competitive 'knowledge workers' with 'generic' skills" (Department of Education, 2001b: 27).

Also linked to this trajectory, and to the development of knowledge societies, is the shift from Mode 1 knowledge production towards Mode 2 knowledge production (Gibbons *et al.* 1994), the development of more open systems of education, the marketisation of higher education and an emphasis on "offering programmes which are more applied and interdisciplinary in their purpose and focus" (Department of Education, 2001b: 27). Mode 1 knowledge is "...traditional disciplinary knowledge, hierarchical, produced by individuals - academics, scientists" (Harris 1999: 41). Mode 2 knowledge, on the other hand, is "socially diffuse, applied, produced by multiple actors in new associations and wide ranging social contexts" (Harris 1999: 41). As Harris (1999: 41) further asserts, "most prior learning is produced in Mode 2 style situations and processes" and is therefore more conducive to RPL practices. Furthermore, the move to socially distributed knowledge production systems calls for trans-disciplinary teaching (Gibbons 2000) that favours models of RPL implementation.

While the change from Mode 1 to Mode 2 knowledge production has been heralded as a triumph for educational reform, it has its critics who claim that Mode 2 knowledge production has "assisted in the triumph of economic reductionism and narrow economic development over broader equity and social considerations" (Kraak 2000: 17).

Anther critic is Muller (2000) who claims that the thesis of Gibbons *et al.* fails to indicate the implications of the shift to Mode 2 for universities and teaching in general. He describes the thesis as a "fairytale" and a "celebratory post-modern view" (Muller 2000: 83) that would lead education into conundrums. Despite this view, there is no doubt that Gibbons' thesis of knowledge production has very appealing elements in terms of RPL policy implementation.

## 2.11 ENSURING THE QUALITY OF RPL

### 2.11.1 Introduction

One important response and counter-offensive to the standards debate is the role of quality assurance in the formulation of RPL policy and its implementation. The SAQA impact study (2004b) indicates that an outcome of the NQF was that it had formalised quality assurance processes that had previously been informal. SAQA stresses that quality assurance should not be seen as an inspection but rather as an intervention to ensure continual improvement and development (SAQA 2004a). The findings from the first cycle of the SAQA Impact Study indicated that providers of education and training saw "...quality assurance as a benchmark against which trust in other institutions' systems and processes could be developed" (SAQA 2004b: 49).

What follows is a discussion of the quality assurance imperative in relation to RPL practices, as well as a discussion around a selection of quality assurance mechanisms, as reflected in the current literature, that support and strengthen a positive approach to RPL policy and implementation.

### 2.11.2 The perceived need for quality assurance of RPL practices

The available literature makes it clear that the quality assurance of RPL practices, in part, holds the key to successful RPL policy and implementation. Van Rooy (2002: 79) asserts that "...RPL services will only be credible if they meet stringent quality assurance measures". The NAP (Department of Education 2001b: 104) also states that "...if higher education institutions are to take up the RPL challenge, they will need to develop appropriate, consistent and quality assured RPL policies, practices and assessment instruments based on the specification of entry requirements and learning outcomes".

### 2.11.3 The role of the Higher Education Quality Committee

There is shared responsibility between SAQA and the Council on Higher Education, through the work of the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) for quality Assurance of education and training. SAQA provides the intellectual and strategic leadership for the implementation of the NQF according to relevant criteria, while "...the

CHE have statutory responsibility for coordinating and generating standards for all higher education qualifications and for ensuring that such qualifications meet the criteria for registration by SAQA...The CHE through its Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) has overall responsibility for quality assurance and promotion in higher education" (Department of Education 2004a: 8).

SAQA records that the various Education and Training Quality Assurors (ETQAs), including the HEQC as an ETQA for the higher education sector) will "...be responsible for the protection of the integrity of the system as a whole and must ensure the sustainability of their RPL systems" (SAQA 2004a: 5). SAQA suggests that the ETQAs should "...take the lead in discussions around the quality of RPL systems and that quality assurance should be accorded high priority for all RPL processes" (SAQA 2004a: 5).

### 2.11.4 Mechanisms for ensuring quality of RPL admissions

Various mechanisms are available for ensuring the quality of RPL admissions in higher education and it is not within the scope of this study to describe each of these in details. It should suffice to say that the following could be used to ensure and assure the quality:

- ☐ Ensuring the quality of the intake through rigorous assessment and moderation processes.
- ☐ Increasing the success rate of RPL candidates through the provision of support mechanisms within the system.
- ☐ Reducing completion times by providing the necessary academic skills and discourse for higher education.
- ☐ Ensuring the quality of the graduates through tracking mechanisms, before, during and after higher education study.

## 2.12 IDENTIFIED GAPS IN RESEARCH IN RPL
### 2.12.1 Introduction
There have been numerous pleas in the literature for more research into RPL related issues. Du Pré and Pretorius (2001:2) identify the need for a "...nationally co-ordinated research and development project to clarify epistemological and conceptual questions in relation to the nature and intrinsic value of experiential learning". Osman (2004) makes

reference to the fact that RPL, as a policy imperative, is new and untested in higher education in South Africa and therefore requires further investigation.

Although the report of JET is the most comprehensive study on the development of RPL policy and implementation done in South Africa, the authors nevertheless acknowledge that "...it will take further qualitative case studies to elicit the type of formal informal (sic) conversations and observations necessary for a fine-tuned conceptualisation of RPL practices" (Breier & Burness 2003: 2). SAQA documentation also stresses the need for "...critical engagement with RPL practices that will build a system for RPL and eventual consensus on the application of RPL across the system" (SAQA 2004a: 4).

### 2.12.2 The role and responsibility of higher education

It has become clear that the responsibility for research into the practice of RPL will devolve to the higher education sector wherein the capacity and resources to do such research lie. It is generally accepted that public institutions, and to a lesser extent private institutions, of higher education will develop new directions and thinking on RPL, rather than industry. In reviewing the literature on RPL related research, it is apparent that a considerable amount of the work that does exist in this regard, although still limited, originates from the higher education sector.

Osman and Castle (2001) point to a lack of research about emerging RPL practice either within or across institutions. Writing some three years later, Osman (2004) still claims that there is a slender body of local research and literature on RPL, and that the policy imperative is new and remains untested. Even in the conclusion to their research, Osman and Castle (2001) point out there are more questions than answers, and raise a number of questions that need to be answered by rigorous and systematic research.

Breier (2001) has identified one particular area where a gap in the research exists and points out that, while much of the research on RPL practice pays attention to what happens before candidates are admitted to formal education through the recognition of

prior learning, none or very few, of these approaches focus on what happens after access or on whether there is post-entry recognition of prior learning.

### 2.12.3 Concluding thoughts on research gaps

To conclude, higher education needs to heed the advice of Michelson (1999: 102) to examine the history of RPL in South Africa thus far and to determine where things have gone right and gone wrong in a way that is "...open-handed about what we think RPL means, where it sits within our visions of a just human future, and what we want it to do". Higher education needs to apply the acid test proposed by Michelson (1999) which asks practioners whether they are excited or alarmed by the prospect of admitting unconventional or non-traditional students to higher education.

### 2.13 SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

Various models of RPL are discussed in the literature review and these have been summarised in this chapter, in terms of the three dominant models: the technical or credit exchange model, the liberal humanist or developmental model and the transformational model. Evidence of the application of each of these models in the various institutions of higher education was discussed in this chapter.

The literature review shows that RPL policy and implementation are steeped in legislative context but uneven in distribution and quality for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons are found in the material requirements for successful implementation of RPL, while others are found in the epistemological basis of higher education that is highly traditional and closed to 'other' forms of knowledge. In addition to the resource and epistemic barriers to RPL, there are systemic barriers that also inhibit the implementation of RPL policy. The extent of implementation of RPL policy in higher education was examined in terms of how it is revealed in the current literature about RPL.

The consultative document on the NQF issued by the Departments of Education and Labour concurrently (Department of Education and Department of Labour 2002: 87) stresses that "Recognition of Prior Learning is another example of a significant objective,

assumed to be achievable through the development of the Framework, but which in fact is heavily dependent on factors outside the NQF itself, such as targeted government funding and the development of a guidance and information infrastructure".

An exploration of the extent of RPL implementation, as evidenced in the literature survey, showed that it has been scattered and diverse with no common approach or level of commitment. It also shows that, while there has been a rhetorical commitment to its implementation, actual implementation has been limited and problematic for a variety of reasons including the lack of expertise, infrastructure and resources. Griesel (2001: 23) claims on the basis of empirical data, that "...even though the notion of recognising prior learning...seems to be well-entrenched in institutional consciousness...the implementation of RPL remains an illusionary vision and largely located at the level of a commitment to policy".

This chapter also examined the impact that RPL has had on curriculum development in institutions of higher education, both at universities and universities of technology. There is evidence to suggest that policy and implementation of RPL are currently facilitated by the development of new learning programmes that accommodate prior experience, through modularisation, by using appropriate teaching strategies and by adapting assessment practices.

The literature review explores some of the challenges of implementing RPL in higher education and demonstrates that the current schooling system is inadequately developed to deliver the necessary numbers of higher education candidates with the relevant skills. This places what some would regard as an unfair burden on higher education to correct the error by the supposed lowering of standards. This problem is compounded by the fluctuating growth patterns in enrolments in higher education which mean that, unless deliberate efforts are made to reserve places for RPL candidates, they could well be swamped by the high numbers of qualified students who seek admission to institutions.

What emerges is a tendency of institutions to adopt a hybrid perspective of RPL, including some aspects of each of the three dominant models (the credit exchange, liberal humanist and the transformational) that suits a variety of purposes and meets a variety of needs within institutions.

Evidence of the optimism for RPL in terms of economic and educational growth can be found in the literature and the chapter concludes with an exposition of the opportunities posed by RPL. Harris (1999: 40) claims that RPL is seen as "...having the potential for emancipation and oppression, domestication and transformation, where, at any one time, and according to context both tendencies can be present and in conflict with each other".

However, this optimism is countered by the view expressed by Michelson (1999: 101) that many South Africans argue that RPL has become another way to reward the already relatively privileged: "...another way to keep epistemological authority in line with social and economic power of other kinds", but that this is not a reason to abandon RPL as a mechanism for progressive social and educational change.

In conclusion, Badat (1999: 10) notes that "...a confluence of multiple and key HE policy initiatives remains to be achieved. There are also severe problems related to availability of financial and especially human resources, inadequate high-level HE policy expertise and a weak knowledge and information base." Although these words were written nearly six years ago, there is evidence to suggest that this is still a valid summation of capacity in the higher education sector.

Chapter 3 explores the research methodology used to examine the challenges and opportunities offered by RPL to higher education and the country at large.

## Chapter 3: Research Methodology

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

The literature study undertaken in Chapter 2 explored the documented challenges and opportunities posed by implementing RPL policy in higher education. Using the reported findings of the literature study, Chapter 3 will report on the design of the research methodology that will be used to investigate some of these opportunities and challenges in more depth through a research approach that includes the following:

- Development of suitable research instruments (survey, questionnaire and interview questions) to collect data. For the purposes of this study, a distinction is drawn between questionnaires and surveys. The term questionnaire is used to describe the tool for data collection from individuals regarding perceptions, while the term survey is used to describe the tool used for data collection from the three institutions regarding objective information about RPL policy and implementation.

- Piloting of the questionnaire using a sample of respondents at the three sites.

- Revision of the questionnaire based on the feedback obtained from the respondents in the pilot study.

- Collection of data from individual respondents regarding their perceptions about RPL policy and provision at three sites of public higher education delivery in KwaZulu-Natal by means of a structured questionnaire.

- Collection of data regarding the general profile of the three institutions in relation to the type of institution (i.e. university of technology; university or comprehensive university[3]); mission and vision; profile and niche area of the institution.

- Collection of institutionally-based data about RPL policy and provision at the three sites by means of an institutional survey designed specifically for this purpose.

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[3] The concept of a comprehensive university was developed by the NPHE. These institutions have a blend of career-focussed and academic, formative programmes.

- Collection of institutionally-based data by means of a document study through review of RPL policy and procedures as contained in relevant documents at the three institutions.

- Processing of the qualitative and quantitative data from the questionnaire responses using commercially available computer software.

- Manual processing of the data obtained from the open-ended questions.

- Triangulation of the data and verification of the preliminary findings through individual interviews.

- Synthesis of the two sets of data with supporting evidence from the literature that already exists (where possible).

- Reporting on the final analysis of the data and the resultant findings.

This research is predominantly an exploratory and descriptive study that seeks, through the use of questionnaires, surveys and interviews, to contribute to the current understandings of RPL policy and implementation in higher education. At the same time, it has elements of evaluation research, as a component of the research, that seeks to evaluate the extent of penetration of government policy and implementation as an interventionist strategy. For these purposes, the work of researchers such as Patton (1987) and Guba and Lincoln (1989; 1994) is important.

This chapter will also deal with some of the ethical considerations that may arise within the study, and it will attempt to problematise some of the unchallenged assumptions that are currently being made in terms of the ethical issue of informed consent.

Chapter 3 will also develop a theoretical framework that aims to justify and explain the research methodology used in the study. It will develop the argument for the use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches (mixed methods approach). This theoretical framework will be interwoven into the fabric of the design and will be discussed in the next section.

## 3.2 ESTABLISHING AN ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR THE RESEARCH

### 3.2.1 Research paradigms

*(1) Defining paradigm*

Various researchers over the decades have attempted to define the term paradigm (Kuhn 1962; Roberts 2002). Kuhn (1962) however coined the now common term paradigm as a means of describing a set of guiding assumptions which influence the method of research, the subject of research and the relationship between the researcher and the researched. In a later work (Kuhn 1970: 175) defines a paradigm as follows: "A paradigm is what the members of a scientific community share...it stands for the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community". Patton (1975: 9) provides further insight and defines a paradigm as "...a world view, a general perspective, a way of breaking down the complexity of the real world".

*(2) Influence of the paradigm on research*

Most of the qualitative research methodologists argue that research is influenced by the particular paradigm out of which the researcher chooses to operate. Roberts (2002) however argues that the distinction between the two dominant paradigms, is not as great as some researchers would like to think it is. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) go so far as to claim that the linkage between research paradigm and research methods is neither sacrosanct nor necessary. Qualitative researchers should be free to use quantitative methods and quantitative researchers should be free to use qualitative methods.

Nevertheless, the paradigm of choice often provides the framework within which to conduct research. It determines a number of important aspects of the research including, to some extent, the methodology. Zuber-Skerritt (1992) points out that certain methods, techniques and types of data (e.g. experiments and tests in a qualitative paradigm, and case studies in the qualitative paradigm) are paradigm-dependent, while others are not (e.g. surveys, interviews and questionnaires).

*(3)    Selecting a paradigm*

The purpose of this section of the chapter is, in part, to:

- ❑ Provide a background for the use of qualitative research methods, alongside quantitative research methods.
- ❑ Address some of the scepticism with which qualitative research is treated.
- ❑ Justify the use of a mixed mode research approach.


This research combines the two dominant approaches in a multi-modal way: while employing a variety of different methods it is methodologically eclectic (Zuber-Skerritt 1992). In a hybrid approach, sometimes described as eclecticism (Roberts 2002), the research makes use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches for conducting research. This eclecticism requires separate discussion, as a prelude to the discussion on mixed mode research.


*(4)    The paradigm wars*

A number of research methodologists provide overviews of the Qualitative-Quantitative Debate - a debate so common that it is already referred to by the acronym QQD (Roberts 2002; Bazeley 2003; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004). Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) provide a useful review of what they call 'the paradigm wars' and incompatibility theories. They point out that much of the debate around the use of the different research paradigms centres on the differences between the two paradigms, while there are numerous similarities between the two. Most researchers feel the need to defend their choice of paradigm ontologically, thus perpetuating the war. Fraenkel (1995) cited in Nau (1995) points out that, whereas the debate should be dialectic, it has become acrimonious.


Furthermore Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) explain how qualitative purists like Guba and Lincoln (1989) have rejected what they call positivism, or positivist philosophy, while quantitative purists like Popper (1963) and Maxwell and Delaney (2004) traditionally claim rhetorical neutrality and context-free generalisations that arrogantly undermine the very tenets of qualitative research. What follows is a brief description of the two paradigms,

followed by the argument and justification for using a mixed mode approach, identified as the third research paradigm, for the research.

### 3.2.2 Quantitative approach to research

The quantitative research paradigm is well documented in a number of seminal texts such as Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), Scriven (1972) and Cresswell (1994). It relies on the collection of quantitative data, which often uses numerical and / or coded data, which is analysed in a statistical or quasi-statistical manner. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 35) categorise this kind of research as normative in so far as it is modelled on the research of natural sciences.

Quantitative research focuses on, *inter alia*, deduction, theory or hypothesis testing and prediction (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004). Some of the features of quantitative research relevant to this study include the following:

- Standardised data collection (using a scaled approach for closed responses).
- A relatively large sample of anticipated responses (by comparison to qualitative data).
- A random sampling.
- Computer-assisted capture of the data for statistical purposes (although computer-assisted capture of data is also possible in a qualitative approach).
- Statistical analyses of the data.
- Statistical inference.
- The use of bar-charts, pie-charts and statistical diagrams to explain and support the analysis of the data.

### 3.2.3 Qualitative approach to research

Qualitative research refers, broadly speaking, to research that produces a set of descriptive data. It purports to be inductive in that the researcher develops concepts and insights, and tries to understand patterns in the data, rather than trying to assess preconceived models, hypotheses or theories (Taylor & Bogdan 1984). Cresswell (1994),

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Silverman (2000), Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), Oakley (2000) and others provide similar meaning to the qualitative research paradigm.

There are many variants of qualitative research and within this paradigm reside a number of different perspectives or subsets that operate within a similar approach. Some of these have relevance to the qualitative aspects of this study. These perspectives can be categorised into three approaches although different theorists categorise them differently and there are some overlaps in their characteristics:

- ❑ Interpretive approach (including hermeneutics, phenomenology and ethnography) where the theory is emergent and should be grounded on data generated by the research act. In this approach, theory does not precede research but follows it (Zuber-Skerritt 1992; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). It builds an ontology that reflects a subjective experience of reality through an interpretive methodology (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999: 6).

- ❑ Constructionist approach where the ontology is socially constructed through textual and discourse analysis as a methodology and the epistemology is political (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999).

- ❑ Critical theory approach (including action research and emancipatory research) where meanings and interpretations are of paramount importance and lead to empowerment (Terre Blanche & Durrheim 1999). Knowledge, and therefore research, is not neutral (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000).

For the purposes of this research, the researcher will assume an approach that is representative of a number of elements of these subsets, rather than being exclusively located within one. There are features of each of the different strains of qualitative research evident in this study. This is a deliberate and predetermined strategy rather than an *ad hoc* arrangement that has arisen from the study.

The researcher is in agreement with the view of Aguinaldo (2004: 133) who believes that researchers using a mixed methodology should not be constrained by a "methodological

straightjacket". Similarly, Roberts (2002) asserts that the link between epistemology and method is not axiomatic but rather rhetorical.

Some of the features of qualitative research relevant to this study include the following:

- Interpretive in approach.
- Inductive in method.
- Focused on exploration and theory generation.
- Contextualised study.
- Textual data and the in-depth analysis thereof.
- Relatively small sample of participants.
- Purposeful sampling methods (used in the individual interviews).
- Reflexivity.
- Validation through alternative research means rather than statistical measurement.

### 3.2.4   Mixed methods approach

*(1)   Introduction to the mixed mode approach*

There is a growing school of thought that believes that research should move beyond the paradigm debate and that researchers should use whatever methods or blend of methods that suit the research problem (Roberts 2002; Creswell 2003; Brewer & Hunter 1989; Howe 1988; Currall et al 1999; Bazeley 2003; Nau 1995; Jones 1997; Kelle 2001; Tashakkori & Teddlie 1998). This school of researchers is in opposition to respected, yet purist, researchers like Guba and Lincoln (1994) who argue that a researcher invariably operates within *one* paradigm. In contrast, many researchers feel that the distinction between paradigms is overdrawn and artificial (Vulliamy, Lewin & Stephens 1990; Roberts 2002; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004). They argue that researchers can, within one study, view the same data from the perspective of different paradigms.

Mixed methods research is called by a variety of different names including mixed mode research, bimodal research, bi-directional research and multimodal research. It is defined by Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 17) as "...the class of research where the researcher

mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study". It is presented as the third research paradigm.

De Vos (2002b) acknowledges that combining the two approaches or paradigms (i.e. quantitative and qualitative) is a matter, as yet, highly problematic. Apart from pointing out some of the differences between the two approaches, the author (2002b) claims that the arguments developed by leading researchers still only pay lip service to the very real difficulties of using a mixed mode approach. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) point out the following as some of the weaknesses associated with mixed-methods research:

❑ Difficulty of one researcher carrying out both qualitative and quantitative research which might require a research team.

❑ More time-consuming.

❑ Some detail of using mixed methods research still needs to be worked out fully by research methodologists.

However, there is a growing body of research that suggests that the two approaches need not be competing but can be complementary. Exploratory research, as defined by Mouton (2001), is particularly suited to this approach as it aims at setting a process of exploration in motion, rather than providing a definitive pronouncement on a particular phenomenon. It seeks new ways of understanding a phenomenon - in this case RPL policy and implementation in higher education. Such a study lends itself to the multi-facetted (and sometimes messy) nature of using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Furthermore, exploratory research is used for the purposes of gathering new information in a discipline or sub-discipline and the establishment of new priorities for further research. It is therefore well suited to this study.

*(2) Models of mixed methodology design*

Three dominant models of mixed method research present themselves in the literature and most of the research methodologists working in the area of mixed method research identify one or more of these models. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004), drawing on the

work of, *inter alia*, Creswell (1994) and Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) made the distinction between two different models, although a third also exists.

The first research design, referred to as a mixed model approach, is achieved through mixing qualitative and quantitative research within and across, all stages of the research process. This model involves an integration of the two types of research concurrently. Creswell (1994) identifies this model as a mixed methodology design where the researcher mixes aspects of the qualitative and quantitative paradigms at all of the methodological steps of the design, thus adding to the complexity of the design. Broadly speaking, Roberts (2002) identifies this as the complementary mode, where quantitative and qualitative methods build upon each other, in a way that is quite different from the integration of both methods. This design recognises that the two methods generate different types of data and therefore assist in the clarification and explanation of meaning.

The second research design, or mixed method approach, is achieved through the inclusion of a quantitative phase and a qualitative phase in the research study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). This design involves a sequencing of the two types of research. Cresswell (1994) presents this model of research design as one that combines qualitative and quantitative paradigms in a single study, where the two approaches form different phases of the study and are, therefore, kept separate.

Creswell (1994) identifies a third design, the dominant-less-dominant approach, in which the two approaches are combined. This involves working in one of the two paradigms, as the dominant paradigm, but including a small component drawn from the alternative paradigm. Thus, the overall design mirrors the research process of working to and fro between inductive and deductive models of thinking in a research study (de Vos 2002). Creswell (1994) acknowledges that, in reality, researchers often have to use both approaches. The combination of the two approaches is best located in the triangulation of data.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) point out that, regardless of the specific model, the findings must be integrated at some point. The necessary integration of data (as required in the Johnson and Onwuegbuzie models (2004); the Kelle model (2001) and de Vos (2002)) is achieved in the data analysis and synthesis phase of the research design. Kelle (2001) also suggests that the methodological integration is achieved through an understanding of triangulation.

There is justification for using a mixed methodology research approach. Qualitative research can describe, in rich detail, complex phenomena as they are situated and embedded in local contexts. Knowledge that is produced by such qualitative research cannot be easily generalised to other people or other settings (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative research, on the flip side of the coin, offers a somewhat rigorous approach to research, but the doubts about 'ontological objectivity' Roberts (2002) raises serious questions about the validity of the results of quantitative research. Quantitative approaches can be equally susceptible to subjectivity as in a qualitative approach (Scriven 1972).

Mixed method research has attained new levels of credibility and respectability. Bazeley (2003: 177) asserts that, "...the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to research within a single study has become an accepted technique for exploratory and evaluative research". Wainwright (1997), working in the field of medical sociology, draws attention to the fact that qualitative research is enjoying newfound respectability even in areas such as medical sociology, that have traditionally dealt with it with a certain degree of ambivalence and trepidation.

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) stress that the goal of mixed methods research is not to replace either of the two approaches, but rather to draw from the strengths and minimise the weaknesses of both in single research studies. While quantitative research has a high level of credibility with 'people in power' (e.g. administrators, politicians and funders), on the other hand, the researcher's categories and theories that are being tested in

quantitative research, may not reflect local constituencies' understandings (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

In terms of Johnson and Onwuegbuzie's analysis (2004) this study can be categorised as a mixed method approach (or pluralist position) in terms of the way in which the research is designed. It uses a quantitative approach, although there is an element of what Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 20) call a "within-stage mixed-model approach" in that it uses a questionnaire. It includes a summated rating scale (quantitative data collection) and open-ended questions (qualitative data collection), followed by a qualitative approach in which the qualitative phase is conducted to inform the quantitative phase. Methodological integration will take place at the level of the reporting the findings, as suggested by de Vos (2002b).

In defending the use of mixed method research, Roberts (2002: 2) contends that "…any 'mixing' of methods should be accompanied by a rationale that avoids the charge of creating an 'incongruent' research design". Furthermore, "…a methodologically aware eclecticism may result in a principled deployment of both quantitative and qualitative methods in a complementary fashion" (Roberts 2002: 11).

To avoid any charges of incongruence, it is necessary to provide the rationale for the use of a mixed methods approach, and thus defend it. While each of the different methodologies has weaknesses and strengths, the particular strengths (and therefore justification) of this mixed methods approach are the following:

- ❑ It can answer a broader and more complete range of research questions because the researcher is not confined to a single method or approach (mono-method).
- ❑ The researcher can use the strengths of an additional method to overcome the weaknesses in another method by using both in a research study.
- ❑ It can provide stronger evidence for a conclusion through convergence and corroboration of findings.
- ❑ It can add insights and understandings that might be overlooked when only a single method is used.

- It can be used to increase the generalisability of the results.
- It can produce more complete knowledge required to inform theory and practice.
- If findings are corroborated across different approaches, there can be greater confidence in the conclusions.
- If the findings are conflicting, then the researcher has greater knowledge and can modify interpretations and conclusions accordingly (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

Despite the eclectic approach, some selections are nevertheless required in terms of paradigm (for the purposes of this research). The conscious decision has been made to make use of a scientific style or writing and structure for the thesis. These include the use of:

- The passive, third person voice that is usually associated with a positivist or scientific paradigm, in reporting the research (rather than the more involved and personal voice of the qualitative researcher in a narrative style).
- A structure that separates the literature review from the remainder of the thesis (unlike the majority of purely qualitative studies that integrate the literature review with the discussion of the findings in thematic chapters in a narrative style).
- A structure that lays out the intentions of the research (research methodology) and then discusses the operational aspects of how the research was conducted in reality (rather than integrating the two as usually happens in qualitative studies creating a narrative style).

Having identified the similarities and the complementary nature of qualitative and quantitative research, there is nevertheless one important area: the research approach to establishing the validity of the research. A major divide in the QQD lies in the measurement of the validity of the data. Roberts (2002: 5) asserts that "...if two epistemological positions define truth differently, each will have a different conceptualisation of validity". Jones (1997) points out that the main objection to the use

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of a qualitative research approach is the concept of validity and the difficulty of determining the truthfulness of findings.

## 3.3.    RESEARCH VALIDITY

### 3.3.1    Defining validity

While quantitative research has statistical measures of validity and reliability that can be applied, qualitative research is deemed by some researchers operating in a positivist paradigm as having a less rigorous approach.   Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) point out that the use of the term positivist is a poor choice for labelling quantitative researchers today because positivism has long since been replaced by newer philosophies of science.   Many of the earlier qualitative researchers believed that the concept of validity did not sit comfortably in a qualitative paradigm (Pyett 2003).

Although there is no single or common definition of validity (Winter 2000), there is some consensus among researchers as the general notion of validity. Hammersley's (1987: 69) definition is often presented as the definitive definition in the literature: "An account is valid or true if it represents accurately those features of the phenomena, that it is intended to describe, explain or theorise".

### 3.3.2    Linking validity to reliability

A common practice is to link notions of validity with those of reliability, but as Aguinaldo (2004) points out, validity has something to do with reliability or the measurement of consistency, but not everything to do with it.  It is possible for a research finding to be a highly consistent result but not necessarily a valid one. Winter (2000) makes the assertion that, while an aggregated definition of validity could be accuracy, that of reliability, could be replicability.

### 3.3.3    Validity as a unitary concept

The literature dealing with validity asserts that validity is not located in any one particular section of any study: it is the unifying characteristic for the entire research process (Winter 2000). Different types of validity are apparent at different stages of the research.

A number of researchers (Winter 2000 and Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000 to name but two) rely on the work of Maxwell (1992) in this regard. Some of these different types of validity that have some relevance for this study are described below:

- Descriptive validity at the data gathering stage which describes what was observed or experienced and the factual accuracy of the informational statements (for example in collecting the data from the institutional survey which will be conducted in this study).

- Interpretative validity is where an account is deemed to be valid if the 'players' are able to confirm or recognise the findings of the research, in particular where there is a chance that they may be disadvantaged by the results (for example triangulating the data with the respondents and undertaking 'member checking' in this study).

- Theoretical validity goes beyond the level of accuracy and refers to the mental and emotional constructs of the researcher. This refers to the meaning-making stage of the research (for example through maintaining a dialogue with the theory underpinning the study).

- Generalisability is the degree to which the research is believed to be generalisable to wider groups and circumstances. It is one of the most common tests of validity in quantitative research. However it is considered to be of little or no importance to many qualitative researchers. In this study, the generalisability does however have significance for the researcher in terms of the way in which the study is reflective of a sectoral response (regionally based) to the phenomenon of RPL policy and implementation if only for the internal validity (valid for the particular population) of the research and there is no elaboration of cause and effect in the study. External validity is only a secondary goal in terms of the extent to which the results can be generalised and applied to other populations.

- Evaluative validity is an inescapable inevitability within research and offers a measurement of the research in terms of its overall validity (for example meta-evaluation of the research with informed readers, impartial colleagues and the supervisor at various points in the study) (Winter 2000).

In addition to these types of validity, other types of validity have also been described in the literature, which have relevance to this study:

- ❑ Face validity describes a kind of validity that is openly apparent and 'common sense' (Patton 1982a; Reaves 1992). This type of validity is evidence in the construction of a questionnaire that seeks questions that will be valid at the most basic level of understanding.

- ❑ Construct validity concerns the way in which the research questions are framed and the resultant design of the research (Winter 2000).

In the next section, different understandings of validity are explored in terms of their application to the quantitative and the qualitative paradigm of research.

### 3.3.4 Quantitative understandings of validity

Winter (2000) argues that the use and nature of the term validity in qualitative research are controversial and varied. Much of the debate, and sometime criticisms around the quality of qualitative research, relates to the possibility of ensuring the validity of qualitative research (Wainwright 1997; Winter 2000; Pyett 2003; Aguinaldo 2004; Roberts 2002 and Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004).

Traditional criteria for validity are rooted in a positivist tradition (Winter 2000). In a quantitative research paradigm specifically, validity refers to the extent to which the findings offer access to an objective social reality (Aguinaldo 2004) and has a greater significance than mere consistency (Reaves 1992). It is clear, however, that a researcher's understanding of the concept of validity is, in many ways, defined by his or her belief system or ontological orientation.

A quantitative understanding of validity carries with it notions of:

- ❑ Controllability.
- ❑ Replicability.
- ❑ Predictability.
- ❑ Context-freedom.

❑ Observability (Reaves 1992).

### 3.3.5 Qualitative understandings of validity

While there are some qualitative researchers who reject the notion of validity altogether, there is a growing body of knowledge around ensuring the validity of qualitative research. In qualitative research, conclusions are not measured by their proximity to the truth *per se* but rather by their utilitarian function (Aguinaldo 2004), although this pragmatic approach is not beyond scrutiny. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 16) ask an important question: "Without public scrutiny and adequate standards, how is one to decide whether what is claimed is trustworthy or defensible?" They also make the point that research is more than simply one researcher's highly idiosyncratic opinions written into a report. Roberts (2002: 7) on the other hand, talks of the "precision of description" necessary in qualitative data (and by implication mixed method research) and claims that the researcher should be guided by the question: "How can we hope to detect and eliminate error?" (Roberts 2002: 6).

Although validity in qualitative research is also concerned with relevance and accuracy, it is not concerned with the statistical measurement of the concept, and, as Patton (1990) points out there are no straightforward tests for making sure that qualitative research is reliable and valid. Furthermore, the processes that researchers undertake to achieve validity in qualitative research are rarely described in the literature (Pyett 2003). Qualitative research has generated its own understandings of validity - trustworthiness, credibility, plausibility and relevance, among them. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) list a number of strategies that are recognised and regularly applied in qualitative research. These include member checking, triangulation, negative case sampling, pattern-matching and external audits.

The conceptualisation of validity is being theorised in new ways, and discussions around validity in qualitative methodology have grown in number. Aguinaldo (2004: 130) comes to the conclusion that "validity is not a determination...but a process of

interrogation" and it necessitates a notion of multiple realities, while not precluding the practice of power from a Foucauldian perspective.

In summing up, Winter (2000: 7) claims that "the validity of the research [qualitative] resides with the representation of the actors, the purposes of the research and appropriateness of the processed involved". Following this argument, Winter (2000: 8) also claims primacy for the question: for who is the research valid? All the research findings relate to the philosophical and political views of the researcher with the theoretical awareness of a social construction of reality (Denzin & Lincoln 1998).

Furthermore, the validity of research findings ultimately depends upon trust in the researcher's integrity (Wainwright 1997: 7). Validity, as described by Wainwright (1999: 7) refers to the techniques employed by the researcher to indulge a "Socratic distaste for self-deception". Further to this argument, Wainwright (1997: 12 - 13) holds that "the pursuit of validity comprises a means by which the researcher can minimise the risk of self-deception. Even the most apparently rigorous tests of validity used by the quantitative researcher, such as random sampling and statistical inference, are not immune to manipulation" (Wainwright 1997: 12).

A number of theorists (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Kelle 2001, de Vos 2002b; Reaves 1992) identify the triangulation of data as one possible means of confirming the understandings that have been reached through either a qualitative or a quantitative approach. What follows is a discussion of the triangulation of data as a method of confirming or validating the results that arise from a quantitative data gathering process. It is important to remember that a *method* is not deemed to be valid, but an appropriate method can produce valid data (Winter 2000: 7 - 8).

### 3.3.6   Triangulation of data

*(1)    Linking validity and triangulation*

For the purposes of this study, triangulation is understood as the process whereby data is verified or tested by using different sources for data collection, and by cross-referencing

data. It is a validation of initial research findings by using a variety of information collection methods (de Vos 2002b) and sources.

The primary intention of using data triangulation in this study is to provide a means of establishing the validity of the data obtained from the completed questionnaires. The purpose of the triangulation will also be to interrogate any inconsistencies that present themselves in the data that may result from weaknesses in the data collection instruments. However, one should be able to assume that, if there is little divergence in the data obtained from the two different sources, then the researcher is justified in assuming that the data is valid. However there are some limitations to this assumption which will be discussed later this chapter.

Cohen and Manion (1989) make the point that triangulation is useful when "...an established approach yields a limited or frequently distorted picture". For the purposes of this research, the data obtained from the questionnaires might provide a limited perspective about perceptions of RPL policy and implementation and, for this reason, it would be beneficial to make use of triangulation methodology in order to provide more depth and richness to the data and its interpretation. Such an approach will provide a second level of analysis that will benefit the understanding and complexity of the study.

*(2)    Methodological triangulation*

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) describe a variety of kinds of triangulation and their characteristics, under the broad heading of methodological triangulation, which is highly relevant to this study. This type of triangulation uses a different method on the same object of study – in this case RPL policy and implementation.

Individual interviews provide one suitable method for triangulation. Using this approach to triangulation, the outcomes of the questionnaire will be tested against the outcomes obtained in semi-structured interviews. In addition, any puzzling or discordant elements of the results of the preliminary analysis of the questionnaire will be interrogated in these interviews.

Respondent triangulation (Reaves 1992) is a method whereby the researcher reverts to the subjects with tentative results and refines these in the light of the subjects' reactions. This method is not without its critics. Silverman (2000) suggests that rather than treat triangulation as a validation process, it should be regarded as a further source of data and insight. Notwithstanding the reservations about the triangulation of data as a validation process, there is no doubt that triangulation provides for a richer pool of data from which to extract findings.

Corroboration through triangulation, is however not the sole reason for the use of mixed methods research in this study. As Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) point out, in many cases the goal of mixing methods is not only to search for corroboration but rather to expand one's understanding. Kelle (2001: 3) cautions that convergence of the data is not necessarily a sign of validity and that triangulation is rather a means of increasing "…the scope, depth and consistency in the methodological proceedings".

While Silverman (2000) acknowledges that triangulation may improve the reliability of a single research method, he presents some cautionary notes in regard to the use of mixed modes:

- It is often misleading to attempt to present 'the whole picture' through the use of a mixed methods approach.
- The researcher cannot simply aggregate data in order to arrive at an overall 'truth'.

A further method of establishing validity in a qualitative study is through reflexivity (Wainwright 1997) and this concept will be discussed in the next subsection.

### 3.3.7 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is described as a personal strategy by which the researcher manages the analytical oscillation between observation and theory in a way that is valid to him or herself (Wainwright 1997). This is referred to as a dialectical approach which allows the researcher to oscillate between the two (Wainwright 1997). The researcher can influence

the validity by adopting a reflexive perspective on his or her work. The researcher strives to demonstrate the validity of the analysis by providing a 'thick' description of the data that will be sufficiently dense (Wainwright 1997).

Winter (2000) cautions that the researcher should however, be alert to the highly selective and subjective processes involved in all research. There is the possibility of different or multiple realities that might exist in any description or the multi-perspective experiences of different researchers. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) explain that 'realities' should probably be called perspectives or opinions or beliefs.

Having provided the motivation and justification for the mixed methods approach adopted by the study, the ontological basis for the research design, and developed the position from which the researcher will argue, the following section goes on to discuss the mixed methods design.

## 3.4    FRAMING THE RESEARCH

### 3.4.1    Delineation of research boundaries

At the outset, the research design needs to delineate the boundaries of the field of research. A regional focus has been selected, namely all institutions of higher education in the KwaZulu-Natal region have been selected as sites for data collection sites, thus setting the geographical boundaries of the study. This selection excludes Mangosuthu Technikon, based on the assumption that it will eventually be merged with the Durban Institute of Technology, as per the recommendations of the NPHE.

### 3.4.2    Selection of sites

Wainwright (1997) makes the point that the selection of the research site should be guided by an attempt to achieve validity, rather than by the unattainable goal of representiveness, with due consideration for:

  ❑    The type of institution. As it happens, the three sites are representative of the three different kinds of institutions of higher education that now exist - universities of technology, universities and comprehensive institutions.

- The ease of access to the participants.
- The possibility of recording valid data.
- Whether there are characteristics of the site that might adversely influence a participants' testimony.

Because the characteristics of the ideal site cannot be prescribed in advance, there is a need for the researcher to manage these in a reflexive manner. The three institutions of higher education in KwaZulu-Natal have been selected for the following reasons:

- Each of the three institutions is different in terms of the type of higher education institution: Durban Institute of Technology is a university of technology; the University of KwaZulu-Natal is a university and the University of Zululand is a comprehensive institution in terms of the recommendations of the NPHE.

- All three institutions have been exposed to similar interventions in terms of RPL (such as the joint esATI (Eastern Seaboards Association of Tertiary Institutions) and JET RPL project).

- All three institutions have been influenced by similar thinking in terms of a number of joint ventures that impact on the implementation of RPL in higher education (such as the regional Post Graduate Masters Certificate in Teaching in Higher Education).

- All three institutions are attempting to respond to similar market-related trends and regional imperatives.

- All three sites are easily accessible for the purposes of data collection and verification.

- The dynamics at these three institutions are similar to the dynamics occurring in higher education on a national basis: two of the three institutions are involved in a merger process, and the third is transforming to become a comprehensive university.

*(1)    Profile of Durban Institute of Technology*

The Durban Institute of Technology (DIT) is categorised as a university of technology in terms of the National Plan for Higher Education (NPHE). DIT arises out of the merger of

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Technikon Natal and ML Sultan Technikon. It offers full-time and part-time programmes leading to a variety of tertiary qualifications, from one-year certificates to doctorates in technology. It has a number of campuses, Durban City, Berea (Steve Biko and ML Sultan, Ritson Road, Brickfield Road), Indumiso (outskirts of Pietermaritzburg), Pietermaritzburg and Richards Bay (www.dit.ac.za).

*(2)    Profile of University of KwaZulu-Natal*

The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) is categorised as a university in terms of the NPHE. It arises from the merger of the University of Durban-Westville and the University of Natal. Its mission statement claims that it is "...a truly South African university that is academically excellent, innovative in research, engaged with society and demographically representative, redressing the disadvantages, inequities and imbalances of the past" (www.ukzn.ac.za). UKZN has a number of campuses including Edgewood (formerly Edgewood College of Education), Howard College (situated on the Berea), Medical School and Pietermaritzburg campus.

*(3)    Profile of University of Zululand*

The University of Zululand (UZ) is categorised as a comprehensive institution in terms of the NPHE. The University of Zululand has moved to align itself with the requirements of a comprehensive institution. It is restructuring its academic offerings to provide for a career focussed and relevant education to surrounding areas. Its mission statement declares that it is a "...rural based comprehensive university providing quality, career focused undergraduate and postgraduate education, including research in the social and natural sciences, in partnership with the local and global community" (www.uz.ac.za).

### 3.4.3   Sampling methods

Random sampling (as opposed to structured sampling) has been selected as an appropriate strategy for the data collection. For the purposes of this research this means that the respondents who will be requested to complete the questionnaires will be selected at random from the pool of academic staff at the three institutions. A distinction will be drawn between academic teaching staff, who are located within departments and who

lecture on a daily basis, and academic non-teaching staff, who provide academic support mechanisms to academic staff but do not lecture on a daily basis.

While not attempting to be representative, an attempt will be made to cover all of the distinguishing characteristics in the biographical section of the questionnaire in a fairly representative way. These characteristics include the following:

- Highest educational qualification.
- Years' experience in higher education.
- Gender.
- Institution.
- Position in the institution.
- Academic teaching staff or academic non-teaching staff.

### 3.4.4 Research population

In terms of the selection of respondents, the entire research population is defined as all academic staff in public institutions of higher education in KwaZulu-Natal. From this grouping, the respondents will be chosen at random, although opportunistically, based on access and interest, from the three sites. The only criteria for selection of the respondents will be that they should:

- Have been in higher education for more than a year.
- Occupy an academic post.
- Be accessible.
- Be willing to participate in the study.

## 3.5    THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

### 3.5.1    Design of the research instruments

*(1)    Design of the institutional survey*

The institutional survey is designed to gather data related to the institutional response to the imperative to establish policy for RPL and implement that policy. The specific design of the survey relies heavily on the work of Volbrecht (2001) at Cape Technikon in regard to establishing the following information regarding the profile of RPL policy and implementation at the three institutions:

- ❑ Motivation for the development of RPL policy and implementation (economic, political, in response to national imperative, student demand).

- ❑ Policy development (status, responsibility for implementation, location within institution, scope).

- ❑ Implementation (number of students following RPL route, professions, programmes, assessment methods).

- ❑ Resources (staff, budgets, training, student support).

- ❑ Quality assurance of RPL processes (student tracking, success rates).

*(2)    Design of the questionnaire*

There is an abundance of literature that deals with the theory underpinning the design and construction of questionnaires (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000; Delport 2002; Reaves 1992; Patton 1982a; Mouton 2001) for the purposes of quantitative data collection and these have been considered in the design of the questionnaire used in this study.

In particular, McAuliffe (2003) discusses the challenges of conducting practitioner research by email, as is partly the case in this survey. Among other things she discusses the vulnerability of professional reputation when one's practice comes under scrutiny in the name of research. Following on from this, she discusses ways of encouraging engagement in the process by eliminating some of the barriers. She challenges the boundaries of traditional qualitative research data collection and embrace a new medium (i.e. email) while taking cognisance of the moral and ethical dilemmas of conducting

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research by email. These considerations have been taken into account in the design and administration of the questionnaire.

The greatest challenge when using questionnaires to collect data is the difficulty of non-responsiveness. Various factors are known to influence the rate of return of questionnaires in an educational environment and these include:

- The time in the academic year when the questionnaires are distributed.
- The length of the questionnaire.
- The means of distribution.
- Complexity of the questionnaire.
- The follow-up procedures and response systems (Delport 2002).

The questionnaire used to collect data in this study is designed to answer the research questions raised in the statement and analysis of the problem. For the purposes of this study, the questionnaire will be used to elicit the perceptions and opinions of the respondents in regard to RPL policy and implementation in an attempt to answer the research question. It is important to note that it is not designed to establish factual information regarding the implementation of RPL at the respective institutions: this is the purpose of the institutional survey. An extended explanation is provided at the commencement of the questionnaire in order to encourage participation, and to ensure that all the ethical concerns have been addressed.

The design of the questionnaire is also dependent on the trends and patterns that emerge in the literature review in regard to the establishment and implementation of RPL policy. It uses the tried and tested methods of questionnaire design and construction with the classical features and characteristics germane to most questionnaires of this nature:

- All closed items are presented as statements with which the respondents can agree or disagree.
- A four point Likert scale.
- All statements are posited positively rather than negatively.

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- The items are grouped together in a way that will inform the process and structure of reporting on the findings.

- The number of statements is limited to ensure that the respondents do not feel overwhelmed by the length and the time required for the completion of the questionnaire.

- Selected biographical information is requested from the respondents. This information includes the following which will be used to establish a limited number of cross tabulations that will be reported on in the results:
  - Highest educational qualification.
  - Years' experience in higher education.
  - Gender.
  - Institution.
  - Position in the institution.
  - Academic teaching staff and academic non-teaching staff.

- The questionnaire allows for the respondents to remain anonymous and thus protects the respondents and ensures confidentiality.

- Limited number of open-ended questions at the end of the questionnaire which allow for supporting comments from respondents.

- There is consistency and uniformity in the length of each statement.

In addition, the design of the questionnaire in terms of layout and numbering has taken into account the needs of the computer software package (Sphinx Survey) in order to ensure their compatibility as recommended by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000).

The study is intended to be exploratory and the questionnaire has been designed in keeping with this. Because the questionnaire is not intended to isolate any variables or provide data that will be analysed in a highly statistical manner, there are deliberately no cross-referencing questions to test the reliability of the data. The verification will be ensured through other methods, such as triangulation, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

*(3)     Design of the individual interviews*

The design of interviews for the purposes of collecting qualitative data is well documented in the literature (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004; Hubbell 2003; Mathers, Fox and Hunn 1998; Reaves 1992; Kvale 1996; Patton 1982b). Individual interviewing is one of the tools available for triangulating data, along with focus group discussions and others.

Greeff (2002) points out that interviews are a useful way of collecting large amounts of data quickly and are very effective in achieving a depth to the data that is collected. Individual interviews are also a particularly useful technique as they allow for rich, qualitative data to be collected in a spontaneous way. The purpose of the individual interviews used for this study, is two-fold:

- ❑ To provide an alternative means of collecting data (other than the questionnaires) around perceptions of RPL policy and implementation, and thus to triangulate the data (methodological triangulation).

- ❑ To check the validity of the data by testing the researcher's interpretation of the data collected from the questionnaires.

The purpose of the individual interviews in this study is therefore to triangulate back to the participants, the trends revealed through the data collected by means of the questionnaire. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 18) refer to this use as a "manipulation check".

The interviews will be semi-structured and will be designed around an interview schedule with a set of three to four predetermined questions. Greeff (2002) indicates that using an interview schedule forces the interviewer (in this case the researcher) to think explicitly about what the interview should cover. The researcher should ask appropriate questions around the various areas that she wishes to cover. The questions will be sequenced from the most simple to the most complex.

### 3.5.2 Data collection

*(1) Purpose*

The principles of sound data collection practices are well documented (Reaves 1992; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000) and this study will take due cognisance of these relating to procedure and administration of the research. Data will be collected at two different levels: at an individual level (through both the use of a structured closed questionnaire and individual interviews) and at an institutional level (through a structured questionnaire to be completed by one member of staff and a review of the three institutional websites). The intention is not, however, to highlight the inadequacies of the institution in implementing RPL, but rather to demonstrate the extent to which RPL policy and implementation has been articulated and communicated to the implementers of RPL at the chalk face.

*(2) Data collection by means of institutional websites*

Data regarding key elements of the institutional profile will be collected by means of an environmental scan of the institutions' websites. These data will be standardised in terms of the following information:

- ❏ Type of higher education institution.
- ❏ Mission statement.
- ❏ Responsiveness to national imperatives.
- ❏ References to RPL in strategic documents.

*(3) Data collection by institutional survey*

The results of the institutional information survey (see Appendix 1) regarding RPL policy and implementation at the three institutions will provide insight into the institutions' level of participation in RPL processes. Only one such survey will be completed per institution as the information is institutionally bound or institutionally located. The researcher will complete the survey together with the RPL advisor, or person in the equivalent post, at each institution. This will provide the opportunity to explain any of the questions that may not be clear and to clarify and verify any of the responses that might be ambiguous or unclear.

*(4)    Data collection by questionnaire*

The questionnaire *(see Appendix 2)* to be completed by individuals in the institutions will be used to collect data about the way in which staff members perceive the particular institution's position on RPL.   This data will complement the data obtained in the institutional surveys in order to gain insight about the extent to which academic staff members (teaching and non-teaching) have become aware of institutional policy and implementation of RPL.   The final version of the questionnaire will be informed by the quality of the data that has been collected by means of the pilot questionnaire in the pilot study.

*(5)    Data collection by individual interviews*

The respondents who will be interviewed will be selected from the group of people who completed and returned questionnaires.   In the process of collecting the data using questionnaires, all respondents will be asked to indicate their willingness to participate in an individual interview. The interviewees will be selected by a process of purposive sampling methods with at least one academic teaching staff member and one academic non-teaching staff member from each institution being interviewed. Thus, a total of six individual interviews will take place, with the researcher as the interviewer.

Because the individual interviews are intended to verify and add value to the results of the data collected in the first phase of data collection, the individual interviews will take place after the administration of the final version of the questionnaire and following a preliminary analysis of the statistical results of the data. (No individual interviews will take place during the pilot study.) The duration of each interview will optimally be one hour and will be conducted at a suitable venue arranged by the institutional co-ordinator.

The individual interviews will be semi-structured. One or two initial questions will be posed at the commencement of the interview in order to provide the initial impetus for discussion.  After that, further questions will arise for discussion and debate, but these

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questions will all contribute to the data gathering process. Field notes will be kept of each interview.

The researcher should be skilled as an interviewer (Greeff 2002) and for the purposes of this study, the researcher has considerable experience. The researcher will exercise the usual caution when conducting the individual interviews. These include the need to:

- Create an atmosphere of trust that is conducive to discussion.
- Avoid being intrusive and dominant in the discussion.
- Be direct but not 'skew' the findings in any way.
- Keep time.
- Keep the individual focussed.

*(6)    Data collection by means of document study*

Documents pertaining to policy, procedures and implementation of RPL at the three institutions will be obtained and studied with the aim of establishing critical data related to the institutional response to the national imperative for RPL policy and implementation.

## 3.6    THE PILOT STUDY

### 3.6.1   Purpose and value of the pilot study

A wide number of authors who work in both qualitative and a quantitative research approaches stress the importance of the pilot study (Strydom 2002b; Strydom & Delport 2002; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000).

No matter how carefully a data collection instrument is designed, there is always the possibility of error, and the pilot study is designed to pre-test the research instrument. The pilot study improves the chances of the study succeeding, and will give direction and focus to the planning and execution of the main study. It will provide a preliminary sense of the perceived value and worth of the entire study.

### 3.6.2   Administration of the pilot questionnaire

The pilot questionnaire will be administered at all three sites in the same manner as in the main study. The questionnaires will be delivered through email due to the relatively small sample of respondents that had been handpicked. The majority of the respondents are members of doctoral studies support group that operates in the KwaZulu-Natal area. This support group is called PaperHeaDs and has been operational for five years. The researcher is one of the founder members of the group, which is made up of eight women who have the following similarities:

- Mature learners.
- Working in institutions of higher education in KwaZulu-Natal.
- Pursuing doctoral studies at a variety of different institutions in South Africa.
- An expressed interest in matters of teaching and learning.

There are some differences within the group in that the members come from the different institutions in KwaZulu-Natal, namely DIT, UKZN and UZ. Most are non-teaching academics in support positions, while a few are academic teaching staff. A few of the members are located in traditional academic departments, while most are located in support units or centres.

### 3.6.3 Capturing data from the pilot questionnaire

The data from the completed pilot questionnaires will be captured in the same way as that of the main study, by means of a computer software programme called Sphinx Survey that has been specifically designed for this purpose. The questionnaire itself is captured on the software prior to the data capture. The data capture is done through a method of assigning a set of values to each of the possible responses for each of the items in the questionnaire.

### 3.6.4 Processing of quantitative data from the pilot questionnaire

The data from the completed pilot questionnaires will be processed in the same way as those of the main study. In processing the data, particular attention will be paid to any outlying responses, which may suggest a misinterpretation of the question, unexpected responses, and any obvious misreadings of the questions.

### 3.6.5 Verification of the data in the pilot study

The data collected during the pilot study will be verified, primarily in the following ways:

- Presenting of the preliminary findings at a series of workshops at the three institutions.
- Personal, one-to-one discussions with the respondents who took part in the pilot study.

### 3.6.6 Preliminary findings

The preliminary findings from the pilot study will be derived from a synthesis of the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire, and the limited qualitative data that will be provided in the relatively few open-ended questions contained in the questionnaire. These will serve a variety of purposes, and will give direction to the formulation of issues that need to be raised in the individual interviews. The preliminary findings will be presented to groups at each of the three sites or institutions in the form of a series of workshops at these institutions.

### 3.6.7 Critique of the questionnaire

Respondents participating in the pilot study will be asked to complete the pilot questionnaire as well as a feedback questionnaire (see Appendix 3) that will provide for a debriefing of their experiences of the following aspects:

- Face validity of the instrument in terms of its capacity to yield the kind of data that will answer the research questions successfully.
- Wording of the questions.
- Sequencing of the questions.
- Possible redundant questions.
- Confusing questions.
- Gaps in the questions.
- Validity of the categories of biographical information.

### 3.6.8 Revision of the questionnaire

On the basis of the feedback received from the respondents who complete the pilot questionnaire, the final draft of the questionnaire will be developed for the purposes of data collection in the main study. In addition, the researcher will use the pilot study for the purposes of evaluating the impact of the pilot questionnaires on the total investigation. This will provide the researcher with the opportunity to make final modifications to the questionnaire and the processes related to the capture of the data and their eventual processing.

## 3.7    ADMINISTRATION OF THE RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

### 3.7.1    Gathering data by means of the institutional survey

For obvious reasons, the researcher felt that it was not necessary to conduct a pilot study for the administration of the institutional survey. In the final study, an informed individual from each of the institutions will be requested to complete the institutional survey. This person should have a working knowledge of the national policy framework around RPL and should also have an in-depth understanding of the institution's RPL policy and implementation.

### 3.7.2    Gathering data by means of the questionnaire

The pilot study will inform the administration of the final version of the questionnaire. The questionnaire will be administered in the same way as the pilot study, giving cognisance to any problems or difficulties that might have been experienced during the pilot study. The distribution of the questionnaire will be through a variety of methods, via email, at each of the three institutions, with as wide a distribution as possible. In addition to the general distribution through email, certain individuals will be targeted because of their central and pivotal involvement in RPL policy and implementation in their respective institutions. Questionnaires will also be distributed by internal post and at workshops.

Respondents will be given the opportunity to return the questionnaire by means of a variety of methods: via email, directly by post or through the co-ordinating person at each of the three sites. In exceptional circumstances, the respondents may request that the

completed questionnaires be collected in person. In the case of the UZ, the researcher will act as co-ordinator and will actively distribute and collect questionnaires.

## 3.8 CAPTURING THE DATA

### 3.8.1 Data obtained from the institutional survey

Data obtained from the institutional survey will be captured manually when the data is collected through a person-conducted questionnaire.

### 3.8.2 Data obtained from the questionnaires

The data from the questionnaires will be captured by the researcher in a systematic and rigorous manner and monitored in order to ensure that the possibility of errors is minimised. Furthermore, the format of the software programme that will be used for this purpose is designed to highlight obvious errors. This will increase the reliability of the data.

### 3.8.3 Data obtained from the individual interviews

For the purposes of this study, the qualitative data obtained during the individual interviews will be captured manually. The interviews will be recorded on tape and transcripts will be made of the proceedings. If necessary, a field worker will accompany the interviewer to assist with the capture of data.

### 3.8.4 Data obtained from the websites

The data obtained from the website will be captured manually at the time of conducting the environmental scan of the three relevant websites.

### 3.8.5 Data obtained from the document study

The data obtained from the document study will be captured manually and will be interpreted in the light of the other data that will be collected, and will be integrated with data that has been obtained from other sources.

## 3.9 ANALYSING AND INTERPRETING THE DATA OBTAINED FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

### 3.9.1 Introduction

It is important to note that data collection and data analysis are interrelated processes in a study of this kind with a qualitative 'flavour'. Although the different processes are discussed in separate sections of this chapter, the two processes occur simultaneously to some extent.

### 3.9.2 Quantitative data processing

The descriptive data analysis of the quantitative data will be processed by means of a commercially available computer software programme called Sphinx Survey which allows for the analysis of the data and the subsequent generation of tables, graphs, pie-charts, and cross tabulations.

The following descriptive statistical methods, *inter alia*, will be used to analyse and make meaning of the data:

- ❑ Establishing trends and patterns through numerical analysis of the data in terms of percentage responses.
- ❑ Creating cross tabulations using the biographical information as filters or lenses through which the data will be viewed.
- ❑ Determining possible relationships between items.
- ❑ Creating comparisons between the responses to different but significant items.
- ❑ Determining the possibility of certain items being significant in terms of high or low responses.

### 3.9.3 Qualitative data processing

*(1)    Computer-assisted qualitative data processing*

As a primary mode of processing, manual data analysis methods will be used to process the data in an interpretive way. A variety of qualitative data processing methods exist - many of them computer based. Software packages such as SPSS and Sphinx Survey provide a means of processing qualitative questionnaire data. However, due to the nature of the research, as well as the nature of the qualitative data, and the purpose for which it will be used, a manual approach is best suited.

*(2)    Interpretive data analysis*

The following are identified (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000; Mouton 2001) as the most effective, reliable and valid means of processing qualitative data manually:

- Data reduction.
- Generating units of meaning.
- Classifying, categorising and ordering these units of meaning.
- Counting frequencies of occurrences in ideas or themes.
- Coding - translating question responses and respondent information into specific categories for the purposes of analysis.
- Identifying themes and noting patterns and recurring themes.
- Identifying and noting relations between variables.
- Finding intervening variables that might hide or obstruct strong relationships.
- Building a logical chain of evidence.
- Making conceptual and theoretical coherence.
- Trend analysis.
- Establishing relationships between items.

The data that has been collected by means of the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and in the individual interviews will be analysed by means of the methods enumerated above. The data will be coded according to predetermined set of codes as established through the analysis of the pilot study.

## 3.10   PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

### 3.10.1  Quantitative data

The quantitative data will be reported in a narrative and discursive manner as well as be presented in numerical formats such as tables, graphs and pie-charts. This data will be interspersed with the qualitative data.

### 3.10.2  Qualitative data

The qualitative data will be presented by means of the interpretation of the data, and where appropriate, quoting verbatim from what respondents have stated at the individual interviews and in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. The qualitative data will also be used to support and confirm the interpretations of the quantitative data.

### 3.10.3  Synthesis of the two sets of data

Integration of the various sets of data and modes of enquiry, as required by the mixed methods approach to research, will occur at the level of presenting the findings in the study. The two sets of data will be woven together to create a narrative that reflects the opportunities and challenges presented by RPL policy and implementation in higher education in South African as reflected in the perceptions of academic staff in institutions of higher education.

### 3.10.4  Dissemination of the research

The research will be disseminated by means of a variety of consultative and other methods. This will be in the form of:

- Feedback to individual participants in a consultative forum.
- Presentations to stakeholders at the three institutions.
- Journal articles.
- Presentations at conferences.

## 3.11   ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

### 3.11.1. Defining ethics in the context of educational research

Strydom (2002a: 63) defines ethics as "...a set of moral principles that are suggested by an individual or group, are subsequently widely accepted and offer rules and behavioural expectations about the most correct conduct towards experimental subjects and respondents, employers, sponsors, other researchers, assistants and students". Reaves (1992: 40) defines it in a similar way as "...systems of morals, beliefs about what is right and wrong that are held in common by a group of people". Interestingly, Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) who have come to provide a seminal text on educational research methodology make no attempt to define ethics in their extended writings on ethic research.

### 3.11.2   Identifying the need for an ethical approach to research

There can be no doubt about the need for an ethical approach to one's research. There is a growing awareness (as reflected in the growth of literature in this regard) of moral issues and the resultant tensions that are created that can and have arisen in social research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). There is also evidence that the subject of ethics in social research is a far-reaching and challenging one.

There are, however, some aspects of the way in which these ethics are applied in educational research that can be challenged. There are numerous sets of guidelines, principles and checklists listed in the literature (Strydom 2002a; Reaves 1992; Cresswell 1994) that present themselves as a 'how-to' manual rather than an academic dialogue. Burgess (1989: 2) makes the point that much of the so-called debate around ethical issues in sociology has centred around scandals and dramatic circumstances and this can be true of a number of other disciplines.

With the exception of a few noted authors, for example Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) who deliberately caution about being prescriptive in this regard, there is, little, if any attempt, to problematise these guidelines and checklists. These guidelines are presented in ways that suggests an automatic acceptance of them. When issues of ethics

are discussed in the literature, it is generally to debate and discuss the incorrect application of the principles of ethical research, rather than an attempt to debate the underlying assumptions upon which these principles are based.

This section of the chapter seeks to challenge the underlying assumptions, interpretation and application of some of these principles. One of these areas is that of informed consent.

### 3.11.3 Informed consent

*(1) The need for informed consent*

The principle of informed consent is based on a medical understanding of research and arises from the subject's right to freedom and self-determination within a democratic society (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000). The need for informed consent when conducting research is well documented (Strydom 2002a; Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000; Reaves 1992; Mouton 2001). Many of these authors advocate that the informed consent of the participants is a necessary condition rather than a luxury, and should be coupled with a clear explanation of various aspects and adequate information related to the study. However, there is the contrary opinion of Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias (1992) in Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 51) that says the following: "The principle of informed consent should not...be made an absolute requirement of all social science research. Although usually desirable, it is not absolutely necessary to studies where no danger or risk is involved. The more serious the risk to research participants, the greater becomes the obligation to obtain informed consent".

*(2) Access to information*

There can be no doubt that there is an ethical consideration for individuals to give their consent to use their personal opinions and information for the purposes of research, often with the proviso that their anonymity is guaranteed. However, the issue of consent at an institutional level becomes more contentious. Much social research necessitates obtaining consent and co-operation of subjects who are to assist in investigations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000) and it appears to be taken for granted that the consent of the

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institution providing the facilities is also required. It becomes apparent that the literature deals with informed consent at two levels: the individual level and the institutional level.

While the first is unproblematic, the second is somewhat more contentious in the light of the newly promulgated Promotion of Access to Public Information Act (Republic of South Africa 2000) that recognised that "...the system of government in South Africa before 27 April 1994, amongst others, resulted in a secretive and unresponsive culture in public and private bodies which often led to an abuse of power and human rights violations" (Republic of South Africa 2000). This legislation was enacted in order to "...foster a culture of transparency and accountability in public and private bodies by giving effect to the right of access to information" (Republic of South Africa 2000: 1).

Notwithstanding, every effort is made to apply the relevant guidelines as suggested by Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000: 51) for "reasonably informed consent" of the individuals as well as institution while conducting the study. These guidelines have been developed by the United States Department of Health, Education and Welfare in 1971:

- ❑ A fair explanation of the procedures to be followed and their purposes.
- ❑ A description of the benefits reasonably to be expected.
- ❑ An offer to answer any inquiries concerning the procedures.

Attempts will be made to solicit both the consent of the direct participants in the study, as well as the institutional heads of the three sites.

### (3)    Power relations
What becomes apparent is that there is little evidence in the literature to suggest that this notion of informed consent can be problematic or could be challenged in terms of the way in which this consent can be used as an instrument of power in a potential power relationship. For example, the capacity to withhold access to critical information required for research on the grounds that the results might not reflect an institution or organisation in a favourable light, constitutes an uneven power relationship.

The promulgation of the Promotion of Access to Information Act (Republic of South Africa 2000) has changed the way in which information can be accessed. It has implications for the right to obtain information from institutions that can be regarded as being in the public domain with or without the consent of the head of the institution. The authority of the head of an institution of higher education, has, in the past, gone unchallenged on the basis of the unequal power relations that existed in the apartheid era. In the post-apartheid era, this authority has been replaced by the need for transparency, accountability and access.

This power play or relationship works both ways, an overt awareness of the power relations that exist between researcher and researched needs to be fostered. The researcher needs to identify all possible stakeholders within the study to ensure that all persons, organisations or institutions affected by the researcher and on whom the study may impact are informed of the extent of the study and its possible consequences.

### 3.11.4 Further ethical considerations

A further ethical consideration is the need for clear articulation of the research objectives to the various stakeholders: the participants, the management of the selected site institutions and any other members of the selected institutions who may be interested or affected by the research.

*(1) Feedback to the participants*

In order to comply with the demands of ethical research procedures, the initial findings of the quantitative data collection process, as well as the final research findings and results, should be made available to the participants and any other members of the stakeholder groups. This level of transparency is, however, set against the need for confidentiality, which will be discussed in the following section.

*(2)    Confidentiality*

The need for confidentiality (Strydom 2002a) in any kind of research is paramount to maintaining an ethical approach to the research. Confidentiality is achieved through maintaining an anonymity regarding the participants as well as respect for the rights and interests of the participants. The participants need to be assured that their privacy will be respected.

*(3)    Ethics of the researcher*

Strydom (2002a) stresses the ethical obligation of the researcher in regard to the competence and skill in undertaking the proposed research. In this study, the researcher's own experience in conducting interviews for the purposes of evaluation research, coupled with the need for confidentiality and sensitivity to privileged information that her position as Quality Assurance manager demands, has prepared her for this kind of research.

## 3.12    LIMITATIONS    AND    POSSIBLE    SHORTCOMINGS    OF    THE INVESTIGATION

### 3.12.1 Selection of research sites

No study involving three different sites for data collection can be regarded as devoid of difficulties. The following difficulties are anticipated for the study:

- ❑ Difficulty of obtaining the required information from the institution in terms of the institutional survey due to inaccessibility of the necessary information.

- ❑ General suspicion and concerns that academics might have about a hidden agenda on the part of the researcher due to the fact that two of the three institutions (DIT and UKZN) have undergone a merger process and the third (UZ) is in the process of transforming to a comprehensive institution.

- ❑ The exclusion of Mangosuthu Technikon, which falls into the KwaZulu-Natal region, but was proposed for merger with DIT in the NPHE. This merger was postponed for a period of five years in 2004.

- ❑ While no specific reference has been made to distance education as a mode of instruction, it should be noted that the University of South Africa (UNISA)

has a strong presence in KwaZulu-Natal by way of its regional office that operates in the province.

□ The difficulty of selecting sites of delivery that have recently undergone or who are undergoing a merger process. The merger process, by its very nature, results in disparities of policies and an initial unevenness of implementation.

□ The exclusion of private institutions of higher education that account for a significant number of learners in higher education in the region. Although private institutions are becoming a significant competitor for public institutions of higher education in South Africa, and therefore constitute a stakeholder provider in the Kwazulu-Natal region, no attempt has been made to include them in the study. Their inclusion in the research study would increase the size of the study considerably and a different research approach would have had to be considered.

### 3.12.2 Data collection

Further possible limitations of the study related to the data collection phase of the study might be the possibility of a high non-response rate for the questionnaires. This may for a variety of reasons including

□ Questionnaire-fatigue and the timing of the study in terms of the academic calendar.

□ Danger of research fatigue or what Mouton (2001: 106) refers to as "over surveying" on the part of the respondents who tire of the process.

□ A generalised resistance to the implementation of national policy on the part of higher education.

□ Difficulty of getting the questionnaires distributed at the three sites.

□ Difficulty of obtaining the participation of academics who are hard-pressed for time.

□ Apathy on the part of the potential respondents.

### 3.12.3 Reliability of data

A further possible limitation for the study may be the reliability of the data in terms of the following:

- ❑ The limited reliability (as has been discussed earlier) of the three most recent sources of research (the JET 2003 Report, the HEQC Status Report on Delegation (2004) and the SAQA impact study) into the status of RPL policy and implementation.

- ❑ The danger of what Mouton (2001: 103) refers to as "fictitious constructs" where the respondents are not competent to answer certain types of questions (i.e. asking them about matters of which they have no knowledge). This includes measuring constructs or attitudes that do not exist. The study operates from the assumption that all academic staff should know something about RPL in the light of the high level of priority that the policy environment has created for RPL policy and implementation.

- ❑ Mouton (2001) devotes considerable space to a discussion of possible sources of error that might impact on the reliability of the research. Those relevant to this study include the following:

  - ○ Human error in the capture of data.
  - ○ Incomplete questionnaire that contain many missing responses.
  - ○ Incomplete data sources.
  - ○ Biased samples owing to a homogeneous research population.
  - ○ No piloting or pre-testing.
  - ○ Leading questions.
  - ○ Instruments that are too long.

### 3.13  SUMMARY

Chapter 3 set out to establish the ontological basis for the research. In order to do so, it was necessary to discuss both qualitative and quantitative research paradigms and their methodologies. Having discussed the two dominant paradigms, this chapter went on to argue for, and defend, the selection of a mixed methods approach in which both qualitative and quantitative research methods are applied for various purposes within the

research. It provided the justification for the selection of the three sites of research in terms of the ontological approach selected for the research in terms of a mixed methods approach. It described the various steps to be taken within the research design and provided a theoretical framework for each of these steps. In the following chapter, the results of the research study will be presented.

# Chapter 4: Institutional responses to RPL
## Presentation of the Data

## 4.1    INTRODUCTION

The following two chapters present the data that was collected by means of the research methodology as outlined in Chapter 3. These chapters use the literature review of Chapter 2 as a guiding framework for answering the following research questions that were posed in Chapter 1:

*What are the challenges and opportunities presented by the need to implement RPL policy, in line with the national imperative, in higher education?*

*How have the challenges and opportunities posed by RPL policy and its implementation been addressed in institutions of higher education? In other words, has RPL been successfully institutionalised?*

*How can the implementation of RPL policy at institutions of higher education add value to the national skills development and economic initiatives?*

The data will also answer some subsidiary but complementary questions posed by the research.

Chapter 4 relies heavily on the data collected by means of the institutional survey, the interview with the coordinator in regard to RPL within the institution, and various policy documents from the three institutions. This chapter records the official or institutional response to RPL policy and implementation. This is however supplemented with data that has been obtained from other sources including, *inter alia*, the JET report (Breier & Burness 2003).

While it is not the intention of this research to compare and contrast the three institutions, any differences in the data will be presented and noted where significant. For this purpose

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all data is aggregated between the three institutions. It is also important to test some of the assumptions and commonly held views (as expressed in the literature) in terms of the sectoral differences in approach between universities and universities of technology, and the impact of merging on institutions in terms of their responses to RPL implementation.

The literature survey has influenced both the data collection and the data analysis processes. Some of the predominant views about higher education implementation of RPL, as reflected in the literature, are tested through the data analysis. While it is not the intention to focus directly on these, rather than the primary research questions raised at the commencement of the study and at the start of this chapter, some of the questions that arise from the literature survey are pertinent to the study and will add value to the research. The questions include the following:

- Does the data show evidence of the enthusiasm that the former technikon sector has shown for RPL implementation, as evidenced in du Pré and Pretorius (2001)?

- Is there evidence of the epistemological barriers, as discussed in the literature (Luckett 1999; Michelson 1999) and are they preventing the successful implementation of RPL?

- Is there evidence that merger-related problems are delaying the implementation of RPL as suggested in the literature survey (Breier & Burness 2003)?

- Are there significant differences in the responses of former technikons and universities in relation to RPL implementation and its impact on curriculum development, as described in the literature survey (Breier & Burness 2003)?

After discussing some of the difficulties of conducting the research, the following section will provide an analysis of the philosophical approach to RPL of each of the three institutions, using evidence from institutional documentation. It will assess the implications of the various institutions' mission statements and institutional RPL policies in terms of the implications for RPL implementation for each of the institutions.

The following elements of the RPL policy and implementation will be analysed in each:

- Philosophical and strategic approach to RPL.
- Scope of RPL implementation.
- Extent of RPL implementation to date.
- Identified resource requirements for successful RPL implementation.
- Monitoring and oversight arrangements (including reporting on RPL).

## 4.2    DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED IN CONDUCTING THE STUDY

### 4.2.1   Problems of access to potential respondents

*(1)    Informed consent*

The literature is unequivocal on the issue of informed consent of individuals. There are, however, some less clearly defined areas that are emerging in terms of accessing public information from public organisations such as public universities.

After much soul-searching and debate with colleagues, the researcher made the decision to proceed with the study at her own and the other two institutions, without obtaining the formal written support for the research from the relevant the Vice Chancellors. The researcher made this decision based on the following criteria:

- All the requirements for good practice in conducting research had been fulfilled in terms of informed consent of the individual participants involved.
- The research was ethically sound and did not infringe on the rights of any of the stakeholders.
- There was a need for the researcher to establish her own credibility as a researcher among her peers, both within her institution and in other institutions involved in the study.
- The researcher felt that ethical problems might arise from conducting research outside of one's own institution while excluding one's own from any kind of scrutiny. There was no educationally sound reason for excluding her own institution.

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- The researcher's belief that the research was in the interests of her own and other institutions and that the results would benefit the institutions, the region and higher education at large.
- The Access to Public Information Act (Republic of South Africa 2000) provides for access to public information for non-commercial purposes.
- Feedback to the institutions as those individuals who had requested it had been provided for in the methodology.

*(2)    Access to participants*

The distribution of the questionnaires proved to be far more problematic than the researcher had first imagined. While it was possible to post the questionnaire and the covering letter on the internal message services of two of the institutions, the third institution posed greater difficulties. Initial attempts to distribute the questionnaire at the third institution were prevented by the internal network moderator at this institution, and the questionnaire was subsequently sent out via the personal address list of the study co-ordinator at the institution. This route did not however prove to be very successful as very few responses were received from this institution via this means.

As a means of gaining access to the potential participants at the institutions, it was decided to offer workshops on RPL at the various institutions, including a presentation of the findings of the pilot study, and to disseminate the questionnaires at these workshops.

A further difficulty encountered in terms of the collection of data, was the fact that there was a newly created post of RPL advisor at one of the institutions that was unfilled for most of the duration of this study. This meant that it was difficult to find the appropriate person with whom to communicate in terms of the collection of data, as well as in terms of the facilitation of the workshops.

Despite the fact that there were numerous methods employed to encourage the completion of the questionnaires, the response rate remained very low in relation to the number of questionnaires distributed through a variety of means. Because of the

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methodological approach of the research however, this did not have any impact on the reliability of the data.

## (3)    Institutional bureaucracy

The reluctance to send out the questionnaire on the Intranet at the third institution described above, poses a variety of different issues. Jansen (2005) asked the question "When does a university stop being a university?" and related this to academic endeavours. Research is prioritised, along with teaching and learning, and community engagement, as one of the three cornerstones upon which institutions of higher education exist. Sending out a research questionnaire, provided that it complies with the requisite standards for research of this kind, should not be prevented by any person who believes in the pursuit of knowledge within institutions.

The problem of institutional bureaucracy was further compounded by the newly formulated rulings of an ethics committee at the third institution, which dictates that all research conducted within the boundaries of the institution had to be approved by this committee. It meant that some staff were reluctant to send out the questionnaire on a large scale for fear of falling foul of this ruling. There were, however, staff who did distribute it without any reference to this committee at all. Ironically, senior managerial staff at this institution were highly supportive and helpful in distributing the questionnaire at a later stage of the data collection phase.

## (4)    Difficulty of conducting interviews

One of the unexpected difficulties encountered during this study, was the difficulty of conducting interviews at one of the institutions in the study. At this institution, staff arrived late for the interview, while some requested to leave before the interview was completed. This resulted in a lack of coherence in the interviewing process that had to be overcome through thoughtful and logical analysis of the data. It was apparent that staff were feeling the pressures of time and that they were not able (or unwilling) to allocate sufficient time to the interviews.

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### 4.2.2 Job classification of academic staff

Although every attempt was made to accommodate all eventualities with regard to job classification, there were nevertheless a significant number of the respondents who indicated "other" in terms of position in the institution. This did not, however, influence or affect the interpretation of the data in any significant way; it merely limited the number of cross tabulations that could be performed on the data.

### 4.2.3 Possible over-representation of University of Zululand data

Due to the fact that the researcher is a member of staff at UZ, she was aware of the need not to allow her comprehensive understandings of that institution to skew the data and its analysis in any way. In order for ensure this, the researcher created a framework for the collection and analysis of data that would allow for consistency and uniformity across the three institutions.

### 4.2.4 Access to publications and conference papers

Obtaining access to certain publications and conference papers also posed a problem. Rather surprisingly, one Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) was reluctant to share academic readings that had been used in one of their training programmes on RPL, with the researcher. Despite the assurance that the electronic version of the readings was for purposes of this study only, and not for any commercial gain, the staff member who was in charge of this training was very reluctant to provide the researcher with these readings. She employed a number of gate-keeping mechanisms to prevent giving the researcher access to such academic readings, without overtly refusing to assist.

In addition, the research-based information available on this NGO website was inadequate for the purposes of rigorous research, and there were very few academic publications available through the website. For instance, although the conference report from an RPL conference hosted by the NGO was available, none of the conference papers were. There are also very few publications from NGO staff members on the website. This is rather surprising in that this particular NGO is seen to be the leading NGO in the area of RPL in South Africa.

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### 4.2.5 Sampling difficulties

One of the constraints of the research was the difficulty of accessing an appropriate sample in terms of the spread across position classifications within the three institutions. Due to the initial low and lengthy response rate, it become apparent that it would not be possible to undertake any purposive sampling and that the sampling would have to be random. This difficulty is, however, in keeping with the inferential statistical approach taken in the study. As it turned out, the questionnaire did in fact yield responses from a sufficiently broad representation of the various sectors of the institution.

### 4.2.6 Data analysis

One aspect of the data analysis that the researcher found difficult was dealing with the 'messiness' of the data that came from a variety of different sources and had to be integrated into a coherent representation of the study. The quantitative data and the qualitative data, from a variety of sources, had to be synthesised into a meaningful narrative that reliably reflected the response of higher education to RPL. This was not altogether unexpected given the various warnings about dealing with mixed data that emanated from the theoretical exploration of the research methodology.

An overview of RPL implementation at the three institutions, based on a variety of different sources (including the institutional survey, relevant documents and individual interviews) will be provided. What follows is an analysis of the three institutions in relation to the key elements identified as indicators of successful implementation.

## 4.3    UNIVERSITY OF ZULULAND

### 4.3.1    Philosophical and strategic approach to RPL

*(1)    Policy framework*

The approach to RPL adopted by the University of Zululand (UZ), as evidenced in the RPL policy and its implementation, is largely driven by student demand, while acknowledging the social responsibility that higher education institutions have in addressing equity and other imbalances. It is also driven by the institution's mission

statement. In addition, it pays heed to the SAQA and HEQC requirements, as detailed in their *Criteria for institutional audits* (Department of Education 2004c) and *Criteria for programme accreditation* (Department of Education 2004d) and it thus also fits, to some extent, into the compliance-driven model.

The institutional response to both the perceived need for an alternative admissions programme in general, and to the requirements of SAQA and the HEQC has largely been *ad hoc* to date. Various different bodies at the University of Zululand have, in the past, grappled with the notion of developing a means of providing alternative criteria for admissions, including criteria based on prior learning.

The current RPL policy and implementation strategy was initially drafted by the Quality Promotion and Assurance manager and underwent a rigorous consultative process that included narrow consultation with targeted stakeholders as well as broad consultation with all staff members at the institution. The policy and procedures were accepted by Senate in 2004 and are currently being implemented.

## (2) Rationale for implementation

RPL policy and implementation has particular significance for UZ given its institutional context, its mission and its history. A new Mission and Vision, adopted in 2005, have been defined for UZ. The mission is as follows:

- To provide access to students from diverse backgrounds to an enabling and caring learning and teaching environment.
- To offer relevant programmes that are responsive to the development needs of the society.
- To generate knowledge through research and disseminate it through publications, teaching and development, in partnership with the community.

The vision of the institution is as follows: "The University of Zululand will be the leading, rural-based, comprehensive university providing quality career-focused

undergraduate and postgraduate education, including research in the social and natural sciences, in partnership with the local and global community".

This mission and vision has stark implications for the success of RPL at UZ. In fulfilling this mission and vision, the institution will have to commit to the implementation of RPL as one of the mechanisms for providing access to "students from diverse backgrounds" as stated in the mission. In terms of its claim to being a comprehensive institution, offering vocational and career-focused programmes alongside university-type offerings, it needs to provide access to programmes that accommodate learning that has happened in the world of work.

*(3)     Implementation strategy*

Up to 1999, the only means of access prospective students had to UZ, was the formal one of matriculation certification. Students were routinely admitted to the university without a matriculation exemption, now known as endorsement. There had been no institutionally based recognition of successful learning that might have taken place in other ways, for example, through related work experience. However, some departments had pioneered a process in response to vocational demands. By and large, the University followed the route of formal accreditation of secondary learning.

One deviation from this however has been the University's brief participation in the Regional Access Programme (RAP) in the 1990s. This was an Eastern Seaboard Association of Tertiary Institutions (esATI) initiative, where institutions of higher education in the KwaZulu-Natal region provided selected students, without matriculation exemption, with a one-year preparatory course, after which they were able to gain access to any of the institutions in the region.

Currently, UZ conforms to the overall portrait painted by the HEQC report on delegated areas (Department of Education 2004b), in the sense that it now has an institution-wide policy, while implementation is still primarily driven at the faculty level. This is partly due to the fact of limited institutional resources which has meant that RPL policy and

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implementation has been designed to utilise existing structures and personnel. There is however a growing tendency at the institution to make the implementation of RPL a more centralised process across the institution.

Currently, the policy and implementation are coordinated by staff in the Quality Promotion and Assurance unit of the institution. There is no intention to set up a dedicated centre or unit for RPL at UZ in the foreseeable future.

*(4)    Marketing and recruitment*

There is currently no intention to market the University's RPL services or to actively recruit students for admission via an RPL route. Future RPL candidates will be dealt with in terms of the University's commitment to, and it fulfilment of, its mission statement.

It is, however, anticipated that UZ will continue to admit RPL candidates. In the light of attempts by Department of Education to cap enrolment numbers at institutions, there is the intention to ring fence a certain number of the total enrolment for RPL purposes. This quota will be concomitant with the HEQC recommendations of a figure not exceeding 10% of the total intake.

## 4.3.2   Scope of RPL implementation

The University of Zululand's policy for RPL indicates that RPL will be implemented for the three purposes, namely:

- ❑   The transfer of credits from other institutions (something that has been done routinely in the past by institutions of higher education, but that still constitutes an instance of RPL).
- ❑   Admission to programmes where the minimum requirements are not met.
- ❑   Advanced standing in programmes where credit is given for some, although not all, of the credits and not exceeding the 50% residency clause. The institution currently took a political decision to apply the 50% residency clause rigorously, as it has funding implications.

As in all three of the institutions in the study, there is some debate at the University of Zululand as to what can be classified as RPL. While some academic staff would argue that admitting students to honours programmes, who have not met the 60% requirement in their undergraduate degrees, are instances of RPL, others would disagree. The Quality Promotion and Assurance unit at UZ does not consider these to be RPL cases and they are currently being referred to faculty boards for decision-making purposes.

How does this approach compare to both the national picture and to the other institutions? Breier and Burness (2003) report that most institutions that are implementing RPL according to national policy and for similar purposes, and the institutional survey reveals that UZ is following this trend in implementation.

In keeping with the national trend, UZ still applies the 50% residency clause for RPL applications. Exemption status is applied for by the university on behalf of the students once they have successfully completed their first year at the university. Prior to the development of the university-wide policy and procedures on RPL, a number of RPL cases did pass through Senate according to a departmental RPL policy and were approved and implemented, most particularly in the Department of Nursing Science. There have however, subsequently, been problems that have been raised by the Nursing Council of South Africa about the validity of these assessments.

### 4.3.3   Extent of RPL implementation

It is not possible to say how many students have been accepted at UZ through the RPL route since 2003. However, with the acceptance of the policy and procedures for RPL, the number of RPL candidates is being monitored through the office of Quality Assurance and Promotion at the university. This monitoring however excludes those students who have been admitted to the institution without matriculation endorsement.

Although it is not possible to say exactly how many, a number of students were accepted into programmes on the basis of RPL in the Department of Nursing Science in the past. Students have made application to the Faculty of Arts, which covers humanities and

social sciences (one in the English Department, two in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies and in the Faculty of Science and Agriculture one in the Department of Agriculture) at the time of writing.

### 4.3.4 Identified resource requirements for successful implementation of RPL

#### (1) Fiscal budgeting

UZ has developed an approach to the implementation of RPL that utilises the existing structures and resources. It has not set up a special unit, but rather uses existing committees, units and personnel to conduct RPL assessment for both the assessment and admission of students to the institution based on the outcome of the RPL assessment. There is no dedicated budget for RPL.

#### (2) Staffing

Staff in the office of Quality Assurance and Promotion are currently being utilised to implement and oversee policy on RPL. There is no intention to appoint dedicated staff in the near future.

#### (3) Capacity building

It is not possible to say how many staff have received training in the implementation of RPL policy. Academic teaching staff have been offered short workshops and seminars in the implementation of RPL policy, although the attendance at these workshops is generally very poor. A few academic teaching staff from the Faculty of Education have attended RPL conferences in the past.

#### (4) Costs and fees / cost recovery

There are currently no direct costs being incurred by the institution for the implementation of its RPL policy and it operates on the basis of cost recovery. There are however indirect costs of implementing RPL that are difficult to quantify and calculate. Potential RPL candidates are currently charged a non-refundable assessment fee of R1000 which is used for the payment of expenses related to external moderation of the RPL assessments.

### 4.3.5 Monitoring and oversight arrangements

*(1) Moderation arrangements*

To date, the methods of assessment for RPL purposes at UZ have been varied. They have included a variety of methods including challenge tests and portfolios. There is, however, no formal portfolio development course and no intention to establish one due to the resource-intensive nature of such courses. Academic staff members in the relevant departments have been instrumental in assisting the students in gathering the evidence to make the assessment of competence possible.

Until recently, there has been little attempt made to externally moderate RPL assessments. However, since the implementation of the policy and procedures for RPL implementation, all RPL assessments have been externally moderated.

*(2) Tracking mechanisms*

Until now, there have been very few mechanisms for tracking the performance of RPL students who are admitted to the institution. This is due to change as the Quality Promotion and Assurance unit will attempt to track such performance. It is, therefore, currently not possible to make comparisons between the success rates of RPL candidates and other candidates.

*(3) Support mechanisms for RPL admissions*

There have been, and are still, very few additional support mechanisms for assisting RPL candidates once they enter the system. This is due to the lack of an established academic development and support function at UZ.

While the implementation of RPL policy is somewhat decentralised to faculties and departments, oversight and monitoring is a more centralised process, although it still makes use of existing institutional structures, such as the Quality Promotion and Assurance unit, the Teaching and Learning Committee and Senate for the purposes of

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monitoring. This is also in line with the general trends demonstrated at other institutions as reported on by the HEQC (Department of Education 2004b).

In terms of reporting mechanisms, all RPL cases (excluding admissions without matriculation endorsement) are referred to Senate for approval. However, in the future, all RPL applicants (successful or unsuccessful) will be reported to Senate, in addition to the current approval mechanism, by the manager of the Quality Promotion and Assurance unit.

## 4.4    DURBAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

### 4.4.1    Philosophical and strategic approach to RPL

*(1)    Policy framework*

RPL at DIT is being implemented by means of a Senate approved policy. This policy was developed by a task team working together with a reference group. The person responsible for the drafting of this policy claims that it went through a fully consultative process where *all* staff were given the opportunity to make input to the document. She also claims that there was extensive consultation with all stakeholders in the process.

*(2)    Rationale for implementation*

There are mixed reasons in terms of the rationale for RPL implementation. While the institution responded to the demands of potential students, there was also a deep seated interest in, and commitment to, issues of social justice and redress of some members of staff. The former Technikon Natal became involved in the implementation of RPL as a response to the CTP policy for RPL. Staff at this institution, in particular the Assistant Deputy Vice Chancellor, were early members of the JET research initiatives. The institution worked closely according to the SAQA policy when it was developed.

Reference is made to the institution's mission statement at the commencement of the *Recognition of prior learning and current competencies policy and procedures* document (DIT n.d.) citing "creating opportunities" as one of the priorities for the institution and therefore part of the rationale for implementation. The individual interviews revealed that

the legislative compliance issue was always on the periphery and that the commitment to RPL implementation was initiated prior to any need to comply.

Initiatives to implement cross-institutional RPL practices, through esATI failed to get support from the various institutions in the region, and therefore the former Technikon Natal instituted its own RPL unit.

The person responsible for drafting the policy indicated that the process "grew naturally". She also indicated that staff involved in RPL at DIT since its inception, were very aware of transformation issues in higher education.

*(3)     Implementation strategy*
RPL policy, and its implementation, was piloted through two separate studies - one that dealt with the academic aspects of RPL (such as assessment and curriculum) and the other that dealt with administrative issues (such as applications and fees).

The issues that relate to the exemption status of potential candidates does not apply to technikons and is therefore not applicable here. The institution has continued to apply the mature age exemption rule. It also applies the 50% residency clause in regard to the final exit level outcomes for qualifications. In keeping with the national policy guidelines, the institution provides RPL only for access purposes and the candidate is not awarded the interim qualification. This interim qualification is only recognised if the candidate is successful in the programme to which he or she is granted admission.

The implementation strategy for RPL at DIT is currently located within the Centre for Higher Education and Development (CHED), but there is the possibility that it will become a fully-fledged, independent unit in the future. RPL assessments are currently undertaken through a variety of methods, and the academic staff currently involved in the RPL assessments indicated that the type of assessment used depended to a large extent on the disciplinary direction of the application.

*(4)     Marketing and recruitment*

The DIT RPL services have not been vigorously marketed to date, but future marketing is planned for by means of brochures, posters and capacity building of institutional staff. While the staff who were interviewed indicated that they expected the institution's RPL intake to increase in the coming years, they felt that their main intake of students would not be affected by this, or vice versa. However, they acknowledged that such decisions relating to enrolment planning would need to be taken at higher institutional levels and should be in accordance with the strategic enrolment plan for the institution, lodged with the Department of Education.

### 4.4.2   Scope of RPL implementation

The policy for RPL at DIT currently covers admissions. The transfer of credits (or what the institution refers to as 'exemption from subjects') is dealt with through a separate mechanism that existed before the inception of RPL. There is evidence in earlier documentation to suggest that the issue of admission without the minimum requirements and for the purposes of partial credits within a programme (which is referred to in the UZ policy document as 'advanced standing') were once conflated, but this is no longer the case. The institution now differentiates between conferment of status and the granting of advanced standing through a process that must abide by the same quality assurance mechanisms, including moderation and external examination, as with all assessments at the institution.

True to the evidence in the literature survey that showed that the former technikons have taken the initiative to provide an RPL service for its employees, there was evidence at DIT of an interest in putting current employees through the process of RPL with the same remission of fees as was applicable for study purposes.

### 4.4.3   Extent of RPL implementation

It is difficult to say how many students have gone through the RPL route in the past because, sometimes, as little as a few credits for a subject are awarded. Students have entered the Faculty of Arts and Design with RPL status, while other faculties were

described by the interviewee as "quiet". (She however suggested that there could be a growth in numbers coming into the Faculty of Engineering through the route of RPL once the advocacy campaign had been initiated.) Quantifying the number of students admitted through RPL is difficult because of the differing definitions of RPL that operate within the institution. However, the person who has been responsible for all RPL assessments through the pilot project indicated that approximately ten students were admitted by RPL as opposed to Senate Discretionary Exemptions, in 2005. Since the end of the pilot project and the appointment of a fulltime coordinator, a further twelve students have been through the RPL process.

### 4.4.4   Identified resource requirements for successful implementation

#### (1)   *Fiscal budgeting*

There was currently no dedicated budget for RPL, and it is funded through its function in the CHED at DIT. One full time staff member was employed and this was a direct cost to the institution. The fees that were currently being charged for RPL services were being allocated to an RPL administration budget.

#### (2)   *Staffing*

Currently, there was one person employed to coordinate RPL services at DIT. There was a further one staff member who had another function within CHED and was operating in an advisory capacity. Each academic department has identified an RPL representative, with whom the RPL coordinator liaises. Academic departments retain the responsibility for the choice of the content for assessment and the assessment methodology used. Executive Deans are the ultimate arbiters of academic quality in their faculties as per the DIT statute.

#### (3)   *Capacity building*

Early involvement of the former Technikon Natal staff in research visits to Canada, and other internal RPL initiatives lead to several visits to the institution by experts in the field of RPL, who conducted workshops at the former Technikon Natal. Although a few staff from CHED had received training on a JET RPL training course, none of them had yet

completed the course at the time of writing this thesis. Other staff training in regard to RPL had taken place in pockets and on a voluntary basis only. However with the election of RPL representatives in faculties, a programme of training in RPL philosophy and procedures is to be rolled out at the end of 2005 and in early 2006.

## *(4)    Costs and fees / Cost recovery*

RPL candidates are charged non-refundable fees of R1500 and R 2500, after successful completion of RPL assessment for advanced standing into a Bachelor of Technology degree and a Doctorate of Technology degree respectively, with an administrative fee of R150.

### 4.4.5    Monitoring and oversight arrangements

*(1)    Moderation arrangements*

The moderation arrangements for RPL assessments are dealt with in terms of the institution's policy for assessment. Individual departments take ownership of the RPL assessments and, likewise, take ownership of the moderation of assessment. External moderators are utilised when necessary.

*(2)    Tracking mechanisms*

Because of the relatively small intake of RPL candidates to date, DIT has not made extensive use of any formal tracking mechanism for such candidates. However, as part of the institution's commitment to implementing RPL, a tracking database has recently been purchased for this purpose. This database is synchronised with institutional ITS systems. In addition, there is a parallel, paper-based administration system that has been created to track the coordinator's liaison with academic heads of departments and programme coordinators and 'turn around times' for the process. This parallel system also provides for the duplication and verification of evidence used for RPL assessments.

*(3)    Support mechanisms*

DIT staff acknowledged, as did staff at the two other institutions, that the support mechanisms available for *all* students at the institution might be inadequate. At DIT academic support for students is a department issue and some departments provide mentoring for learners that have been admitted through the RPL process.

## 4.5    UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

### 4.5.1    Philosophical and strategic approach to RPL

*(1)     Policy framework*

The philosophical and strategic approach to RPL at UKZN appears to have been somewhat fragmented to date. In the first instance, this fragmentation is a product of the merger between the two institutions. As part of the restructuring exercise and the establishment of a merged institution, an executive director for Access and Retention has been appointed and she has been tasked by the Executive of UKZN to draw up a draft policy for RPL. The position of the Executive Director for Access and Retention is a three-year one, in which time, all access functions (including RPL) should be mainstreamed within the routine practices of the institution. This is an indication of the commitment of the merged institution to the implementation of RPL.

In terms of the strategic approach adopted to date, one of the interviewees from the former University of Natal referred to the various "wedges that were being cut into the system" in terms of RPL. These RPL initiatives have existed at the two institutions that form part of the merged institution:

◻    The University of Durban-Westville (one of the merger partners) had an approved policy in place prior to the merger and the Office of the Registrar was responsible for implementation of this policy. It covered admissions to the institution where the minimum requirements had not been met. In the Faculty of Education where the largest number of RPL candidates were admitted, the policy also covered admissions to honours programmes. It was reported that this process caused the institution concern as it was deemed to be contrary to the *Norms and standards for educators* (Department of Education

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2000a) and also to the Higher Education Management Information Systems (HEMIS) data reporting processes.

❑ There has been an RPL policy operating for some time in the School of Education and Development (SED) as part of the newly merged institution.

❑ Work has been done in collaboration with the merged university's partners. For example, it was reported that work has been done with staff in Nursing Science in collaboration with staff at the St Mary's hospital in developing an RPL policy.

❑ Work has been done in units or divisions. For example, initial work in the area of RPL was done in the Open Learning Network (part of the former University of Natal), commencing in 1999 where RPL was implemented to a limited extent: "five mature learners with varying levels of education ranging from grade 8 to failed grade 12" (Bulman 2003: 2) were admitted in a pilot project, and on the basis of this, an alternative access programme was developed that allowed for students to complete a single module in place of matriculation exemption. In addition to this the "Centre for Adult Education developed an RPL process with testing for admission to the Participatory Development Certificate in Education" (Bulman 2003: 5).

❑ Work has been done in pockets within departments. For example in the School of Nursing, where Khanyile (2002) developed a policy as a basis for her doctoral research and used the School of Nursing at the former UN as one of her three pilot sites.

❑ Work has been done on a project basis at the former University of Natal (Luckett 1999) in rural resource management, in 1999, through a JET funded programme. This research was disseminated by Luckett (1999). The programme no longer exists however, and was replaced by the Centre for Adult Education programme referred to above.

❑ Work has been done in terms of a trade union project working in collaboration with Ford Foundation that has proposed a pre-university year-long programme to allow students access to graduate studies, with RPL being built into the

proposal. External funding will be provided for this by the Ford Foundation and will commence in 2006.

*(2)    Rationale for implementation*

RPL was included in the Strategic Vision of the former University of Natal in relation to the promotion of life-long learning. It was also considered in the preparation of all new modules and programmes as an entrance requirement (Bulman 2003).

Since the merger between the two institutions, some staff at UKZN feel that the institution has taken a pragmatic approach to the implementation of RPL that borders, in some instances, on compliance, while others felt that the approach was need-driven. The institution had not been driven to comply with national policy and some academic staff were questioning the need for, and purpose of, such policy. It was however reported that there were a few vocal academic staff in committees (particularly in the Faculty of Humanities) who were lobbying for the implementation of RPL. Another interviewee from the former University of Durban-Westville felt that there had been no one reason for the implementation of RPL.

*(3)    Implementation strategy*

The person who was currently responsible for the drafting of the policy indicated that it would be located within the context or framework of open learning (what appears to be an umbrella term for Access, RPL and Continuing Education). She felt that this policy was more like a business plan in that it included aspects like resource allocation. At the time of writing, this draft policy is being developed through a consultative process and will serve at Senate for approval.

It is currently unclear where the coordination of RPL will be located, although the Quality Promotion and Assurance unit has made it clear that it should not be located within its function. There is some possibility of housing the implementation of RPL under the umbrella portfolio of access and retention. The possibility of locating it within the Open Learning Network also exists, although at the time of writing, the future of this

division is somewhat uncertain. RPL initiatives are also coupled to academic development, and this could also be a possible home for RPL implementation at UKZN in the future.

One interviewee felt that much of UKZN's strategic and philosophical policy and approach to RPL implementation is influenced by the merged institution's devolution policy, where authority gets handed down to the four colleges, from there to the eight faculties and then on to the fifty-two schools, while core policies still apply to the whole institution on all campuses. This strategy influences budgeting processes and resource allocation as well.

There was general consensus among the people interviewed that the merging process had not hampered the institution's implementation of RPL in any significant way. They felt that opportunities for implementation had been created as a result of the merging process and that the newly merged institution was taking the process seriously. In fact, they believed the merger had advanced issues of RPL. There was however, one reservation in this regard that relates to the large expenses that accompany the merging process, which means that finances and budgets are tight.

*(4)    Marketing and recruitment*
Bulman (2003: 6) reports that students who have come into the School of Education via the RPL route have been "...recruited by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education on the basis of those applying to their employer for upgrades of their qualification in order to meet the requirements for a teaching licence". Bulman (2003) also reported that, in the School of Nursing, there has been no formal recruitment process.

It is not anticipated that there will be a large number of RPL candidates in the future, as the process is not being marketed vigorously. Because UKZN does not offer many part time and open learning opportunities, one of the interviewees expressed the view that it would be unlikely that there will be a large demand for this service as, in her opinion, RPL candidates do not seek fulltime study opportunities. However, there was the

intention to introduce a quota system in order to reserve places for access students, including RPL candidates.

## 4.5.2    Scope of RPL implementation

Both historically and currently, candidates are admitted to programmes, through RPL, only where the minimum requirements for entry are not met. There is no opportunity for candidates to apply for advanced standing within programmes. The transfer of credits from other institutions is dealt with as a formality. The new policy on RPL for the merged institution currently being developed does include the opportunity for offering advanced standing in the programme.

The JET report (Breier & Burness 2003) provides some information on the way in which the former University of Natal altered its Senate Discretionary Exemption rules to accommodate RPL candidates in 2003. The institution regards the Senate Discretionary Exemption admission policy as a form of RPL. This policy allows students who are 25 years of age, or older, and have three years' work experience to register for programmes. This is the result of the pilot project in the Centre for Adult Education.

Both the JET report (Breier & Burness 2003) and the individual interviews reveal that, currently, such students who do not meet the minimum requirements for entry into a programme, and fulfil the age and work experience condition can register for a 16 credit module. If they then attain 55% in this module, they may be admitted to a degree programme. (The module is not a specialised or dedicated one but one that features within existing programmes.) In terms of the Matriculation Board rules, this module may not, however, count towards the formal degree (Breier & Burness 2003). This means that students who are successful in attaining the 55% minimum for this module are not required to complete the one-year of university study in order to gain Senate Discretionary Exemption (Breier & Burness 2003).

### 4.5.3 Extent of RPL implementation to date

In the former University of Natal, RPL had originally been initiated in 2000 when five students of varying ages and academic levels were admitted without the matriculation requirement through the route of the Open Learning Network. Students had also been admitted for some time before this, under Rule G33 which allowed candidates to enter programmes on proof of work experience. Such proof consisted of a portfolio or profile curricula vitae where the candidate listed his or her work experience in detail, and was subsequently admitted on this basis. Some attempts are made to match the experiences of the learner to the outcomes of the programme as, in the opinion of one of the interviewees, the institution sought to find generic skills that would enable the candidate to study at postgraduate level, where almost all the instances of RPL at UKZN occur.

Since the merger between the two institutions, it is not possible to say how many students were admitted through the route of RPL. Most of the RPL candidates have been in medically related disciplines, with the bulk of the candidates being admitted to nursing programmes, and education. Bulman (2003: 5) reported that RPL is being implemented in the School of Education, the School of Nursing and in the School of Community Development and Adult Learning. Very few students have been admitted via the RPL route to science and commerce programmes. Specific programmes (for example Public Health) make use of the RPL process on a regular bass. One of the interviewees indicated that the capacity to quantify RPL admissions would depend on how one defined RPL. Students are currently still admitted in the same way as through the G33 rule, although it is now called the GR7 (non-technical) rule.

Thomson (2005) reports that the School of Education and Development (SED) at UKZN, Pietermaritzburg campus did undertake to voluntarily change its own access requirements for teachers wanting to pursue further study at the post-graduate level in 1998. "For the first time, students who had done their initial four year teacher training in a College of Education (as opposed to a university), were admitted to the Bachelor of Education Honours (Professional Development Studies) programme" (Thomson 2005: 2). She also reports that 750 students were admitted to the programme in this way in 1998.

The consensus among those interviewed was that, depending on how RPL is defined, RPL implementation had been successful for graduate studies at UKZN. However, in the opinion of one interviewee, an issue that continued to hinder its implementation was the issue of English language usage or academic literacy, and the concomitant ability to read and write in English. She felt that, while some programmes coordinators checked the language proficiency of their entrants others did not.

### 4.5.4 Identified resource requirements for successful implementation

#### (1) Fiscal budgeting

It was reported that there was no provision made for a budget for RPL in the last fiscal year (2004), but the possibility exists that a budget might be allocated in the coming year. The devolution process had also changed the budgeting process, although it is anticipated that there will be a centralised budget for RPL implementation but that this would have to be motivated for.

#### (2) Staffing

The need to establish a dedicated RPL office, with specialist staff, had been identified by the Executive Director for Access and Retention, but it was not clear at this stage whether or not the institution would buy into this process. Provisions for staffing of this office were specified in the draft policy document and one senior academic and one administrator would be sufficient as a starting point. This staffing would be augmented with assistance from specific staff in faculties who would allocate a proportion of their time to the implementation of RPL. This was in line with the current strategy of devolution adopted by the institution. The Executive Director for Access and Retention remained hopeful however that it would be acceptable to the institution.

In terms of resources, the institution was currently in the process of appointing a researcher for the purposes of providing access and retention statistics. The interviewee indicated that the IT systems were in place to provide the data, but that the institution

needed the staff to extract the data. Initially, the post would be funded on 'soft' funding but it was hoped that this position would be extended to an institutionally funded post.

### (3)    Capacity building

Individual staff members have received some training in RPL over the years, but this has been of an *ad hoc* nature and was scattered across the institution. A few staff have received formal training, while others have attended conferences and once-off seminars on RPL. There have however been no large-scale training initiatives in the area of RPL at the institution. Bulman (2003) reports that nursing tutors from colleges had been trained in the skills of assessing prior learning by means of a RPL facilitation module of 16 credits.

One interviewee reported that, in terms of the evolution of the policy environment within the institution, the need for intensive training had not yet been identified in the institution. Another interviewee indicated that time pressures were always a deterrent for training as academic staff are always busy.

### (4)    Costs and fees / cost recovery

It should be acknowledged that it is very difficult to quantify the indirect costs associated with the implementation of RPL at most institutions. Fees for RPL services vary according to the procedure followed and the department to which the candidate is applying. No common fee structure for RPL services been developed for the merged institution.

### 4.5.5    Monitoring and oversight arrangements

### (1)    Moderation arrangements

The assessment of candidates who enter UKZN through the route of RPL and via the module system are moderated in the same way as other assessments within the modules. There are currently no special arrangements for the moderation of RPL assessments. Moderation was not undertaken by any one person but assessments were moderated by

various structures in the institution such as faculty boards, research committees and college boards.

*(2)* *Tracking mechanisms*

While UKZN does not currently have the capacity to track RPL students once they are in the system, there were strategies being put in place to do this in the future. It was acknowledged that there was the necessity for being able to do this for the purposes of both supporting students and quality assurance purposes.

*(3)* *Support mechanisms*

The Executive Director of Access and Retention reports that, while there were few dedicated support mechanisms specifically in place for RPL students, there were a number of mechanisms in place for all students. These included academic mentoring, academic development services such as an academic literacy module that was credit bearing, and a writing centre.

In regard to the support given to the large intake of RPL candidates in the School of Education, Bulman (2003: 7) reports that "...the School of Education contends that support would defeat the purpose of the portfolio as proof of 'prior' learning". An additional constraint reported by Bulman (2003) is the high cost of providing support to students in the current mode of distance education that has been adopted by the School of Education.

## 4.6  SUMMARY OF REGIONAL TRENDS

In the analysis of the three institutional responses to RPL, the following trends appear to be generalised across the institutions in the KwaZulu-Natal region. It should however be noted that UKZN are currently developing their policy on RPL and the trends that emerge are only valid at the time of writing this thesis.

   ❑   RPL is being successfully implemented in very scattered and limited ways in isolated areas of the institutions such as nursing and education.   RPL

implementation is happening in pockets within institutions and there are differing levels of support given to departments who wish to implement RPL.

❑ The implementation of RPL is fragmented and *ad hoc*, and there is little evidence of a unitary institutional view of or approach to RPL. This fragmentation may be a reflection of the fragmented nature of higher education. This is consistent with the evidence obtained from the literature review that indicated that while institutions had created policies for RPL there was scant attention paid to issues of implementation. Furthermore, there is support for evidence obtained in the literature review to suggest that policy formulation has not necessarily led to successful implementation.

❑ Opinions about the institution's commitment to RPL implementation differ from person to person within the institution and among those who have been involved in the implementation.

❑ Reasons given for the implementation of RPL at the various institutions vary from person to person. This would suggest that there have been no overt decisions about why RPL is being implemented. There is very little consistency across an institution with regard to understanding the rationale for implementing RPL. This has perhaps impacted on the levels to which RPL has been institutionalised at the various institutions.

❑ In all three institutions there is evidence of a weak alignment of RPL implementation with the mission and vision for the institutions. The imperative to implement RPL is embedded in the mission and vision of each of the three institutions in different ways, but there is little to suggest that any of the three institutions has fully operationalised the implications of these mission statements in terms of RPL.

❑ All three institutions express similar concerns about the way in which RPL is being defined and about the blurring of the boundaries between RPL and access issues. RPL is currently being used as a catch-all concept and is being loosely linked to mature age exemption, access, Senate Discretionary Exemption clause, in-house admission rules that have existed for some time, and *bona fide* cases of RPL.

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- RPL is being implemented for similar purposes within the three institutions (i.e. for credits and access to programmes where the minimum requirements have not been met) although these purposes are named differently in the three institutions. The exception is the case of UKZN where currently, RPL is not being implemented for the purposes of advanced standing in programmes, as is currently the case in the other two institutions.

- RPL is most commonly being applied at the postgraduate level in all three institutions. This is consistent with the national trends identified in the work of Breier and Burness (2003).

- All three institutions have similar difficulties quantifying RPL numbers due to the lack of a precise definition of RPL.

- There is very little evidence at any of the three institutions that adequate resources (infrastructures, human and financial) have in the past been allocated to RPL implementation. There is also doubt in the mind of the researcher that new resource allocations will be adequate to ensure the successful implementation of RPL at any of the institutions. While resourcing levels remain inadequate, the commitment to RPL implementation will remain a paper exercise and rhetoric.

- Monitoring and oversight arrangements for RPL at the three institutions are currently grounded in existing practices and function within existing institutional assessment policies, some of which are formally documented and others not.

- All the three institutions realise the importance of tracking the progress of RPL candidates once they enter the institution, but none has yet to put in place an effective mechanism.

- All three institutions acknowledge that there are inadequate support structures for students in general within their institutions, and in particular for students who enter through the process of RPL. There is also very little happening by way of mentoring students.

- None of the three institutions is actively marketing its RPL agenda and students are generally not being recruited via any structured approach. In the

main, individual departments are responsible for recruitment of RPL candidates through informal structures.

❑ Capacity building around issues of RPL at the various institutions has been *ad hoc* and unstructured. No consistent or systematic training has taken place at any of the three institutions.

❑ In one subtle difference, the three institutions apply the rules for payment differently, and this application is directly linked to the individual institution's own understandings of RPL.

❑ There is, however, one very significant difference at the three institutions and that is in the location of RPL implementation at the three institutions. In the case of UKZN, implementation currently rests with the Office of Access and Retention, although it is also loosely linked to Open Learning, while at DIT it is located in an academic development type unit (Centre for Higher Education Development). At UZ it is currently located in the office of Quality Promotion and Assurance. This might suggest that RPL implementation has yet to find a natural home within institutions and may be further evidence that RPL implementation has not been sufficiently institutionalised in order to be successful. This finding is consistent with the national picture as presented by Breier and Burness 2003).

Further analysis of institutional policy and implementation in the next chapter will search for evidence of the following as indicators of successful implementation strategy:

❑ Academic staff understandings of RPL.

❑ Knowledge of the existing procedures for the implementation of institutional policy.

❑ Academic staff perceptions of institutional capacity to implement RPL.

❑ Support mechanisms for RPL candidates after access and admission.

❑ Integration of RPL policy with curriculum issues.

❑ Arrangements for monitoring and evaluation of RPL policy and implementation.

❑ Awareness of national policy in regard to RPL policy and its implementation.

**Chapter 5: Academic staff perceptions of RPL**

**Presentation of the data**

## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter commences with a description of how the pilot study was conducted, and then moves on to a presentation of the data that attempts to answer the research questions. The data that was collected regarding the current understandings of academic staff in three institutions of higher education in KwaZulu-Natal, with regard to the implementation of RPL in higher education, will be presented. This chapter highlights the perceived challenges of RPL implementation and how these challenges are being and can be met. This chapter will also expose what the perceived benefits of RPL policy and implementation are, in terms of both educational and economic opportunities.

Using the HEQC 2004 Report (Department of Education 2004b) as baseline data, it will also be edifying to establish the extent to which the three institutions (University of Zululand, the Durban Institute of Technology and the University KwaZulu-Natal) conform to the national trends in terms of RPL implementation, and to find ways in which they differ from national trends. It is also important to compare ways in which the policy and implementation of RPL is different from or similar to each of the other institutions.

The intention of this chapter of the study is to create a dialogue between the various sets of data, that will result in an in-depth and continuous narrative of higher education response to RPL implementation. What follows is a description and analysis of the pilot study.

## 5.2 RESULTS OF THE PILOT STUDY

### 5.2.1 Purpose of the pilot study

The purpose of the pilot study was to test the face validity of the questionnaire in terms of its potential to collect data that would be relevant to the study and would attempt to answer the questions formulated in the research design. Furthermore, the pilot study was

designed to elicit comments on the technical aspects of the questionnaire design (e.g. layout, formulation of the questions, guidelines for the completion of the questionnaire and requested biographical information of the respondents).

## 5.2.2 Structure of the pilot study

The pilot study made use of a final draft of the proposed questionnaire (see Appendix 1) consisting of 42 questions, as well as a feedback questionnaire designed to elicit comment on the questionnaire itself (see Appendix 3). The feedback questionnaire was designed to solicit comments on the *same* aspects of the questionnaire from all the respondents and, in this way, to standardise the feedback to be received and to provide for some consistency.

The feedback questionnaire was structured in such a way as to solicit responses on the following issues:

- Layout of the questionnaire.
- Clarity of questions.
- Possible ethical issues and concerns.
- Validity of the 'positions' requested in the biographical section of the questionnaire.
- Selection of intervals in terms of years' of experience.
- Length of the questionnaire (including a prediction of willingness of staff to complete the questionnaire).
- Language, terminology and accessibility of the questionnaire.

The pilot questionnaires were sent to 10 respondents scattered across the three institutions as well as to one independent respondent, who has been integrally involved in RPL policy and implementation at JET. Among the 10 respondents were both teaching academic staff (those who actually have classroom responsibilities) and non-teaching academic staff (those who come from academic backgrounds and who have usually taught in the past, but are now in academic support positions such as Academic Development, Quality Assurance or Centres for Higher Education Development).

Both sets of data, from the pilot questionnaire as well as from the feedback questionnaire, were analysed and the results informed the structure of the final draft of the questionnaire. The results were also used to provide an indication of the kind of issues that would emerge from the research. Although it was not requested, information regarding the teaching or non-teaching status of the respondents was available to the researcher, and the questionnaires in the pilot study were analysed accordingly.

### 5.2.3 Profile of respondents in the pilot study

The questionnaire was sent to 10 respondents across the various institutions. Some respondents completed only the feedback questionnaire, while some only completed the pilot questionnaire. (For this reason it is not possible to provide summations in Table 2.) Some respondents completed both however. Although it was not requested, the distinction between academic teaching staff and academic non-teaching staff was available to the researcher. The following table provides an analysis of the number of responses received in the pilot study.

**Table 2: Profile of respondents in pilot study**

|  | Total Number received |
|---|---|
| Feedback questionnaires received | 6 |
| Questionnaires received | 6 |
| Academic teaching staff | 2 |
| Academic non-teaching staff | 8 |
| UKZN | 3 |
| DIT | 4 |
| UZ | 3 |
| Male | 1 |
| Female | 9 |

### 5.2.4 Qualitative feedback on the questionnaire

Generally the feedback on the proposed questionnaire as an instrument for collecting data for use in the research was very positive. The respondents felt that it would deliver the kinds of data required to answer the research questions. It was felt that the questionnaire was not so demanding, either in terms of time or the use of specialist language and terminology, that it might exclude any staff from answering the questionnaire. On the issue of the intervals used to categorise number of years' experience of the respondents, little feedback was received, with the exception of one respondent who suggested the use of an open-ended question rather than the use of intervals.

All the respondents felt that the questions were unambiguous although a few of the respondents suggested the splitting of some of the questions that appeared to deal with two issues simultaneously, which Mouton (2001: 103) refer to as "double-barrelled questions" that combine two or more questions in one.

Only one of respondents commented on the ethical issue of anonymity of the respondents by pointing out that the various suggested means of returning the questionnaire (i.e. by hand, fax, email, internal post and external post) did not necessarily provide the respondents with true anonymity as even fax numbers can be traced. The other respondents felt that the ethical issues that usually surround research of this kind had been dealt with sufficiently.

One respondent stated in the feedback questionnaire that all her responses were placed in the centre of the columns suggesting a somewhat unemotional or bland response to the issues. As a solution she suggested that a few controversial items should be included in order to obtain a more extreme response from the respondents.

On the point of clarity, a further respondent commented that it was technically better to include the actual wording of the options (strongly agree; agree; disagree and strongly disagree) at the top of each page of the questionnaire rather than use the abbreviations (SA, A, D and SD) as had been used in the pilot study.

### 5.2.5 Recommended revisions

The pilot study was highly successful in achieving its purpose. The feedback received in terms of both the feedback questionnaire and the actual questionnaire intended for use in the research, yielded a supply of rich, relevant and useful comments and responses that contributed to the revision of the questionnaire in a way that would make it a useful instrument for the collection of data.

The following revisions were made on the basis of the feedback received from the pilot study:

- An error in the numbering of items was corrected.
- A typographical error was corrected.
- The introductory section that provided guidance for responding to the questionnaire was reworked to include more specific information. Because of the large number of 'I don't know' responses, the instructions were amended on the final version of the questionnaire to indicate to respondents should not be concerned if they provided a high number of such responses. The researcher regarded these responses as very significant as they provide an indication of the general lack of clarity that surrounds the implementation of RPL.
- The issue of anonymity was addressed through the inclusion of the words 'optional' after 'name'.
- A distinction was made between academic teaching staff and academic non-teaching staff in the biographical profile.
- A number of the questions were split into two separate questions in instances where several of the respondents commented that these questions contained two elements which should be handled separately. As a result the final questionnaire consisted of a total of 43 questions.
- The full wording (i.e. strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree) was included at the top of each page of the questionnaire in place of the previous abbreviations.

- An open section was added at the end of each section instead of only at the end of the whole questionnaire, in order to facilitate the collection of further qualitative data.

- The question dealing with the number of years' experience in higher education remained a closed question (clustered in five-year intervals).

- Some interesting discrepancies were found in terms of the analysis of non-teaching versus teaching academics and, as a result, it became clear that the distinction between teaching academics and non-teaching academics would provide for a more meaningful analysis of the data.

### 5.2.6 Data capture and analysis

Although the anticipated quantitative results that were obtained from the data in the pilot study could not be deemed to be statistical reliable as a result of the small number of respondents the exercise was nevertheless undertaken in order to iron out any teething problems that might only reveal themselves during the process. A trial run of the data capture process was undertaken using Sphinx Survey, a computer software programme developed and distributed by Sage Publishers for the purpose of capturing and analysing both qualitative and quantitative data.

### 5.2.7 Findings from the pilot study

It should be noted that the data collected and analysed in the pilot study is skewed towards non-teaching academics (eight out of ten respondents were non-teaching academic staff), many of who are in academic development-type posts or quality assurance positions. The researcher was aware of the bias in this case. The final questionnaire was administered to a more representative group of the population.

The responses to the pilot draft of the questionnaire nevertheless revealed the following salient points:

- Academic non-teaching staff in support positions were generally better informed about RPL policy and implementation than their academic teaching counterparts, hence the proposed distinction between the two in the data collection phase.

- The results of the pilot survey also revealed that academic teaching staff were *most* uncertain about their understanding of RPL and its required procedures (Section B of the questionnaire), about institutional readiness and about the quality assurance of RPL (Sections D and E of the questionnaire respectively).

- There is a dichotomy between the demands of RPL policy and implementation and the capacity of institutions of higher education to operate as agents of delivery in terms of implementation of national policy.

- The respondents were unanimously convinced of the benefits of an RPL policy and implementation to both higher education and to the economy in general.

- Some of the data obtained in the open-ended section of the questionnaire in the pilot study was rich in meaning. One respondent said the following[4]: *"I did attend a conference presentation last year...which I thought would be all about rules and regulations but it was magical stuff about indigenous knowledge and non-scribal histories"*. There was also evidence of some irritation with the 'rules'. One respondent said: *"I also keep away from most things in the workplace that require working with faculty rules - the director I work for kindly keeps us **protected** [my emphasis] from all that stuff"*.

- There was evidence to suggest that staff were linking Senate Discretionary Exemptions with RPL and that they saw it as a form of RPL.

- While academic non-teaching staff (largely in support roles) claimed to be more knowledgeable about RPL than their teaching counterparts, as would be expected, a significant number of these respondents still doubted their institution's procedures for implementing RPL as well as its staff's understanding of RPL and its required procedures (Section B of the questionnaire).

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[4] From this point onwards, all qualitative data is reported verbatim and includes no corrections, or references to grammatical incorrectness suggested by the researcher. It should also be noted that all direct quotations from respondents will be indicated through the use of italic text and a smaller font size within the body of the main text.

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- Academics were generally convinced of the national benefits that could be derived from RPL in terms of the benefits to higher education, the national economy and the national skills development initiative.

- Academics generally expressed concerns about the following aspects of RPL implementation:

    o Different understandings of RPL.

    o Institutional procedures for implementing RPL.

    o Expertise required for implementing RPL.

    o Institutional infrastructure and resources for implementing RPL.

    o Institutional understanding of the quality assurance mechanisms required for implementing RPL.

    o Institutional capacity to provide candidates with assistance in gathering and presenting evidence for RPL assessment purposes.

    o Institutional understandings of curriculum and the ways in which RPL is facilitated by such curriculum.

    o Curriculum structures that will accommodate RPL, such as multiple entry and exit points.

    o Institutional capacity to value all kinds of knowledge.

    o Articulation of national policy.


## 5.3. STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

### 5.3.1 Distribution of questionnaires

Questionnaires were distributed by means of the following methods:

- Via colleagues at the three other institutions who volunteered to assist in this regard.

- General email distribution through the networking systems at two of the institutions.

- Internal mail boxes at UZ.

- At various workshops at the three institutions.

- Personal appeals to individuals at all three institutions.

### 5.3.2 Return of questionnaires by institution

The following table provides an analysis of the ways in which respondents returned the completed questionnaires to the researcher. It indicates that the majority of questionnaires from UZ and DIT were returned by means of email, while the majority at UKZN was collected at workshops.

Table 3: Return of questionnaires by method and institution

|  | UZ | UKZN | DIT |
|---|---|---|---|
| Email | 20 | 13 | 9 |
| Internal post (UZ only) | 15 | 0 | 0 |
| External post | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Workshops | 4 | 19 | 25 |
| In person (hand delivered) | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Fax | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 40 | 34 | 42 |

### 5.3.3 Profile of respondents by gender

The following table and pie-chart indicate that the majority of respondents at DIT and UKZN were female, while at UZ the majority were male.

Table 4: Profile of respondents per institution by gender

|  | Female | Male | Total N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 42.5% | 57.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 66.7% | 33.3% | 100% |
| UKZN | 70.6% | 29.4% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 59.5% | 40.5% | 100% |

**Figure 1:** Pie-chart representation of gender of respondents
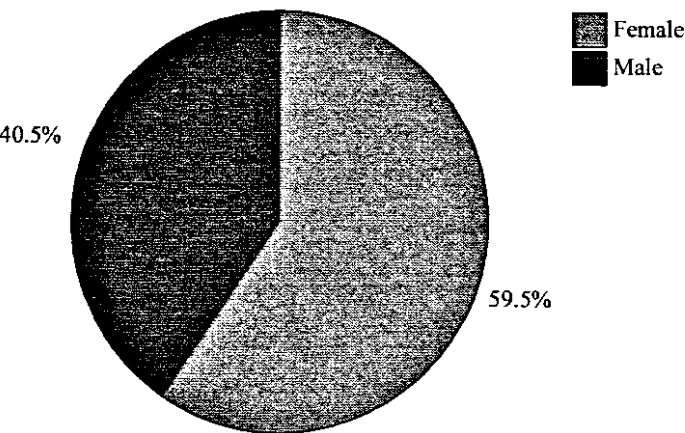


**5.3.4 Profile of respondents by work experience**

The following table provides an indication of the levels of work experience of the respondents.

**Table 5:** Profile of respondents per institution by work experience

| | Non-response/ unspecified | 1 – 5 years | 6 – 10 years | 11 – 15 years | More than 15 years | Total N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 0.0% | 20.0% | 20.0% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 0.0% | 45.2% | 14.3% | 19.0% | 21.4% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 2.9% | 26.5% | 8.8% | 14.7% | 47.1% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 0.9% | 31.0% | 14.7% | 18.1% | 35.3% | 100% |

The majority of academic staff who completed the questionnaires had more than 15 years' experience in higher education (35.3%). The second highest category of work experience was the 1 - 5 years category (31.0%).

The following pie-chart reflects this data graphically.

**Figure 2: Pie-chart representation of years experience of respondents**



0.9%

35.3%

31.0%

14.7%

18.1%

- Non -response
- 1 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 15 years
- more than 15
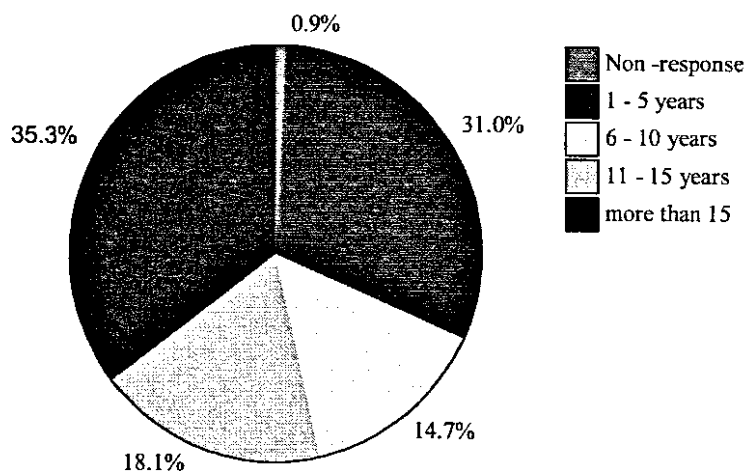
### 5.3.5   Profile of respondents by position in institution

The following table indicates the distribution of respondents according to their position within the respective institutions.

**Table 6: Profile of respondents per institution by position in the institution**

| | Non Response | Head of school | Head of unit | Dean | Senior professor | Prof | Associate professor | Senior Lecturer | Lecturer | Other | Total N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 7.5% | 0.0% | 5.0% | 0.0% | 2.5% | 15.0% | 0.0% | 22.5% | 42.5% | 5.0% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 4.8% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 11.9% | 51.7% | 26.2% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 0.0% | 5.9% | 5.9% | 11.8% | 5.9% | 5.9% | 5.9% | 17.6% | 23.5% | 11.8% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 4.3% | 3.4% | 3.4% | 3.4% | 2.6% | 6.9% | 1.7% | 17.2% | 42.2% | 14.7% | 100% |

The majority of the academic staff who responded to the questionnaire were lecturers (42.2%), with senior lecturers constituting the next largest group of respondents (17.2%). The smallest group of respondents were academic staff at the associate professor level

(1.7%). While both DIT and UKZN have the position of associate professor, none of the respondents came from that category at either institution. There were, however, some associate professors who responded to the questionnaire at UZ.

### 5.3.6 Profile of respondents by teaching status

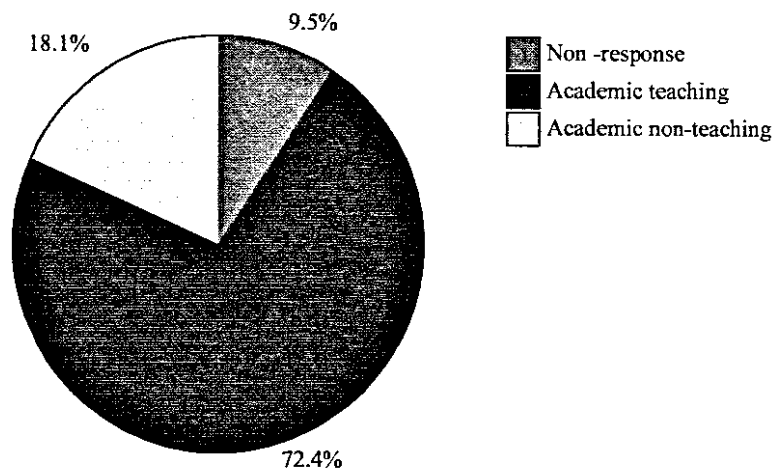The following table indicates the distribution of respondents according to their teaching or non-teaching status.

<u>Table 7</u>: **Profile of respondents per institution by teaching status**

|  | Academic non-teaching Staff N = 21 | Academic teaching staff N = 84 | Non-response/ Unspecified N =11 | Total N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 5.0% | 82.5% | 12.5% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 11.9% | 69.0% | 19.0% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 11.8% | 64.7% | 23.5% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 9.5% | 72.4% | 18.1% | 100% |

The majority of staff who responded to the questionnaire were academic teaching staff (72.4%). This is a reliable reflection of the ratio between academic teaching staff and academic non-teaching staff in most institutions. There was a lower representation of non-teaching academic staff at the University of Zululand, but this is due to the fact that there are much fewer non-academic teaching staff at this institution. There were a high number of non-responses by staff at the UKZN on this item (23.5%) and generally, a high number of non-responses to the item in general (18.1%) in comparison to other items in the biographical section of the questionnaire. There is no apparent reason for this other than the actual format of the questionnaire which might have caused respondents to overlook this item.

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The following pie-chart shows the distribution of academic non-teaching staff to academic teaching staff of the respondents at all three institutions combined, in the study.

**Figure 3: Pie-chart representation of nature of position of respondents**



## 5.3.7 Profile of respondents by highest qualification

The following table provides an indication of the distribution of the respondents according to their highest qualification.

**Table 8: Profile of respondents per institution by highest qualification**

| | Non-responses | Honours | Masters | Doctorate | Post doctoral | Other | Total N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 0.0% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 37.5% | 2.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 2.4% | 35.7% | 42.9% | 7.1% | 0.0% | 11.9% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 0.0% | 17.6% | 29.4% | 52.9% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 0.9% | 25.0% | 37.9% | 31.0% | 0.9% | 4.3% | 100% |

The majority of respondents had a master's degree as their highest academic qualification (37.9%) followed by doctorates (31.0%). A number of respondents at DIT indicated that

their highest educational qualification was only a degree and this was not catered for in the classifications of qualification: there were therefore a higher number of 'other' responses from staff at DIT (11.9%).

## 5.4  PERSONAL UNDERSTANDINGS OF RPL

### 5.4.1  Introduction

As previously stated, the findings in Chapter 5 are based largely on the data that was collected by means of the individual questionnaires and represents the perceptions of academic staff regarding RPL policy and its implementation at their own institutions. It is important to note that these perceptions may differ from the official institutional policy on RPL as collected by means of the institutional survey (see Chapter 4). There is often a discrepancy between the official response of an institution and the perceptions of staff who work in the institution. This is a common phenomenon and is not particular to this study.

The challenges and constraints that are reported on in this section of the study arise out of the various sets of data: the open-ended section of the questionnaires, the institutional surveys and the individual interviews. In some instances the evidence is also anecdotal. It should be noted that respondents did not confine themselves to identifying possible challenges and constraints in Section I which deals specifically with the constraints, they identified these challenges and constraints throughout the completion of the questionnaire, in each of the different sections and therefore these constraints and challenges have been integrated into the various sections and are not reported on separately.

What becomes clear through the various data sources is that there is a range of adjunct issues that were raised by academic staff at the three institutions that are significant to the debates around RPL implementation, although they have not been covered specifically by the questionnaires. Such issues include the identification of an appropriate target group for RPL implementation and the need to define what constitutes RPL in an operational context. While these issues are not necessarily barriers or obstacle to the successful

implementation of RPL, they nevertheless impact on its implementation. Discussion of these aspects will be integrated into the data analysis process.

### 5.4.2 Personal understanding of the concept

*(1)     Personal understandings of the concept*

**Responses to Item 7:**   I understand clearly what is meant by the concept RPL.

The following table reflects how respondents perceived their own understanding of the concept RPL.

**Table 9: Summary of responses to item 7 by institution**

|  | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 5.0% | 25.5% | 60.0% | 10.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 14.3% | 26.2% | 50.0% | 9.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 0.0% | 29.4% | 50.0% | 14.7% | 5.9% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 6.9% | 26.7% | 53.4% | 11.2% | 1.7% | 100% |

Generally, staff at all three institutions felt that they had an understanding of what is meant by the concept RPL.   53.4% indicated that they, as individuals, had an understanding of RPL, while 11.2% strongly agreed. A very small percentage of staff responded, 'I don't know' (6.9%). This finding was true for each of the three institutions where the majority of respondents in each case felt that they had an understanding of the concept.

Interestingly, the highest percentage of respondents who felt that they had a personal understanding of the concept of RPL was from people who had had between eleven and fifteen years' experience in higher education (66.7% agreed and 23.8% strongly agreed). (See Table 10.) Understandably the highest percentage of 'I don't know' responses came from respondents with one to five years' experience in higher education.  Very obviously, this suggests that the longer staff stay in the system, the more they learn about RPL.  A

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less obvious observation is that it is often the staff with one to five years' experience who are the 'foot soldiers' who are required to implement RPL in departments and these are the staff who perceive themselves to have the least understanding of the concept. The following table illustrates this point.

**Table 10:** Summary of responses to Item 7 by work experience

| | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Non-response** | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **1 – 5 years** | 16.7% | 25.0% | 47.2% | 11.1% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **6 – 10 years** | 5.9% | 35.3% | 41.2% | 17.6% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **11 – 15 years** | 0.0% | 23.8% | 66.7% | 9.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **More than 15** | 2.4% | 26.8% | 56.1% | 9.8% | 4.9% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 6.9% | 26.7% | 53.4% | 11.2% | 1.7% | 100% |

If one looks at perceptions of personal understanding of the concept in terms of position within the institution, the following emerges.

**Table 11:** **Summary of responses to Item 7 by position in institution**

| | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-response | 0.0% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 40.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Head of school | 0.0% | 25.0% | 25.0% | 25.0% | 25.0% | 100% |
| Head of unit | 0.0% | 25.0% | 75.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Dean | 0.0% | 50.0% | 50.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Senior professor | 0.0% | 33.3% | 66.7% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Professor | 12.5% | 0.0% | 75.0% | 12.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Associate professor | 0.0% | 100% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Senior lecturer | 5.0% | 35.0% | 45.0% | 10.0% | 5.0% | 100% |
| Lecturer | 10.2% | 22.4% | 57.1% | 10.2% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Other | 5.9% | 29.4% | 52.9% | 11.8% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 6.9% | 26.7% | 53.4% | 11.2% | 1.7% | 100% |

Of the respondents, professors felt most confident about their personal understanding of the concept of RPL, while senior professors also felt they understood the concept of RPL. (It is important to note that in some instances the deans are also professors.) The sample of respondents in these two categories was however very small and therefore should not be generalised any wider than the context of this particular study.

*(2)     Understanding of RPL as opposed to access*

In dealing with the individual's understanding of RPL, a number of the respondents showed evidence of having conflated the two concepts of RPL and Access. A relevant example of this is the following comment: *"Admission and placement tests in which our staff participated will go a long way in contributing towards the readiness of our institution to handle RPL"*. Another respondent linked the two concepts but did so in a more structural way:

*"The RPL policy may be able to work in tandem with certain access programmes and student support programmes already in place at UKZN".*

There is also evidence of some confusion as to whether or not Senate Discretionary Exemptions for mature age should also be included as RPL. In the open section of the questionnaire one respondent made the following comment: *"In my opinion, staff in general do not appear to have grasped the difference between, e.g. mature age exemption and RPL".*

## (3) Understanding of target group

While there are many synergies between the two, the purpose and discourse of access and RPL are quite different, and the operationalisation of each has a different focus. Because of these similarities and differences, some of academic staff revealed through the individual interviews, that the discourse surrounding the target market of RPL, or who RPL was intended for, is a complex issue. One interviewee said: *"RPL is not for school leavers"*, while another at the same institution said that discussions of access were often focussed on school-leavers. This also suggests the conflation of issues of access and RPL.

One respondent based his or her responses to the questionnaire on an existing rule that had been in place at the former University of Natal and had subsequently been amended to serve the merged institution: *"My responses are based on rules for entrance that have been in place for over 30 years that allow candidates with no bachelors degree to enter postgraduate study (UKZN Rule GR7)".*

In contrast, another respondent stated in the comments section of the questionnaire that *"My response to question 15 is based on RPL being focused on people with no formal schooling or a totally inadequate background making application. This is not covered by our Rule GR7".* This respondent was clearly able to make the distinction between the conditions under which the Senate Discretionary Exemption clause operated in the past, and the new and current conditions under which RPL should be implemented, where it is possible to admit candidates without any formal schooling.

One of the constraints that has been identified is the socio-economic conditions of the very people for whom RPL has been designed. The following comments reflect some of the responses in this regard:

- o *"In many cases, that process puts significant demands on the candidates. Thus, time and resource demands are restricted by the socio-economic conditions of the candidates. Therefore, such students need encouragement and sponsorship to achieve their goals."*

- o *"I am not sure that the very people who are targeted to benefit from PL are aware of it and how the process works. So my question is: "Are we reaching all those who would benefit?" However I may just be ignorant of the awareness levels of people in the community. "*

The data therefore supports the dilemma presented in Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 17): "The research shows that unless RPL processes are deliberately conceptualised, designed and supported to meet social redress and equity purposes, then RPL can end up working against its own transformative aims. RPL can become a new way to devalue worker's knowledge and a new way to fail and keep people out of the system, economically and educationally".

With a few notable exceptions, what becomes clear is that individual academic staff understandings of RPL are contextualised in terms of their own institution's understandings of RPL and its implementation. From this it can be concluded that individual and institutional understandings of RPL are inextricably bound together and do not usually operate independently of each other. A further conclusion that can be extrapolated from this: in order for RPL to be institutionalised, the concept has to be well-grounded at the institutional level for it to impact on the understandings of individuals within the institution.

*(4)     Appropriate level for implementation*

It was evident from the individual qualitative responses that some staff were unclear about the levels at which RPL was currently being implemented in institutions. One respondent states very tentatively that *"...while a policy has been drafted for RPL at the*

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*University of Zululand, I am still somewhat confused by the apparent DoE requirement of a matriculation certificate for degree entry even for mature age exemption. Perhaps this means that RPL should be targeted at those wishing to enrol for certificate and diploma courses and not for degrees, but I thought it should cover all qualifications".* In a similar vein, one respondent said: *"Cynically it cannot thus become the norm or a high percentage of basic undergrad intake but perhaps has the best niche in programmes at post grad for say career upgrading or re-tooling where there is a lot of 'value' (academic and financial) in each student".*

## (5) RPL as a catch-all concept

Staff and institutions conflate issues of RPL and access, but the blurring of the boundaries actually goes further than that. It was evident in the qualitative responses obtained from respondents that RPL was being used as a catch-all concept for all access related issues. This supports the findings derived from the institutional survey in regard to the defining of RPL. One respondent wrote: *"In my opinion, staff in general do not appear to have grasped the difference between, e.g. mature age exemption and RPL. The 'L' seems to be silent in their conceptions of this mode of access".* This would suggest that staff do not fully understand the need to identify *learning* that has taken place for the purposes of recognising prior learning. Another respondent said: *"Some staff appear to confuse approval of equivalent status of degrees with RPL".*

A further finding relating to this item is that, while staff believe that they themselves have a good understanding of the concept of RPL, there is nevertheless variances in *how* staff understand RPL. Staff who responded were aware that RPL was being defined in different ways by different people. One respondent provided the following condition to responding to the questionnaire: *"Answers depend on one's understanding of RPL".* In spite of the finding from the data, that individuals felt they had a good personal understanding of the concept the individual interviews and the institutional survey revealed that there are vastly differing views of what RPL is.

One must therefore conclude that, while there is general consensus around textbook definitions of RPL, there is some confusion about what these definitions mean in terms of implementation and operationalisation. What becomes apparent is that RPL is being used

loosely as a catch-all concept for all categories of alternative admissions: access, mature age exemption, conferment of equivalent status and old-style Senate Discretionary Exemption clauses, as in the case of UKZN. The lack of an operational definition of RPL, which considered the various disciplines, was identified: *"The major challenge is an operational definition of RPL and this should be looked* [at] *in the context of the various disciplines"*.

### 5.4.3   Institutional perspectives

*(1)     Institutional understandings*

<u>Response to Item 8:</u>   Staff at my institution have a clear understanding of RPL.

The following table reflects the respondents' perceptions of their colleagues understanding of RPL at their respective institutions.

<u>Table 12:</u>  **Summary of responses to Item 8 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 0.0% | 35.0% | 2.5% | 27.5% | 32.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 4.8% | 35.7% | 4.8% | 23.8% | 26.2% | 4.8% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 23.5% | 2.9% | 20.6% | 41.2% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 1.7% | 31.9% | 3.4% | 24.1% | 32.8% | 6.0% | 100% |

The analysis above shows that respondents were unsure if other staff at their own institutions had a clear understanding of the concept of RPL. The majority of respondents indicated that they disagreed that staff had a clear understanding of the concept (32.8%). A high number of respondents also replied, 'I don't know' (31.9%).

There is evidence to suggest that issues of access and RPL are not only conflated in the minds of individuals, but also in terms of the way in which institutions view them. In terms of the concept of RPL, one institution in the region has structurally coupled the notion of RPL to that of access as reflected in the conceptual framework of foundation

loosely as a catch-all concept for all categories of alternative admissions: access, mature age exemption, conferment of equivalent status and old-style Senate Discretionary Exemption clauses, as in the case of UKZN. The lack of an operational definition of RPL, which considered the various disciplines, was identified: *"The major challenge is an operational definition of RPL and this should be looked* [at] *in the context of the various disciplines"*.

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**Table 12:  Summary of responses to Item 8 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 0.0% | 35.0% | 2.5% | 27.5% | 32.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 4.8% | 35.7% | 4.8% | 23.8% | 26.2% | 4.8% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 23.5% | 2.9% | 20.6% | 41.2% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 1.7% | 31.9% | 3.4% | 24.1% | 32.8% | 6.0% | 100% |

The analysis above shows that respondents were unsure if other staff at their own institutions had a clear understanding of the concept of RPL.   The majority of respondents indicated that they disagreed that staff had a clear understanding of the concept (32.8%).   A high number of respondents also replied, 'I don't know' (31.9%).

There is evidence to suggest that issues of access and RPL are not only conflated in the minds of individuals, but also in terms of the way in which institutions view them. In terms of the concept of RPL, one institution in the region has structurally coupled the notion of RPL to that of access as reflected in the conceptual framework of foundation

programmes. This is evident in the portfolio of the Director of Access and Retention who is responsible for both access and RPL.

## (2)    Institutional procedures

**Response to Item 9:**  I understand what procedures are required for RPL implementation at my institution.

The following table reflects respondents' perceptions of their own understanding of procedural requirements at their respective institutions.

**Table 13:  Summary of responses to Item 9 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 0.0% | 12.5% | 7.5% | 40.0% | 30.0% | 10.0% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 2.4% | 23.8% | 4.8% | 23.8% | 38.1% | 7.1% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 0.0% | 5.9% | 8.8% | 32.4% | 35.3% | 17.6% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 0.9% | 14.7% | 6.9% | 31.9% | 34.5% | 11.2% | 100% |

While respondents indicated that they themselves had a personal understanding of the concept of RPL, they indicated that they did not have as clear an understanding of the procedures that were required for RPL implementation at their own institutions. The majority of respondents disagreed with the statement (34.5%). There were also a significant number of respondents who agreed (31.9%) at all three institutions. There were a high number of respondents who strongly disagreed that they had a clear understanding of the procedures for implementing RPL at their own institutions (11.2%). Wheelahan (2003: 9), working in an Australian environment, draws attention to the fact that "...RPL processes are overly complicated and bureaucratic". The interpretation of the data that suggests that staff do not fully understand institutional procedures for implementing RPL is supported by the qualitative data: *"Most staff, I believe, are unfamiliar*

*with the policies and processes"* and *"Procedures are in place but knowledge of them by staff is limited".*

One might ask: Is it necessary for all staff to know and understand the procedures for RPL at their own institutions? The researcher believes that, if RPL had been institutionalised at the respective institutions, the procedures would be clear to staff. This could be regarded as one of the indicators of successful implementation.

There is also evidence to suggest that academic staff believe that other staff also lack a clear understanding of the institutional procedures. This is evident in the responses to Item 10: 'My institution and its staff understand clearly what procedures are required for RPL implementation'.

**Table 14:** **Summary of responses to Item 10 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 0.0% | 40.0% | 2.5% | 12.5% | 40.0% | 5.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 2.4% | 40.5% | 4.8% | 16.7% | 31.0% | 4.8% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 23.5% | 2.9% | 11.8% | 44.1% | 17.6% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 0.9% | 35.3% | 3.4% | 13.8% | 37.9% | 8.6% | 100% |

Most of the respondents believed that their institution and its staff did not have a clear understanding of the procedures required for RPL implementation. There was no specific reference made in the item to either institutional or national procedures in this item and therefore the researcher is working from the assumption that both national and institutional procedures are being referred to. There was a very small difference between the percentage of respondents who replied 'I don't know' (35.3%) and the percentage that replied 'disagree' (37.9%). However when one combines the percentage of respondents who replied 'disagree' with those who replied 'strongly disagree' (46.5%) then it is clear that the majority of respondents replied with some confidence that they felt that their

institutions and its staff did not have a clear understanding of the procedures, both national and institutional, for the implementation of RPL.

This finding is also supported by the qualitative data: *"I feel the University staff in general are not very well informed (despite sound efforts to inform them)"*. In a similar vein: *"Clear policy in place but some staff appears not to want to engage with it and follow procedures"*.

The one variance in the data received from across the three institutions is that UKZN respondents believed more strongly than those from the other two institutions, that their institution and its staff did *not* have a clear understanding of the procedures for implementing RPL (a combined total of 61.7% at UKZN compared to a combined total of 35.8% at DIT and 45.0% at UZ).

In summary, what emerges for both the quantitative and the qualitative data is that there is considerable variance in the response to RPL implementation within and across individual institutions at the operational level. A number of questionnaires and the individual interviews revealed a very scattered approach to RPL across different faculties and their practices (including RPL). This variance might even be across departments within one faculty, or across faculties within one institution. This is evident in the following response: *"It has been very difficult to answer most of these questions because they refer to the institution and one cannot claim to know what other units or faculties within the institution or not understand about RPL"*.

Furthermore, academic staff demonstrated, and some were aware of the fact, that there are different operational ways in which RPL is being conceptualised, even within the same institution. These differences impact on the way in which RPL is being implemented at the various institutions and the resultant institutional procedures.

## 5.5 INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY

### 5.5.1 Institutional readiness to implement RPL

**Response to Item 11:** My institution is ready to implement RPL policy and offer RPL assessments.

The following table reflects the respondents' perceptions regarding how prepared they view their institutions to be, to implement RPL.

**Table 15:** Summary of responses to Item 11 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 35.0% | 2.5% | 20.0% | 32.5% | 7.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 2.4% | 47.6% | 9.5% | 14.3% | 21.4% | 4.8% | 100% |
| UKZN | 2.9% | 29.4% | 2.9% | 14.7% | 38.2% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 2.6% | 37.9% | 5.2% | 16.4% | 30.2% | 7.8% | 100% |

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not know if their institutions were ready to implement RPL policy and to offer RPL assessments (37.9%). The next most selected option was 'disagree' which indicates that the respondents did not feel that their institutions were ready to implement RPL or to offer RPL assessments (30.2%). In a trend that has already been identified in the data from previous items, UKZN respondents gave a stronger indication that they did not feel that their institution was ready to implement RPL policy (a combined total of 50.0% compared to 26.2% at DIT and 40.0% at UZ).

### 5.5.2 Tracking mechanisms

**Response to Item 12:** My institution has the mechanisms to track the performance of RPL candidates, for developmental purposes, once they enter the institution.

A further indicator for institutional readiness to implement RPL, might be the institution's capacity to track the performance and achievements of RPL candidates once they are in the system. The following patterns emerged.

Table 16: Summary of responses to Item 12 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 35.5% | 2.5% | 22.5% | 22.5% | 15.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 2.4% | 50.0% | 7.1% | 19.0% | 19.0% | 2.4% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 26.5% | 2.9% | 20.6% | 38.2% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 1.7% | 37.9% | 4.3% | 20.7% | 25.9% | 9.5% | 100% |

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not know if their institutions had the mechanisms to track the performance of RPL candidates for developmental purposes (37.9%), while a significantly high percentage disagreed that their institutions had such mechanisms (25.9%). This was also supported by evidence from the qualitative data: *"This* [RPL] *is a complex process because many aspects of PL are difficult to assess and therefore implementation and tracking can be equally difficult"*.

In a similar trend to that which has already been identified, respondents from UKZN gave the strongest indication that they did not feel that their institution had the mechanisms to track the performance of RPL candidates for development purposes (a combined total of 50.0% compare to 21.4% at DIT and 37.5% at UZ). The data reveals that respondents from DIT were the most positive of the three institutions about the capacity of their institution to implement RPL.

### 5.5.3 Expertise required for RPL implementation

*(1)    Specialist expertise required*

**Response to Item 13:**  Special expertise is required by institutions to implement RPL.

The following table reflects the respondents' perceptions of the special expertise they believe is required to implement RPL at their respective institutions.

**Table 17:  Summary of responses to Item 13 by institution**

|  | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 15.0% | 17.5% | 57.5% | 10.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 26.2% | 26.2% | 47.6% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 2.9% | 20.6% | 73.5% | 0.0% | 2.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 15.5% | 21.6% | 58.6% | 3.4% | 0.9% | 100% |

Respondents were in agreement that special expertise was required by institutions in order to implement RPL. A combined total of 80.2% either agreed or strongly agreed that such special expertise was required. The responses received in the qualitative section of the questionnaire indicated however, that perceptions of what kinds of expertise were required to implement RPL in higher education differed considerably. There is some debate and a general lack of consensus regarding who the agents of RPL implementation should be, and therefore who should be trained to have such requisite expertise (i.e. academic teaching staff, RPL specialists or both).

Some respondents felt that subject expertise was required, while other respondents felt that technical expertise related to the implementation of RPL was required, as evidenced in the following comment: *"The expertise needed for RPL is specialised in a manner that people who are going to be doing the RPL must be taken for training on it. Not that they must be RPL specialists, but the same educators or lecturers can be empowered to do it and are in fact the best people to do it".*

Further to this debate on the location of expertise for implementing RPL, one respondent commented: *"I think expertise is there because people are experts in their fields but they need to be engaged on what RPL is and how it could be implemented in their programmes"*. Another respondent said, *"In truth, it is the teachers of a subject who know best what aspects of P.L. should be recognised"*. This sentiment was echoed in a number of responses: *"Lecturers who designed modules should be involved* [in the evaluation of prior learning] *as they know what students are supposed to master in a specific module"*.

There was also some evidence to suggest that staff were challenging the fact that expertise was required at all: *"...not sure if there is expertise required or we just need clear and specific guidelines to follow in the evaluation of RPL documents presented by candidates"*. There was also some evidence of staff trying to come to their own understandings of what such expertise would be: *"I am not sure what 'special expertise' means here. Presumably it refers to knowledge not within the purview of an ordinary HoD, Dean or Registrar"*.

In the case of UKZN, the issue of expertise in RPL was also linked to distance education as a mode of instruction in terms of the way in which expertise was perceived: *"It seems to me that colleagues working in distance programmes are very familiar and have the expertise required for RPL"*. This might relate to the particular way in which RPL has been conceptualised at UKZN. It gives further support to the notion that individuals' understandings of RPL are inextricably bound up with their institution's conceptualisation of RPL.

The lack of specialised expertise was identified as a constraint for the implementation of RPL in higher education: *"Everyone has to come on board - lack of knowledge of managers and supervisors with regard to RPL a major stumbling block"*. In relation to this identified constraint, the need for training was identified in the following comments:

- o *"There will be a need for training as well guidance to enable lecturers to implement this process"*.
- o *"With appropriate training, I am sure that I will be able to implement such a policy."*

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o    *"Insufficient training to implement inconsistency in implementation, inter and intra institutional."*

In a number of instances, the expertise required for implementing RPL policy was linked to the need for staff to be trained assessors. These responses were typical: *"No recognised assessors - need to under[go] assessor training course"* and *"One needs to train as an assessor"*.

The qualitative data also alluded to the academic drift that was occurring in higher education where the following was identified as a constraint to successful RPL implementation: *"Academics not being clear on the actual competencies they want to develop in learners and as a result failing to identify the competencies they can RPL on RPL candidates"*. The researcher must therefore conclude from the data that the kinds of expertise required for successful implementation of RPL is not clearly defined and that some clarity is required in this regard.

## (2)    Institutional expertise

**Response to Item 14:**  My institution has the necessary expertise to implement RPL.

The following table reflects academic staff perceptions of the expertise at their respective institutions, to implement RPL.

**Table 18:  Summary of responses to Item 14 by institution**

|         | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---------|--------------|--------------|----------------|-------|----------|-------------------|---------------|
| UZ      | 2.5%         | 32.5%        | 5.0%           | 42.5% | 15.0%    | 2.5%              | 100%          |
| DIT     | 0.0%         | 52.4%        | 14.3%          | 23.8% | 9.5%     | 0.0%              | 100%          |
| UKZN    | 0.0%         | 26.5%        | 2.9%           | 35.3% | 29.4%    | 5.0%              | 100%          |
| TOTAL   | 0.9%         | 37.9%        | 7.8%           | 33.6% | 17.2%    | 2.6%              | 100%          |

The majority of respondents indicated that they were not sure if their institutions had the necessary expertise required to implement RPL (37.9%). This was supported by the qualitative data: *"At the moment I am not sure if the institution has the necessary expertise to implement RPL"*. However, a considerable percentage of academic staff indicated that they did feel that their respective institutions had such expertise (33.6%). The qualitative data suggests that institutions believe that they have personnel who would be in a position to assist in the implementation of RPL, but that these people are not being utilised to their full extent: *"Expertise probably is available if coordinated and promoted"*.

There was the suggestion by one respondent that her particular institution had this expertise but lacked the political will to make effective use of it: *"The right rhetoric is there, but nobody really knows what to do about it. If you are going to do it properly then resources and expertise are needed, and I guess these could be found in the institution, but it's not the top priority"*. Another respondent supported the notion of lack of political will as being a constraint: *"Lack of urgency regarding the implementation of RPL policy passed at Senate level some time ago"*. This theme was echoed in another response: *"Competing priorities, necessity to cut student numbers, lack of resources as always, and lack of good*

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*practices to follow"*. One respondent summed up the constraints to RPL implementation in one word - *"Leadership"*. Another commented that there was no *"driving unit"* and this suggests a commonly held perception in higher education: for policy implementation to be successful, institutions need to have a champion for implementing particular policies. This is, however, somewhat problematic in terms of creating a model that lacks sustainability and it is essentially personality-driven.

A number of respondents referred to the attitude of staff in relation to staff capacity to implement RPL: *"There is capacity to implement RPL, my concern is the institutional readiness, with specific reference to the attitudes of the staff"*. When asked about the constraints to RPL implementation in higher education, one respondent identified the following: *"Mindset of staff - still entrenched in the profile of the 'traditional' matric entry learner"*, and another said: *"One['s] general attitude is a problem"*.

To summarise, academic staff have reservations about their institution's expertise to implement RPL successfully. Part of this reservation is based on what they perceive to be a lack of political will to prioritise the implementation of RPL and make effective use of the existing resources. A further reservation is related to what staff perceive as a 'traditional' mindset among academic staff.

*(3)    Personal expertise*

**Response to Item 15:**    I have the expertise to conduct RPL assessment requests that come to my department or faculty.

The following table reflects the confidence that academic staff felt in regard to conducting RPL assessments within their department and faculty.

**Table 19:**  Summary of responses to Item 15 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 0.0% | 12.5% | 15.0% | 42.5% | 22.5% | 7.5% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 0.0% | 23.8% | 9.5% | 19.0% | 38.1% | 9.5% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 2.9% | 8.8% | 0.0% | 26.5% | 47.1% | 14.7% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 0.9% | 15.5% | 8.6% | 29.3% | 35.3% | 10.3% | 100% |

Congruent with the fact that the majority of respondents at all three institutions felt that they understood the concept of RPL, a considerable percentage of respondents also felt that they had the expertise to conduct RPL assessment requests that came to the department or faculty (37.9%). However, the majority of respondents (45.6%) still felt that they did *not* have the expertise to deal with any assessment of RPL that would come to their department or the faculty.

Of interest was whether or not the position of the respondent within the institution had an influence on perceptions regarding personal expertise to conduct RPL assessment requests. The following emerged from the data.

**Table 20:** Summary of responses to item 15 by position in institution

| | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-response | 0.0% | 20.0% | 40.0% | 0.0% | 20.0% | 20.0% | 100% |
| Head of school | 0.0% | 25.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 25.0% | 50.0% | 100% |
| Head of unit | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 75.0% | 25.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Dean | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Senior professor | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 66.7% | 33.3% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Professor | 0.0% | 12.5% | 12.5% | 37.5% | 37.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Associate professor | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 50.0% | 50.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| Senior lecturer | 0.0% | 20.0% | 25.0% | 30.0% | 15.0% | 10.0% | 100% |
| Lecturer | 2.0% | 20.5% | 4.1% | 26.5% | 36.7% | 10.2% | 100% |
| Other | 0.0% | 5.9% | 0.0% | 35.3% | 47.1% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 0.9% | 15.5% | 8.6% | 29.3% | 35.5% | 10.3% | 100% |

While it should be noted, as before, that the number of responses from academic staff at the levels above senior lecturer was small and therefore, cannot be statistically generalisable, some comment can be made about the sample in this study. It would appear that, the higher the rank the more confident the respondents were about their individual expertise to conduct RPL assessment requests, with the exception of the rank of professor where an equal numbers of respondents indicated that they were could and could not conduct such assessments (37.5%).

Another important cross analysis that can be conducted in this regard is an analysis of the perceptions of personal expertise in relation to the number of years' experience the respondent has had in higher education. The results are depicted in the following table.

**Table 21: Summary of responses to Item 15 by work experience**

|  | Non-response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Non-response | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| 1 - 5 years | 2.8% | 25.0% | 2.8% | 22.2% | 27.8% | 19.4% | 100% |
| 6 - 10 years | 0.0% | 23.5% | 11.8% | 17.6% | 41.2% | 5.9% | 100% |
| 11 - 15 years | 0.0% | 19.0% | 9.5% | 33.3% | 33.3% | 4.8% | 100% |
| More than 15 | 0.0% | 2.4% | 12.2% | 36.6% | 41.5% | 7.3% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 0.9% | 2.4% | 8.6% | 29.3% | 35.3% | 10.3% | 100% |

This data suggests that, with the exception of the six to ten year classification, the more years' experience the respondent has, the more confident they are about their expertise to conduct RPL assessment requests. Academic staff with more than fifteen years' experience agreed most strongly that they had the personal expertise (36.6%). However, this category of staff also felt most strongly that they did *not* have the expertise to conduct RPL assessment requests (a combined total of 48.8%). This category of staff was the most polarised in terms of their responses. As could be expected, respondents with the least experience in higher education (one to five years) were the most unsure about whether or not they had the expertise to undertake RPL assessment requests (25.0%).

A further issue, generally related to the assessment of prior learning, was raised by two of the respondents: *"My observation is that departments are using subjective methods / procedures"* and *"There appears also to be high levels of subjectivity involved in who 'qualifies' for recognition".* Another respondent took the argument further and said that *"it* [RPL] *carries great potential for abuse ".*

There is further evidence to suggest that while staff believed that they have a good understanding of the concept of RPL, they are unsure of a number of institutional procedures, including referral to institutional structures. In response to Item 16: 'I know

the procedures within my institution to refer potential RPL candidates to the right institutional structure', evidence was provided, and this is reflected in the following table.

**Table 22**: **Summary of responses to Item 16 by institution**

| | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 25.0% | 5.0% | 27.5% | 35.0% | 7.5% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 31.0% | 4.8% | 26.2% | 35.7% | 2.4% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 20.6% | 2.9% | 29.4% | 35.3% | 11.8% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 25.9% | 4.3% | 27.6% | 35.3% | 6.9% | 100% |

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not know the internal procedures and institutional structures for referring potential RPL candidates (35.3%). There was congruence between the three different institutions in regard to this item. In summary, staff demonstrated varying levels of confidence about their own understandings and expertise in RPL implementation, but the majority do not feel that there is clarity on issues of institutional processes, procedures and structures for RPL implementation.

## 5.5.4 Acceptance of the national imperative

***Response to Item 17:*** *My institution and its staff have accepted the implementation of RPL as a national imperative.*

The perceptions of academic staff in relation to their respective institution' acceptance of the national imperative to implement RPL is reflected in the following table.

Table 23: Summary of responses to Item 17 by institution

|  | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N=116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 22.5% | 17.5% | 47.5% | 12.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 40.5% | 19.0% | 31.0% | 9.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 26.5% | 11.8% | 32.4% | 26.5% | 2.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 30.2% | 16.4% | 37.1% | 15.5% | 0.9% | 100% |

One important indicator for successful implementation is the extent to which institutions have accepted the national mandate to implement RPL. There is a strong indication that the respondents believe their institutions have accepted the implementation of RPL as a national imperative (37.1% agreed). There were however a significant number (the second highest percentage) who indicated that they did not know if their institutions had accepted the national imperative (30.2%).

Unexpectedly, the institutional exception with regard to this item was the case of UZ where the majority of respondents indicated that they did not know if their institution had accepted the national imperative of RPL implementation (40.5%), while at the other two institutions, UKZN and DIT, the majority indicated that their institutions had accepted the national imperative of RPL implementation (32.4% and 47.5% respectively). This interpretation is not consistent with other perceptions of academic staff thus far, that indicate that RPL has achieved greater levels of acceptance at DIT than at the other two institutions.

In an unexpected finding, one respondent linked the national imperative to implement RPL with the notion of affirmative action: *"In terms of 17, there is some resistance since some staff see it as affirmative action (which in some quarters have negative connotations). My impression is that while students are admitted into programmes using RPL criteria, the 'sink or swim' mentality is adopted".*

## 5.6 RESOURCES

### 5.6.1 Requisite infrastructure and resources (physical and financial)

*Response to Item 18:* Additional infrastructure and resources (physical and financial) are required in order to implement RPL policy in higher education.

The following table indicates the perceptions of staff in regard to the need for additional infrastructure required in order to implement RPL policy in higher education.

<u>Table 24</u>: **Summary of responses to Item 18 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 15.0% | 15.0% | 47.5% | 17.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 33.3% | 28.6% | 31.0% | 7.1% | 0.05% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 14.7% | 38.2% | 41.2% | 2.9% | 2.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 0.9% | 21.6% | 26.7% | 39.7% | 9.5% | 1.7% | 100% |

Respondents at the three institutions acknowledged that RPL implementation in higher education requires additional infrastructure and resources (a combined total of 66.4% of the respondents). However, a considerable percentage of respondents indicated that they did not know if this *was* the case (21.6%). Staff at UZ indicated that RPL implementation in higher education did not require additional infrastructure and resources (17.5%). This might be the result of the particular model of RPL that has been set up at UZ where the institution has used existing structures to implement RPL.

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There was also evidence of this standpoint from other institutions, as reflected in the following comments:

- o *"If a decentralized RPL approach is used additional staff is not necessary. Capacity-building of existing staff can accommodate the RPL process as RPL assessment still rests with the academic staff".*

- o *"Resources are a scarce commodity in our institution yet academics and non academics are still expected to fall in line with innovative and necessary projects such as RPL without the necessary supports that are needed whether it is training in understanding the policy or actual time to accommodate the consultation process that occurs with RPL. This issue of inadequate resources has implications on quality service delivery. "*

Support was evident for not duplicating processes in the various institutions that would require each institution to have duplicated resources for undertaking similar processes: *"Set up a regional RPL office to deal with the RPL applications. This RPL office to house expert staff – to deal with assessment, portfolio development etc. "*

### 5.6.2  Institutional infrastructure and resources (physical and financial)

**Response to Item 19:**  My institution has the required infrastructure and resources to implement RPL policy.

The following table shows staff perceptions of their respective institution's capacity in terms of infrastructure and resources to implement RPL policy.

**Table 25:  Summary of responses to Item 19 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 5.0% | 35.0% | 7.5% | 17.5% | 32.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 61.9% | 2.4% | 21.4% | 14.3% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 35.3% | 8.8% | 14.7% | 29.4% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 1.7% | 44.8% | 6.0% | 18.1% | 25.0% | 4.6% | 100% |

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not know if their institutions had the required infrastructure and resources to implement RPL policy (44.8%). A significant number of respondents (in total) also indicated that they did not feel that their institutions had the necessary infrastructure and resources (25.0%). This is borne out by the data collected in the individual interviews where the interviewees indicated that their institutions would require more resources to implement RPL successfully.

In the qualitative data, resources were also repeatedly quoted as one of the numerous constraints to implementing RPL. These responses were typical in this regard:

- o *"I believe that the effective implementation of RPL requires additional resources (human, physical and financial), not to 'build empires' but, for example, to ensure consistency in the implementation of RPL and in particular to support learners in the process".*

- o *"Unless it [RPL] is properly resourced, it will fail or never amount to much and so have very little impact. Many would argue our resources are better spent, say, on access programmes".*

- o *"At Institution X specifically, if any cost is involved, whether in terms of hiring specialist staff or training existing staff or whatever, then RPL will just sit and mould away, just as has happened with the so-called staff 'skills development' programme."*

Despite the fact that a significant percentage of respondents from UZ indicated that they did not feel that there were additional resource requirements created by RPL implementation, a significant percentage of respondents from UZ indicated here that they did not feel that their institution had sufficient resources and infrastructure to implement RPL successfully (32.5%). Similarly, a relatively high percentage of respondents from UKZN indicated that they did not feel that their institution had the requisite resources and infrastructure (a combined total of 41.2%). Respondents also alluded to the fact that higher education is generally under-resourced and this also impacts on RPL implementation: *"Shortage of resources is a problem for almost all the H.E. Institutions in South Africa".*

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In the case of DIT, where an office with one fulltime person had recently been set up, the interviewees indicated that there was a possibility that this office would become a fully-fledged unit in the future. At the UZ, it was clear that the staff currently dealing with RPL and located in the office of Quality Assurance and Promotion, were already dealing with a wide range of functions, and that for RPL to be successfully implemented, additional staff would be required. Staff who were interviewed from UKZN, indicated that RPL would require a dedicated office, but that this was expensive and that this allocation of resources would be challenged by some staff members.

Linked to the issue of institutional capacity to implement RPL, was the issue of staff workload. A few respondents pointed to concerns that staff working in higher education carried excessive academic workloads that would be a deterrent to the successful implementation of RPL in higher education: *"Staff are already individually over burdened. Initiatives such as mergers etc come on top of existing high workloads"*. Another respondent set reasonable workloads as a 'condition' for implementation using the current resource base: *"RPL is quite an involving activity and extra staff will be a must given the present loads. But if loads are okay maybe the present staff would cope"*.

### 5.6.3 Additional human resources

**Response to Item 20:** RPL implementation requires additional staff in order to be successful in higher education.

Staff perceptions of the additional staff required in order to implement RPL successfully, are reflected in the table below.

**Table 26: Summary of responses to Item 20 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 22.5% | 15.0% | 45.0% | 12.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 38.1% | 19.0% | 28.6% | 14.3% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 17.6% | 29.4% | 44.1% | 5.9% | 2.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 0.9% | 26.7% | 20.7% | 38.8% | 11.2% | 1.7% | 100% |

Congruent with the notion that additional financial and infrastructural resources are required for the successful implementation of RPL in higher education, the majority of the respondents acknowledged that additional human resources were also required in order for RPL implementation to be successful in higher education. A total of 59.5% of the respondents indicated that they either strongly agreed or agreed that such additional human resources were also required. In a deviation from the other two institutions, a higher percentage of respondents from DIT indicated that they did *not* know if additional human resources were required for the implementation of RPL (38.1%).

### 5.6.4 Availability of institutional human resources

**Response to Item 21:** My institution has the necessary staff to implement RPL policy.

Staff perceptions of institutional capacity to provide the necessary staff to implement RPL, are reflected in the table that follows.

**Table 27:** Summary of responses to item 21 by institution

| | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 35.0% | 10.0% | 17.5% | 32.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 52.4% | 4.8% | 19.0% | 23.8% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 0.0% | 35.3% | 2.9% | 26.5% | 23.5% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 0.9% | 41.4% | 6.0% | 20.7% | 26.7% | 4.3% | 100% |

The majority of respondents at all three institutions indicated that they did not know if their institutions had the prerequisite human resources to make the implementation of RPL successful at their institutions (41.4%). A relatively low percentage of respondents felt that their institutions *had* such human resources (a combined total of 26.7%) while a significant number felt that their institutions did not have the necessary human resources (a combined total of 47.4%). There were no institutional exceptions in this regard.

There appears to be a lack of consensus around whether or not institutions have the capacity to implement RPL successfully and, while the researcher has some reservations in this regard, an institutional audit would need to be conducted to provide clarity in this area.

### 5.6.5 Financial assistance for RPL candidates

Although the aspect of financial assistance for RPL implementation was not specifically interrogated by the questionnaire or the interviews, one respondent acknowledged the need for financial assistance for potential RPL candidates, as a key element to the successful implementation of RPL policy in higher education: *"While RPL is designed to*

*promote wider access to higher education and while this is one of the components of the vision and mission of UniZul, with widespread unemployment in our area, few older men and women with little or no formal education have the financial resources to enter higher education. Realistically, therefore I am not sure how RPL can work to widen access without financial aid. Bursary givers also appear to target youngsters contemplating a career."*

To sum up briefly regarding resources, there was a strong indication that the resources currently allocated to the RPL agenda are insufficient to allow for successful implementation. It was acknowledged that a high level of resourcing is required for RPL practices, and without these, RPL will remain a marginalised priority that does not receive its full recognition within institutions of higher education.

## 5.7    QUALITY ASSURANCE OF RPL PRACTICE

### 5.7.1    Institutional understanding of moderation requirements

<u>Response to Item 22:</u>    My institution and its staff understand the demands of implementing RPL in terms of moderation requirements.

The following responses reflect staff opinion with regard to the demands that RPL places on the moderation system.

<u>Table 28</u>:  Summary of responses to Item 22 by institution

|  | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 37.5% | 0.0% | 17.5% | 42.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 61.9% | 9.5% | 11.9% | 16.7% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 29.4% | 5.9% | 20.6% | 44.1% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 44.0% | 5.2% | 16.4% | 33.6% | 0.9% | 100% |

The majority of all respondents indicated that they did not know if their institutions and their staff understood the demands of implementing RPL in terms of the moderation requirements (44.0%). A significantly high number also indicated that they did not think

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that their institutions understood the moderation requirements of implementing RPL assessments (a combined total of 34.5%). Respondents from both UKZN and UZ indicated very strongly that they felt their institutions did not have a good understanding of the moderation requirements of RPL implementation (a combined total of 44.1% and 45% respectively). The highest percentage of respondents who agreed that their institution *had* a good understanding of the moderation requirements of implementing RPL assessments was at UKZN where 26.5% strongly agreed or agreed that the institution had a good understanding of the moderation requirements for RPL assessments.

Consistent with the evidence obtained from the institutional interviews, one respondent from UKZN claimed that additional quality assurance mechanisms were not required: *"Our RPL procedures are married to the normal assessment procedures including moderation and appeals procedures. It was not necessary to create new procedures for already existing ones".*

There was evidence at two of the three institutions that there had been problems with professional bodies (in particular the South African Nursing Council) in registering graduates who had been admitted through the route of RPL: *"The students have a problem with a Professional Body to register them as licensed practitioners because they* [the professional body] *are not well informed with RPL".* There was also the suggestion that some cases of RPL had been dealt with unprocedurally: *"Certain departments have dealt with RPL cases in an unprocedural manner and I do not know whether there were clear procedures for dealing with RPL appeals".*

There is a strong suggestion that institutions do not have adequate moderation practices to satisfy the imperative of professional bodies and ETQAs (in the case of higher education, the HEQC) in terms of ensuring the quality of RPL practices. One must ask: Is it necessary to create dedicated moderation procedures for RPL, or will existing practices be adequate for these purposes? The researcher is of the opinion that specific and dedicated procedures are necessary for ensuring the quality of RPL practices.

### 5.7.2 Perceptions of academic standards

Consistent with some of the literature on issues of RPL, some respondents made reference to the concerns about academic standards: *"Sometimes concerned about RPL being used to water down academic expectations?"* Another respondent said: *"The main challenge is to avoid waving everybody through. This will cripple the institution"*. One respondent echoed this sentiment: *"It* [RPL] *will be of benefit if candidates do not simply want a 'quickie' degree or qualification"*. This was consistent with the literature review that pointed out the scepticism that surrounds RPL implementation.

The research showed that some staff were aware of the gate-keeping and epistemological defensiveness that was detected in the literature survey. One respondent said: *"Biggest constraint? People already in the system who entered the system [in] the traditional way, not wanting (this is not articulated!!) to 'allow' student in via another route..."*.

In regard to the issue of standards, more than one respondent pointed to the need to benchmark RPL practice, both nationally and internationally: *"Difficult to project into the future with a country like South Africa where change is so rapid. I would like to see case studies from countries where RPL has been in operation for a long time. I do not have information on the success of RPL in the developed world. I imagine it works better in less developed countries"*. Another said, *"Not sure if there is international precedence in this regard, especially in higher education"*.

### 5.7.3 Successful implementation

**Response to Item 23:** My institution has successfully dealt with RPL cases in the past.

Academic staff perceptions of the way in which their respective institutions had dealt with RPL cases in the past, are reflected as follows.

**Table 29: Summary of responses to Item 23 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 0.0% | 45.0% | 2.5% | 20.0% | 22.5% | 10.0% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 0.0% | 66.7% | 7.1% | 19.1% | 7.1% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 2.9% | 38.2% | 0.0% | 29.4% | 29.4% | 0.0% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 0.9% | 50.9% | 3.4% | 22.4% | 19.0% | 3.4% | 100% |

The majority of the respondents indicated that they were not aware of whether or not their institutions had been successful in implementing RPL (50.9%). This is despite the fact that many of the respondents are in positions that would participate in some of the decision-making processes at their institutions.

However, a significant number of respondents at all three institutions indicated that they *did* believe that their institutions had successfully implemented RPL (22.4%). The greatest percentage of respondents who indicated positively was from UKZN (29.4%). This might be due to the long-standing history of the G33 rule at the former University of Natal that has been adapted and applied at the newly merged institution.

The qualitative data, as well as the JET report (Breier & Burness 2003) and Thomson (2005) indicate that the understanding of RPL at UKZN is largely limited to the use of the Senate Discretionary Exemption clause, and this might account for the relatively high percentage who responded positively to this question. This might also be an indication that the exchange model of RPL implementation has been successfully applied at UKZN.

Once again it becomes clear that clarity around the operational definition of RPL is critical to successful implementation: the responses to this item depend largely on how the institution has defined RPL.

### 5.7.4   Institutional procedures for RPL appeals

**Response to Item 24:**   My institution has clear procedures for dealing with RPL appeals.

Ways in which academic staff perceived their respective institution's procedures for dealing with RPL appeals are reflected below.

**Table 30:**   Summary of responses to Item 24 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 40.0% | 7.5% | 22.5% | 17.5% | 10.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 2.4% | 61.9% | 4.8% | 23.8% | 7.1% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 2.9% | 35.3% | 5.9% | 5.9% | 44.1% | 5.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 2.6% | 46.6% | 6.0% | 18.1% | 21.6% | 5.2% | 100% |

An appropriate and relevant appeals procedure for RPL assessments is one important indicator for mature and successful quality assurance practices within institutions. The majority of respondents indicated that they did not know if their institutions had clear procedures for dealing with RPL assessment appeals (46.6%). The respondents from UKZN however disagreed that their institution had clear procedures for RPL assessment appeals (44.1%). This percentage was considerably higher than both UZ (17.5%) and DIT (7.1%) in this regard. In a situation that was different from the other two institutions, the majority of the respondents from UKZN disagreed that the institution had clear procedures, whereas at the other two institutions, the majority responded that they did not know if there were clear procedures. Very few respondents from UKZN responded positively in this regard (5.9%).

## 5.7.5   Assistance with evidence gathering

**Response to Item 25:** My institution can provide candidates with the necessary assistance in gathering and presenting evidence for RPL assessment purposes.

The table below reflects staff perceptions of institutional assistance that is offered to RPL candidates for gathering and presenting evidence for assessment purposes.

**Table 31:   Summary of responses to Item 25 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 2.5% | 35.0% | 7.5% | 30.0% | 17.5% | 7.5% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 0.0% | 57.1% | 4.8% | 28.6% | 7.1% | 2.4% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 5.9% | 29.4% | 0.0% | 11.8% | 44.1% | 8.8% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 2.6% | 41.4% | 4.3% | 24.1% | 21.6% | 6.0% | 100% |

The majority of respondents did not know if their institutions were able to provide assistance to possible candidates in gathering and presenting evidence for RPL assessment purposes (41.4%). In a similar response to the previous item, the majority of respondents from UKZN disagreed that their institution was able to assist potential candidates in gathering and presenting evidence for RPL assessment purposes (44.1%). This has implications for teaching staff who need to either provide assistance to RPL candidates in regard to gathering and presenting the evidence or to being in a position to refer students to a relevant structure within the institution.

To sum up briefly, there are very few dedicated quality assurance mechanisms within the institutions, and there is a reliance on the existing quality assurance mechanisms. There is, however, some doubt in the mind of the researcher as to whether or not these mechanisms are adequate for the purposes they should serve.

## 5.8 CURRICULAR RESPONSIVENESS

### 5.8.1 Introduction

Ralphs (2001: 1) reiterates the importance of curriculum reform for RPL implementation: "...RPL can only achieve its role and purpose in the construction of democratic education **as part of** [his emphasis] a progressive and holistic model of curriculum reform, clearly grounded in the social, political and economic conditions of our time and strongly articulated to the objectives of human development for all".

An important question that needs to be answered in terms of the ways in which curriculum responds to national imperatives, is the following: Is there evidence of RPL acting as a catalyst for curriculum transformation in the ways in which Ralphs (2001), Luckett (1999), Osman (2002), and Prinsloo and Buchler (2005) describe it as a catalyst for change?

While the data suggests that staff perceive the potential of RPL implementation to act as a catalyst for curriculum reform and transformation, a number of constraints threaten the process. Most importantly, these include academic defensiveness, issues around standards and change fatigue that academic staff working in higher education are currently experiencing.

Many respondents indicated that they were only able to respond to this section of the questionnaire in terms of their own departments and programmes, and that their perceptions might, therefore, not be consistent across the institution. This is not unexpected given the picture that emerges that RPL has not been institutionalised in the various institutions used for the study.

### 5.8.2  Curriculum that acknowledges students' prior experience

**Response to Item 26:**   Curriculum at my institution accommodates RPL by acknowledging the experiences that students bring to the learning.

Staff perceptions about the way in which curriculum at their institutions accommodates RPL, are reflected below.

**Table 32:  Summary of responses to Item 26 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 17.5% | 2.5% | 40.0% | 30.0% | 7.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 31.0% | 4.8% | 35.7% | 23.8% | 4.8% | 100% |
| UKZN | 8.8% | 14.7% | 8.8% | 26.5% | 29.4% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 3.4% | 21.6% | 5.2% | 34.5% | 27.6% | 7.8% | 100% |

The majority of respondents indicated that curriculum at their institutions accommodated RPL by acknowledging the experiences that students bring to the learning (34.5%). The institution with the highest number of positive responses in this regard was UZ (40.0%) with the lowest number of positive responses at UKZN (26.5%).

There was evidence in the qualitative responses that some staff were clearly *not* in agreement that curriculum at their institution accommodated RPL. One respondent, writing from the personal experience of having studied in her own institution stated the following: *"Often, if I tried to bring in other aspects from my professional or life experience I was marked down as they considered it to be irrelevant as it was not directly part of the course teaching"*.

One respondent (from the university of technology sector) commented as follows in the open-ended section of the questionnaire: *"The flexibility, support etc from RPL will not be evident in the curriculum ... I do not think that alternative access routes have featured high on the list of priorities in the minds of staff when engaging with curriculum development and the*

*concept of 'learning assumed to be in place' is still in the opinion of many staff only concerned with matric grades".* This was also evident in the following response: *"I think that people value what students bring along to the institution. However, I doubt if the curriculum really caters for what the students bring along. Rather I see a situation whereby students are expected to learn what they are taught".*

### 5.8.3 Curriculum that facilitates assessment of prior learning

<u>Response to Item 27:</u> Curriculum at my institution is developed in such a way to facilitate the assessment of prior learning.

The following two tables are indicative of staff perceptions of the way in which curriculum facilitates the assessment of prior learning.

<u>Table 33</u>: **Summary of responses to Item 27 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 2.5% | 25.0% | 5.0% | 25.0% | 35.0% | 7.5% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 0.0% | 35.7% | 9.5% | 16.7% | 33.3% | 4.8% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 5.9% | 14.7% | 2.9% | 17.6% | 47.1% | 11.8% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 2.6% | 25.9% | 6.0% | 19.8% | 37.9% | 7.8% | 100% |

The majority of the total number of respondents indicated that the curriculum at their institutions did not facilitate the assessment of prior learning (37.9%). There were however some institutional differences in that the majority of respondents from DIT indicated that they did not know if curriculum at their institution facilitated the assessment of RPL (35.7%) whereas at UZ and UKZN the majority of respondents indicated that curriculum that their institutions did *not* facilitate the assessment of RPL (35.0% and 47.1% respectively).

Two respondents pointed to the issue of rote learning of content knowledge as being a barrier to successful RPL implementation: *"Assessment has changed to accommodate prior*

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*learning but it is still skewed towards content knowledge that is pushed at the university".*
Another said: *"Lecturers were more interested in students regurgitating the work that had been set down".*

One respondent related reliance on rote learning of content to the need for curricular change in higher education: *"The time of just teaching learners content and taking content acquisition as an end in itself is over. The country has adopted the education system that is outcomes or competences driven i.e. we are teaching towards the achievement of specific competences. Content is then used to develop the requisite competences, so content is no longer the end in itself. As such programmes must be designed with this in mind. If that is done it will be very easy accredit or credit competences that have been developed informally".*

**Response to Item 28:** Curriculum at my institution is outcomes compliant and this facilitates the assessment of RPL.

Table 34: Summary of responses to Item 28 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 5.0% | 20.0% | 10.0% | 42.5% | 17.5% | 5.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 35.7% | 9.5% | 40.5% | 14.3% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 5.9% | 23.5% | 2.9% | 35.3% | 26.5% | 5.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 3.4% | 26.7% | 7.8% | 39.7% | 19.0% | 3.4% | 100% |

The need to use an OBE approach to curriculum (including assessment) has been identified in the literature survey as one of the prerequisites for the successful implementation of RPL in higher education. This also relates to the concept of a curriculum that facilitates the assessment of RPL in an outcomes based way. In an apparent contradiction, the majority of respondents indicated that they felt that curriculum at their institutions was outcomes compliant and therefore did facilitate the assessment of RPL (39.7%). A considerably higher number of respondents from UKZN

indicated that curriculum at their institution was not outcomes compliant (26.5%) than at the other two institutions (17.5% at UZ and 14.3% at DIT).

This finding would seem in contradiction to the previous item where respondents felt that curriculum at their institutions did *not* facilitate the assessment of RPL. This might reflect a fundamental lack of consensus on the way in which curriculum is defined in higher education. However, closer interrogation of the question revealed that there was some ambiguity in the question and that, if the question had been split into two questions a more consistent interpretation of the data might have been possible.

The qualitative data raised this issue in an indirect way. One respondent questioned whether outcomes based education does in fact facilitate RPL implementation: *"In general, the curriculum approach is an outcomes-based one, but whether this facilitates RPL is a moot point"*.

### 5.8.4 Curricular support for RPL candidates

**Response to Item 29:** Curriculum at my institution provides support for RPL candidates after they enter the institution.

The following table reflects the perceptions of staff in relation to the support that is offered to RPL candidates, at an institutional level, after they are admitted.

**Table 35: Summary of responses to Item 29 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 7.5% | 30.0% | 2.5% | 25.0% | 22.5% | 12.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 59.5% | 9.5% | 14.3% | 14.3% | 2.4% | 100% |
| UKZN | 8.8% | 11.8% | 5.9% | 14.7% | 47.1% | 11.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 5.2% | 35.3% | 6.0% | 18.1% | 26.7% | 8.6% | 100% |

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Providing support for RPL candidates once they enter the system, through the curriculum by means of the integration of theory and practice, the introduction of work-based learning and other such mechanisms, is another prerequisite for the successful implementation of RPL in higher education. The majority of respondents at all three institutions did not know if this kind of curricular support, was provided at their institutions (35.3%). A significantly high percentage of the total respondents also indicated that they did *not* feel that such support was provided through the curriculum (26.7%). In this instance respondents from UZ gave the most positive response (25.0%) while respondents from DIT and UKZN gave similar responses (14.3% and 14.7% respectively). UKZN academic staff felt more strongly that the curriculum at their institution did not provide adequate curricular support for RPL candidates (47.1%). This is consistent with overall institutional perceptions that have emerged from the data in previous sections.

The qualitative data revealed that staff identify foundation courses and programmes as being almost the only form of academic support that assists RPL candidates: *"Some faculties have very good foundation courses and opportunities to develop academic discourse – not applicable to all".* Also, *"Support in the form of a foundation programme under implementation".* Another respondent pointed to an obvious shortcoming: *"In general terms, in my opinion, the flexibility, support etc. for RPL will not be evident in the curriculum ".*

## 5.8.5 Supportive structure of curriculum

**Response to Item 30:** Curriculum at my institution accommodates RPL by having multiple entry and exit levels.

Staff perceptions of the ways in which curriculum accommodates RPL, through multiple entry and exit levels, are reflected in the table below.

**Table 36: Summary of responses to Item 30 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **UZ** | 10.0% | 25.0% | 0.0% | 17.5% | 32.5% | 15.5% | 100% |
| **DIT** | 0.0% | 38.1% | 2.4% | 28.6% | 28.6% | 2.4% | 100% |
| **UKZN** | 8.8% | 11.8% | 5.9% | 8.8% | 41.2% | 23.5% | 100% |
| **TOTAL** | 6.0% | 25.9% | 2.6% | 19.0% | 33.6% | 12.9% | 100% |

Although it has been identified as a factor that contributes towards successful implementation of RPL in higher education, there have been a number of attempts by the Department of Education to restrict the offering of multiple exit and entry points for programmes within the university sector. It is, therefore, not surprising that respondents from DIT responded the most positively in this item (28.6%) as the curriculum at former technikons has traditionally accommodated RPL entry more effectively than universities where this is a relatively new phenomenon. However, given the nature of the former technikon sector, one might have expected an even higher percentage of positive responses from DIT in this regard.

The majority of respondents indicated that they did not feel that curriculum at their institutions accommodated RPL by having multiple entry and exit levels for programmes (33.6%). A considerable number of respondents even strongly disagreed with this statement (12.9%). There was therefore a combined percentage of 46.5% who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Three respondents referred to the current Department of Education stance on not encouraging certificates and diplomas for funding approval:

- o *"The policy from DoE discouraged multiple entry and exit points!"*
- o *"Our degrees now have a single outcome - a Masters degree, whereas there were multiple exit points before - a DoE ruling".*
- o *"Have received mixed messages when it comes to multiple entry and exit levels. They are not developed necessarily with RPL in mind".*

One respondent identified the lack of flexibility in the curriculum that was a result of the Department of Education policy: *"At the present time there are few stand alone diploma or certificate course which are DoE approved at Unizul".*

Reference was also made to recent quality assurance initiatives that had been detrimental to the development of a curriculum with multiple entry and exit levels: *"We seem to be moving away from multiple entry and exit levels in the wake of the MBA reaccreditation's exercise which seemed to discourage multiple exit levels".*

## 5.8.6 Development of academic discourse

**Responses to Item 31:** Curriculum at my institution will be flexible enough to allow RPL candidates the opportunity to develop the skills and academic discourse that they might not already have to be successful in higher education.

The table below reflects staff perceptions of how successfully academic skills and discourse are developed within their institutions.

Table 37: Summary of responses to Item 31 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 2.5% | 35.0% | 2.5% | 37.5% | 20.0% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 52.4% | 7.1% | 16.7% | 21.4% | 2.4% | 100% |
| UKZN | 8.8% | 20.6% | 5.9% | 23.5% | 32.4% | 8.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 3.4% | 37.1% | 5.2% | 25.9% | 24.1% | 4.3% | 100% |

Regarding the flexibility of curriculum to allow RPL candidates to develop academic skills and discourse required of them to be successful in higher education, the majority of respondents indicated that they did not know if this was the case at their institutions (37.1%). A considerable number of respondents, however, did agree that the curriculum at their institutions allowed RPL candidates to develop academic skills and discourse (25.9%). In this instance the respondents at UZ were the most positive with some 37.5% agreeing that this was indeed the case at their institution. Academic staff at UKZN felt most strongly that candidates were not being empowered to develop academic skills and discourse through the curriculum (32.4%).

As indicated earlier, some respondents saw foundation programmes as a possible vehicle for developing academic discourse for RPL candidates, but there was no mention made of how academic discourse is developed for all students within the boundaries of the discipline.

### 5.8.7 Valuing other kinds of knowledge

**Response to Item 32:** Curriculum at my institution values all kinds of knowledge (formally acquired and informally acquired) equally.

Staff perceptions of the way in which curriculum at their respective institutions value different kinds of knowledge, are provided in the table that follows.

**Table 38:** Summary of responses to Item 32 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 5.0% | 25.5% | 5.0% | 32.5% | 27.5% | 5.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 45.2% | 4.8% | 23.8% | 23.8% | 2.4% | 100% |
| UKZN | 8.8% | 23.5% | 5.9% | 14.7% | 38.2% | 8.8% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 4.3% | 31.9% | 5.2% | 24.1% | 29.3% | 5.2% | 100% |

Following from the discussion in the literature survey regarding the mediation of the two different types of knowledge that needs to take place in the implementation of RPL, there was an indication that the majority of respondents did not know if the curriculum at their institutions valued all forms of knowledge equally (31.9%). This mediation between different types of knowledge has been identified as pivotal to the successful implementation of RPL for transformational purposes.

The qualitative data yielded rich responses from staff in regard to the valuing of 'other' kinds of knowledge. One respondent had this to say: *"Most of our students are from severely disadvantaged backgrounds and cannot be understood as having a similar educational background as students who have studied at urban schools. Because of this disadvantage, lec turers in some departments often bld in reference when lecturing or conducting tutorials to informal and cultural knowledge which is acquired outside the realms of classroom education or book learning. An example here would be tutorial discussions by members of the English*

*department on the value of lobola or the role of polygamy which illustrate some of the issues*
*students encounter in literature taught in the department courses".*

There was evidence of staff being critical of the 'traditional' modes of knowledge acquisition and the contestations over what constitutes 'knowledge': *"The curriculum is heavily weighted in favour of the formal acquisition of knowledge, - even service learning is formal, so not quite sure how informally acquired knowledge would be incorporated".* Furthermore there was the acknowledgement that *"informally acquired knowledge is difficult to measure".* This is in line with the findings of the literature survey where Wheelahan, Newton and Miller (2003: 4) claim that "...personal learning is not neatly packaged and subject to comparison to academic or course requirements".

### 5.8.8 Traditional constructs and the nature of higher education

While the majority of qualitative comments regarding the constraints for implementing RPL focussed on resource constraints, a number of respondents also made reference to other constraints, such as the traditional constructs of higher education and its defining characteristics. One respondent had this to say: *"Whilst I understand the basic concept of RPL, I do not know in what way this is assessed and how it can be useful to staff where so much emphasis at tertiary education institutions is placed on conventional paper qualifications".* The reliance on disciplinary-based knowledge was also identified as a constraint: *"The old 'discipline subjects' are a barrier to RPL, especially recognizing essential workplace competencies"* and *"Generally, traditional modes of learning and teaching dominate our institution with a few exceptions".*

Academic staff also created a dichotomy between academic skills and other skills. There was evidence of an outdated understanding of vocationally-based skills and their lack of theoretical underpinning: *"Assessing prior learning in a H.E. context work skills are not necessarily academic skills. H.E. institutions are not equipped to evaluate prior learning (in engineering). H.E. institutions are academic institutions. They prepare students academically to cope with the demands of industry, and to engage in life-long learning. RPL deals with skills acquired in industry & those skills may be very specific/narrow & not built on a theoretical foundation".* Another response makes reference to 'proper' education and training in

much the same way as evident in the discourse of Gawe (1999) as discussed in the literature review: *"Although through experience, many gain good expertise in certain disciplines, to gain full advantage of their expertise, they need also to develop good understanding of the other inter related faculties, through **proper** [my emphasis] education and training"*.

In summary, there is little evidence to suggest that the implementation of RPL has had any major impact on curriculum transformation. Traditional modes of knowledge production and assessments persist in dominating higher education to the detriment of RPL implementation. There is limited evidence to suggest that curriculum in higher education values other kinds of knowledge. In fact, there is strong evidence of a continuation of traditional forms of knowledge production.

The change to an outcomes based system of education as a model of curriculum, has had only a limited impact on RPL implementation. Attempts at curriculum reform have been hampered to some extent by bureaucratic old-school thinking of the national structures (e.g. the Department of Education) in terms of the offering of certificates and diplomas in the university sector.

Curriculum in higher education has failed to deliver the kinds of transformation hoped for by researchers such as Ralphs (2001) and Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 24) who talk about RPL in a progressive and holistic paradigm that will "...increasingly challenge the construction and content of qualifications to be more inclusive of knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that are produced in 'communities of practice' outside of the formal institutions of learning in society".

There should however be a strong cautionary note about not expecting too much from curriculum change in terms of the delivery of higher education. There is currently a great deal of expectation of curriculum in higher education. A current assumption is that changes to curriculum will be a panacea for solving very deep-seated economic and

educational problems. Some of these problems are so deeply ingrained in the make-up of the country that the expectations placed on the curriculum may be unrealistic.

## 5.9 NATIONAL ARTICULATION OF RPL POLICY IN RELATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

### 5.9.1 Introduction

As was evident in the literature review, the implementation of RPL in higher education is driven by a number of national policy imperatives. These policies have been, and are being, articulated to relevant stakeholders in a number of different ways. The following section examines how successfully these have been articulated, as perceived by academic staff. This may be regarded as a measure of how successfully RPL is being implemented in institutions of higher education.

### 5.9.2 Articulation of national policy on RPL in the higher education sector

**Responses to Item 33:** National policy on RPL policy and implementation is clearly articulated:

Staff perceptions of the successfulness of national RPL policy articulation are reflected as follows.

**Table 39:** Summary of responses to Item 33 by institution

| | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 5.0% | 42.5% | 5.0% | 30.0% | 10.0% | 7.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 52.4% | 7.1% | 19.0% | 21.4% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 11.8% | 29.4% | 0.0% | 32.4% | 23.5% | 2.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 5.2% | 42.2% | 4.3% | 26.7% | 18.1% | 3.4% | 100% |

The findings of the research indicate that the majority of academic teaching and non-teaching staff do not know if national policy on RPL implementation is clearly articulated

or not (42.2%). The very fact that most of the staff did not know, might point to the lack of penetration that such policy on RPL implementation has had in the higher education sector. Further evidence suggests that academic staff have not been exposed to the national agenda for RPL implementation. However, a significant percentage of respondents felt that national policy on RPL has been clearly articulated (26.7%).

In a further finding that presents itself in the qualitative data, one respondent pointed to what she saw as an overestimation of the role of RPL in national policy for higher education: *"The assumption seems to be that lots of people have been excluded from formal education and now can come back and enter it, but as far as I can tell the demand is very small and is accommodated one way or another, usually at postgrad level. Don't think it's quite as big a deal as the policy-makers thought it would be"*.

A further issue relating to the articulation of RPL policy within higher education as a sector was the accessibility of the discourse of national RPL policy for academic staff working in higher education: *"Is the discourse of RPL made accessible to non-experts?"*

### 5.9.3 Feasibility of implementing national policy in higher education

<u>Responses to Item 34:</u>  National policy on RPL is easy to implement in higher education.

The views of staff in regard to the ease with which RPL can be implemented in higher education are indicated below.

<u>Table 40:</u>  Summary of responses to Item 34 by institution

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 7.5% | 47.5% | 2.5% | 17.5% | 22.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 2.4% | 59.5% | 2.4% | 7.1% | 26.2% | 2.4% | 100% |
| UKZN | 8.8% | 29.4% | 0.0% | 8.8% | 38.2% | 14.7% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 6.0% | 46.6% | 1.7% | 11.2% | 28.4% | 6.0% | 100% |

One of objections to implementing RPL in higher education is the claim that the learning that takes place in higher education does not 'lend' itself to RPL implementation, thus suggesting an incompatibility. This assumption is supported by the personal experiences of the researcher in dealing with the resistance of academics to the implementation of RPL. However, the findings of the research show that the majority of the staff from all three institutions did not *know* if it was easy to implement RPL policy in higher education or not (46.6%).

If one interprets this finding in conjunction with the finding that most of the respondents believe that they themselves have a personal understanding of the concept of RPL, then there is an apparent contradiction in terms of the fact that most of the respondents could not say if RPL was easy to implement in higher education or not. There were however a significant percentage who felt that it was not easy to implement RPL in higher education (combined total of 34.4%).

In an interesting reflection in the qualitative data, one respondent pointed to the political nature of RPL: *"RPL is not an easy option educationally and is still contexted in politics not education"*. Another respondent identified the need for the system to mature as one of the critical success factors: *"RPL is not easy to implement, this will require maturation of the system (including admin.) that can, in my opinion only come with engaging in the practice"*.

The researcher was not able to detect any overt and strong objection on the part of academic staff to the implementation of RPL in higher education on the basis that it was *not* possible to implement it. The constraints that were raised in this regard were mostly related to administrative and logistical issues, as opposed to being philosophical or ideological obstacles.

### 5.9.4    Alignment of national RPL policy to aims and objectives of higher education

**Responses to Item 35:**  Implementing RPL policy is appropriate to the current aims and objectives of higher education.

Staff perceptions regarding the alignment of RPL policy with the aims and objectives of higher education, are reflected as follows.

**Table 41:  Summary of responses to Item 35 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 5.0% | 27.5% | 15.0% | 52.5% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 45.2% | 16.7% | 38.1% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 14.7% | 14.7% | 29.4% | 35.3% | 2.9% | 2.9% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 6.0% | 30.2% | 19.8% | 42.2% | 0.9% | 0.9% | 100% |

The research revealed that the majority of respondents indicated that the implementation of RPL was appropriate to the aims and objectives of higher education (42.2%). A significant percentage of staff from all three institutions were unsure if the implementation of RPL policy was appropriate (30.2%). A surprisingly low percentage

of respondents felt that RPL was *not* appropriate to the aims and objectives of higher education (combined total of 1.8%). Once again, there was no evidence of strong ideological resistance to the implementation of RPL based on the notion that it was not aligned to the current aims and objectives of higher education.

One interesting response indicated that the RPL imperative *was* in direct opposition to the aims of higher education and that this would prove to be a constraint to the implementation of RPL in higher education: *"Pushing new paradigms onto an institutional infrastructure and system that it was never designed for".*

### 5.9.5 Benefits of national policy for higher education

*(1)  Long term benefits*

**Responses to Item 36:** *The implementation of RPL policy will be beneficial to higher education in the long term.*

The following table provides the perceptions of staff regarding the benefits of implementing RPL policy for higher education.

Table 41: Summary of responses to Item 36 by institution

| | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 5.0% | 32.5% | 22.5% | 37.5% | 2.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 21.4% | 38.1% | 38.1% | 2.4% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 14.7% | 8.8% | 29.4% | 44.1% | 2.9% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 6.0% | 21.6% | 30.2% | 39.7% | 2.6% | 0.0% | 100% |

Congruent with other findings, the majority of respondents at all three institutions indicated that they felt that the implementation of RPL would be beneficial to higher education. A combined total of 69.9% agreed or strongly agreed with this item. Only 2.6% indicated that they did not believe that the implementation of RPL would benefit

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higher education. Ironically, respondents from UKZN who had been most critical of their institutional response to RPL implementation, now indicated the strongest of the three institutions that it would benefit higher education (44.1%).

## (2)    Opportunity to diversify

**Responses to Item 37:**  The implementation of RPL policy will allow institutions of higher education to diversify their student profiles.

The following table shows staff perceptions of the opportunity that RPL implementation provides for institutions to diversity their student profiles.

**Table 42:  Summary of responses to Item 37 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 5.0% | 22.5% | 27.5% | 45.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 23.8% | 26.2% | 47.6% | 2.4% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 14.7% | 5.9% | 41.2% | 32.4% | 5.9% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 6.0% | 18.1% | 31.0% | 42.2% | 2.6% | 0.0% | 100% |

The majority of respondents at all three institutions indicated that the implementation of RPL would allow institutions of higher education to diversity their student profiles. A combined total of 52.5% indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with this item. One respondent, however, felt that RPL did not offer much opportunity in this regard as the student population was already sufficiently diversified: *"Not much role in diversifying an already very diverse student body"*.

*(3)    Articulation between sectors (universities of technology and university) and within sectors*

Although it was not specifically dealt with in the quantitative data, respondents highlighted the possibility of articulation as one of the benefits that RPL could have for higher education: *"RPL will be useful if it can be used to facilitate transfer from one course and university to another, although as I understand there are mechanisms currently in place outside RPL which make this process possible"*.  The articulation opportunities provided by RPL implementation were also evident in the following response: *"We do facilitate students coming mostly from technikon background but with prior learning, into university programmes"*. Another respondent commented: *"It is difficult to predict for a university ... how much RPL will be used but clearly it can be important for facilitating specific articulation pathways which a particular programme requires"*.

There was also evidence of the university-technikon divide in terms of skills development and the benefits that could be derived for higher education: *"Think it's really too small to have that much effect one way or another.  Sure, if masses of people went back to university to upgrade their formal qualifications that would be beneficial, just don't think it's realistic to expect many to be doing that.  May be different for universities of technology, but not really the case for research-type universities"*.  This sentiment was also evident in the following comment: *"I agree* [that RPL will be beneficial to institutions of higher education in the long term] *in terms of 'skills development'. I am unsure if one can automatically assume this includes 'knowledge development / production"*.

*(4)    Personal development*

One respondent pointed to the priority of personal development as the main opportunity provided by RPL implementation in higher education: *"RPL is mainly aimed at student betterment"*. Another respondent saw the benefit for students in terms of the possibility of avoiding duplication: *"RPL will assist learners especially to prevent repetition of learning outcomes previously acquired"*.

*(5)     Opportunities for staff*

The results were consistent with the findings in the Breier and Burness report (2003) which indicated that the former technikon sector recognised the opportunities that RPL provided for staff advancement, to a greater extent than did the university sector. One respondent provided this comment, which illustrates the benefits that can be derived from advancing staff within the institution: *"My personal viewpoint is that if staff were able to be assessed in terms of RPL, such an institution would benefit tremendously by untapped knowledge and experience. Many staff have been in this institution for ten, twenty or even thirty years (from the former Technikon Natal or ML Sultan Technikon), and have a wealth of knowledge and experience that is not recognized nor formally utilized, because such staff do not have the formal 'piece of paper' indicating a specific qualification. Imagine the constructive and beneficial effect on higher education if such people were able, through properly implemented RPL, to become active in jobs that were previously denied to them because they had no formal qualifications!".*

### 5.9.6   Systemic challenges related to implementation of national policy

*(1)     Merger-related issues*

The literature survey revealed that mergers in higher education have had an adverse effect on the implementation of policy, including RPL. This is supported by the personal experiences of the researcher who has engaged with staff from institutions that are undergoing merger processes. There is the generally held idea that mergers between institutions in effective displaced RPL implementation as an item on the agenda and on the list of priorities. Norgård and Skodvin (2002: 12) found that "...a major negative consequence of merger was the deflection of academic staff attention from learning and teaching issues, resulting in 'academic stagnation'".

There were, however, mixed responses as to whether or not this was in fact the case at UKZN. One interviewee felt that this had *not* been the case at the newly formed UKZN. In fact, she felt that, rather than hinder the implementation, it had created an environment which was ripe for change and restructuring which allowed for the establishment of an office for Access and Retention. However, she did acknowledge that the merger did have an impact in terms of resource allocation in that the cost of mergers was high, and this effectively took resources away from other areas.

The qualitative responses provided in the questionnaires reveal a somewhat different picture, however. One respondent stated: "[RPL] *has not been a priority area for us in the merger period*", while another respondent said: "*My rating is largely based on the fact that we* [UKZN] *are undergoing a period of transition linked to the merger. Once policies and procedures are standardised across the university I am sure that the situation will improve ... most staff, I believe, are unfamiliar with the policies and processes (especially at Westville Campus since the policies currently being implemented are to a large extent that of the former UN)*".

In the case of DIT, the perception of the interviewees was that the merger *had* had an influence on the implementation of RPL in the sense that "*...day-to-day survival was the order of the day ... the merger shook up all the processes, mostly because it happened in a rush with no frameworks in place, so the first year put everything on hold without legitimate policy in place to bolster the good practices each institution had before the merger. Territoriality and resistance to change hamper any kind of institutional progress ... the* [merger] *kept all the institutional fora in state of perpetual resistance so nothing went through for fear of job loss*".

### (2)    Conflicting imperatives

A number of respondents raised the issue of enrolment management as a factor that impacts on RPL implementation. Some raised it in the context of the recent attempts by the Department of Education to cap student enrolment which was sited as a possible barrier to the implementation of RPL: "*Has not been a priority area for us in the merger period, also given the capping of student numbers. I think RPL was appropriate a while back when the policies were being made. But the situation has changed quite a lot since – we have too many students for instance, so RPL not such a priority*". This is evidence that RPL was being used as a mechanism to boost student enrolments as indicated in the literature survey.

There is also evidence to suggest that some academic staff are aware that some of their colleagues see RPL as a ruse to admit more students in order to guarantee their survival and therefore resist it. One respondent said: "*Senate and Faculty Boards are far too conservative and to try admit students on the basis of RPL often runs into problems with people*

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*seeing RPL as a ruse to admit students to courses for which they are not formally qualified to enter. There is a lack of flexibility in many academics especially if they perceive that other academics are trying to increase their enrolment by admitting students who have not done what they see as necessary prerequisites despite the fact that these students might have a wealth of relevant experience in the particular field".* Other respondents perceived the potential dangers of unmanaged implementation: *"RPL becomes over-used to increase student numbers without adequate monitoring".*

To sum up, there is evidence to suggest that academic staff are aware of how enrolment management impacts on RPL and vice versa, in a dynamic and ever-changing policy environment in which higher education operates.

### (3)    Policy-driven environment

The difficulties of working in a policy-driven environment such as the current higher education environment, was also identified as a constraint to the implementation of RPL: *"Challenge overload - staff being of the opinion that there is too much to do to cope with their workloads and too much emphasis on change".* This reflects some of the frustrations that academic staff are having in dealing with the various policy imperatives currently affecting higher education, as demonstrated in the literature review. One response made reference to the lack of sustainability in following through on policies as well as the exponential explosion of policies that higher education has witnessed of late as a possible constraint: *"The failure of Govt to follow through on their statements about RPL and the proliferations of conflicting policy".*

Operating in a policy-driven environment requires greater policy awareness and heightened understanding of policy and the systemic implications thereof. The general lack of awareness of policy was identified as a constraint for the successful implementation of RPL in higher education: *"Before one attempts to implement a policy, one needs to ensure that the policy itself is well understood by those that are going to implement it. Failure to this will certainly lead to the failure of the attempted implementation. The challenge would therefore be to ensure that those that are participating in the implementation (all aspects) need to be fully aware of the policy and its consequences".*

*(4)    Coordination of national policy*

The frustrations experienced by academic staff as a result of the lack of national coordination of policy is evident in the following comment: *"There is a need to have forums where all the stakeholders (community, (workplace) service, Registration or Licensing Bodies) will have to be deliberate on RPL and how we could make it work because some workplaces are refusing to recognize RPL candidates and licensing bodies are not registering RPL candidates on completion of the RPL Programs. As a result the RPL candidates are left hanging. They spend money undertaking RPL programs and then their workplaces and licensing bodies do not recognize them".*

In summary, most academic staff have not been exposed to national policy with regard to RPL policy and its implementation and this might be a factor influencing its successful implementation in higher education. The research shows that academic staff believe that the national RPL imperative is aligned to the aims and objectives of higher education and that higher education can only benefit from its implementation by providing opportunities for diversification of its student profile, allowing for articulation between different institutions and different sectors, and by providing opportunities for staff mobility within institutions. There are, however, a number of constraints in this regard and these include conflicting national imperatives, operating in a highly policy-driven environment, a lack of coordination of national policy and merger-related issues.

## 5.10    NATIONAL BENEFITS OF RPL IMPLEMENTATION

### 5.10.1 Introduction

The literature study reflects a reasonable level of optimism about the opportunities that RPL offers for both economic and educational development. Most of the literature reveals similar optimism for RPL and what its implications are for higher education and the country at large. The findings of the research support and strengthen this optimism about the benefits that RPL holds for the future of the country: most specifically, Prinsloo and Buchler (2005) talk about how RPL can contribute to the human resource development needs of the nation.

### 5.10.2 Benefits to learners

**Responses to Item 38:** The implementation of RPL policy will be beneficial to learners in the long term.

The following table shows staff perceptions of the benefit that RPL policy will have for learners in the long term.

**Table 43: Summary of responses to Item 38 by institution**

| | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N=116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 7.5% | 5.0% | 35.0% | 52.5% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 14.3% | 35.7% | 50.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 8.8% | 11.8% | 41.2% | 35.3% | 2.9% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 5.2% | 10.3% | 37.1% | 46.6% | 0.9% | 0.0% | 100% |

The overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that they felt that the implementation of RPL would benefit learners in the long term. A combined total of 83.7% indicated that they either strongly agreed or agreed with this item. Very few respondents indicated that they did not know if this was the case (10.3%), while even fewer respondents indicated that they did not agree with this item (0.9%). Respondents across the three institutions were equally positive in this regard.

This finding is further supported by the qualitative data: *"The RPL is a framework for the life long learning as would benefit individuals and companies in the long run"* and *"This policy will provide opportunities to the people, who are previously disadvantaged, to explore their potentials fully"*.

### 5.10.3 Benefit to the national skills initiative

**Responses to Item 40:** The implementation of RPL policy will have a positive impact on the national skills development initiative.

Staff perceptions of the positive impact of RPL policy on the national skills development initiative are reflected in the table below.

**Table 44: Summary of responses to Item 40 by institution**

|  | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N=116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 7.5% | 20.0% | 27.5% | 42.5% | 2.5% | 0.0% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 23.8% | 35.7% | 35.7% | 4.8% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 8.8% | 11.8% | 38.2% | 41.2% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 5.2% | 19.0% | 33.6% | 39.7% | 2.6% | 0.0% | 100% |

There was general consensus that the implementation of RPL policy would have a positive impact on the national skills development initiative. A total of 73.3% either agreed or strongly agreed with this item. While 19.0% of the respondents still did not know if this would be the case, the percentage of respondent who agreed is significantly high enough to be meaningful. Very few respondents indicated that they felt that RPL policy and implementation would not have a positive impact on the national skills development initiative (2.6%).

There was however qualitative data obtained from the open-ended section of the questionnaire that presented a contrary viewpoint: *"I think RPL policy is more of a personal benefit thing and less on National Skills Development"*. There were some even more strong responses: *"There is no guarantee that RPL is the most cost-effective way of addressing the issues raised in questions 38 to 41"*. Despite these two responses, the enthusiasm for the 'public good' imperative of RPL was overwhelmingly evident in both the qualitative and the quantitative data.

### 5.10.4 Benefit to the economy

**Responses to Item 41:** The implementation of RPL policy will have a positive impact on the national economy in the long term.

Staff views on the positive impact of RPL implementation on the national economy are provided in the following table.

**Table 45:** Summary of responses to Item 41 by institution

| | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 7.5% | 17.5% | 25.5% | 45.05 | 2.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 26.2% | 31.0% | 38.1% | 4.8% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 11.8% | 20.6% | 38.2% | 29.4% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 6.0% | 21.6% | 31.0% | 37.9% | 2.6% | 0.9% | 100% |

In a similar trend, the majority of respondents felt that the implementation of RPL policy would have a positive impact on the national economy in the long term. A combined total of 68.9% either agreed or strongly agreed with this item. Similarly, there were very few respondents who disagreed (3.5%). It was, however, somewhat unexpected that 21.6% of the respondents indicated that they did not know if RPL policy would have a positive impact on the national economy in the long run.

While the quantitative data was very positive about the benefits of RPL for the national economy, it acknowledged the benefits with conditions attached: *"Speaking purely in terms of the concept of RPL, it should be beneficial to all relevant stakeholders in the long term if it was clearly articulated to the tertiary education community; the process of application, assessment and acceptance was known by all staff; and if students were encouraged to express themselves in terms of their 'other' knowledge and experience ... I imagine that it would have a constructive impact if it was understood, utilized and implemented across all sectors of commerce and*

### 5.10.4 Benefit to the economy

**Responses to Item 41:** The implementation of RPL policy will have a positive impact on the national economy in the long term.

Staff views on the positive impact of RPL implementation on the national economy are provided in the following table.

**Table 45:** Summary of responses to Item 41 by institution

| | Non response | I don't know | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | TOTAL N = 116 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| UZ | 7.5% | 17.5% | 25.5% | 45.05 | 2.5% | 2.5% | 100% |
| DIT | 0.0% | 26.2% | 31.0% | 38.1% | 4.8% | 0.0% | 100% |
| UKZN | 11.8% | 20.6% | 38.2% | 29.4% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 100% |
| TOTAL | 6.0% | 21.6% | 31.0% | 37.9% | 2.6% | 0.9% | 100% |

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*industry. However, it does not seem to me to be a 'quick-fix' solution to any problem, whether of an educational, developmental or economic nature".*

### 5.10.5 Social redress

Although social redress was not commonly stated as a possible benefit of RPL implementation in higher education, some respondents did make reference to it: *"Considering that equitable access to Higher Education has not been a reality in South Africa, I see RPL as one of the tools of addressing the redressing of this challenge".*

## 5.11 SUMMARY OF DATA AND FINDINGS

### 5.11.1 Introduction

There was clear evidence of a dichotomy that has developed between the demands of national RPL policy and the capacity of institutions of higher education to operate as agents of delivery in terms of the implementation of national policy. In attempting to respond to the national imperative to implement RPL in higher education, the three institutions have largely implemented a model of credit exchange and there is little evidence from the data to suggest that RPL has acted as a catalyst for transformation in higher education.

While there were some institutional variances, there was consensus among the three institutions regarding higher education's responsiveness to RPL implementation. Despite the three different foci of the three institutions (i.e. university of technology, comprehensive institution and university), perceptions of academic staff, both teaching and non-teaching, at the three institutions were similar in regard to RPL implementation at their institutions.

The institutional surveys suggest that there are some differences in the ways in which the three institutions have responded to the national imperative at an official level in terms of policy and structure, but these differences have not influenced the perceptions of the respondents at the three institutions who demonstrated similar perceptions of RPL implementation. This is consistent with the finding of Breier and Burness (2003) that the

presence or absence of institutional policy is not necessarily a success indicator for RPL implementation.

There was wide-spread evidence to suggest that the majority of academic staff (both teaching and non-teaching) were not sufficiently aware of their institution's responsiveness to RPL implementation. There was also evidence to suggest that national policy on RPL implementation had not penetrated the higher education sector sufficiently.

### 5.11.2 Developing personal and institutional understandings of RPL

Academic staff (both teaching and non-teaching) at the three institutions were confident of their own understanding and expertise regarding RPL implementation. They were less confident that their respective institutions had a clear understanding of the infrastructure, resources and human resource requirements for successful implementation of RPL. There were significant numbers of respondents who indicated that they could not answer in relation to the items and this is a clear indication that there is general lack of awareness and penetration of RPL national policy imperative in the three institutions.

### 5.11.3 Curricular responsiveness

Respondents felt that curriculum at their institutions did not consciously accommodate RPL assessments or facilitate the implementation of RPL. Respondents revealed that they were not aware of many of the ways in which curriculum could facilitate and support RPL implementation. They felt that curriculum did not allow students sufficient opportunity to develop academic skills and discourse once candidates were admitted.

There was certainly evidence of the epistemological barriers referred to by Luckett (1999), Michelson (1999) and others in the literature survey. These barriers include inadequate curricular support for RPL candidates, little attempt to value other kinds of knowledge and an academic defensiveness that centres on 'quickie' qualifications and 'waving people through'.

There was no strong evidence to suggest that the former technikon sector were any more successful in their responsiveness to RPL implementation in terms of their curriculum development strategies than their university counterparts. Both sectors were grappling with similar problems and the divide is certainly more in the minds of staff rather than in their practices.

## 5.11.4 Institutional readiness

There was evidence to suggest that the three institutions have inadequate infrastructure in the following areas:

- Mechanisms for developing academic skills and literacy.
- Mechanisms for supporting students once they enter into the academy (e.g. mentoring)
- Mechanisms to track the performance of RPL candidates once in the system.

Similar institutional inadequacies were evident in the terms of the quality assurance mechanisms in place to deal with RPL assessments. While the institutions used existing moderation procedures determined by their assessment policies, these were seen by academic staff to be inadequate. There was a general lack of clarity about institutional procedures, coupled with a lack of confidence for the capacity of the institution, to deal with RPL implementation.

## 5.11.5 Systemic alignment of RPL to higher education

Generally, respondents were convinced that the implementation of RPL policy was in line with the aims and objectives of higher education, that the implementation would be beneficial to higher education and that it would provide institutions of higher education with the opportunity to diversify their student profiles. In the same vein, respondents were optimistic that the implementation of RPL would have national benefits.

There was some consensus, albeit limited, that the merger processes retarded the implementation of RPL in some ways. This is ascribed to the following aspects of the merging process:

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- Creating competing priorities within institutions.
- Changing the strategic agenda of institutions.
- Utilising large amounts of the budget.
- Job insecurity which results in resistance to change.
- Loss of strategic focus.

There is no compelling evidence to support the assumption of du Pré and Pretorius (2001) that the former technikon sector was more enthusiastic about RPL implementation than its university counterpart.

The lack of coordination of national bodies in terms of the need to fulfil the mandate of higher education in regard to the implementation of RPL (e.g. Department of Education, professional bodies and the HEQC) was proving to be a systemic barrier to the successful implementation of RPL in higher education.

### 5.11.6 Addressing the challenges of RPL implementation

The data suggests that institutions of higher education have not successfully addressed a number of the challenges posed by the implementation of RPL. These challenges include, *inter alia* and most importantly, the following:

- Resolving the conflicts posed by competing national policy (at both an institutional and a systemic level).
- Resolving the conflict in pedagogy that complicates the implementation of RPL.
- Developing common and sustainable institutional understandings of RPL.
- Allocating adequate resources (financial, physical, infrastructural and human) to the implementation of RPL.

One crucial success factor for meeting the challenges posed by the implementation of RPL that emerged was the need for an individual within the institution to champion the cause of RPL. While it is acknowledged that institutional leadership should advance various national imperatives, due to the increasing pressures on such leadership, there is a

need for someone within the institution to act as the champion of the cause. This person should however be in a fairly senior position within the institution in order to facilitate the successful implementation of policy.

### 5.11.7 Adding value to national economic imperatives

Because the implementation of RPL has had limited success, these three institutions have not been able to add value to the national skills development initiative and to national economic imperatives through its implementation strategies successfully. While there is debate in some quarters about the desirability of this market imperative for higher education, this debate did not emerge strongly in the qualitative data. Academic staff in the three institutions do believe that successful implementation will be beneficial to both higher education in general, and to the national economy at large.

In order to be successful in adding value to the national economy, institutions of higher education will need to resolve the competing tensions of a developmental agenda and a neo-liberal economic agenda (Badat 1999; Allais 2003). While the data did not develop this debate, it is nevertheless critical to the charting of a way forward for the implementation of RPL in higher education.

### 5.11.8 Institutionalisation of RPL practice

Consistent with the findings from the literature review, the research data suggests that these three institutions of higher education have had a measure of success in developing policy for the institution in regard to RPL, but that the institutionalisation of such policy has not been successful in terms of developing understandings about RPL, mainstreaming RPL and allocating resources for implementation. Part of the reason for this might be that the institutions have failed to make the move to a "post-bureaucratic" organisational form, where everyone with the organisation takes responsibility for the success of the whole (Moore 2005: 49).

There is, therefore, a strong suggestion that RPL has not become *fully* institutionalised at any of the three institutions in the sense that there is no common understanding of RPL,

its application, procedures and scope. There is also strong evidence that the penetration of RPL policy and implementation has not been fully achieved in any of the three institutions, for similar reasons. The need for such institutionalisation was identified in the qualitative data: *"Articulation or RPL within institutions in such a way that it is a fully mainstreamed activity."*

However, the question arises: Is it necessary and important that most academic staff (both teaching and non-teaching) in institutions have a certain level of understanding about RPL policy and its implementation - both nationally and institutionally? This would present a maximalist model of implementation where implementation had permeated every level of the institution. Perhaps a minimalist model, where only key stakeholders are involved would be sufficient.

These remain questions that can only be answered by the vision and mission of the individual institutions only. In the case of UZ, the notion of RPL is embedded in the mission statement and it is therefore critical that RPL implementation become an integral part of admissions and curriculum at UZ. In the case of UKZN, the emphasis within the mission statement is different but no less compelling for the RPL implementation. At DIT, the emphasis on technology and its imperative to engage with industry in terms of training make it an institutional imperative for that institution.

Finally, one respondent provided a holistic view of how RPL could be institutionalised: *"One of the problems is that decisions taken by Senate are often not operationalised at the level of departments and lecturers within faculties. Deans need to 'flag' documents approved at Senate and then make sure that their HoDs have alerted their staff to the meaning and implications of these documents. However, the recruitment policies and staff also need to be aware of policies such as RPL, which means the Dean of Students and Director of Public Relations need to take such policies on board and direct the attention of their recruiting staff to them."*

## Chapter 6

## Summary, findings and related recommendations

## 6.1   INTRODUCTION

The findings of the research, as reported in Chapters 4 and 5, can have relevance only if some concrete and operational solutions can be derived from them. It is clear that the implementation of RPL raises a number of pedagogical and other questions. These recommendations are an attempt to address some of these issues. This chapter also attempts to address some of the reasons why the implementation of RPL has not been widely successful in achieving its aims since inception in the mid 1990s. What follows is a summary of the research and its findings, together with eight broad recommendations that relate to the successful implementation of RPL policy in higher education.

## 6.2   FRAMING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review provided the theoretical framework for the research into RPL policy and implementation in higher education. It explored the extent to which RPL had been successfully implemented in higher education, as reported in the literature, as well as the theoretical models that underpin its implementation. It looked at the international trends that have enlightened the implementation process, as well as the possible barriers that exist for successful implementation. Such barriers include epistemological, physical and ideological ones. In conclusion, it reviews the possible benefits that RPL implementation would have for higher education in particular, and for the national economic imperatives in general.

## 6.3   FRAMING THE RESEARCH

The research was framed in a mixed methods approach or the third research paradigm. It used a blend of quantitative and qualitative data, gathered through a variety of methods, to explore the issues related to higher education's response, as a sector, to the national imperative of implementing RPL. The selection of three sites of higher education delivery (university, university of technology and comprehensive institution) provide for the diversity with higher education as a sector.

## 6.4    FINDINGS

### 6.4.1   Introduction

The findings have been presented thematically and the qualitative data and quantitative data have been synthesised in their analysis in order to create a narrative of higher education's response to RPL policy and implementation. The findings relate only to the three institutions of higher education in KwaZulu-Natal, but there is some indication that these may, in fact, be representative of both the institutional responses to the RPL imperative and of the perceptions of academic staff nationally.

### 6.4.2   Articulation of national policy on RPL

What becomes evident is that there has been inadequate articulation of national RPL policy and implementation within the higher education sector. This lack of clear articulation includes the perception that the RPL policy, as developed by SAQA, is not particularly useful for purposes of implementing RPL. Successful articulation would also rely on strong and positive messages from academic leadership both within institutions and nationally, which has not been the case thus far.

### 6.4.3   Institutional responses to RPL implementation

It emerges that institutions have, in many cases, put policy in place for RPL implementation, or are in the process of doing it. However, this policy is not being implemented with any rigour or vigour. There is a somewhat half-hearted attempt to appease national agencies calling for its implementation. Few resources have been allocated for this purpose, there is little by way of recruitment and marketing and the extent of RPL implementation remains limited despite years of legislative history and pronouncements.

Further indicators of the lack of commitment to the implementation of RPL at an institutional level, are the lack of academic support provided to RPL candidates, the lack of effective tracking mechanisms for RPL implementation and the unclear procedures that exist for RPL implementation.

### 6.4.4 Academic staff perceptions of RPL policy and implementation

It is clear that academic staff, both in teaching and in non-teaching positions, have differing understandings of RPL depending on both their institution and their academic discipline. These differing understandings have resulted in the inability of institutions to quantify the extent of RPL implementation within the institutions. There are a significant number of areas in which academic staff do not know about their respective institutions' policy and procedures for RPL implementation. Many of them are also highly critical of some of their colleagues who focus rigidly on the subject matter that has been 'taught' while effectively ignoring 'real' practical experience and learning that has happened outside of the classroom.

### 6.4.5 Institutionalisation of RPL

What emerges is that RPL has not been institutionalised in the sense that it should have permeated into every aspect of the institution: the curriculum, qualification structures, admission policies, academic support structures and assessment practices. While institutional mission statements might determine the extent to which RPL is a focus area for any particular institution, institutions have domesticated RPL policy by tailoring it to the needs of the institution's historical ethos.

### 6.4.6 Perceived barriers to implementation

Academic staff, generally, feel that their respective institutions are not well equipped to implement RPL in terms of expertise, qualification structures, methods of teaching and assessment and current conceptualisation of knowledge production. There is also strong evidence that the traditional approaches to knowledge production might, in effect, serve as invisible barriers to RPL implementation. Evidence of academic territorialism is further confirmation that there are many and varied barriers to RPL implementation. The research highlighted a number of these barriers which include systemic barriers such as conflicting regulations and competing pedagogies.

### 6.4.7 Benefits of RPL implementation

Higher education needs little convincing that RPL implementation can be mutually beneficial for both the sector and the national economy and skills development initiative. How those benefits can be unlocked, however, is not as clear.

## 6.5 CLOSING THE GAP: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL RPL IMPLEMENTATION

### 6.5.1 Changing curriculum to accommodate RPL

*(1)    Curriculum enquiry*

Arising from the inadequacies identified by the research in the curriculum with regard to facilitating RPL, the first and most important recommendation is the need to couple RPL implementation with an enquiry into curriculum and the way in which it is currently perceived in institutions of higher education. Research shows that the current models of curriculum in higher education are not conducive to the implementation of RPL in ways envisaged in the policy documents. There is a very weak alignment between curriculum and the kinds of features required to strengthen RPL implementation.

Following Harris' (1999: 40) claim that RPL cannot simply be "bolted on to" existing curricula, more structured attempts need to be made to ensure that RPL implementation is mainstreamed into the curriculum at all levels: at entry levels and exit levels, and in curricular support. This research supports the recommendation of Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 3) that a holistic framework for RPL implementation needs to see RPL as "…a progressive paradigm of educational and social practices, and not just a set of 'add-on' procedures".

Based on the finding that the dominant curriculum within institutions of higher education remains a traditional one that gives credence to a paper-based recognition of learning, further investigation into the power relationships of educational institutions and into the traditional approaches to knowledge production that dominate higher education, is required to understand the curricular needs of RPL candidates fully. There is a very real need to investigate the advantages of moving from Mode 1 knowledge to Mode 2

knowledge. The research (through the literature survey) suggests that successful implementation of RPL depends on moving from Gibbons (1994) Mode 1 Knowledge (traditional disciplinary knowledge) to Mode 2 knowledge (socially diffuse and applied knowledge across disciplines and social contexts) (Harris 1999). An investigation into how this can best be achieved is recommended.

This enquiry should be extended to include a thorough interrogation of the kinds of assessments used in higher education. The research shows that the current approaches to assessment (including evidence of rote learning) are not conducive to RPL practices either at the entry level or within programmes.

*(2)    RPL as social practice within the curriculum*

The recommended curricular changes include the need to see RPL as a social and political practice as well as an educational one. There is however a perception, consistent with the findings of Harris (1999), that RPL practice has been sentimentalised by the social functions that RPL is being required to fulfil. Nevertheless, there is a need to see RPL as closely bound to context. RPL has political, social, economic, historical and cultural contexts and these need to be explored in terms of the ways in which these contexts can enhance the implementation of RPL.

*(3)    Terminology related to RPL*

It is clear that different institutions define RPL differently. Also, individual's personal understandings of RPL are linked to the ways in which their institutions define RPL. Much of the debate around how RPL is defined can be understood through the investigation of different models of curriculum development, as well as alternative approaches to teaching, learning and assessment.

*(4)    Facilitating structures*

A further requirement in terms of curriculum that facilitates RPL, is the need for flexible and facilitating curriculum structures that allow students to enter and leave at different stages without having to make continual linear progression. Credit-based modular

models of curriculum allow for greater flexibility with regard to RPL and enhanced articulation opportunities than do linear models of curriculum.

*(5)    Epistemological access through curriculum*

The research findings suggest that epistemology can act as a barrier to successful RPL implementation. Challenging (and changing) the curriculum acknowledges the need to provide epistemological access to the curriculum for RPL candidates. While institutions claim to be widening their access to students from diverse backgrounds, their curriculum and insistence on students' acquisition of an academic discourse, often acts as a gate-keeping mechanism for such students: "We are challenged to revisit the very epistemological assumptions we have about knowledge and its mode of application, and to reconsider the roles of legitimization we usurp for ourselves in our multiplicity of roles as academics, 'champions', activists, policy-developers and so on" (Prinsloo & Buchler 2005 : 22).

Consistent with the findings of Harris (1999), there are some potentially excluding factors about RPL that need to be highlighted and overcome in the attempt to implement RPL policy successfully. Some ways in which these excluding factors can be addressed is through acknowledging the need to provide structured opportunities for the development of academic skills and literacy within the mainstream teaching of disciplines, mentoring programmes and a curriculum structure that facilitates entry and exit from programmes in ways that will not act as deterrents to RPL candidates.

*(6)    Culture of awareness in relation to curriculum*

The development of a culture of awareness in RPL related areas, including a sensitivity of staff to acknowledge and value learning that does not necessarily conform to the norms of traditional knowledge systems, is a cornerstone of successful RPL implementation.

The need to develop such a culture is easy to identify. More difficult, is the need to identify how that development is best done. Such awareness can only be promoted through thoughtful and structured staff development programmes that expose academic

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staff to such matters of curriculum, the fostering of ongoing debate between academics in regard to curriculum issues, and by valuing research that focuses on teaching and learning issues such as these.

### 6.5.2 Developing institutional capacity

Arising from the research finding that institutions have insufficient institutional capacity to implement RPL successfully, the second recommendation relates to the need to develop such capacity in higher education in order to speed up the implementation of RPL and to begin to deliver on the social obligation. Developing such capacity involves the development of suitable infrastructure within the institution and includes some of the features that follow.

### *(1)   Buy-in from academic leadership of institutions*

The development of institutional capacity to implement RPL successfully and in ways that are aligned with the principles and practices of the newly reconfigured higher education landscape, requires the commitment of institutional leadership to the process in all its various aspects: philosophically, organisationally and financially. Academic leadership needs to reassess their mission statements in regard to the successful implementation of RPL and their current capacity to implement RPL.

### *(2)   Institutional audit*

While the research suggests that there is generally insufficient capacity within the institutions to implement RPL, there is also evidence to suggest that some expertise does reside within institutions that is not being adequately tapped. There is evidence to suggest that expertise is lying 'fallow' and could be 'ploughed' in order to process a 'crop' of successful RPL candidates. A comprehensive and thorough audit of the institutions is required to establish where such expertise lies and how it can be most effectively used in the best interests of the institutions.

*(3)     Development of staff capacity*

The development of staff capacity within departments in areas related to the implementation of RPL is critical to the successful implementation of RPL. Such development starts with a clear understanding of policy and includes the capacity to make necessary curriculum changes, to act as assessors and moderators in specialised ways, to reflect critically on their practices, to act as RPL advisors and facilitators. Attempts need to be made to demystify RPL in higher education and this might also counter some of the resistance that academic staff demonstrate to the implementation of RPL.

One aspect related to staff development that requires further investigation is the issue of workloads that was raised on a number of occasions in the research. Academic staff claim to have insufficient time to deal with RPL in addition to their regular academic work. In the first instance, staff should be encouraged to see RPL implementation as part of, rather than additional to, their academic work. The only feasible way of doing this is to factor transformational initiatives into workload calculations. Furthermore, higher education needs to subject itself to an appropriate time and motion study in order to ascertain the extent of work overload.

There has been little by way of sectoral capacity development in the field of RPL implementation, and the introduction of such capacity development might signal that academic leadership is making a commitment to RPL implementation in higher education. To date most of the capacity development in the area of RPL has been done by Sector Education and Training Authorities, SAQA and NGOs. Perhaps the time is ripe for professional organisations like Higher Education South Africa and the HEQC to initiative capacity building in the field of RPL.

*(4)     Organisational structures*

The research reveals the inadequacies of institutions in providing the necessary infrastructure to implement RPL successfully. The development of the internal mechanisms for dealing with RPL requests in a rigorous and systematic manner within the organisational structure are essential to successful implementation of RPL policy

within institutions of higher education. This should be coupled with the development of mechanisms to track the progress of RPL candidates through the institution (not for the purposes of stigmatisation but rather for development and research purposes).

Furthermore, the location of RPL coordination within institutions needs to be re-examined. While there can be no intention to prescribe to institutions about this location, until RPL co-ordination is able to find a natural home it will continue to be a marginalised and personality-driven phenomenon.

## (5) Third stream income generation[5]

One avenue that needs to be explored is the possibility of using third stream income to fund the implementation of RPL. This possibility might appear to be alien to the nature of institutions of higher education (to say nothing of unpalatable) but such income has been identified by a number of successful institutions as having a role to play in funding the 'nice-to-have's' of education.

## (6) Provision of necessary resources

Human resources, in the form of dedicated RPL staff, financial and physical resources, at a threshold level, are required to kick start the implementation of RPL and these should be budgeted for before implementation. The issue of cost recovery versus social responsibility should be addressed as a matter of urgency. Well-resourced institutions need to examine their social responsiveness in regard to the cost recovery for RPL candidates. Poorly resourced institutions need to be able to draw on funding incentives and a more favourable funding structure in order to ensure that the costs for implementing RPL are recovered.

## (7) Development of academic support systems

The research reveals that successful implementation of RPL policy does not end with the entry of such candidates to the system. It necessitates the development of academic

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[5] Third stream income is revenue generated by institutions of higher education through alternative strategies such as commissioned research and the offering of short courses.

systems to support RPL candidates within the educational system. This support requires overt attempts on the part of lecturers and the institution at large to facilitate students' access into the relevant academic discourse.

The research reveals that most academic staff believe that academic development provisions for student are inadequate. Further resourcing of academic development is required to ensure that RPL candidates are adequately supported once they enter the system. Further investigation is required to establish appropriate models for support of RPL candidates academically, given their academic profile which is quite different to that of school-leavers.

*(8)     Developing and maturing quality management systems*
While this was not strong, there was some evidence of academic staff being concerned with standards in relation to RPL. One way of dealing with such concerns is to have recourse to robust quality assurance systems within institutions. While it might be adequate, as an interim arrangement, to utilise the existing arrangements, these will prove to be inadequate if RPL implementation is institutionalised and mainstreamed. Dedicated quality assurance arrangements are required for successful implementation of RPL practices.

Because of the reliance on existing quality assurance mechanisms, these systems will need to be strengthened in order to meet the stringent requirements of the HEQC. It should be noted that quality assurance in general is a relatively new phenomenon for many institutions of higher education (some of which are included in this study) and that quality assurance systems will need to be able to evolve in response to the changing higher education environment.

*(9)     Establishment of inter-institutional collaboration*
The research identified the need for institutions of higher education to collaborate in regard to RPL policy and implementation. This is one way in which the capacity of individual institutions can be enhanced. Such inter-institutional collaboration might take

the form of a regional clearing house for all RPL applications in the province. However, such a venture requires a great deal of investigation in order to ensure that it is able to delivery the desired outcomes for the institutions in the region.

While some regions have decided to join resources to deal with the access requests across all the member institutions, this goal has not been achieved in KwaZulu-Natal. Such regional and inter-institutional collaboration would benefit KwaZulu-Natal. The benefits of such inter-institutional collaborate are indicated by SAQA (2004a) as follows:

- ❑ Maintaining low costs.
- ❑ Discouraging competition among institutions in the region.
- ❑ Strengthening the regional economy and the social well being of the local environment.
- ❑ Regenerating and building new skills.
- ❑ Mobilising significant strategic strengths of institutions.

In addition, there are other benefits that have been identified, which are not directly related to cost. These include:

- ❑ Clear articulation of programmes between education bands and institutions.
- ❑ Efficient transfer of credits.
- ❑ Agreement on the levels and minimum requirements for candidates seeking credits for particular qualifications.
- ❑ Coherent quality assurance.
- ❑ Retention of institutional autonomy by dealing with generic issues rather than content (SAQA 2004a).

### 6.5.3 Closing the gap between theory and practice

*(1) Institutions of higher education as delivery agents*

The next recommendation relates to the need to close the gap between theory and practice and between expectations and reality. The research provides strong evidence to suggest that there is a mismatch between the demands of the national imperative for implementing RPL and the capacity of institutions to act as delivery agents.

Furthermore, the research shows that although in theory RPL is seen to be potentially emancipating, transformative and socially inclusive, it is often operationalised in ways that undermine these noble goals. This gap needs to be closed through a means that supports the students for which RPL was intended - those who have previously been marginalised.

## (2)    Realignment of curriculum and RPL policy

The closing of the gap between theory and practice also requires the (re)conceptualisation of RPL for the South African context through further applied research, case study development and models of best practice.  Part of this reconceptualisation necessitates a review by SAQA of the feasibility, practicality and sustainability of higher education to address the national imperative of enhancing the development of skills in South Africa.

Closing the gap between theory and practice links to the two previous recommendations in that it depends on closer alignment of curriculum and RPL policy (through rigorous interrogation) as well as the need to address the resource requirements associated with the implementation of RPL.

## (3)    Strategic focus

Closing the gap also means that institutions need to understand the implication of their lofty mission statements that are developed in strategic planning sessions in luxury venues, for everyday practice at their institutions. It means aligning all aspects of their practice to the philosophy they claim as their own.  Institutions need to revisit their mission statements and how these are operationalised on a day-to-day basis.

A further issue regarding strategic focus is the need to resolve some of the tensions that the research reports in terms of development and the neo-liberal economic agenda. Higher education (and by implications institutions) need to decide on which of the two strategic foci they wish to adopt. Without this decision, the two imperatives will compete at the expense of RPL implementation.

### 6.5. 4  Removing systemic barriers to RPL implementation

*(1)      Creating an enabling policy framework*

Research shows that creating a policy framework is not sufficient in itself to successful implementation. This view is also supported by the research of Prinsloo and Buchler (2005). There are indeed other factors that contribute to making the framework enabling. This includes creating a framework that is feasible, practical and well articulated. Policy makers need to take note of the fact that there is a common perception that RPL policy is not clearly articulated in the higher education sector and this perception may well be held by other sectors in education and training as well.

An aspect of such an enabling framework includes resolving issues related to the Department of Education stance on the offering of certificates and diplomas at universities. Multiple entry and exit levels, as facilitated by certificates and diplomas as exit points on programmes, is one mechanism through which flexibility can be achieved. However, this issue remains unresolved.

*(2)      Advocacy*

Despite the proliferation of legislation that legitimises RPL policy and its implementation as revealed through the literature review, the research shows that the articulation of RPL as a national imperative has been unsuccessful in the higher education sector. A corollary to the creation of enabling policy frameworks is the need to advance policy implementation through an ongoing advocacy programme and the establishment of networks. Prinsloo and Buchler (2005: 20) support this recommendation: "Certainly, our experience in South Africa has shown that, even where RPL has been written into policy frameworks and legislation, the need for ongoing advocacy work and the establishment of networks is critical".

Part of this advocacy is strengthening and developing the alignment of RPL policy and implementation with the aims and objectives of higher education. The research shows that academic staff do not see RPL to be in direct opposition to the aims of higher education and this concept needs to be strengthened. In addition, the research showed

that academic staff are unanimous in recognising the benefits of RPL implementation for the national economy and this needs to be developed and strengthened through meaningful engagement between academics and policy-makers. Higher education needs to be regarded as contributing and adding value to the national economic imperatives.

*(3)    Positive signal from academic leadership*

One of the threads that runs through the literature survey and the current study is that there has been no definitive signal from academic leadership of higher education to indicate that higher education should be heeding the call for RPL. Professional bodies that represent the academic leadership of higher education (such as HESA and CHE) have not, to date, given any strong indications that they have accepted the national imperative to encourage the implementation of RPL in institutions of higher education. Until this happens, RPL is destined to linger on the fringes of academia.

*(4)    Stablising the higher education environment*

There is no doubt that the process of merging institutions has had adverse effects on the implementation of RPL in higher education. Some institutions have had to transform their *modus operandi* from being a university to being a comprehensive institution that offers a wide range of programmes to cater for a diverse student population.

The research shows that the sector is generally 'change-fatigued'. So many changes have taken place in higher education over the past decade that academic staff have adopted a cautious 'wait-and-see' approach to any new changes that are suggested. Academic leadership needs to stabilise the sector and prioritise areas for attention. Such stability will create a climate in which limited changes can take place in meaningful ways.

### 6.5.5    Managing enrolments

The literature survey and the research reveal that student enrolments are increasing at a rapid rate and that RPL candidates might prove to be the victim of an oversupply of adequately certificated students entering the system. In the light of the Department of Education's attempt to check this unplanned growth through control mechanisms (both

systemically and institutionally), it will be necessary to ring-fence a percentage of enrolment numbers to ensure that potential RPL candidates are not prejudiced by the system. Furthermore, the Department of Education needs to acknowledge its commitment to redress and equity through its enrolment planning strategies that foster and promote RPL practices.

### 6.5.6    Providing funding incentives

*(1)     Institutional funding*

The literature survey and the research show that unless some funding incentives, on the part of government, are provided to encourage the implementation of RPL, there is going to be little motivation for institutions to take the imperative seriously, other than to fulfil their claims to social responsiveness.

Furthermore, there is evidence of institutions of higher education being cash-strapped and stretched in terms of resources. RPL is resource-intense at all levels, regardless of the model that is adopted. Providing funding incentives for RPL has another function as well. The literature survey suggests that funding is a key incentive for change and transformation and the provision of such incentives would provide a strong signal from the Department of Education that it values and rewards RPL practices.

*(2)     Student financial support*

As suggested earlier, the research shows that the take-up of RPL has often been by those students who have already been advantaged in some way. However, if RPL is to touch people who have been marginalised, institutions will have to consider funding such students. These are often people who cannot afford to study fulltime as they are often supporting families.

### 6.5.7    Resolving legislative incoherence

*(1)     Matriculation certificates and entry into higher education*

SAQA (2004a) claims that to date, very few providers have engaged with the Matriculation Board on the issue of the matriculation certificate as a prerequisite for entry

into higher education. There is a commonly held notion that this challenge is not the responsibility of the individual provider, but should rather be taken up by a national body. The newly formed Higher Education South Africa (HESA), formed out of the previous South African University Vice Chancellors' Association (SAUVCA) and the Committee for Technikon Principals (CTP) may be well-placed to do this. It also remains to be seen how the new school leaving Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) which will come into being in 2008, will be used as a requirement for entry into higher education.

*(2)* *Fifty percent residency clause*

The research shows that the 50% residency clause works in direct opposition to the implementation of RPL policy. In order to allow for more than 50% of a qualification to be awarded, this clause needs to be amended. In terms of national RPL, there should be nothing to prevent a full qualification being awarded. This clause is linked to funding issues and could, in part, be resolved by further funding at the output stage.

*(3)* *Articulation between institutions and sectors*

One of the opportunities that was identified for RPL implementation was the articulation of learning between institutions and different sectors of education and training. A primary function of the NQF is to facilitate articulation between institutions, which is to be achieved through an agreed-upon national qualification framework and level descriptors. However, the NQF is set to change in the near future with the finalisation of the HEQF and the level descriptors are yet to be accepted as final. These two aspects of the national education landscape make articulation between institutions difficult and, unless these two elements stabilise further attempts to improve articulation of learning across institutions whether through RPL or other means, will be severely impeded.

*(4)* *Review of role of the Matriculation Board*

The research shows that there is a common perception that the current Matriculation Board is one of the gate-keeping mechanisms utilised by higher education to exclude students. While Kotecha (2001) claims that this perception is not supported by the facts,

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a general review of the Matriculation Board and its current mandate, roles and functions could serve to clarify some of the issues regarding the perceived exclusionary nature of higher education.

## (5)     *Review of role of Umalusi*

The role of Umalusi, as an ETQA for the general and further education sector, is one that requires some consideration in relation to the admission requirements of students entering higher education. The research shows that the current schooling sector does not deliver on it responsibility of preparing adequate numbers of students for study in higher education. Once the Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) is in place, more attention will need to be given to the ways in which non-traditional students enter higher education (Amoore 2001a). Umalusi will have to consider ways of providing access routes for mature students and who seek entry through RPL.

## (6)     *Coordination of national authorities*

The research shows that there is a disjuncture between the various national bodies that regulate education and training in South Africa and more particularly in higher education. While SAQA is responsible for a large proportion of the national guidelines on RPL policy and its implementation, other stakeholders in the system (such as the Department of Education and the HEQC) also have authority in terms of funding (Department of Education) and quality assurance (HEQC). In addition, there are professional bodies (such as the South African Nursing Council) that regulate activities in higher education. Unless these bodies all concur on policy, implementation and practice, it is going to result in the kinds of tensions that are evident in the research.

## (7)     *Revision of SAQA policy on RPL*

The research suggests that the SAQA policy on RPL might not be sufficiently applicable in the higher education sector. A review of the policy, in terms of the ways in which it is being implemented in higher education, would be critical to a revision of the policy in the future.

### 6.5.8 Exploiting the benefits of RPL

*(1)    Benefits for higher education*

Given that the sector believes that RPL policy and implementation are aligned to the aims and objectives of higher education, and that higher education can benefit from RPL by diversifying its student profile, more effort should be expended on strengthening this alignment in ways that would be mutually benefit to both learners and to higher education. Such advancement would be best placed in the hands of academic leadership in higher education (e.g. Vice Chancellors, professional associations and professional bodies).

*(2)    Broad national economic imperatives*

There is firm evidence to suggest that academic staff need little convincing of the benefits that RPL policy and implementation will have on national economic imperatives. However, more needs to be done in terms of bring that ideal to fruition. This can be achieved through the cooperation of national agencies involved in education and training and skills development, such as the Department of Education and the Department of Labour.

## 6.6    FURTHER RESEARCH

### 6.6.1    Further audits of RPL practice

There is always a need for further research in any area under investigation. Most research produces more questions than answers. While numerous institutional audits of RPL practice have been conducted, the researcher is of the opinion that there is not *one* of these that has been sufficiently thorough and comprehensive enough to take the process forward. Part of the reason for this inefficiency is the different operational definitions of research that exist within the sector. A regional focus may allow for the in-depth kinds of analysis required to indicate areas of bottlenecking within institutions in regard to RPL policy.

### 6.6.2 Models of best practice

Models of best practice in RPL policy implementation do exist in the sector, although the evidence suggests more of diversity and distinctness than best practice. Best practices that do exist need to be researched and disseminated in order to improve practice within the sector. Earmarked funding needs to be made available for this purpose.

### 6.6.3 Dedicated annual conference

One of the mechanisms for promoting research in a particular area is through the production and dissemination of research by conferencing. This mechanism for research dissemination creates the opportunities to network and for researchers to connect with other researchers working in similar areas. Conferences also create the opportunity to raise awareness levels. A dedicated annual conference on RPL will allow for this research and its dissemination.

### 6.6.4 Professional body interest groups

A possibility for further research into RPL-related matters in higher education exists through the development of a special interest group for RPL, within a professional organisation, such as the newly formed Higher Education Learning and Teaching Association of South Africa.

### 6.6.5 Journal dedicated to RPL practice

While articles and papers on RPL are accepted by most journals of education, the creation of a dedicated journal for RPL research would further enhance the credibility of the research. Such a journal would require start-up funding but would provide a clear signal that RPL is firmly on the agenda of education and training in general. It would also serve to increase the interest of higher education sector, which has research as one of its three cornerstones, in RPL practices. Furthermore, it would serve to professionalise and demystify the practices of RPL for hardcore academics. It would be a forum through which some of the scepticism surrounding RPL policy and its implementation, as evidenced in the research, could be addressed.

## 6.7 CONCLUSION

Through the analysis and presentation of the data, the research questions posed at the commencement of the study have been answered to the extent to which 'answers' are available. The research has explored the challenges facing higher education in terms of RPL policy and implementation, while also showing that higher education has been ineffectual in addressing a number of these problems. Despite these challenges and the lack of capacity to address them, the research demonstrates that higher education believes that there are numerous opportunities that can be created through successful RPL implementation and that these need to be explored.

The RPL agenda is lagging behind its own implementation timeframes. There has been very little activity around RPL in higher education since the period 1999 - 2000 when there was a flourish of activity in regard to RPL.

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that RPL has not been institutionalised. The current half-hearted attempts at implementation are not highly successful and are a waste of the resources, however few, that are currently being allocated to the process and these could be better spent elsewhere. The most powerful recommendation that can be drawn from this research is the following: unless higher education is prepared to make a commitment to the implementation of RPL through its allocation of resources, institutionally and nationally, it should be taken off the higher education agenda.

However, if RPL were to be taken off the agenda of higher education, a great deal would be lost to the sector in terms of, *inter alia*, the opportunity to transform curriculum, the opportunity to reduce the time and costs of training and education, and the opportunity to continue providing redress for people affected by apartheid.

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# RPL POLICY AND IMPLEMENTATION

## INSTITUTIONAL INFORMATION

| 1. | Institution | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 2. | Name of person | |
| 3. | Position of person in institution | |

| **POLICY** | | |
| --- | --- | --- |

| 4 | What was the process used to draft the policy? | | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 5. | Can you describe the process by which the policy was drafted? | | |
| 6. | What is its current status? | Draft | |
| | | Accepted but not implemented | |
| | | Accepted and implemented | |
| | | Accepted and piloted | |
| | | Accepted, revised and implemented | |
| 7. | Location of policy | Centre for RPL | |
| | | Unit | |
| | | Department | |
| | | Other | |
| 8. | Scope of policy | Transfer of credits | |
| | | Admission without minimum requirements | |
| | | Advanced standing in a programme | |
| | | Full qualification | |
| | | Other | |
| 9. | Does your institution apply the 50 % residency clause? | | |
| 10. | How do you deal with exemption status of RPL candidates? | | |

| | IMPLEMENTATION | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 11. | How many students were accepted to your institution through RPL in 2003? | Unable to say | | |
| | | Undergraduate | | |
| | | Postgraduate | | |
| | | Other | | |
| 12. | How many students were accepted to your institution through RPL in 2004? | Unable to say | | |
| | | Undergraduate | | |
| | | Postgraduate | | |
| | | Other | | |
| 13. | Programmes / professions | | | No of students |
| | | Medical or related | | |
| | | Legal | | |
| | | Social work | | |
| | | Teacher education | | |
| | | Humanities | | |
| | | Commerce | | |
| | | Sciences | | |
| | | Other (specify) | | |
| 14. | How many students do you anticipate being involved in RPL in the future? | 2005 (Number of students) | 2006 (Number of students) | |
| | | | | |
| 15. | How many staff are currently involved in the implementation of RPL? | Location of staff member | No of staff | |
| | | | PT | FT |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| | | | | |
| 16. | What was the estimated expenditure on RPL policy and implementation in 2004 budget? | Direct costs | Indirect costs | |
| | | | | |
| | | Unable to say | | |
| 17. | How many staff have received formal training in RPL policy and implementation? | Number of staff | | |
| | | Unable to say | | |

| 18. | What kinds of training was this? | Internal training course | |
| | | CTP training course | |
| | | External provider course | |
| | | Conferences | |
| | | *Ad hoc* workshops and Seminars | |
| | | Other | |
| 19. | What would you say motivated your institution to develop this policy? | | |
| 20. | How successful has your institution's approach to RPL been (in your opinion)? | | |

### ASSESSMENT OF COMPETENCE

| 21. | What kinds of assessment methods do you use to assess the competence of your RPL candidates? | Portfolio development | |
| | | Challenge tests | |
| | | Other: (specify) | |
| 22. | If the method uses portfolio assessment, who assists the candidate in this development? | | |

## QUALITY ASSURANCE

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 23 | What quality assurance mechanisms do you use to ensure the quality of your RPL applicants? | Tracking of RPL candidates within the system | |
| | | Moderation of RPL assessment | |
| | | Impact studies | |
| | | Other | |
| 24 | What additional support (over and above those already provided to first time students) do you provide to RPL candidates once they enter the system? | Specialised orientation | |
| | | Academic literacy courses | |
| | | Bridging courses | |
| | | Mentoring | |
| | | Other: (specify) | |
| 25. | Has it been possible to track the success rates of RPL candidates as yet? | | |
| 26. | If so, how do these rates compare to candidates who enter through conventional routes? | | |

# Higher Education Response to Recognition of Prior Learning Implementation

## Questionnaire

---

**Background and guidelines:**

I am gathering data on <u>current understandings and perceptions of staff</u> in higher education regarding the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy at three sites of delivery: University of Zululand, University of KwaZulu-Natal and the Durban Institute of Technology.

It is not the purpose of this questionnaire to obtain factual information regarding the status of RPL policy and implementation at your institution. (This information will be obtained by means of an institutional survey that will be completed by someone within each institution who has been involved in the process of developing and implementing policy.) Therefore please do not be concerned if there are a number of questions of which you have no knowledge and thus need to answer "I don't know". Please try to respond in some way to every question though.

I would be grateful if you would assist by completing this questionnaire. The questionnaire should take between 15 and 30 minutes to complete, depending on the amount of open-ended questions you choose to respond to.

You may choose to remain anonymous; however if you would like to receive individual feedback on the research, please provide your name and email address in the space provided below.

You may submit this questionnaire in a variety of ways:
- in person,

- by email (to **lsuther@pan.uzulu.ac.za**)

- by fax (**035.902.6595**) or

- by post: **Lee Sutherland**
  **University of Zululand**
  **Private Bag X 1001**
  **Kwadlangezwa**
  **3886**

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**Name (optional):**

**Email address (optional):**

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**Are you prepared to be interviewed in person regarding the issues raised in the questionnaire?**

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| | | Section A: Biographical information | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **Institution** | | | |
| 2 | **Position in institution** | | X | |
| | | Head of school | | |
| | | Head of unit | | |
| | | Dean | | |
| | | Senior Professor | | |
| | | Professor | | |
| | | Ass Professor | | |
| | | Senior Lecturer | | |
| | | Lecturer | | |
| | | Other (Please specify) | | |
| 3 | **Nature of position** | Academic teaching staff | | |
| | | Academic non-teaching staff | | |

| | | | X |
|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | **Years experience in higher education** | | X |
| | | 1 - 5 years | |
| | | 6 - 10 years | |
| | | 11 - 15 years | |
| | | More than 15 years | |
| 5 | **Highest educational qualification** | Honours | |
| | | Masters | |
| | | Doctorate | |
| | | Post doctoral | |
| | | Other (Please specify) | |
| 6 | **Gender** | Female | |
| | | Male | |

| Section B: Understanding of RPL and its required procedures | | I don't know | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 7 | I understand clearly what is meant by the concept RPL. | | | | | |
| 8 | Staff at my institution have a clear understanding of RPL. | | | | | |
| 9 | I understand what procedures are required for RPL implementation at my institution. | | | | | |
| 10 | My institution and its staff understand clearly what procedures are required for RPL implementation. | | | | | |
| 11 | My institution is ready to implement RPL policy and offer RPL assessments. | | | | | |
| 12 | My institution has the mechanisms to track the performance of RPL candidates, for developmental purposes, once they enter the institution. | | | | | |
| | Comments: | | | | | |

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| Section E: Quality Assurance | | I don't know | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 22 | My institution and its staff understand the demands of implementing RPL in terms of moderation requirements. | | | | | |
| 23 | My institution has successfully dealt with RPL cases in the past. | | | | | |
| 24 | My institution has clear procedures for dealing with RPL appeals. | | | | | |
| 25 | My institution can provide candidates with the necessary assistance in gathering and presenting evidence for RPL assessment purposes. | | | | | |
| | Comments: | | | | | |

| Section F: Curricular responsiveness | | I don't know | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26 | Curriculum at my institution accommodates RPL by acknowledging the experiences that students bring to the learning. | | | | | |
| 27 | Curriculum at my institution is developed in such a way to facilitate the assessment of prior learning. | | | | | |
| 28 | Curriculum at my institution is outcomes compliant and this facilitates the assessment of RPL. | | | | | |
| 29 | Curriculum at my institution provides support for RPL candidates after they enter the institution. | | | | | |
| 30 | Curriculum at my institution accommodates RPL by having multiple entry and exit levels. | | | | | |
| 31 | Curriculum at my institution will be flexible enough to allow RPL candidates the opportunity to develop the skills and academic discourse that they might not already have to be successful in higher education. | | | | | |
| 32 | Curriculum at my institution values all kinds of knowledge (formally acquired and informally acquired) equally. | | | | | |
| | Comments: | | | | | |

| Section F: Curricular responsiveness | | I don't know | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 26 | Curriculum at my institution accommodates RPL by acknowledging the experiences that students bring to the learning. | | | | | |
| 27 | Curriculum at my institution is developed in such a way to facilitate the assessment of prior learning. | | | | | |
| 28 | Curriculum at my institution is outcomes compliant and this facilitates the assessment of RPL. | | | | | |
| 29 | Curriculum at my institution provides support for RPL candidates after they enter the institution. | | | | | |
| 30 | Curriculum at my institution accommodates RPL by having multiple entry and exit levels. | | | | | |
| 31 | Curriculum at my institution will be flexible enough to allow RPL candidates the opportunity to develop the skills and academic discourse that they might not already have to be successful in higher education. | | | | | |
| 32 | Curriculum at my institution values all kinds of knowledge (formally acquired and informally acquired) equally. | | | | | |
| | Comments: | | | | | |

| Section G: National policy in relation to higher education | | I don't know | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 33 | National policy on RPL policy and implementation is clearly articulated. | | | | | |
| 34 | National policy on RPL is easy to implement in higher education. | | | | | |
| 35 | Implementing RPL policy is appropriate to the current aims and objectives of higher education. | | | | | |
| 36 | The implementation of RPL policy will be beneficial to higher education in the long term. | | | | | |
| 37 | The implementation of RPL policy will allow institutions of higher education to diversify their student profiles. | | | | | |
| | Comments: | | | | | |

| Section H: National benefits of RPL | | I don't know | Strongly agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 38 | The implementation of RPL policy will be beneficial to learners in the long term. | | | | | |
| 39 | The implementation of RPL policy will be beneficial to institutions of higher education in the long term | | | | | |
| 40 | The implementation of RPL policy will have a positive impact on the national skills development initiative. | | | | | |
| 41 | The implementation of RPL policy will have a positive impact on the national economy in the long term. | | | | | |
| | Comments: | | | | | |

| Section I: Constraints | |
|---|---|
| 42 | What do you see as being the constraints to and challenges for implementation of RPL policy? |
| | |
| 43 | Further comments: (use an additional page if necessary) |
| | |

1.  Is it "okay" to use the word 'instructions'? Perhaps Background? Is there enough information here? Have I covered all the ethical concerns?

2.  Does "positions" cover all or almost all possibilities for people who might fill in the questionnaire? (I don't think that VCs or DVCs will complete the questionnaire.) Do I need to know if they are 'academics' or 'support staff' (like Academic Development Staff)

3.  Are the grouping in Years Experience valid? i.e. Will the data that I get not be skewed by my random clustering of years?

4.  Are there any questions that you feel are ambiguous / unclear / don't make sense? Please specify.

5.  Is the length of questionnaire suitable? How long did you take to complete this questionnaire? Could you see other people in your institution being willing to complete a questionnaire of this length and nature?

6.  Do you have any comments on the layout of the questionnaire? Is it easy to read and clearly formatted?

7.  The target group of respondents is academics (both with teaching responsibilities and without) in tertiary institutions in KZN. Are the questions suitably pitched at this group?

8.  Is the language and terminology accessible to all of the target group?

9. Do you have any other comments on the questionnaire?

# RECORD OF QUALITATIVE RESPONSES OBTAINED FROM QUESTIONNAIRE

## SECTION B: UNDERSTANDING OF RPL AND ITS REQUIRED PROCEDURES

- There has been no serious discussion about RPL

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| 84 |
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- My responses are based on rules for entrance that have been in place for over 30 years that allow candidates with no bachelors degree to enter postgraduate study (UKZN Rule GR7).

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| 83 |
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- Has not been a priority area for us in the merger period, also given the capping of student numbers.

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| 87 |
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- Answers depend on one's understanding of RPL. What we have in place is a mechanism to allow access to Hons. Level; this is perhaps one form of RPL.

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| 47 |
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- Whilst I understand the basic concept of RPL, I do not know in what way this is assessed and how it can be useful to staff where so much emphasis at tertiary education institutions is placed on conventional paper qualifications.

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| 82 |
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- I feel that UKZN is trying to establish appropriate mechanisms for RPL.

- My experience is essentially with postgraduate students on the course work masters programmes we offer – they are multi-, inter- and trans-disciplinary, another issue which the institution is not really able to fully understand an incorporate within its mainstream academic activities.

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- As a member of the Faculty's Higher Degrees Committee I have access to information and the opportunity to engage with RPL policies (especially its implementation in terms of postgraduate studies). However, most staff, I believe, are unfamiliar with the policies and processes (especially at Westville Campus since the policies currently being implemented are to a large extent that of the former UN). There appears also to be high levels of subjectivity involved in who "qualifies" for recognition.

- This is a complex process because many aspects of PL are difficult to assess and therefore implementation and tracking can be equally difficult. However, there are ways in which satisfactory criteria can be established. Whether or not the institution is ready for implementation depends entirely on the availability of resources – there are staff who could do this but they would need to be released from other duties.

    79

- I am aware of RPL as a result of a personal interest in student selection tools and the need for career pathing for healthcare assistants in several health science professions.

    77

- We have an RPL policy and this has been implemented in pilot programmes. However, in my opinion, staff in general do not appear to have grasped the difference between, e.g. mature age exemption and RPL. The 'L' seems to be silent in their conceptions of this mode of access.

    76

- Admission and placement tests in which our staff participated will go a long way in contributing towards the readiness of our institution to handle RPL.

    3

- In 2003, 20 students were accepted in the RPL study for a doctoral thesis by one family member.

    51

    36

- Mostly Deans have knowledge and access to this sort of information.

- The issue has been discussed, but it is difficult to answer for everybody e.g. no. 8 & 10.

  | 4 |

- While I think I have a clear understanding of the concepts involved, I might be wrong. I feel the University staff in general are not very well informed (despite sound efforts to inform them).

  | 9 |

- Clear policy in place but some staff appears not to want to engage with it and follow procedures. General monitoring through information systems are not high standard; therefore monitoring of RPL candidates is unlikely to be properly done. Some staff appears to confuse approval of equivalent status of degrees with RPL.

  | 29 |

- While there has been a 1$^{st}$ year discussion/information regarding RPL, I am not sure that everybody in this institution full understand the requirements for the implementation of RPL.

  | 13 |

- I have never been workshopped on the required procedures for RPL and my observation is that Departments are using subjective methods/procedures.

  | 32 |

- Institution has the capacity to implement once guidelines are established.

  | 33 |

- It has been very difficult to answer most of these questions because they refer to the institution and one cannot claim to know what other units or facilities within the institution understand or not understand about RPL. If these questions were referring to my faculty, answers would have been different. For example in my faculty i.e. education, we have ha numerous engagements and workshops on RPL, we developed the policy on RPL, and we have even implemented it in our NPDE programmes.

  | 2 |

- While a policy has been drafted for RPL at the University of Zululand, I am still somewhat confused by the apparent DoE requirement of a matriculation certificate for degree entry even for mature age exemption. Perhaps this means that RPL should be targeted at those wishing to enroll for certificate or diploma courses and not for degrees, but I thought it should cover all qualifications. At the present time there are few stand alone diploma or certificate courses which are DoE approved at UniZul.

39

- While RPL is designed to promote wider access to higher education and while this is one of the components of the vision and mission of UniZul, with widespread unemployment in our area, few older men and women with little or no formal education have the financial resources to enter higher education. Realistically, therefore I am not sure how RPL can work to widen access without financial aid. Bursary givers also appear to target youngsters contemplating a career. My understanding of RPL is that it must encompass some work experience which can be evaluated to ascertain whether the candidate can meet the outcomes expected, whether at entry level or at the level of the qualification required normally for entry to a higher degree or diploma.

39

## SECTION C: EXPERTISE REQUIRED FOR RPL

- My response to question 15 is based on RPL being focused on people with no formal schooling or a totally inadequate background making application. This is not covered by our Rule GR7.

  $\boxed{83}$

- Again, has not been a priority. Each faculty determines their own procedures where necessary but I suspect the number entering through RPL is very small.

  $\boxed{87}$

- Need to be trained.

  $\boxed{89}$

- New/entering academics should be introduced to RPL as early as possible.

  $\boxed{103}$

- It seems to me that colleagues working with distance programmes are very familiar and have the expertise required for RPL.

  $\boxed{115}$

- No recognized assessors – need to under assessor training Course.

  $\boxed{49}$

- I think I could develop the expertise, given information by experts.

  $\boxed{46}$

- The expertise needed for RPL is specialized in a manner that people who are going to be doing the RPL must be taken for training on it. Not that they must be RPL specialists, but the same educators or lecturers can be empowered to do it and are in fact the best people to do it.

  $\boxed{68}$

- We do facilitate students coming mostly from technikon background but with prior learning, into university programmes.

  $\boxed{82}$

- The issue of RPL is handled within the Higher Degrees Committees, and I have been part of these structures.

  $\boxed{81}$

- My rating is largely based on the fact that we are undergoing a period of transition linked to the merger. Once policies and procedures are standardized across the university I am sure that the situation will improve.  $\boxed{80}$

- We are in the process of developing a RPL policy. With appropriate training, I am sure that I will be able to implement such a policy.  $\boxed{77}$

- In truth, it is the teachers of a subject who know best what aspects of P.L. should be recognized.  $\boxed{65}$

- I think before one can do RPL assessments, one needs to train as an assessor!  $\boxed{34}$

- Procedures are in place but knowledge of them by staff is limited.  $\boxed{9}$

- not sure if there is expertise required or we just need clear and specific guidelines to follow in the evaluation of RPL documents presented by candidates. Need to know what potential candidates should provide for assessment.  $\boxed{28}$

- At the moment I am not sure if the institution has the necessary expertise to implement RPL. I am also not aware of any procedures that are in place for the implementation of RPL.  $\boxed{13}$

- I can refer candidates to appropriate specialists – I know nothing of "Institutional Structures".  $\boxed{33}$

- I think all what is needed for RPL implementation are clear rules and procedures and constructive engagement among people who want to implement RPL in their programmes. I think expertise is there because people are experts in their fields but they need to be engaged on what RPL is and how it could be implemented in their programmes. More so again on why RPL for learners i.e. save time and resources by not training people when they can provide evidence of competence.  $\boxed{2}$

- I am not sure what 'special expertise' means here. Presumably it refers to knowledge not within the purview of an ordinary HoD, Dean or Registrar.

<div style="text-align: right;">39</div>

## SECTION D: INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND CAPACITY

- No coordinated policy let alone a univ wide process but expertise probably is available if coordinated and promoted.

<div style="text-align: right;">84</div>

- The right rhetoric is there, but nobody really knows what to do about it. If you are going to do it properly then resources and expertise are needed, and I guess these could be found in the institution, but it's not the top priority.

<div style="text-align: right;">87</div>

- If a decentralized RPL approach is used additional staff is not necessary. Capacity – building of existing staff can accommodate the RPL process as RPL assessment still rests with the academic staff.

<div style="text-align: right;">103</div>

- Shortage of resources is a problem for almost all the H.E. Institutions in South Africa.

<div style="text-align: right;">57</div>

- Institution has adequate structures and means to implement RPL.

<div style="text-align: right;">82</div>

- CEAD has been totally committed to the notion of RPL. We have suffered as a result. It takes much care and commitment to address the special needs of most RPL candidates. So, we place ourselves under continual pressure to make sure the outputs are there – graduated students.

<div style="text-align: right;">46</div>

- In terms of 17, there is some resistance since some staff see it as affirmative action (which in some quarters have negative connotations). My impression is that while students are admitted into programmes using RPL criteria, the "sink or swim" mentality is adopted.

<div style="text-align: right;">80</div>

- The RPL policy may be able to work in tandem with certain access programmes and student support programmes already in place at UKZN.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">77</div>

- I believe that the effective implementation of RPL requires additional resources (human, physical and financial), not to 'build empires' but, for example, to ensure consistency in the implementation of RPL and in particular to support learners in the process.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">76</div>

- To make the RPL process effective, enough resources must be provided.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">16</div>

- Shortage of Human Resources is a problem for almost all the Institutions in South Africa.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">61</div>

- Existing staff should be trained.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">37</div>

- Probable need for staff member dedicated to RPL implementation. Need for provision in budget for RPL implementation in institution.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">29</div>

- There is capacit6y to implement RPL, my concern is the institutional readiness, with specific reference to the attitudes of the staff.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">32</div>

- Need resources and specialists to develop guidelines/placement tests, not to implement policy once it has been formulated.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">33</div>

- RPL is quite an involving activity and extra staff will be a must given the present loads. But if loads were okay maybe the present staff would cope.

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">2</div>

- One of the problems is that decisions taken by Senate are often not operationalised at the level of departments and lecturers within faculties. Deans need to 'flag' documents approved at Senate and then make sure that their HoDs

  <div style="border:1px solid;display:inline-block">39</div>

have alerted their staff to the meaning and implications of these documents. However, the recruitment policies and staff also need to be aware of policies such as RPL, which means the Dean of Students and Director of Public Relations need to take such policies on board and direct the attention of their recruiting staff to them. However, as I said before, without financial aid it is unfair to raise expectations which cannot be realistically met.

## SECTION E: QUALITY ASSURANCE

- Again the context is not covered by our existing Rule GR7 which is focused on postgraduate students.

| 83 |

- Early days for us. There are established traditional routes which could be seen as RPL, such as the old R33 which recognizes prior experience for entry into postgrad studies, but as yet we are still at policy development phase for RPL proper.

| 87 |

| 89 |

- Training is required.

- Our RPL procedures are married to the normal assessment procedures including moderation and appeals procedures. It was not necessary to create new procedures for already existing ones.

| 103 |

- RPL Program was initiated and we had 2 Groups of Students. This was successful but the students have a problem with a Professional Body to register them as licensed practitioners because they are not well informed with RPL.

| 49 |

- RPL Program was initiated and we had 2 Groups of Students. This was successful but the students have a problem with a Professional Body to register them as licensed practitioners because they are not well informed with RPL.

47

- If this is equated with our rule GR. 7. How successful we have been is a moot point.

80

- It all boils down to the heads of department ... they know what is required and should be left to their judgments.

58

- Both students and staff are not guided sufficiently. While some know how the system works and use it optimally (some even manipulate the process in my opinion) many are not aware of opportunities RPL allows and certainly are not aware of how to get prospective students through the system.

80

- RPL is in its infancy at UKZN.

77

- My 'agree' comments are based on the existence of the policy and procedures, however they must be tempered with an uncertainty about how this would/does play out at, for example, a faculty level. In my opinion there will be differences in practice as described by 22 – 25 across the institution.

76

- 24 – Procedures exist but staffs don't know how to implement them. Senate does not roam to be able to come to a clear decision.

31

- 22 RPL policy includes moderation, but staff might not be aware of implications of this.

29

- Candidates may get the necessary assistance towards gathering necessary documents/evidence for RPL however, I am not aware of standard procedures to be followed in such cases.

13

- Certain Departments have dealt with RPL cases in an unprocedural manner and I do not know whether there were clear procedures for dealing with the RPL appeals.

  <div style="float:right; border:1px solid;">32</div>

- I have answered this section from personal experience with a candidate who wished to gain entry to our MA in Development Studies through RPL. We worked with the QPU to develop a portfolio and the request was then taken to Senate and granted. Unfortunately, the student became gravely ill and did not enter the programme.

  <div style="float:right; border:1px solid;">39</div>

## SECTION F: CURRICULAR RESPONSIVENESS

- 1. The policy from DoE has discouraged multiple entry and exit points!
  2. A clear distinction is made between RPL and Access.

  <div style="float:right; border:1px solid;">83</div>

- These ones are difficult to answer as it is so dependant on each programme's approach. In general, the curriculum approach is an outcomes-based one, but whether this facilitates RPL is a moot point. We seem to be moving away from multiple entry and exit levels in the wake of the MBA reaccreditation's exercise which seemed to discourage multiple exit levels. Some faculties have very good foundation courses and opportunities to develop academic discourse – not applicable to all. The curriculum is heavily weighted in favour of the formal acquisition of knowledge, - even service learning is formal, so not quite sure how informally acquired knowledge would be incorporated.

  <div style="float:right; border:1px solid;">87</div>

- Curriculum is currently under review. The new curriculum (outcomes) will be more RPL-friendly. The old "discipline subjects" are a barrier to RPL, especially recognizing essential workplace competencies.

  <div style="float:right; border:1px solid;">103</div>

- I think that people value what students bring along to the institution. However, I doubt if the curriculum really caters for what the students bring along. Rather I see a situation whereby students are expected to learn what they are taught. Assessment has changed to accommodate prior learning but it is still skewed towards content knowledge that is pushed at the university.

- 26 – to some limited extent in my school, but even not award credits for PL. I can speak only of my school – not of the whole institution.

- In this particular aspect of curriculum I can speak from personal experience, having completed a Management qualification through DIT. Specific comments are as follows:

  * Q26 – Lecturers were more interested in students regurgitating the work that had been set down; often, if I tried to bring in other aspects from my professional or life experience I was marked down as they considered it to be irrelevant as it was not directly part of the course teaching.

  * Q27 – Experiences as outlined in Q26 certainly indicates that this is not so!

  * Q31 – The curriculum at DIT is very rigid; see response to Q26 above.

  * Q32 – No it does not; the 'curriculum' is set down to give specific content to students without having a reciprocal input point (i.t.o. RPL).

- Cannot comment on the institution, questionnaire does allow comments on Department practice.

- Well, there is recurriculation that is going on at a moment and I think RPL is accommodated in all levels.

- In my experience, students with RPL have been taken into research based projects. In such cases there is not much problem in accommodating the student's needs or to provide edge to their past experiences.

- By institution I am taking that to mean DEAD. Our degrees now have a single outcome – a Masters degree, whereas there were multiple exit point before – a DoE ruling. 

  81

- Generally, traditional modes of learning and teaching dominate our institution with a few exceptions.

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- In general terms, in my opinion, the flexibility, support etc. for RPL will not be evident in the curriculum. In the departments or programmes that have participated in the pilot the scenario may be different. I do not think that alternative access routes have featured high on the list of priorities in the minds of staff when engaging with curriculum development, and the concept of 'learning assumed to be in place' is still in the opinion of many staff only concerned with matric grades.

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- Informally acquired knowledge is difficult to measure.

  37

- My response to questions 26 – 32 is agree, but only as far as my department is concerned, not for the whole institution. By virtue of the changes in the whole educational system of tertiary institutions the answer for all the above questions would be agree but it is difficult to answer for all the departments.

  4

- On paper we seem to have the curricula and policies in place but in practice I think that there are a lot of misconceptions and the policies are poorly understood.

  9

- Have received mixed messages when it comes to multiple entry and exit levels. They are not developed necessarily with RPL in mind.

  28

- Support in the form of a foundation programme under implementation. There are different entry levels in that credit equivalence for a module may be given.

  33

- It is difficult to answer for university wide curricula. However, most of our students are from severely disadvantaged backgrounds and cannot be understood as having a similar educational background as students who have studied at urban schools. Because of this disadvantage, lecturers in some departments often build in reference when lecturing or conducting tutorials to informal and cultural knowledge which is acquired outside the realms of classroom education or book learning. An example here would be tutorial discussions by members of the English department on the value of lobola or the role of polygamy which illustrate some of the issues students encounter in literature taught in the department courses.

## SECTION G: NATIONAL POLICY IN RELATION TO HIGHER EDUCATION

- There is a long way to go although there are policy and research docs on RPL e.g. SAQA but although UWC going strong it still has many questions left to consider. RPL is not an easy option educationally and is still contexted in politics not education.

- This is difficult. I think RPL was appropriate a while back when the policies were being made. But the situation has changed quite a lot since – we have too many students for instance, so RPL not such a priority. Not much role in diversifying an already very diverse student body. The assumption seems to be that lots of people have been excluded from formal education and now can come back and enter it, but as far as I can tell the demand is very small and is accommodated one way or another, usually at postgrad level. Don't think it's quite as big a deal as the policy-makers thought it would be, but as this is not really my area I could be wrong.

- I have no knowledge of the National policy on RPL, nor of any specific current aims and objectives of higher education. Relating to Q36, I have marked this as

Strongly Agree as although I do not know what the RPL policy states, my personal viewpoint is that if staff were able to be assessed in terms of RPL, such an institution would benefit tremendously by untapped knowledge and experience. Many staff have been in this institution for ten, twenty or even thirty years (from the former Technikon Natal or ML Sultan Technikon), and have a wealth of knowledge and experience that is not recognized nor formally utilized, because such staff do not have the formal 'piece of paper' indicating a specific qualification. Imagine the constructive and beneficial effect on higher education if such people were able, through properly implemented RPL, to become active in jobs that were previously denied to them because they had no formal qualifications! This is just my way of thinking about the situation.

- RPL will assist learners especially to prevent repetition of learning outcomes previously acquired.

  68

- RPL is mainly aimed at student betterment. Obviously, there will be certain benefits due such interactions to the institution.

  82

- The appropriateness and effectiveness will depend largely on the support provided (which is currently limited).

  80

- RPL is not easy to implement, this will require maturation of the system (including admin.) that can, in my opinion only come with engaging in the practice.

  76

- RPL will be useful if it can be used to facilitate transfer from one course and university to another, although as I understand there are mechanisms currently in place outside RPL which make this process possible.

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## SECTION H: NATIONAL BENEFITS OF RPL

- It is difficult to predict for a university (not a comprehensive or univ of tech) how much RPL will be used but clearly it can be important for facilitating specific articulation pathways which a particular programme requires. It clearly is important if a programme is targeting adult returners for example.

  <div style="text-align:right">84</div>

- There is no guarantee that RPL is the most cost-effective way of addressing the issues raised in questions 38 to 41.

  <div style="text-align:right">83</div>

- In terms of 41, if it is taking one professional from one sector and then paling them in another job, essential a job has not been created (e.g. a qualified nurse who studies medicine to become a doctor).

  <div style="text-align:right">86</div>

- See comments above. Think it's really too small to have that much effect one way or another. Sure, if masses of people went back to university to upgrade their formal qualifications that would be beneficial, just don't think it's realistic to expect many to be doing that. May be different for universities of technology, but not really the case for research-type universities.

  <div style="text-align:right">87</div>

- Sometimes experience "speaks louder" than pure academic knowledge.

  <div style="text-align:right">94</div>

- Speaking purely in terms of the concept of RPL, it should be beneficial to all relevant stakeholders in the long term if it was clearly articulated to the tertiary education community; the process of application, assessment and acceptance was known by all staff; and if students were encouraged to express themselves in terms of their 'other' knowledge and experience. I am not an economist, so I am not sure how RPL would impact on the national economy. I imagine that it would have a constructive impact if it was understood, utilized and implemented across all sectors of commerce and industry. However, it does not seem to me to be a

  <div style="text-align:right">56</div>

310

'quick-fix' solution to any problem, whether of an educational, developmental or economic nature.

- This policy will provide opportunities to the people, who are previously disadvantaged, to explore their potentials fully.  | 82 |

- Disagree with 41, 'Cause HIV/AIDS will downplay any positive impact. Skilled people that are ill are not productive.  | 11 |

- Considering that equitable access to Higher Education has not been a reality in South Africa, I see RPL as one of the tools of addressing the redressing of this challenge.  | 6 |

- I think RPL policy is more of a personal benefit thing and less on National Skills Development.  | 61 |

- Sometimes concerned about RPL being used to water down academic expectations??  | 28 |

- The RPL is a framework for the life long learning as would benefit individuals and companies in the long run.  | 32 |

- It will open up access opportunities for those who could not have one. It will increase student intake since access will be increased. It will save time and money.  | 2 |

- Difficult to project into the future with a country like South Africa where change is so rapid. I would like to see case studies from countries where RPL has been in operation for a long time. I do not have information on the success of RPL in the developed world. I imagine it works better in less developed countries.  | 39 |

## SECTION I: CONSTRAINTS

- Development of institutional policy – dealing with current rules (e.g. minimum residence at univ to get a qual), structures (lack of flexibility in meeting student demand, new prog accreditation etc.). Having the capacity to implement at the school and faculty level. Training assessors. Curriculum challenges to deal with deficiencies in knowledge/skills. Bottom line is it is not an easy option for student or university and is very time consuming. Cynically it cannot thus become the norm or a high percentage of basic undergrad intake but perhaps has the best niche in programmes at post grad for say career upgrading or re-tooling where there is a lot of 'value' (academic and financial) in each student.

  84

- Mostly these reduce to resources. We already have a shortage of specialists in a range of disciplines. Dealing with RPL candidates requires considerably different approaches, even for candidates at postgraduate level. This is expensive in terms of human resources. Unless it is properly resourced, it will fail or never amount to much and so have very little impact. Many would argue our resources are better spent, say, on access programmes.

  83

- Assessing prior learning in a H.E. context work skills are not necessarily academic skills. H.E. institutions are not equipped to evaluate prior learning (in engineering).

  85

- H.E. institutions are academic institutions. They prepare students academically to cope with the demands of industry, and to engage in life long learning. RPL deals with skills acquired in industry & those skills may be very specific/narrow & not built on a theoretical foundation.

  85

- Competing priorities, necessity to cut student numbers, lack of resources as always, and lack of good practices to follow.

  87

312

- Academic capacity – time!!

- Autonomy within institutions means that curriculum offered by them vary from other institutions.

- Time. Pushing new paradigms onto an institutional infrastructure and system that it was never designed for.

- ITI All happening at once. – recurriculate, OBE, RPL, MERGER, ...

- Resources.

- Lack of Resources. Time constraints – staff 'overloaded'. No time to be innovative.

- Lack of institutional knowledge of procedures to implement it. Possibly lack of capacity too.

- Constraints would come from individuals in departments who have a "narrow vision" of learning that has been obtained "informally". Academics still tied to a discipline approach (subjects).

- Lack of ...

- Lack of a clear implementation plan or strategy. There is also need to standardize assessment of RPL. There's also need to place students in groups that will enable them to use prior knowledge for their benefit throughout their studies.

- Having sufficiently qualified and caring academic employees. The traditional way universities operate, has been able to cope with RPL. I am convinced that further evolution is necessary, but am not sure what the great fuss is about.  116

- Resources. Weak leadership.  50

- * Inadequate RPL skilled personnel. (Facilitators and assessors)  49
  * Policy – Instructions RPL Policy
  * Material Resources such as funding for this.
  There is a need to have forums where all the stakeholders (community, (workplace) service, Registration or Licensing Bodies) will have to be deliberate on RPL and how we could make it work because some workplaces are refusing to recognize RPL candidates and licensing bodies are not registering RPL candidates on completion of the RPL Programs. As a result the RPL candidates are left hanging. They spend money undertaking RPL programs and then their workplaces and licensing bodies do not recognize them.

- Not clearly planned and driven nationally.  48

- Inst. Capacity and resources. Contradictions in policies. Interest. Messy. Individual basis.  47

- Costs. Accuracy of assessment. Varied backgrounds of learners vs limited capacity of institutions.  46

- Weighing (assessing) of Prior learning setting standards of RPL. Reality understanding what RPL means.  62

- Lack of knowledge on the ground about RPL in general.  56

- Lack of communication by DIT about what is being done in terms of RPL at this institution. $\boxed{56}$

- Lack of information as to how individuals can utilize the RPL system to their benefit. $\boxed{56}$

- At DIT specifically, if any cost is involved, whether in terms of hiring specialist staff or training existing staff or whatever, then RPL will just sit and mould away, just as has happened with the so-called staff 'skills development' programme. $\boxed{56}$

- In broader terms, I would have to ask if employers across the different economic spheres are aware of the RPL policy, what it is supposed to achieve and how, its implementation, and whether they are prepared to employ staff who have gained recognition through this method. $\boxed{56}$

- Budget limitations, human resources shortage as compared to increased workload to assessors. $\boxed{57}$

- Blind adherence to policy is a problem ... I think we need an easing in phase with gradual tightening up. $\boxed{58}$

- Bureaucratic red tape, confusion of myriad of qualifications and their meaning to the general public and workplace. $\boxed{59}$

- Shortage of resources – financial and human resources. $\boxed{68}$

- There is still a need to develop educators/lecturers on RPL. I don't believe that it must be done by a certain/particular department in the institution but every lecturer must be empowered to be able to do RPL in his/her own department. $\boxed{68}$

- Everyone has to come on board – lack of knowledge of managers and supervisors with regard to RPL a major stumbling block. In the library especially one has staff who has worked for more than 20 years (the most junior posts), they know how to do virtually everything but often the paper qualification like matric prevents them from gaining a qualification.

60

- The main challenge is to avoid waving everybody through. This will cripple the institution.

1

- The Technical Colleges should be playing a much stronger role in allowing under-prepared students to find their feet. This will prevent learners with unrealistic expectations from clogging up the universities.

1

- Although through experience, many gain good expertise in certain disciplines, to gain full advantage of their expertise, they need also to develop good understanding of the other inter related faculties, through proper education and training. In many cases, that process puts significant demands on the candidates. Thus, time and resource demands are restricted by the socio-economic conditions of the candidates. Therefore, such students need encouragement and sponsorship to achieve their goals.

82

- Articulation or RPL within institutions in such a way that it is a fully mainstreamed activity. Importantly, there will need to be fine ways of monitoring and evaluating the implementation of policy.

81

- Clear guidelines. Fairness in implementation. Information to potential candidates to ensure as many as possible can take advantage of opportunities provided. Necessary support (academic, financial, etc. to students). Effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess effectiveness and progress.

80

- Definitions of PL, assessment criteria, resources, human and financial.

79

- Understanding the concept for us in SA. Developing the means to assess PL, and a way of assisting to aid the applicant to add to their S,K and A so that they can enter the system – and the buy in that this is going to require from everybody – already overworked and stretched in HE. Biggest constraint? People already in the system who entered the system who entered the traditional way, not wanting (this is not articulated!!) to 'allow' students in via another route ...

- Funds for the necessary support structures both academic and other.

- Mindsets of staff – still entrenched in the profile of the 'traditional' matric entry learner. Lack of staff development to a) promote changes in mindset and b) support staff in changing practice that will value the richness of the contribution that RPL learners make to the institution, to the curriculum etc. Challenge overload – staff being of the opinion that there is too much to do to cope with their workloads and too much emphasis on change. Perspectives, assumptions, approach ... that those with responsibility for the portfolio of RPL implementation project within the institution; is it appropriate for the academic/admin staff, is the discourse of RPL made accessible to non-experts ...?

- He funding framework – no incentives for RPL.

- Only a few people have the actual knowledge and skills and one general attitude is a problem.

- Staff, especially those in management positions, do not have a clear idea of the procedure to be followed when admitting such students.

- Having a constant ... of assessing/measuring prior learning.

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- There isn't much awareness about RPL, procedures and infrastructure in place at UKZN, Westville.

  $\boxed{74}$

- Untested in local environment requires resources above normal.

  $\boxed{53}$

- It will be of benefit if candidates do not simply want a "quickie" degree or qualification.

  $\boxed{19}$

- The "open-ended" nature of RPL (that there is no easy "recipe" to follow. It will probably require additional time and resources on an already stressed system.

  $\boxed{54}$

- Infrastructure. Staff training.

  $\boxed{14}$

- The provision by Management of the necessary infrastructure (which includes money and staff) in order to set up a viable RPL unit.

  $\boxed{15}$

- Dedicated office with the necessary staff, finances and infrastructure. Clear ... policy on RPL and its implementation strategy. Set up a regional RPL office to deal with the RPL applications. This RPL office to house expert staff – to deal with assessment, portfolio development etc.

  $\boxed{63}$

- Clarity of communication. Establishing habits. Organizing and developing structures and processes. It's a good idea to formalize RPL as a concept and process – though to save extent it has "always been there" – if teaching and learning was 'good'.

  $\boxed{20}$

- The failure of Govt to follow through on their statements about RPL and the proliferations of conflicting policy.

  $\boxed{43}$

- No driving unit.

  $\boxed{7}$

- People have not been told what RPL is.

- The policies are not clear.

- The University is currently changing to a comprehensive institution. As our courses will become more practically oriented, implementing RPL will become easier. However, it is difficult to evaluate the previous learning of students in the workplace and give it a value in the form of module content. Once our courses are more practically oriented, this process will become easier. The evaluation of prior learning is a sensitive and difficult process. Lecturers who designed modules should be involved as they know what students are supposed to master in a specific module. I am not sure that I know how to do this. There will be a need for training as well guidance to enable lecturers to implement this process. If prior learning will enable students to skip certain modules it should not be on the long term to the detriment of the student. If he/she are not doing certain modules, they should still be able to apply those in future modules.

- Before one attempts to implement a policy, one needs to ensure that the policy itself is well understood by those that are going to implement it. Failure to this will certainly lead to the failure of the attempted implementation. The challenge would therefore be to ensure that those that are participating in the implementation (all aspects) need to be fully aware of the policy and its consequences.

- The fact that people who don't know the discipline at first hand will be passing judgment on the candidate's P.L.

- I am poorly informed about RPL, but feel that it could have a negative impact on student members. Why attend university if you can work and earn a salary? After 10 or more ears you can then enroll for an MSc.

- I am not sure that the very people who are targeted to benefit from PL are aware of it and how the process works. So my question is: "Are we reaching all those who would benefit?", however I may just be ignorant of the awareness levels of people in the community. Resources are a scarce commodity in our institution yet academics and non academics are still expected to fall in line with innovative and necessary projects such as RPL without the necessary supports that are needed whether it is training in understanding the policy or actual time to accommodate the consultation process that occurs with RPL. This issue of inadequate resources has implications on quality service delivery.

- The curriculum is not flexible enough, not many entry levels available for RPL candidates. Lack of urgency regarding the implementation of the RPL policy passed at Senate level some time ago.

- As mentioned above, Budget Limitations, staff shortage, work load increased to assessors.

- Insufficient training to implement inconsistency in implementation, inter and intra institutional.

- In as much as one understands and appreciates the reason for the introduction of RPL, it carries great potential for abuse, therefore it is not easy to state whether in the long run it is beneficial or not; only time will tell.

- Acceptance by academics. Senate and Faculty Boards are far too conservative and to try admit students on the basis of RPL often runs into problems with people seeing RPL as a ruse to admit students to courses for which they are not formally qualified to enter. There is a lack of flexibility in many academics especially if they perceive that other academics are trying to increase their enrollment by admitting students who have not done what they see as necessary

prerequisites despite the fact that these students might have a wealth of relevant experience in the particular field.

- Still grappling with the concept. Not sure if there is international precedence in this regard, especially in higher education. Lack of clear guidelines to follow is a constraint and it is not made clear yet at Unizul whether to start implementing or not and if yes, how do we go forward?

28

- A bit of scepticism exists about RPL. It is easier to recognize prior learning when it takes place in a formal institution than when it is based on other experiences that people collect in the work place. I think it is much clearer what to do about recognition of formal training and all institutions now ask if the certificate is from a recognized/accredited institution or programme is CHE/DoE approved??? Much easier question to answer!

28

- Cost of implementing RPL, at least in terms of lecturer time. RPL becomes over-used to increase student numbers without adequate monitoring. Misunderstandings of RPL as, e.g. only amount of experience. Staff unfamiliar with national policy for RPL. Challenges: "Screening" mechanism in case of large no. of applicants for RPL. Need for "training" of applicants on presentation of, e.g. portfolio. Need to train possibly one member of staff in each dept. Institutional budgeting for RPL.

29

- The main challenge
  which will facilitate the implementation process. While there is a lot of information on RPL it needs to be put together and integrated so that it will be easy for the staff to use.

13

- The major challenge is an operational definition of RPL and this should be looked in the context of the various disciplines.

32

- Enunciating unambiguous, relevant procedures which do not overestimate academic ability or potential. Developing successful evaluation and placement tests.

  33

- Academics not being clear on the actual competencies they want to develop in learners and as a result failing to identify the competences they can RPL on RPL candidates. The other constraint is that academics mainly focus on foundational competences (those that deal with knowledge) in exclusion of practical and reflexive competences. And the likelihood is that RPL candidates will be coming with the latter competences.

  2

- The time of just teaching learners content and taking content acquisition as an end in itself is over. The country has adopted the education system that is outcomes or competences driven i.e. we are teaching towards the achievement of specific competences. Content is then used to develop the requisite competences, so content is no longer the end in itself. As such programmes must be designed with this in mind. If that is done it will be very easy accredit or credit competences that have been developed informally.

  2

- Difficult to anticipate in advance of the implementation of the policy at the University of Zululand. As I said earlier, I am not sure how many candidates will present themselves. Students from this university may wish to transfer to other institutions on the basis of RPL.