THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

The Case of the University of the Western Cape

By

Mohammed Natheem Hendricks

A research report submitted to the School of Government, University of the Western Cape, in Partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

Masters in Public Administration

Supervisor: Prof. C Mphaisha

November 2001

ABSTRACT

This research is an attempt to determine the extent to which the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in higher education promotes social transformation. Through analysing the case study of the University of the Western Cape (UWC) RPL programme, some conclusions on this matter were drawn. This research, a qualitative study, analyses key official documents, institutional reports, learning portfolios - produced by RPL candidates wherein they narrated their autobiographical learning histories - extensively. In addition, qualitative data were incorporated into this study to assist in the construction of the context within which RPL is being offered.

This research highlighted the fact that RPL at UWC took place within a particular historical and social context. Firstly, the location of RPL within the discourse of lifelong learning contributed to its transformative potential since, inherent in lifelong learning is the promise of social inclusion which incorporates the need to broaden access to learning opportunities. Secondly, UWC experienced a rapid decline in its student numbers between 1996 and 1998 which threatened the survival of the institution (Koetsier, 1998). Finally the national education legislative and regulatory environment supported and encouraged the implementation of RPL at institutions of higher learning to contribute to social redress and social equity.

Hence, the findings of this research should be read bearing the particular context in mind.

The primary findings were made on the basis of the case study. It was concluded that the extent to which RPL at UWC promoted social transformation was evident in a number of instances. Key amongst these were firstly the recognition of informal and non-formal learning within the Academy for purposes of access; secondly the realisation that RPL is transformative only if linked to other strategies and policies which promote social equity; thirdly that the support provided by the senior administrative staff for the RPL programme was decisive since staff, in general, especially academic staff were reluctant to support and at times were even antagonistic towards RPL implementation at UWC. A fourth instant was that RPL at UWC contributed to social equity and redress by admitting RPL candidates into the institution which were excluded in the past due to their lack of formal qualifications and because they were members of particular population groups. Furthermore, it was found that those RPL students admitted to the institution were generally successful students who performed better than those students who entered the university through the traditional routes.

Another key finding of this research was that the nature and content of knowledges created by the marginalised in society were different to academic modes of knowing because these knowledges were created within different contexts because of diverse realities. This points to the finding that it would almost be impossible to pre-specify criteria against which RPL candidates may be assessed, since the knowledges of these candidates are so diverse.

Furthermore, it was found that English should not be the only language through which RPL candidates articulate their knowledge for assessment purposes. The use of English resulted in a number of RPL candidates leaving the UWC RPL programme before they submitted their portfolios for assessment purposes.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my grandfather and uncle, Boeta Tape Hendricks and Boeta Amien Davids respectively; who never had the opportunity to pursue secular education.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research is my own unaided work. It is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the Degree of Masters in Public Administration. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination at any university.

Mohammed Natheem Hendricks
1 November 2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people for their support in the research process and in writing this thesis:

My supervisor, Professor Mphaisha for his support, guidance and encouragement which is appreciated.

Jaques Avril Du Toit for editing the final draft of this text.

Lucy Alexander for reading and commenting on drafts of this text.

Terry Volbrecht, with whom I have had a number of discussions to clarify my thoughts about this study. His advice and encouragement and the occasional reading are deeply appreciated.

Steven Kemp for his assistance in representing the statistical information.

My wife, Nurjaan Daniels for giving me the space and encouragement to complete this study.

CONTENT PAGE

ABREVIATIONS

APEL	Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
APU	Academic Planning Unit
DLL	Division for Lifelong Learning
FETC	Further Education and Training Certificate
HSRC	Human Science Research Council
NCHE	National Commission for Higher Education
NTB	National Training Board
NTSI	National Training Strategy Initiative
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PDC	Portfolio Development Course
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAB	Senate Academic Planning Committee
SAUVCA	South African University Vice Chancellor Association
SAQA	South African Qualifications Framework
SD	Senate Discretionary
UCT	University of Cape Town
UWC	University of the Western Cape
WG	Working Group
WGs	Working Groups

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH

1.1 Introduction

This introductory chapter presents the principle issue of the research. It also explains and motivates why the University of the Western Cape (UWC) is used as the case study through which the issue is illuminated. The chapter surveys the contemporary context in which the study is undertaken to provide the background to this study. It then describes the problems to be investigated more fully. Furthermore, the introductory chapter provides the objectives of this investigation and identifies the theoretical perspective that informs it. This is followed by the major propositions of this thesis. This chapter concludes by noting the limitations of the study.

Formalised knowledge is highly regarded by both higher education and modern society (Barnett, 1994: 12). However, the recent introduction of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)[1] at institutions of higher learning challenges the privileged position that academically sanctioned knowledge has enjoyed within the education and training discourse. The shift in the position of disciplinary knowledge in higher education in the presence of RPL has prompted the question whether RPL is inherently transformative. From this question arose the principle issue of this study which is to determine the extent to which RPL in higher education promotes social transformation.

1.2 The case study

UWC has been chosen as the case study through which to illuminate the issue. There are a number of reasons for this choice. These include the role played by UWC historically as an institution contributing broadly to social transformation within South Africa; UWC is one of two South African higher education institutions that have adopted an institution-wide RPL policy and is in the process of implementing it. At most other higher education institutions where RPL is practiced, RPL is regarded as a pilot project within one or two departments (see Harris, 2000; Luckett, 1999; Osman, 2001,).

RPL has been introduced by the Department of Education and promoted in South Africa as part of a conscious strategy to reconstruct and develop South African society after years of apartheid. During the 1980's UWC developed a reputation, nationally as well as internationally, as the 'University of the Left'. The university prides itself that it has made a significant contribution to the process of transformation in post-apartheid South Africa.

Seven years after the first democratic elections it seems as if UWC is unable to maintain its reputation as a significant contributor to the process of transformation in South Africa. The can be attributed to key staff members leaving the university to become part of the new government. In addition, transfromatory projects such as the People's History Project and the Social Law Project had been downscaled.

The adoption, in September 2000, of the RPL policy at UWC suggests that the University may once again be making a contribution to transformation in South Africa. This does not imply that

RPL is regarded as inherently transformative (Harris, 2000). However, this study assumes that UWC may inform the practice of RPL so that its potential as a strategy for transformation in the South African context is realised.

This researcher is a staff member within the UWC RPL Project. He, as part of the RPPL team, is responsible for the implementation and monitoring of the UWC Draft RPL Policy. This implies that he may have a particular bias that he may not even be aware of. However, being a staff member within the UWC RPL Project will facilitate relatively easier access to key pieces of information regarding RPL implementation at UWC for the researcher.

1.3 Background to the research

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refers to the formal acknowledgement of the skills, knowledge and capabilities of an individual as a result of learning. RPL rests on the fundamental assumption that socially useful learning is not reserved for formal educational institutions. On the contrary, learning can be acquired in formal, informal or non-formal learning context. RPL assumes that valuable knowledge is produced by human beings in many different contexts, and that such knowledge can be articulated, assessed against pre-requisites for a course of study and recognised.

RPL has two purposes for a student. The student can use RPL to obtain access to a learning programme or the student may obtain a qualification 'in whole or in part through the recognition of prior learning' (SAQA, 1998: 6).

RPL is one of the key principles of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) which is to be applied at all levels of the qualification framework. The NQF responds to the education and training injustices of the previous educational dispensation in South Africa. Following Hendricks et al (2001), the South African NQF is concerned with two social projects:

- To contribute to the reconstruction goals of South Africa. The reconstruction and development goals of the NQF point to the eradication of education and training injustices;
- To provide a quality education and training system that is internationally comparable and which facilitates lifelong learning: the quality concern points to quality assurance practices that are rigorous and internationally comparable (Hendricks et al, 2001: 10).

1.4 The global context

Neo-liberalism has become increasingly dominant in the world during the last decades of the twentieth century. Policies congruent with neo-liberalism require that governments reduce their economic roles in contributing to social development. These policies include reducing government's financial contribution to education and training, including reducing higher education spending in real terms. Groener (2000) suggests that the prospects for educational transformation in South Africa are threatened by the pervasive presence of neo- liberalism. In particular, the shift globally towards neo-liberalism 'is

reflected in the internationalisation and globalisation of the South African political economy' (Groener, 2000: 161).

Neo-liberalism, the philosophical basis for neo-liberal development emphasises global competitiveness, which when translated into the education and training discourse equates to a high skilled flexible workforce. Accordingly, human resource development becomes a necessity. However, the responsibility for education shifts from the state to the individual.

Globalisation also implies the internationalisation and the consolidation of world opinion around key concepts. 'Lifelong learning', 'universal access' to educational and training opportunities and the 'recognition of prior learning' are three key concepts that have received much international attention.

The Fifth International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg, Germany, 1997, makes a commitment in its *Agenda for the Future,* Article 19 (a) to:

> [open] schools, colleges and universities to adult learners:
> (a) by requiring institutions of formal education from primary level onwards to be prepared to open doors to adult learners, both women and men, adapting their programmes and learning conditions to meet their needs;

(b) by developing coherent mechanism to recognize the outcomes of learning undertaken in different context, and to ensure that credit is transferable within and between institutions, sectors and states; …

(e) by creating opportunities for adult learners in flexible, open and creative ways, taking into account the specificities of women's and men's lives;

Regarding flexible entry and exit, which implies 'open' access, to educational institutions, Article 1 (b) of the *World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century* identifies that the core missions and values of higher education should be to:

> … giv[e] learners an optimal range of choice and flexibility of entry and exit points within the system … (UNECSO and UWC, 2001: 3 citing UNESCO, 1998)

The *Cape Town Statement*[2] *on the Characteristic Elements of a Lifelong Higher Education Institution* emphasises the centrality of lifelong learning in the new globalised world.

> Thus lifelong learning enables students to learn at different times, in different ways, for different purposes at various stages of their lives and careers. Lifelong learning is concerned with providing learning opportunities throughout life, while developing lifelong learners.

The *Cape Town Statement* interprets and translates an aspect of 'providing learning opportunities' (UNESCO and UWC, 2001: 12) as follows:

> Prior learning is recognised, both in terms of obtaining access and getting credit for modules. This includes having clearly defined criteria for what constitutes tertiary level learning.
>
> Programmes are in place to facilitate implementation of recognition of prior learning (RPL)… .

1.5 The institutional context

An Education Policy Unit (EPU) research report regarding the presence of RPL practices at institutions of higher learning found little evidence thereof (Breier, 2000: 2, citing Ogude, 2000). Contrary to the EPU findings, and even before RPL had been institutionalised at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), RPL has been practised in a number of Faculties and Departments. This emerged in response to a request from Dr. Tahir Wood, Director of the Academic Planning Unit (APU), who requested information regarding RPL practices at UWC in April 2000. The following statements indicate that RPL was used to provide access to different programmes at the university.

> *The Diploma in Oral Health forms part of the Faculty's recognition for prior learning for the proposed B.Oral Health degree.* (Dean of Faculty of Dentistry, April 2000)

RPL is used to assess applicants for admission to the Post-graduate Diploma in Management, and B.Com (Hons) whether or not they have prior tertiary education. (HoD, April 2000)

The Department is using RPL for admission purposes as well as for awarding of credits. (HoD, April 2000)

If matric learners do not have the required symbols in the required subjects, then courses that learners have done e.g. fashion design courses or Diploma in Human Economic Education are used as entry into the first year. Sometimes credit is given for some courses. (HoD, April 2000)

The Faculty of Education already uses prior learning for access to qualifications. (Head of Teaching and Learning Cluster, April 2000)

We are indeed implementing RPL for admissions purposes, though in a very piecemeal way. For instance, ... I interviewed and admitted a mature student who does not possess a matric but is likely to make a contribution to the Arts Faculty. (Dean, April 2000)

The SOG (School of Government) *is implementing RPL (albeit in a somewhat rough and ready form), largely with regard to our admission*

policy. ... The School's use of RPL is based on its philosophy of keeping admission requirements as open and flexible as possible, consistent with the maintenance of academic standards ... (Acting Director, April 2000)

Although no formal policy was adopted to sanction RPL at UWC before September 2000, RPL has been practiced in different forms and to different standards at UWC for a number of years.

1.6 Objective of the study and theoretical perspective

The intention of this study is to reflect on the implementation of, developments within and impact of RPL in South Africa through a case study of UWC's programme. The main focus of this study is on understanding the extent to which RPL can be a transformative practice and/or the extent to which RPL contributes to social acculturation into the dominant discourse. The sub-questions that guide the study are:

- What is the nature of structural changes required for the successful implementation of RPL?
- Does RPL provide an equitable route for disadvantaged students to gain access to Higher Education and do those adults who gain access succeed and progress academically within Higher Education?
- Are the knowledges and skills of marginalised students valued and legitimised by the academy?

In this study, it is recognised that definitions of legitimate learning are contested by multiple economic as well as ideological forces. Furthermore, it is recognised that definitions of legitimate learning are influenced and determined by national and international contexts and dominant grouping within those contexts.

Globalisation and marketisation are currently exercising an overwhelming determining influence over the nature of the international context, bringing about major changes in the socio-economic and cultural conditions of individuals, institutions and societies throughout the world. The availability of massive amounts of information, through different media, has resulted in greater uncertainty as to what constitutes 'knowledge', 'truth', and progress (Edwards, 1997: 3).

Indeed, globalisation and marketisation, 'have recast modes of knowledge production, circulation and communication' (Harris, 2000: 9) which has brought about a reconceptualisation as to what constitutes 'learning'. In particular, the 'scientific method', once regarded as the only objective and neutral method of arriving at the 'truth' within the 'real world' articulated as knowledge, human emancipation and social progress, 'has been subjected to much criticism and in some quarters discredited (Edwards, 1997: 7).

The idea that human emancipation, as articulated by the 'grand narratives' of the Enlightenment, will result from advancement in scientific knowledge has particularly come in for question. The ambiguous morality of scientific rationality had consequences which placed humanity and the entire living world at risk, especially as applied to high-

technology warfare and 'progress' that led to global warming and environmental degradation (Edwards, 1997: 4).

Within this context of uncertainty, 'natural science' has been unable to present itself as neutral and disinterested because it maintained the interests of the hegemonic ideology. Fundamentally, the sciences are founded on the proposition that knowledge is universal and generalisable. On the contrary:

> … an ideological critique assumes social formations to be divided and knowledge to be particular to specific groups and interest (Edwards, 1997: 4).

This criticism of scientific rationality provides the space for the redefinition of what constitute knowledge and truth. It provides the space to assert that localised, contextual and situated knowledge are equally worthwhile forms of knowledge and which are valued by specific interest groups.

1.7 Major Propositions

In this dissertation it will be argued that the extent to which RPL at UWC promotes social transformation is dependent on a number of factors which include:

- A recognition that social useful knowledge is created in formal, informal and non-formal contexts;

- A recognition that assessment is not only a subjective practice, but also that assessment is informed by the political and social context and the value system of the assessor within which it occurs;
- The adoption of an institutional strategy that includes RPL as a key component to bring about social equity in terms of student access as well as a valuing of marginalised knowledges;
- The active support and promotion of RPL as a legitimate academic practice by the institutional leadership;
- The provision of financial support for RPL students at a national and institutional level;
- The recognition that RPL should be viewed as an institutional rather than a peripheral activity;
- A recognition that English cannot be regarded as the exclusive language of teaching and learning to the exclusion of other languages;
- The realisation that academic staff development is central to the RPL project;
- A recognition that RPL advocacy amongst academic and administrative staff is key to the success of the RPL programme; and
- That staff must be sensitised to the need of RPL candidates to receive support before as well as after admission to the institution.

Whilst recognising that this study is conducted within a particular global, national and institutional context, it is acknowledged that this study has its limitations.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations within this study. This is a small-scale case study and therefore the results may not be generalisable. The study is specific to the context within which the case study is embedded and its specific institutional and national history.

The UWC RPL Project has only been in operation for twelve months and it could be argued that not sufficient information is available to make definitive observations. In addition, the beneficiaries, meaning those who were admitted to the university through RPL, have only been studying at the university for six months at this stage.

In addition, a case study is a subjective form of enquiry. A different researcher may choose to focus on different data, using the same case study and arrive at different conclusions. Furthermore, case studies may give rise to 'false coherence'. Following Nietzsche, Millar describes false coherence as:

> In evaluation, as in other forms of enquiry, there is a danger of imposing a conceptual order upon an empirical chaos. If our evidence forces us to conclude that the field we are investigating is a confusion of conflicts and contradictions, how are we to transcend the confusion? Are we writing in bad faith if we attempt to give a coherent account of a process which is not coherent (Millar, 1983: 121-122)?

This limitation is mediated by the researcher exposing and promblematising his or her perspective 'as part of the presentation of the study' (Millar, 1983: 122).

In recognising these limitations, this research attempts to use the UWC RPL Project to interpret, examine and analyse the assumptions and claims made in the name of RPL which may otherwise not be highlighted.

1.9 Definition of terms used

In this section terms are defined and clarified in terms of the way in which they will be used in this study.

A key term within this study is *Recognition of Prior Learning* (RPL) which rests on the fundamental assumption that people learn in various contexts whether formal, informal and non-formal. Learning which is acquired through formal or informal study, through work and life experiences is worthy of recognition within the formal system after a process of assessment.

RPL assumes that socially useful learning is not reserved for formal learning institutions. It assumes that human beings produce valuable knowledge as they interact within the world. Such learning can be articulated, assessed, valued and recognised.

From the perspective of the student, RPL may provide access to programmes of learning or RPL may provide formal credit within a programme of learning. From an institutional perspective, RPL may influence how a curriculum is designed or offered.

Transformation is used in general to refer to change, however, in this study the term *transformation* portrays a particular kind of change that is structural and either occurs at a social or personal level. In this sense, transformation results in a fundamental change in people's belief and value system which includes a vision about society's future. The transformative vision is concerned with social progress. Transformation is concerned with 'freedom, democracy, or equity and authenticity' (Scott, 1998: 178). Transformation challenges and redefines hegemonic views as to what counts as 'legitimate' knowledge.

Transformation is accompanied by a sense of conflict and struggle - either due to protecting privilege or preventing the entrenchment of marginalisation. Such conflict may occur in the context of change in personal meanings or social structures. *Social structure* refers to the social organisation, the institution and cultural products of society.

Social organisation includes assumptions about race, class and gender. The term *cultural products* refers to the outputs of hegemonic language and knowledge within particular discourses.

Following Scott (1998: 179), this study uses the following indicators to evaluate whether transformation has occurred:

- structural change occurred;
- change based on a vision that includes freedom, democracy, and authenticity;
- knowledge originating/emanating from marginalised groups in society are included in the definitions of what count as 'legitimate' knowledge;
- change based on conflict theory.

Central to RPL practices are concepts such as *formal learning, informal learning* and *non-formal learning*. These concepts are used within this study in the following manner.

Formal learning refers to learning acquired within a formal education and training institution such as a school, university, technikon, or technical college. Formal learning takes place through planned interventions that lead to formal accreditation.

Non-formal learning refers to learning acquired within a non-formal learning context such as trade union education, civic education or on the job training. Non-formal learning takes place through planned learning interventions, however, learning acquired within a non-formal context does not result in formal accreditation.

Informal learning refers to unplanned or accidental learning which takes place at any time in our daily existence and does not lead to formal accreditation, for example, learning attitudes and values from one's elders.

In Chapter 2, the author outlines the literature which has provided the foundation and direction for this study.

ENDNOTES

---

[1] Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is known by different names internationally. For example in countries such as the USA, UK and Canada, RPL is known as Accreditation of Prior Leaning (APL), Accreditation of Prior Experiential Leaning (APEL), Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) and Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (PLAR).

[2]The C*ape Town Statement* was adopted at the 'International Conference on Lifelong Learning, Higher Education and Active Citizenship', in Cape Town October 2000.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the content of selected literature which the researcher has found relevant to this study of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). The review of literature sets out the key understandings gained from the literature as background to the study.

The chapter starts with a review of the meanings attached to RPL and the implications for education and training practice as these pertain to social transformation. This is followed by a review of the texts which focus on institutional implications on RPL implementation. Furthermore, literature pertaining to the national context is reviewed.

2.2 Conceptions of RPL

RPL is based on the assumption that many adults have acquired knowledge and skills through paid and unpaid work experience, social and cultural activities in their communities, membership and involvement in social organisations and through attending non-formal education programmes. An RPL system assesses this learning for access and/or accreditation purposes.

Judy Harris defines RPL as follows.

> The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) refers to the practices developed within education and training to identify and recognise adults' previous

> learning. The broad principle is that previous learning - acquired informally, non-formally, experientially or formally – can and should be recognised within formal education and training frameworks (Harris, 2000: 1).

It is significant that the definition above identifies adults as the main beneficiaries. This definition assumes that the learning experiences acquired by adults are valuable and credit worthy within the formal education and training system.

In particular, RPL policy, procedure and instruments can facilitate access to higher education for a number of adults currently denied entry through a range of factors, chief of which is political and economic disadvantage. However, would such adults be interested in gaining access to higher education? Lueddeke (1997) is convinced that this is the case. He argues that the student population in Britain is shifting from the traditional 18 to 21 age cohorts to a much more mature adult population (1997: 212). In support of his assertion, Lueddeke cites a National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), (1993) report that notes that in the United Kingdom student numbers age 21 and over has grown at twice the rate of those under 21 (Lueddeke 1997: 212).

NIACE goes on to catergorise these mature adults as:

- Deferred beginners – those in their 20's with work and life experience, who enter the system later;

- Returnees – typically in their 30's with considerable work and life experience who are looking for a change in career;
- Developers – between 30 and 50, interested in further professional development and updating current skills;
- Enrichers – who pursue education for community roles and/or retirement (Lueddeke, 1997: 212-213).

These are definitions which have been used in the study.

2.3 Implications for Education and Training

Thomas (1998: 331) argues that RPL is potentially the most radical innovation in education since the development of mass formal education during the last century. Situating RPL within the context of lifelong learning, Thomas proposes that RPL promises a major transformation in the relationships between informal, non-formal and formal education.

The assertion that RPL requires that learning derived from formal, informal and non-formal situations be treated equally is a direct challenge to the formal education system. Since the formal system has traditionally been a closed system which only recognise the learning that results from interventions the system itself designs and creates (Thomas, 1998: 332). Indeed, all other learning not acquired within the formal system was treated as insignificant (Lueddeke, 1997: 216).

Emphasising the traditional power of the formal system, Thomas asserts that 'the education system evaluates on the basis of learning experiences it has designed and controls' (1998: 332). RPL effectively questions the power of the formal system to govern all these decisions. Consistent with the views expressed by Thomas (1998) regarding the power of the formal system, Lueddeke (1997) points out this power is not accidental. On the contrary, he asserts that the formal system, for example schooling, is one of the mechanisms through which 'society control all the important and essential learning … ' (Lueddeke, 1997: 218). When Lueddeke uses the concept 'society' it may be presumed he uses it in the Marxist sense, asserting that the views of society are those views of the ruling class.

Following Thompson, Mayo (1995: 5) asserts that education is never neutral. Formal education, in particular, is often used as an instrument to advance the interests of the hegemonic class through integrating the subservient classes into its ways of seeing the world. Formal education becomes a key tool which presents capitalist economic and social relationships as normal and indeed natural i.e. 'the only *common sense* way in which society could be organised' (Mayo, 1995: 9).

Conversely, Mayo asserts a Freirean perspective on education, it:

> … becomes the 'practice of freedom', the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world (Mayo, 1995: 5).

RPL as a social practice, which is closely associated with education and training, can be viewed in the same way. RPL either promotes conformity or contributes to transformation.

Challis (1993) emphasises that RPL is the most student-centered activity within higher education and that it contributes to 'increased confidence in the learner'. She claims that the control of the entire RPL process is with the individual candidate since he of she identifies the learning, prepares and presents the relevant evidence to support learning claims and decides on the framework for accreditation (1993: 14-15).

Conversely, Fraser (1995) questions this view arguing that whilst RPL is being presented as a tool which contributes to the empowerment and liberation of learners, it often masks the actual role it plays in education - integrating learners 'within a restrictive societal conformity' (1995: 139).

These two divergent views about RPL, one claiming empowerment of learners whilst the other accuses RPL of integrating learners into 'societal conformity', differ fundamentally in their theoretical understandings of the relationship between experience and learning.

2.4 Experiential learning within RPL

There are many debates amongst theorists and RPL practitioners regarding the significance of experience and its relationship to learning and by implication its relationship to RPL.

Those educators and learning theorist who argue that RPL contributes to learner empowerment and liberation and those who suggest that RPL contributes to the social integration of learners into a conservative model concur that experience is essential for learning and thus central to the practice of RPL. Indeed, there exists broad agreement that RPL is concerned with learning that arises from work experience, volunteer activities, social interaction and independent reading (Simosko, 1988: 7-8). There is a recognition that humans learn experientially as they cope with their social, political, cultural and working environments. Susan Simosko (1988) goes a step further and provides a graphic picture of how humans learn experientially from the cradle to the grave. She states that experiential learning:

> … describes legitimately most learning that occurs in our lives. As babies learning about our environment or young acquiring new motor skills, we all learn by doing, by trying, by imitating, by experiencing. So too … into adulthood we regularly and routinely learn by experiencing (Simosko, 1988: 8).

The argument above explains why experience is so central to the recognition of prior learning. Whilst agreeing on the centrality of experience within RPL, there is a dispute regarding the status of experience within RPL and the relationship between experience and learning.

The dominant view held by educators is that RPL does not recognise or value experience *per se* (Butterworth, 1992, Challis, 1993, Evans, 1992, Simosko, 1988). However, it regards experience as fundamental to the formation of knowledge and asserts that RPL recognises and values the 'learning' which is derived from such experience.

Challis (1993) supports this dominant view regarding experience and learning.

> It is important to remember here that past experiences are being recalled in order to identify not the events themselves, but the learning that can be identified as having arisen from that experience. APEL is not a means of accrediting life, but a means of accrediting learning (Challis, 1993: 40–41).

Similarly, Butterworth (1992) asserts that it is not experience that is recognised or valued but rather the learning acquired from it (1992: 46). Butterworth quotes from Evans to endorse her view that:

> The insistence throughout must be that the experience of a student is significant only as a source of learning. The intellectual task of moving from a description of experience to an identification of the learning derived from that experience is demanding. But if it cannot be accomplished, there is no learning to assess, however important to the individual that experience may have been (Butterworth, 1992: 46).

Butterworth elevates the role of experience in deriving learning as a *principle* which 'has become the foundation of the developmental APEL model' (1992: 46).

Learning theorists who claim that experience is only a resource for learning propose that it is the responsibility of the applicant, during the RPL process, to identify the learning through a process of reflecting on the learning. Through this reflective process of transforming experience, it is assumed that knowledge is acquired.

Providing an insight into the reflective process, Butterworth asserts that RPL requires of the applicant to 'evaluate previous experiences and associated learning' (1992: 40). Similarly, Evans (1992: 71) identifies the systematic reflection on experience for significant learning as a key stage in the RPL process. He suggests that the identification of learning can only happen through a systematic process of reflection on the experiences (Evans, 1992: 120).

However, the dominant practice of analysing, reflecting and extracting learning from experience in not accepted universally. Indeed, the literature indicates that a number of RPL practitioners and learning theorists challenge this practice (see for example, Johnston and Usher, 1996; Michelson, 1996a; Stuart, 1996; Usher and Johnston, 1996).

In Michelson's critique of the notion that experience is only recognised or valued when it is transformed into knowledge, she suggests that experience is viewed as if contaminated by 'subjectivity, interestedness, bias, materiality' (Michelson, 1996a: 439). Michelson

challenges the practice of reflecting on experience and asserts that no amount of distancing from experience will introduce a sense of objectivity and rationality since 'reflection is neither an ahistorical nor an individual process' (Michelson, 1996a: 439).

Michelson questions the process of reflecting on experience by firstly providing an insight into the origin of 'reflection'.

> … [I]t will be helpful to examine the etymology of 'reflection'. Our use of the word means a second-order 'processing' phase that casts reflection in chronological terms but etymologically, reflection is part of a vocabulary of bodies, angles and surfaces. It is a metaphor for space. It means to 'turn back, to bend in a certain direction', and in Renaissance usage it often refers to mirrors and the [reflection] of light. In optics, the reflection … is the 'thing itself' freed from its original concreteness. Disembodied, in some senses portable, it is an image from the physical world whose materiality has been excised (1996a: 446).

After providing the etymology of 'reflection' she states:

> Thus, while the reflected image may appear to be objective, … reflection always participates in the social relations it is making. What politics of inspection are being enacted in a given act of reflection? How does relative

> positionality determine what is and is not visible? Who is looking? Who is being looked at? Who is standing where (Michelson, 1996a: 447)?

Usher and Johnston (1996) concur with the reservations of the process of reflecting on experience levelled by Michelson (1996a) and argue:

> Reflection becomes a rationalistic process. Experience is transcended by distancing and separation, the taking of an 'objective' stance where experience is subjected to a process of dispassionate examination and analysis; the knowledge that results is stripped of history, specificity and locating context. It is therefore itself a very particular kind of knowledge despite appearance of universality (1996: 1).

Criticising the dominant perspective of experience as a resource for learning, Usher and Johnston (1996) argue that experiential learning has been theorised in a 'limited and limiting' frame in the sense that, although experience is transformed into knowledge, 'experience' has not been problematised. The fundamental limitation with the theorisation of experiential learning is the assumption that experience is 'a coherent, consistent, accessible' and untainted resource which is autonomous from possible interference of 'socio-cultural mediation' (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 1).

Treating experience as unproblematic has a number of consequences. First, by emphasising rationality, universality and the need to interrogate experience, the

interpreter becomes guilty of preserving the gendered and patriarchal conception of experience. Usher and Johnston draw an analogy between reflecting on experience and mining 'experience' for knowledge as a form of truth.

> Knowledge is assimilated to the masculine, constituted as the victory over the feminine of nature, the body, the irrational, the affective and ultimately the specific and the partial with which experience is equated. In the same sense as reason 'mines' riches (truth) from nature so reason mines knowledge from experience. In other words, experience becomes feminised, exploitable, essential yet at the same time subordinate, useful but only when detached from it (1996: 3).

Secondly, the reflective process alienates the one who has experience from his or her experience since the experience is 'divorced form its situatedness and concreteness' (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 3).

Converse to the view that 'learning' must be privileged above 'experience', radical educators hold the view that there is a symbiotic relationship between experience and knowledge (see Michelson, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 1999, Stuart, 1996, Usher and Johnson, 1996). For them, the issue is not which one precedes the other – experience or knowledge, but rather, the issue is that experience and knowledge are inseparable: They are 'always found together' (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 3-4).

Usher and Johnston (1996) acknowledge that experience by its very nature is inconsistent and incoherent since experience can always be interpreted and re-interpreted within different contexts resulting in different interpretations:

> … [E]xperience does not stand and cannot stand alone as an authentic knowledge source but it is constructed and reconstructed within history, context and discourse (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 4).

However, experience can be viewed as a particular kind of knowledge – 'knowledge which is inevitably embodied, local and partial' (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 7). Clearly, this knowledge is different from academic knowledge which claims universality; it is specific and contextually framed 'which makes those participating demonstratively self-aware of their situations' (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 7).

Recognising that academic knowledge and experience are different kinds of knowledges, Johnston and Usher (1996) suggest that RPL is potentially transformative in the sense that it may create a bridge between experiential knowledge and academic knowledge:

> Thus, in a South African context, practitioners might find a framework and tools for understanding and representing their experience, and re-presenting it to the academic and wider world; and academics might find out more about the specific contexts and complexity of everyday life and issues … (Johnston and Usher, 1996: 7).

This interaction and symbiotic relationship between experiential ways of knowing and academic ways of knowing will ensure that 'more informed and grounded' decisions are made which will contribute to 'social and national transformation' (Johnston and Usher, 1996: 7).

2.5 Knowledge and power

While the role of experience in RPL is an issue for debate, the relationship between knowledge and power is an even more contentious arena amongst writers on the topic. Informal and non-formal learning compete with formal learning in terms of legitimacy and this competition threatens to compromise the transformative potential of the RPL practice. As has been cited, Lueddeke cautions that the provision of formal education is one of the ways through which industrial society 'controls all the important and essential learning in society within the confines of formal education' (1997: 219). All other learning acquired outside of the formal system is treated as insignificant. Since RPL is a practice at the periphery of the formal system - i.e. a practice seeking legitimacy and acceptance - it may be tempting for RPL to be co-opted into the dominant discourse. It is after all, in this instance only a strategy to provide epistemological access to academic knowledge.

The danger with such a strategy is that the Academy still ignores contextualised, located and situated knowledge created in the lives of ordinary people. In this way, RPL, which privileges academic knowledge, perpetuates the ghettoisation of other ways of knowing,

effectively further entrenching the marginalisation of ordinary people in society in which 'academic knowledge' is power (Janks, 2001: 6).

The power of the formal system is so pervasive that it is difficult to challenge its power. Gramsci identified this situation, using the concept of hegemony through which he asserts that the ruling classes strive to dominate the framework of ideas:

> … so that the hegemonic culture, in capitalist society, is a culture in which capitalist economic and social relations, in the market and economy, are seen as normal, and indeed natural; the only 'common sense' way in which society could be organised (Mayo, 1995: 9).

Thomas (1998) shows that formal learning has become the normal, the unquestionable:

> … learning that results from teaching, is very much 'experiential' as learning accomplished in other circumstances. It is simply that the experiences of being a student, of being taught, is so familiar [within the Academy] to us that we hardly recognise it as such, thus blinding ourselves to much experience of formal education. It might be more accurate if we refer to 'sponsored' and 'un-sponsored' experiential learning (Thomas, 1998: 332).

The formal system and its automatically sanctioned selection of knowledge is one of the factors which distributes power in the context of RPL.

RPL plays a role in identifying which knowledge is legitimate. RPL introduces a sense of equality between 'intellectual' and 'manual' labour through recognising that for any manual activity intellectual labour is a necessity although the worker may not be able to articulate it as such. The notion of equality is also present in the argument that socially useful knowledge is not the preserve of the dominant in society. Socially useful knowledge is regarded as the product of active engagement with the 'real world' and since workers are the primary actors, they become the key creators of knowledge (Michelson, 1997: 143). This signals the transformative potential of RPL. Michelson continues:

> RPL recognizes that knowledge is gained in concrete human activity, not in socially isolated contemplation. Moreover, it challenges the monopoly of knowledge that is the hallmark of the traditional academy. … RPL makes the claim that historically devalued lives – those of workers, of women, of non-Europeans – are locations from which knowledge can be created, thus positing experience of the non-elite as an alternative authority (Michelson, 1997: 143).

While RPL may challenge the power of the Academy to define legitimate knowledge, it is still the Academy that sanctions what counts as legitimate knowledge. Indeed, the

Academy still does not value situated knowledge. Stuart (1996) complains that this is the case even in universities who regard themselves as progressive.

> … Sussex as most in universities in Britain, espouses a conservative belief in 'knowledge' that was embedded in the elites of the academy. Only those with cultural capital could be seen to gain recognition from the university (Stuart, 1996: 15).

There are other factors which determine the 'legitimacy' of knowledge in the context of RPL, and Michelson explores the role of RPL within the legitimation of knowledge. Michelson (1997) questions the power of the formal education system to determine and decide what count as legitimate knowledge and identifies RPL as one of the strategies to challenge this power. However, to claim that RPL is inherently transformatory in this way is a deception:

> RPL is inevitably deeply embedded in how society apportions status and visibility. It can't help but be a site in which the social order is mediated, in which differentially powerful groups and institutions struggle towards a vision of human society (Michelson, 1997).

Michelson explains that RPL is implicated in the definition of what counts as useful or valuable knowledge.

> For learning to be recognised, someone must define "legitimate" knowledge, the knowledge that "counts". Someone must be judged by someone else according to standards that somebody has set (1999: 100).

The idea that knowledge production and dissemination are sites of contestation and struggle has already been raised. However, it is reiterated to emphasise that RPL is not insulated from these contestations. Indeed, RPL is implicated in the contestation since RPL is the practice through which specific kinds of knowledge are valued. RPL can value the skills and knowledge as defined by the dominant interest, structures and institutions or RPL can recognise the knowledge and skills that are created by the marginalised in society (Michelson, 1997: 147).

Further evidence that the Academy does not really value prior learning which has been acquired in a social context is the Academy's regard for portfolios of learning as below standard:

> Because an APEL portfolio is often regarded as an alternative for those who could not get an A level, the portfolio has come to be seen as something second rate, associated with candidates who could not make it on a recognised route (Stuart, 1996: 17, quoting Paczuska, 1993).

Whilst recognising the transformative potential of RPL as well as recognising that knowledge is created and disseminated in multiple sites in multiple context by multiple

actors, Michelson criticises facilitators of RPL in universities for their limited use of the transformative potential of RPL.

> … [A]cademic RPL has never challenged the university as the sole legitimate arbiter for what is or isn't accreditable. It has therefor not proved an opportunity to enrich academic ways of knowing or to value knowledge for its difference rather than for its similarity to academic expertise (Michelson, 1997: 143-144).

Contrary to claims that RPL may potentially contribute to social equity and transformation, Michelson laments the complicity of the dominant practices of RPL 'with inequality of economic and institutional power' (Michelson, 1997: 144). McKelvey and Peters concur with Michelson (1997) regarding current RPL practice and specifically argue that since vocational skills are generally defined by management, they are 'reproducing and reinforcing the old divisions in the labour market that are the basis of inequality' (McKelvey and Peters, 1989: 16).

This section reviewed the literature in terms of RPL's relationship to knowledge and power. The literature reminds RPL facilitators that the formal system automatically sanctions knowledge that is created and legitimated within the formal system, simultaneously ignores and devalue knowledge generated informally.

The review of the literature, regarding power and knowledge, suggests that for RPL to be tranformative it needs to recognise that knowledge is created and disseminated in multiple context and by multiple actors. However, whilst recognising that knowledge of marginalised groups are as relevant to those of the dominant groups, the literature suggests that RPL is a contentious practice, precisely because RPL is the practice through which different kinds of knowledge are valued and legitimated.

2.6 RPL as Transformative Process

If RPL is destined to be part of the democratic project, it needs to provide access to educational opportunities. In addition, RPL needs to recognise that the dominant groups in society cannot have the monopoly over the definitions of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and thus learning. MacEwan relates this to the issue of democracy.

> Democracy … depends on a reasonable degree of equality in the distribution of education. If groups or individuals have a monopoly on knowledge, information and understanding, there is no reason to believe that power would be widely distributed, whatever the extent of democratic forms of organisation (MacEwan, 1999: 187).

The contribution of this research is to explore how RPL can facilitate the process of equality through the provision of access to the education and training system.

2.7 The national context

Internationally, in countries such as Canada, Britain, Australia and the USA amongst others, RPL has been practised for over thirty years (Evans, 1992, Harris, 2001). In the South African educational and training discourse though, RPL has been a relatively recent innovation.

The policy environment

Since RPL is a recent innovation in South Africa, there is little literature on the relationship of RPL and the policy environment. Literature discussing the policy environment is primarily White Papers or Acts of Parliament.

RPL has been formally introduced in South Africa as part of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF). The NQF, a social construct which is neither inherently progressive nor conservative, has been proposed as a key mechanism to contribute to equity and redress. Rosemary Lugg states that *The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act* (1995) was promulgated by the South African Government with the intention that the NQF will 'enable the transformation of the education and training system' (1997: 128).

Furthermore, she argues that since the facilitation of access to the formal learning system is an important purpose of the NQF and recognising that the majority of South Africans were marginalised from the formal education and training system, 'the recognition of prior learning (RPL) assessment processes as strategies to enable access to the learning system' (Lugg, 1997: 130) has been identified as a key principles of the NQF.

RPL was placed on the South African policy agenda by the progressive trade union movement during the early 1990's. From the perspective of the progressive trade union movement, RPL was seen as a central strategy to redress educational disadvantages experienced by adults, especially working adults, during apartheid. Zwelizima Vavi, the General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Union (COSATU) states:

> COSATU has consistently argued that we need to ensure that workers gain recognition for the skills and knowledge that have been acquired through years of experience at the workplace and in the communities. While workers daily demonstrate a range of abilities, this is generally not formally recognise … . Recognition of Prior Learning is critical to ensure that workers are able to receive formal recognition for skills and knowledge that have been develop in different ways (COSATU, 2000: iii).

The centrality of RPL as a component of a redress strategy was later incorporated into national educational policy.

The Department of Education (1995) *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995: 15) signals the government's commitment to educational redress.

> It will open doors of opportunity for people whose academic or career paths have been needlessly blocked because their prior knowledge has not been

> assessed and certified, or because their qualifications have not been recognised for admission to further learning, or employment purposes.

The importance of RPL for higher education is signaled in the following policy and plan of the Department of Education.

The Department of Education (1997) *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997: 1.1) identifies the 'redress of past inequalities' as a key challenge for the higher education system. It singles RPL out as a means to redress inequalities and to provide access to higher education for those who were deprived of formal education during the apartheid years.

Further in the *White Paper 3* (1997: 17-18), RPL in combination with a programme-based higher education system is seen as a means of achieving greater mobility within the system it will:

> … remove obstacles which unnecessarily limit learner's access to programmes and enable proper academic recognition to be given for prior learning achieved, thus permitting greater horizontal and vertical mobility by learners in the higher education system.

The *National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa*, as cited in Ministry of Education (2001) identifies another role for RPL in the higher education system. The

National Plan (2001: 15-16) emphasises the need for higher education to produce more graduates, however, it indicates that the current participation rate in the higher education system has decreased from 17 percent in 1996 to 15 percent in 2000. One of the factors, mentioned in the *National Plan* for the decrease in participation rate is 'a sharp decline in the number of school-leavers with matriculation exemption, which is a precondition for entry into universities …'. The decline in school-leavers with matriculation exemption gives rise to the identification of mature adults as a potential target audience to be recruited into the higher education system. *The National Plan* states that:

> [A]n important avenue for increasing the potential pool of recruits to higher education is to recruit non-traditional students, i.e. workers, mature learners, in particular women and the disabled. … 'Recognition of Prior Learning' initiatives should be promoted to increase the intake of adult learners (Ministry of Education, 2001: 23).

Although the higher education policy and plan regard RPL as a key strategy to redress educational inequality, facilitate mobility within the higher education system and increase student numbers ('increase participation'), no guidance or guidelines are provided for higher educational institutions as to how RPL should be implemented (Osman and Castle, 2001: 55). The lack of RPL guidelines may perhaps partly explain the results of an Education Policy Unit research finding, referred to previously, which concludes that little evidence of RPL was found at higher education institutions (Breier, 2000: 2, citing Ogude, 2000).

RPL and its implications for higher education institutions

Literature focusing on institutional implications in the presence of RPL is limited. RPL, being a practice associated with the periphery of the academic enterprise may in South Africa account for the limited literature regarding institutional implications. RPL is seldom regarded as a core activity within the academy as such initiatives are normally projects or experiments located within an academic department or two and thus seldom influence institutional operations.

Lugg (1997) claims that the *South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act* (1995) has been promulgated by the South African Government in anticipation that the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) will 'enable the transformation of the education and training system' (Lugg, 1997: 128). If the NQF is intended to transform the entire system, and since RPL is a principle of the NQF, then surely the NQF, and by association RPL would in turn transform educational institutions.

Indeed, the introduction of RPL is forcing institutional change. By providing an alternative access route to higher education, RPL challenges and effectively transforms, at least at an administrative level, the formal system which depends on a single entry as a means of acquiring credentials.

Knowledge and Power within the South African Context

The formal education system functions in a hierarchical way. There is an expectation that each stage prepares students for the next. RPL unsettles this assumption since RPL will bring into the Academy students who do not come with conventional experiences of being taught. In addition, the context of their knowledge is quite different from the conventional student, a factor which may lead to conflict and misunderstanding.

Michelson locates the discussion that RPL is implicated in contestation over definitions of knowledge in the South African context. She suggests that the practices of RPL in South Africa has no alternative but to be transformatory.

> … RPL (in South Africa) carries with it an explicit expectation that it will aid in overcoming historical inequalities and, in the process help to create a more democratic and fluid workplace. Here as elsewhere, the goal of greater social justice appears merged with the goal of economic development (Michelson, 1997: 149).

As if to emphasise the contentious nature of RPL, Michelson (1997) sketches a typical situation that requires RPL practitioners to confront the issue of what constitutes socially useful knowledge.

> South Africa contains two disparate traditions of 'prior learning', the first of which both justified and sustained apartheid and the second which provided the insurgent skills and knowledge that lead to its overthrow. … [T]he issue

> at stake here is the definition of socially useful knowledge. What vision of society will be written into that definition (Michelson, 1997: 149)?

In both case identified above, prior learning occurred. However, society, or more correctly the dominant in society probably will decide what is useful learning and what is not. The one will be incorporated within the formal system whilst the other is ignored. This then is one of the challenges which confronts RPL.

2.8 Support of staff for RPL programmes in higher education

The success or failure of RPL is dependent on the support of the academic staff. However, Thomas (1998) argues that RPL challenges and unsettles the higher education system which academic staff depend on and support. It is thus not surprising that most RPL initiatives come from 'either senior level administrators or from the government' (Thomas, 1998: 334-335).

Thomas makes the point that whilst it is desirable that RPL should be integrated and assimilated within the regular operations of faculty, it is important that this assimilation does not happen so quickly since RPL frequently needs 'advocates' especially when the practice is not as yet fully accepted (1998: 340).

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter presented a review of the content of selected literature which the researcher has found relevant and foundational to this research. The chapter discussed some of the literature which has been used to develop the conceptual framework for the case study.

The next chapter describes the research process and briefly presents the methodological underpinnings of the process.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a rationale for the choice of methodology. This research is a qualitative study which is based on an analysis of key official documents, institutional reports, learning portfolios - produced by RPL candidates wherein they narrate their autobiographical learning histories, and interview and questionnaire results. The study is conducted within the methodological frame of the case study.

3.2 A rationale for adopting a critical approach

Social reality is constructed within a particular historical, socio-economic and political context. Social reality is produced and reproduced by people as they try to make sense of their own reality. However, the hegemonic group within society tends to dominate definitions as what is to be regarded as 'legitimate' reality. The critical paradigm reminds the researcher that he or she is also an actor constrained by the social reality he or she is attempting to interpret. The researcher is thus not an independent observer. On the contrary, the researcher brings to the research his or her social, cultural and ideological biases.

Myers argues that the qualitative research methodology is an appropriate research methodology for the study of social and cultural phenomena (2001: 2). One of the main strengths of the qualitative research methodology is that it gives the researcher insight into how social, environmental and cultural contexts influence human behavior. When

investigating cultural or social phenomena, the quantitative research methodology may have major limitation since the quantification of textual data results in the loss of the particular social and institutional contexts within which the social phenomenon takes place (Myers, 2001:2).

The epistemological basis of this study is critical. The critical paradigm assumes 'that social reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people' (Myers, 2001: 5). However, whilst people can change their social and economic reality, social change is normally accompanied by social conflict because change is constrained by social, cultural and political domination.

Myers identifies 'social critique' as the main task for critical researchers:

… whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are brought to light. Critical research focuses on the oppositions, conflicts and contradictions in contemporary society, and seeks to be emancipated, i. e. it should help to eliminate the causes of alienation and domination.

The case study, as a qualitative method, is an appropriate method to investigate the extent to which RPL contributes to social transformation. Firstly, RPL at UWC is taking place within a real-life context where different social actors and institutional factors influence and direct the final outcomes. The case study methodology allows one to engage with the specific context (Millar, 1983: 118) and the nature of RPL at UWC. This is thus consistent with Yin's (1994) definition of a case study:

A case study is an empirical inquiry that:

Investigates contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1994: 13).

Secondly, the researcher is an interested participant in the UWC RPL Project which he wishes to understand more fully (Millar, 1983: 118).

Finally, a case study illuminates the implicit social processes and meanings integral to the chosen example (Millar, 1983: 115).

The case study is limited in that it provides information about the UWC context only and thus the findings may not be widely generalisable. However, the analysis of key official documents and the extensive review of the national and international literature pertaining to RPL, ensures a sense of balance between specific located findings and the generalisation of findings.

One of the methods used to obtain data for this research was narrative inquiry. Giovannoli, following Liblich (1998) proposes the following definition for narrative inquiry:

> … refers to any study that uses or analyses narrative materials. The data can be collected as a story (a life story provided in an interview or a literary work) or in a different manner … . It may be used fro comparison among groups, to learn about a social phenomenon or historic period, or to explore a personality (Giovannoli, 2000, 2).

The aim of narrative inquiry is to understand experiences as lived by people. Experiences that are situated, localised and in contexts which are related in narrative form.

Narrative inquiry within the critical paradigm has limitation in the sense that the bias of the researcher is almost unavoidable. Raue expands on this.

> ...[I]t is likely that the participants' stories would be 'taken up' by the researcher as a means to interrupt 'discourse of power'. Their narratives would be brought together to begin the work of creating 'discourse of possibility'. This discourse could then inform curriculum design efforts and instructional practices that would support and empower adult learners (1999: 2).

3.3 Data for the research

The data for this research comprises a case study of the planning, conceptual development and implementation of the UWC institutional RPL project. Factors that gave rise to the RPL project are examined and analysed. The institutional dynamic whilst introducing an innovation is investigated. Furthermore the case study is interpreted to illuminate how issues of language and definitions of knowledge distribute power between the dominant and the marginalised.

The case study was constructed using reports at UWC pertaining to strategies to increase student numbers, providing access to students as well as reports describing the process of RPL implementation.

Being a participant observer, the researcher used his knowledge about the RPL Project in the construction of the case study. The autobiographical learning history narratives, documented within the portfolios, provided rich data of the case study from the perspective of the RPL candidates.

Interviews and questionnaires were used as a strategy at triangulation. Thus, these were primarily used to confirm or contradict data already generated. The researcher interviewed five RPL candidates who were admitted to the university. The purpose of the interviews, which were unstructured, was primarily to verify the profile of the typical UWC RPL candidate. The profile of the RPL candidate was constructed using the learning portfolios submitted by RPL candidates.

Although this study is not a quantitative, the researcher found it necessary to use statistical data that track the throughputs of school going pupils from 1976 through to 1995. This data provided the extent and nature of inequality in educational provision for different population groups in South Africans.

The learning portfolios developed by the RPL candidates were extensively used to examine and analyse the nature of the knowledge and skills which RPL candidates have acquired within informal and non-formal contexts. The portfolios were also used extensively to track the learning careers of the RPL candidates.

Sixty questionnaires were distributed amongst the RPL candidates of which the researcher received 48 (78%) completed questionnaires. The reason for the high return rate was that RPL candidates participated within a portfolio development course and they had to return the questionnaire at the end of the session. The purpose of the questionnaire was to confirm or contradict information the researcher found within the learning portfolios and registration forms.

3.4 The research process

The research process started with an extensive review of the literature which provided the foundation for the research and also assisted to clarify and develop the conceptual framework for the study. This was followed by the construction of the case study of UWC's educational intervention focussing on the transformative potential of RPL.

The construction of the case study started with the building of the profile of the 2001 UWC RPL cohort. This was followed, prompted by the profiles, by an investigation of the pupil throughput from Standard 7 to Standard 10 between 1976 and 1979, as well as the throughput from 1979 to 1982 for the same Standards.

Then the researcher examined and analysed the portfolios that included the autobiographical learning history narratives of all RPL candidates. The focus of the examination and analysis was to establish how these RPL candidates represented their knowledge and skills as well as what they value as useful knowledge and skills within their particular contexts.

This was followed by administering of two questionnaires, one directed at RPL candidates and the other at academic staff who have had interactions with RPL students. With these questionnaires the researcher was able to triangulate the research data obtained using the methods already mentioned.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter presented a rationale for the choice of methodology, the data for the research as well as the research process. Although the research was primarily qualitative, it also used quantitative data to construct and understand the case study.

The next chapter constructs and examines the case study of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at the University of the Western Cape. It describes and analyses the RPL intervention and comments on RPL's significance to broader developments within the higher education sector.

CHAPTER 4

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING AT UWC: THE CASE STUDY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter constructs and examines the case study of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at the University of the Western Cape. It describes and analyses the RPL intervention and comments on RPL's significance to broader developments within the higher education sector.

This chapter commences with a section that provides the background to RPL at UWC. This is followed by a section examining the institutional and policy environment which facilitated the emergence of RPL. The next section describes the case study and is followed by a discussion of the factors which make South Africa particularly fertile for RPL. The role of language as it relates to RPL is examined in the next section, followed by an analysis of the administrative implications resulting from RPL at a higher education institution. The final sections of this chapter focus on the relationship between the Academy and society as well as issues of staff development and the nature of equity brought about due to transformative RPL.

4.2 Background to the case study

The RPL programme at UWC which was conceptualised as an intervention to contribute to social transformation and aimed to increase student numbers by widening access to higher education forms the basis of this research.

RPL is a key component of UWC's mission to transform the institution into a lifelong learning institution. RPL, according to the brochure introducing RPL at the university, is integral to the university's commitment to 'lifelong learning, to equity and to access with success' (UWC, 2000a). The document articulating the UWC RPL policy, procedures and practices sums up the strategic significance of RPL for the university.

> UWC's mission statement declares its commitment to lifelong learning. The university's three-year rolling plan states that 'Increased access to a diverse range of students will occur through alternative admissions, which will include testing for academic potential and recognition of prior learning.' The university aims to be a pioneer 'with regard to access by non-traditional students'. The rolling plan states that access will be facilitated through the 'design of customized learning pathways that meet the needs of diverse ranges of backgrounds, age groups, lifestyles and socio-economic circumstances'. The university will endeavour to ensure that RPL is a strong feature of such learning pathways (Volbrecht, 2000).

Locating RPL within the discourse of lifelong learning, the university positions itself to respond to the fundamental changes associated with globalisation. Globalisation, characterised by rapid technological and economic changes, requires that educational institutions respond to the perceived need to 'upgrade and re-skill people' continuously (Gallacher and Crossan, 2000). However, lifelong learning in itself is not necessarily contributing to an equitable society. On the contrary, lifelong learning may even increase the learning divide between those who have access to knowledge and those who do not have access to knowledge (Gallacher and Crossan, 2000).

This UWC RPL programme is thus being examined to determine whether RPL at UWC contributes to social equity or not.

4.3 Emergence of RPL at UWC: A response to institutional needs

Legislative and regulatory changes in the educational and training environment which resulted from the democratisation process in South Africa, and the drastic decline in the student population at UWC between 1991 and 1998, were two key factors that facilitated the introduction of RPL at UWC.

The legislative and regulatory environment created the context and provided the rationale for the introduction of RPL at UWC. The Department of Education, *White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997), whilst stipulating that a Further Education and Training Certificate (FETC) is the minimum requirement for entry into higher education, argues that such institutions 'should ensure that selection criteria are sensitive to the educational background of potential learners, and *incorporate the recognition of prior learning*…' (1997: 19, emphasis added).

This White Paper (1997) encourages institutions to consider RPL as a strategy to facilitate access for mature adults to higher education:

> … [M]any able, mature applicants for standard-entry … may not have had the chance to fulfil all the requirements for the FETC. The Ministry strongly supports development work and pilot projects which will help institutions to develop criteria to assess applicants' prior learning and experience, so that

> those with clear potential to succeed in higher education can be admitted (1997: 19).

A similar view was expressed earlier by the *National Commission for Higher Education* (NCHE) which identifies equity and the redress of historical inequities as fundamental principles for the transformation of the higher education system (1996: 3). Broadening access, through RPL, will obviously contribute to increasing higher education participation. However, if the higher education system is not transformed, it will perpetuate inequitable access and progress through the system by its continued privileging those who have the 'appropriate cultural capital' as defined by the dominant groups in society.

Regarding the decline in the student population at UWC, Koetsier reports that the average decrease in the student population at UWC between 1996 and 1998 was 11% (1998: 63). He further suggests that the traditional student 18 to 21 age cohort 'did not generate growth' since 1991 (Koetsier, 1998: 63). Discussing the implications of his statistics, Koetsier warns that:

> For the survival of the institution it is vital to extend the intake of students beyond the traditional borders of the intake of full-time school leavers (1998: 63).

The university leadership appears to have understood the implications of the Koetsier research report and resolved to broaden access for 'non-traditional' students by means of the Recognition of Prior Learning.

The intention of RPL at UWC is twofold. Firstly, RPL will 'open access to a wide range of academic activities at UWC to students hitherto denied such access' and secondly, RPL will contribute to the strategies to increase enrolments in part-time studies at UWC (Pokpas, 2000: 13). The *UWC Draft Strategic Plan 2001-2005* recognises mature working adults as a category of potential students who may benefit from RPL and also recognises that mature adults may be in a position to finance their studies (2000: 8).

Consistent with national educational policy, RPL at UWC is viewed as a strategy to increase student numbers. In addition, the Division for Lifelong Learning (DLL) of UWC argues that RPL provides for social redress and should be seen as integral to UWC becoming an adult friendly institution (DLL, 1999) as well as contributing to transformation as stated in the mission.

The leadership of UWC entrusted the DLL to develop policies, procedures and plans for the introduction of RPL at the university. DLL was given the responsibility for the coordination and the implementation of the institutional RPL programme. Coordination included ensuring that an RPL policy is in place to guide implementation.

DLL, in consultation with a Senate Academic Planning Committee (SAB) Task Team, presented the university Senate with a Draft *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy, Procedures and Practices at UWC* which was adopted as a draft framework for RPL implementation at a Senate meeting in September 2000 as a working RPL policy[1]. This *RPL Policy, Procedures and Practices* draft document articulates the rationale for RPL at UWC, it explains what RPL is, and it stipulates specific principles that will guide the implementation of RPL at UWC. Furthermore, the draft *RPL Policy, Procedures and*

Practices document states that 'university will calculate what resources are needed for the effective implementation of RPL, and will generate and allocate funds accordingly' (Volbrecht, 2000: 6).

The adoption of the RPL policy at UWC motivated several developments within the institution. The Office of the Vice-Rector Academic Affairs, a university structure that is located on the 3rd layer of the university hierarchy across the university, ensured all communications with faculties and departments regarding RPL are channelled through that office. The strategy of channelling RPL communications through the Offices of the Vice-Rector Academic Affairs facilitated the smooth introduction of RPL at UWC.

A UWC RPL Forum, whose membership included faculty officers in each faculty, the Director of the Academic Planning Unit (APU) as well as the Institutional Planner, was initiated through the Office of the Vice-Rector, Academic Affairs. In addition, the Vice-Rector insisted that UWC must present a consistent public message regarding RPL. Under the leadership of the Vice-Rector Academic Affairs, the APU Director and the Institutional Planner were mandated to brief the Public Affairs Department about the UWC RPL plans and the strategies that needed to be communicated to external constituencies.

Operational responsibility for RPL implementation was given to RPL Project staff. The tasks of the RPL Project included marketing the RPL services, recruiting candidates to participate in the different RPL services, marketing the concept and providing training workshops for staff development. It was agreed that all contact with the institution by potential RPL candidates would be channelled through the RPL Office.

Reflecting on the introduction of RPL at UWC as an institutional innovation, it is notable that UWC has had a number of 'essential requirements' in place at the start of its RPL programme, as identified by Lueddeke (1977: 222). Lueddeke stipulates that the essential requirements for starting a RPL programme includes:

- Senior management's commitment to establishing APEL as a significant feature of the university's mission to enhance access;
- Development of appropriate policies and procedures to ensure a consistent approach across the institution;
- Provision of sufficient financial resources to enable the funding of pilot studies; … (Lueddeke, 1997: 222).

The successful launch of the RPL initiative at UWC should be seen in the context that the success or failure of RPL is dependent on the support of academic staff members. The support needed was definitely not universal amongst academic staff across the university, because RPL challenges and unsettles the higher education system which academic staff depends on and supports (Thomas, 1998). However, the crucial support which emanated from the senior administrators for the RPL initiative ensured the successful launch of the Project. The critical role played by the UWC leadership to facilitate the introduction of RPL at UWC seems to mirror international experience where most RPL initiatives were either initiated by 'senior level administrators' or it was initiated by 'the government' (Thomas, 1998: 334-335).

4.4 A description of the UWC RPL Project

Conceptualisation regarding RPL started within the DLL of UWC during the second semester of 1999. The process of moving towards conceptual clarity included reading on the topic as well as having extensive conversations with national and international RPL practitioners. A discussion on October 22, 1999 amongst Professor Elana Michelson of New York, Professor Shirley Walters, and Mr. Natheem Hendricks, the last two being staff members within the DLL, resulted in a *Draft Discussion Document: Recognition of Prior Learning at UWC.* Within this discussion document, the authors characterise RPL as a 'transformative practice towards greater institutional flexibility and responsiveness' and argue that RPL is on the agenda of UWC because:

- firstly, of RPL's potential to contribute to redress which 'resonates with [UWC's] history and tradition';
- secondly, UWC regards RPL as an essential element in making 'lifelong learning opportunities available' to mature adults and RPL is an essential element in its strategy to transform the institution into an 'adult learner friendly institution with a growing number of part-time students';
- and finally, RPL is part of UWC's response to the education and training changes, recognising that RPL is a principle of the National Qualifications Framework (Michelson, et al, 1999).

The discussion document concludes with a proposal which argues for the establishment of 'two or possibly three [RPL] pilot projects' as the first steps in a process 'towards a

comprehensive approach to RPL at UWC' in the second half of 2000 so that students can register for the 2001 academic year (Michelson et al, 2000).

Due to institutional constraints, the DLL was only able to appoint an RPL Project Manager in June 2000 to commence work on the UWC RPL programme. Initial work included formulation of the draft *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Policy, Procedures and Practices at UWC.* Simultaneously, the RPL project team developed an advocacy strategy to familiarise academic staff about RPL practices. The advocacy strategy included having meetings with all faculties and departments as well as the production of an information brochure setting out the rationale for RPL at UWC and an indication of the proposed RPL opportunities for candidates.

Furthermore, a RPL assessment workshop was organised for UWC academic staff in collaboration with Peninsula Technikon on October 7-8, 2000. Professor Elan Michelson facilitated this assessment workshop. Apart from the RPL project staff, only three other UWC academic staff members attended the workshop.

Marketing, with the purpose of recruiting RPL candidates started late in December 2000 with the assistance of an external marketing agency. The marketing strategy consisted of an extensive advertising campaign through the print media and radio. The message was simple yet powerful: *If life has prepared you, we will accept you.*

The first RPL candidates started to apply on January 3, 2001 to participate in the UWC RPL offerings. UWC provided two centralised routes of access through RPL to studies at

the university. These were tests offered by the Academic Planning Unit (APU) and the Portfolio Development Course (PDC) offered by the DLL.

RPL candidates who contacted the RPL project office were initially advised regarding the different RPL opportunities and they were 'advised which of the two options were more suitable for specific applicants' (Volbrecht and Hendricks, 2001). In particular, RPL candidates with extensive employment and/or organisational involvement were advised to do the PDC. It was argued that the 'PDC would be more suitable because it would give them (RPL candidates) the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learnt in this history that might not be reflected in a written test' (Volbrecht and Hendricks, 2001). Conversely, candidates, who left school relatively recently and who do not have extensive employment and/or organisational experience were advised to take the APU tests.

The PDC was designed as a course and included a number of workshop sessions interspersed with individualised mentoring and advising sessions. In addition to the two staff members within the RPL project, three advisors/mentors assisted to advise RPL candidates on the construction of their portfolios.

The PDC was constituted as follows:

- Orientation to RPL and an introduction to portfolio development;
- Individualised counselling and mentoring session;
- Presentation and peer review of draft portfolios;
- Individualised counselling and mentoring session;
- Preparation to present portfolio orally to assessors;

- Assessment by Faculty or Department.

The key aim of the PDC was to assist RPL candidates to produce their learning portfolios. A secondary aim of the PDC was to orientate RPL candidates to the Academy.

The main components of the portfolio were:

- Curriculum Vitae – the purpose of including the curriculum vitae in the portfolio was to give the assessors an overview of the RPL candidate's educational and employment history;
- Autobiographical learning history – the autobiographical learning history describes in more detail selected learning experiences of the RPL candidate;
- Evidence to support learning claims – since learning claims are being made within the curriculum vitae as well as the section wherein the RPL candidate details her or his autobiographical learning history, these learning claims need to be supported by appropriate and sufficient evidence;
- Summary and critical discussion of text related to future study – the purpose of this section is to assess the level of academic literacy the candidate has achieved;
- Reflection on feedback received during portfolio development process – as the RPL candidate works on his or her portfolio, she or he receives advice from a personal advisor. This section allows the assessors to judge how the RPL candidate learns from feedback provided by the advisor.

Conversely, the APU tests included tests that assessed the candidate's writing and text processing abilities as well as assessed the candidate's general academic readiness and

potential for studying at the university. Dr. Tahir Wood, Director of APU, assessed the RPL candidates and made recommendations to Faculties.

During 2001 academic year, the RPL project staff within the DLL offered PDC which commenced on January 17, 2001 and ended on 8 February 8, 2001. The APU tests were offered on January 16 and 17, 2001.

Below is the profile of all RPL candidates who participated in the RPL PDC and the APU tests during January 2001. This is followed by the profile of the RPL candidates who successfully gained access to the university through RPL.

Table 1: Profile of January RPL cohort

		No. of candidates (113)	%
Route of Access	APU Tests	29	25.7
	Portfolio	84	74.3
Gender	Male	71	62.8
	Female	42	37.2
Population Group	Coloureds	99	87.6
	Blacks	11	9.7
	Whites	2	1.8
	Indians	1	0.9
Highest Qualification	Below Grade 12	70	61.9
	Grade 12 (no exemption)	31	27.4
	Above Grade 12	1	0.9
	Unspecified	11	9.7
Age Range	22-29 years	8	7.0
	30 and older	101	89.4
	Unspecified	4	3.5

Table 2: RPL candidates admitted to UWC by 12 February 2001

	Total	Result	Sub-total	%
APU Tests	29	Recommended (pass mark 50%)	18	62
		Not recommended (under 50%)	11	38
		Registered	14	48,3
Portfolio	45	Portfolio assessed	35	77.8
		Recommended	34	75.6
		Registered	33	73.3
		Registered with Qualification below Gr.12	22	66.7
		Registered with Qualifications at Grade 12.	11	33.3

This section provided a description of the UWC RPL programmes to illustrate the nature and dimensions of the case study. In the rest of this dissertation, the researcher will continuously draw on the data which is provided in this section.

4.5 Factors which make South Africa particularly fertile for RPL

Education commentators over many years argued the case that the South African education and training system was in crisis. Educational control was fragmented under eighteen different administrations during the apartheid years. Finance and resource allocations were hierarchically benefitting the White administration whilst marginalising the Black[2] administrations (Harthorne, 1991: 41). Whilst the South African education and training system was in crisis because of unequal educational provision, it definitely also experienced a structural crisis in the sense that socio-economic and political barriers prevented pupils from pursuing an uninterrupted schooling.

The structural crisis within education is clearly evident if an analysis is made of the throughput of Standard Seven (Std. 7) pupils in 1976 to become the Standard Ten (Std. 10) pupils in 1979. As well as the Std. 7 pupils in 1979 to become the Std. 10 pupils in 1982. Using statistics provided by the Central Statistical Services (1997: 5.12-5.36) the researcher made a number of calculations to determine the percentage of each population group, as classified by the apartheid system in Std. 7 and Std. 10. The assumption was made that those pupils who were in Std. 7 in 1976 would be in Std. 10 after four years. It is also assumed that those who failed during the four years would be accounted for since there were already pupils either in Std. 8 or Std. 9 who reached Std. 10 in 1979.

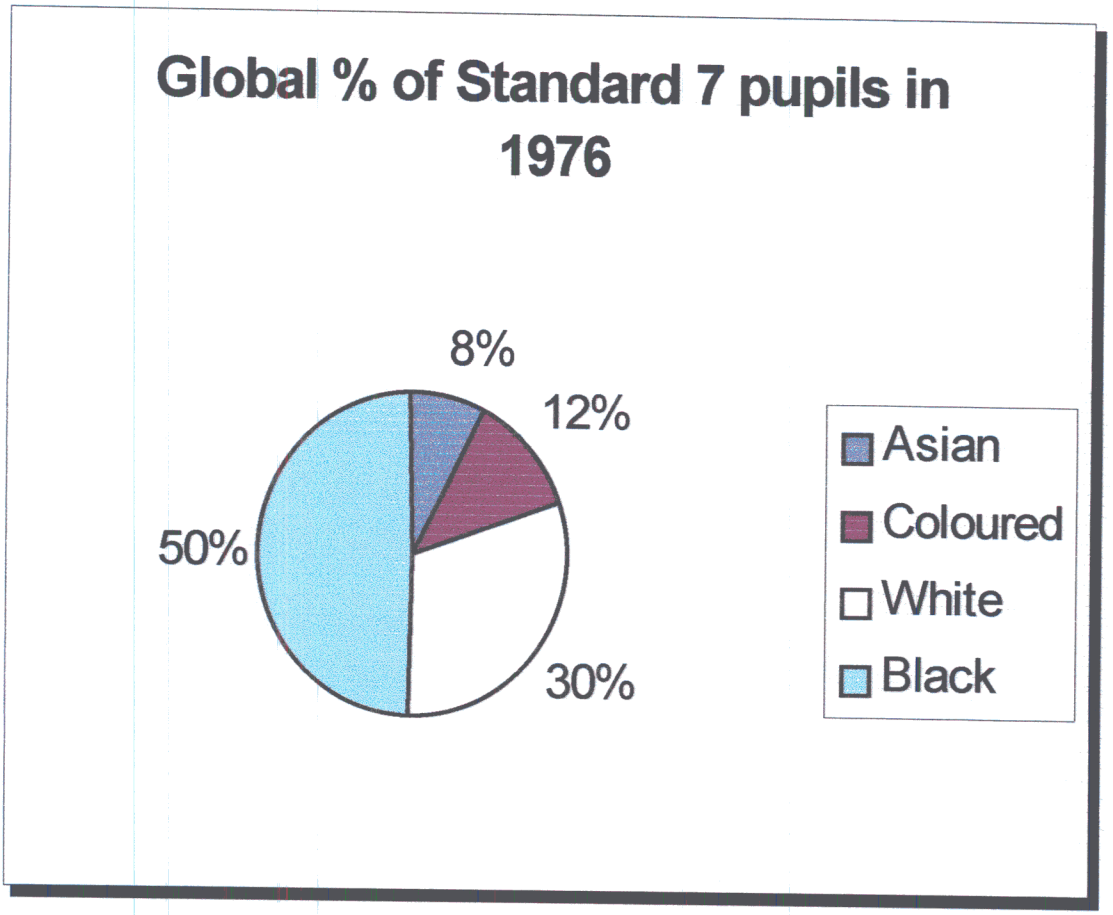
In 1976, the pupils in Std. 7 were: 8% Asians, 12% Coloureds, 30% Whites and 50% Balcks (see Graph 1). In 1979, the pupil cohort in Std. 10 were: 9% Asians, 7% Coloureds, 57% Whites and 27% Blacks (see Graph 2).

Similarly, in 1979, the pupils in Std. 7 were: 5% Asians, 11% Coloureds, 23% Whites and 61% Blacks (see Graph 3). In 1982, the pupil cohort in Std. 10 were: 6% Asians, 8% Coloureds, 41% Whites and 45% Blacks (see Graph 4).

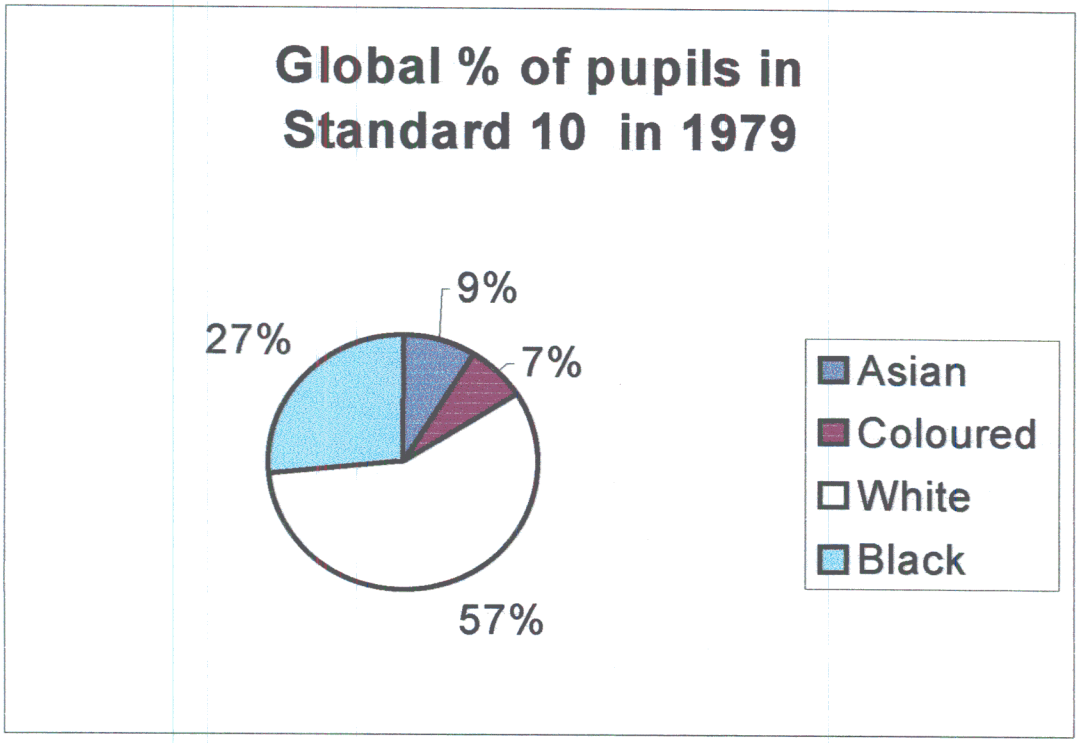
The statistics for the 1976-1979 cohort were not chosen to suggest that the structural crisis started in 1976. On the contrary, this phenomenon stretches back many years. This cohort was chosen because, in terms of their current age and nature of their life experiences, this cohort and those that followed could be regarded as the target group for higher education RPL programmes. The 1979-1982 cohort was chosen for similar reasons, as well as to show that these findings are consistent.

Whilst unequal provision of educational opportunities certainly was a major factor as to why Black and Coloured pupils were not progressing in the system as expected, the argument of unequal provision was not a sufficient explanation. The other part of the explanation suggests that the South African education system experienced a structural crisis.

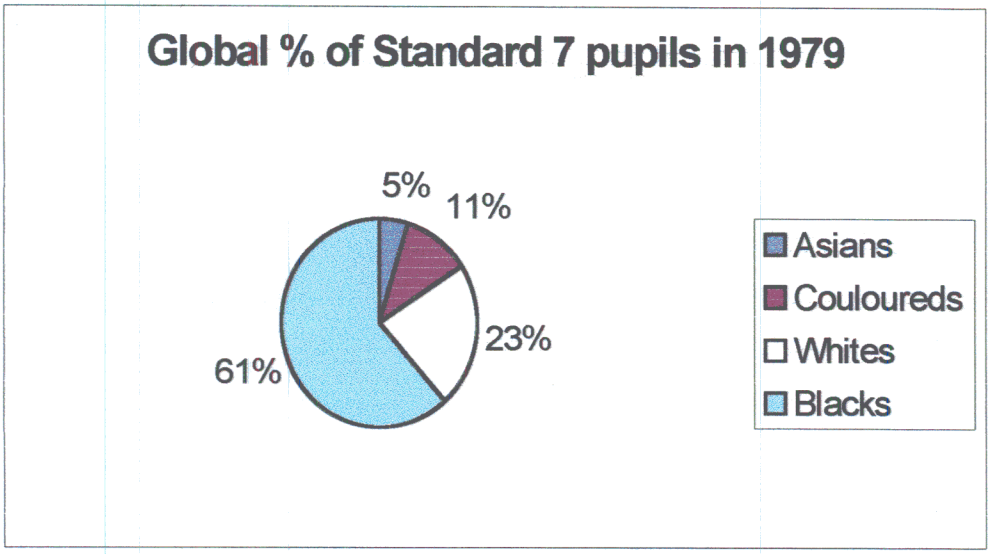
Graph 1: Source: Graph calculated (Central Statistical Services, 1997)



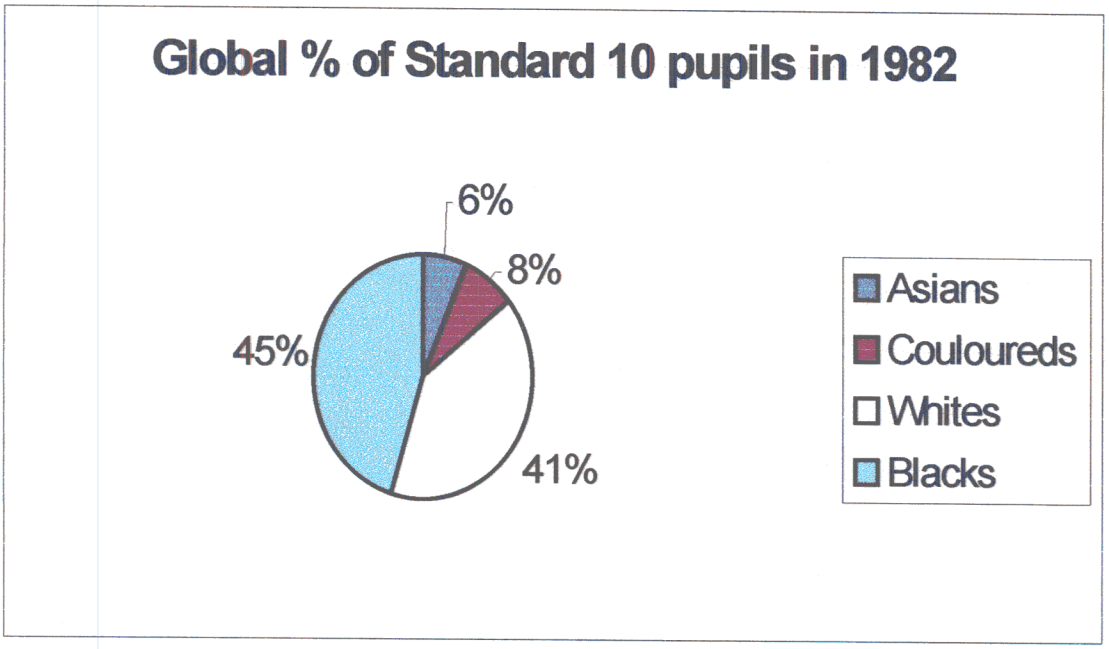
Graph 2: Source: Graph calculated (Central Statistical Services, 1977)



Graph 3: Source: Graph calculated (Central Statistical Services, 1977)



Graph 4: Source: Graph calculated (Central Statistical Services, 1997)



The structural distortion and inequality within the South African education and training system which these graphs seem to confirm in and by themselves are shocking. However, these graphs are not representing the full picture since the White population group account for only 13% of the South African population (NECC, 1992: 41).

The structural crisis the South African education system experienced from the 1970's was evident in a number of RPL candidates' autobiographical learning narratives. The autobiographical narratives confirm the structural crisis by suggesting that pupils were unable to continue with their studies because of socio-economic and political reasons:

> *All through my high school years I've been dreaming of becoming a medical practitioner. My dreams were shattered when I had to leave school*

at the age of fifteen. Having passed standard seven I started working to help my parents support a family of ten children (RPL candidate 1, January 28, 2001).

When I passed Standard Nine ... I fell pregnant. ...The fact that I never matriculated or studied further made me develop a low self-esteem. I was discouraged demotivated and had an inferiority complex (RPL candidate 2 January 28, 2001)

As a black male who lived for 34 years under the apartheid regime, life has always been about fighting for survival. With working class parents our world was about bread and butter issues. Survival was key to our existence. ... Whilst in Standard Nine I was taken out of school to go and work to support to help supplement the household income (RPL candidate 3, February 13, 2001).

*...I remember may father saying, "die boere onderdruk al vir ons vir al die jare ..." (*The boers have been oppressing us for all these years) ... *I was confronted with the very same oppression in the early 1980s at high school. This immediately led to my involvement into student politics and youth organisation... . This is where I developed my political and theoretical understanding of the South African situation....* (RPL candidate 4, February 11, 2001).

The views expressed within the autobiographical narratives are supported by the results of a questionnaire administered by the researcher. The question that is relevant in this

instance asks RPL candidates what prompted them to leave school. The overwhelming majority of respondents identified poverty or the need to assist their families financially (70,8 percent) as the main reason as to why they left school before reaching Std. 10. Political repression was identified by 12,5 percent of respondents and falling pregnant was cited by 4,2 percent of respondents who left school before completing their schooling career. The rest (12, 5 percent) identified boredom or laziness as reasons for leaving school before completing Std. 10.

Another factor that contributed to pupils leaving school early, which applied particularly to Black and Coloured pupils, was the requirement that a pupil wishing to pursue a trade needed only a Std. 7 pass, whilst those wishing to pursue a profession such as teaching or nursing only needed a Junior Certificate (Std. 8 pass). Since a number of Black and Coloured families lived in poverty, they grabbed the opportunity to gain employment. This is perhaps once again an indication of how successful the hegemony operated, setting low targets and thereby inviting citizens willingly to co-operate and remain poorly educated in a general sense, since the general practice was not that Std. 8 was sufficient because White pupils needed a Std. 10.

The above arguments as to why pupils left school before completing their schooling career suggest that they were not necessarily weak pupils. A number of them completed their final year successfully at either Standard 7 or Standard 8.

If the recognition of prior learning is going to contribute to social inclusion, equity and redress, institutions of higher learning may need to target mature adults who successfully completed their final years of study, whether the final years are Std. 7, 8, or 9, rather than

targeting those who have failed in Std. 10. If only the 1976-1979 cohort is taken as an example than 138 346 pupils left the education system between Std. 7 and Std. 10. If the 1979-1982 cohort is taken that 184 168 pupils were lost to the education system between Std. 7 and Std. 10. These values were calculated using data provided by the Central Statistical Services (1997: 5.12-5.36).

The enormity of the number of pupils who became lost to the education system between Std. 7 and Std. 10 becomes evident if the total number of Standard Sevens from 1976 to 1980 are calculated and subtracted from the total number of pupils in Standard 10 from 1979 to 1983. This calculation was done by the researcher who arrived at the following values: total number of Std. 10 pupils for the five years mentioned equals 624 898 pupils; total number of Std. 7 pupils during the five years mentioned equals 1 480 677 pupils. Hence, pupils who left the education system before reaching Std. 10 equals 855 779 pupils. This figure only represents a small proportion of the potential target group for higher education RPL programmes.

4.6 English, as the language of learning and teaching

The UWC language policy recognises English and Afrikaans as institutional teaching and learning languages. However, in the last five years, English has become the *de facto* teaching language at the institution. The exclusive use of English not only results in the marginalisation of the other official South African languages, but it also results in the failure to 'recognise and celebrate knowledge created in the course of peoples' ordinary lives' (Michelson, 1999: 99).

There are two approaches to RPL at UWC: the Portfolio Development Course (PDC) approach and the Academic Counselling and Assessment (ACA) approach. In the PDC, candidates are required to develop a portfolio narrating their autobiographical learning history followed by an interview. Candidates who opted for the ACA were required to write a battery of tests and to be interviewed. In both approaches to RPL at the university, English was the only language through which candidates were allowed to display their knowledge and skills to the assessors. Although the language question was never explicitly raised by the candidates or the RPL facilitators, there existed a 'taken for granted', even 'common sense' assumption that English is the language in which the process would be delivered. Tacit within this is the assumption that English is the language of the Academy.

Candidates who struggled with proficiency in English soon realised that their skills and knowledge might not be valued in an environment which equates English proficiency with cognitive development. A number of these candidates then withdrew from the PDC. Those who were much more proficient in English completed their portfolios and were admitted to the institution, except one candidate who was denied entry on medical grounds and another candidate who applied to study at a post-graduate level and gained access to the Third Year. In addition, five RPL candidates, who applied for the *Certificate: ETD Adult Learning* presented their portfolios in Afrikaans. It should be noted that the *Certificate: ETD Adult Learning* is offered as a resource based learning programme and the materials supporting the learning and teaching are also available in Afrikaans.

Providers of RPL need to grapple with the language question not only when candidates seek access to the institution but also when they have been admitted to the university as students. Academic results for the 2001 academic year - the first semester, indicate that

the students who were admitted to the university through the RPL programme scored on average five percent above the rest of the class in all departments. However, those students whose first language is not English, especially in the programmes where English was the only language of teaching, were clearly at a disadvantage and their results reflected it. In those learning programmes, for example the *Certificate: ETD Adult Learning,* where Afrikaans formed part of the teaching language, the RPL candidates performed well.

The argument presented above is not suggesting that RPL practice should ignore that most education programmes at UWC are offered in English and that RPL students are unlikely to succeed if provided with access. On the contrary, for RPL to be transformative it needs to identify and remove barriers that may prevent those who are marginalised. In this instance, English as the only teaching and learning language perpetuated the *status quo* not only at the point of entry but also post entry. One of the challenges RPL presents to institutions of higher learning is the challenge of multi-lingualism in its teaching and learning policy.

Language is not only a medium through which people communicate; language is also the medium through which the culture of people is transmitted. Phillipson (1992: 55) accuses English of being imperialistic since the English language is used for 'effecting and maintaining an unequal allocation of power and resources'. For example, within a pedagogic relationship, the use of English may have major consequences for learning if the indigenous language of the learners is ignored (Phillipson, 1992: 55). More insidiously, the unconscious assumption of an institution that English is the norm can be damaging to the confidence of speakers of other languages, which may comprise their learning potential.

Academics sometimes make the simplistic assumption that competence in English equates to higher levels of cognitive development. Kathy Luckett (1999), for example, makes such an assumption. In reporting on the characteristics of candidates who sought access to a Rural Community Development Certificate programme offered at the University of Natal, she states that these candidates typically display:

> … low levels of "cognitive development" – few have reach cognitive proficiency in (CALP, Cummis 1996) *English* and some not even in their first language; resulting in limited competence in manipulating abstract, decontextualised, prepositional knowledge (Luckett, 1999: 70, emphasis added).

Perhaps Kathy Luckett is saying this because the learning programme is offered in English. If the learning programme was offered in isiZulu, she might have had a different view.

Stuart (1996) criticises the view that equates a limited proficiency in English with low level of cognitive development. Stuart challenges academics that equate definition of knowledge with competence in English by reminding them of practices in Britain:

> The definition of knowledge in Britain is centred around a 'reasonable grasp of English'. In other words, knowledge that is constructed outside of our framework cannot realistically be recognised as knowledge (Stuart, 1996: 7).

Hilary Janks, Professor in Linguistics at University of Witwaterant, reinforces the Stuart's critique by signaling the complex dynamics when students are required to learn in a foreign language, she states:

> I often wonder if I would have completed my own schooling if I had had to learn mathematics, biology and history through the medium of isiZulu and my other subjects through the medium of seSotho, while living in a designated group area that cut me off from contact with all native speakers of these languages (Janks, 2001: 4).

Indeed the language question is contentious, however, if UWC is serious about redressing past imbalances and if it wishes to contribute to social equity, the institution needs to consider the issue from a learning perspective rather than from a teaching and/or institutional efficiency perspective. If there is a commitment towards 'learning centredness', then the language choices should support learning.

4.7 Institutional and administrative impacts

The introduction of RPL at UWC not only required changes at the institutional level but it also required UWC to challenge the matriculation regulations. The matriculation regulations require that all candidates wishing to pursue university studies should be in possession of a Matriculation Exemption. H.T. Amoore, chairperson of the Matric Board Exemption Committee, reminds universities that the Matriculation Board and the South African University Vice Chancellor's Association (SAUVCA) has a responsibility to ' … protect the integrity of the process of admissions into higher education …' (Amoore, 2000: 3). He further argues that whilst '… individual universities do have the power to

determine admission requirements …' as provided for in the Higher Education Act (1997), universities '… must do so subject to matriculation regulations' (Amoore, 2000: 3).

Amoore (2000) sees regulations governing Senate discretion as a case of conditional exemption. In support of his view, Amoore quotes paragraph 31 of the government gazetted regulations governing senates discretion:

> …the Committee of Principals shall issue a certificate of conditional exemption to a person who, in the opinion of the senate of a university, has demonstrated, in the selection process approved by that senate, that he/she is suitable for admission to bachelors degree studies, which certificate shall be valid for admission to university only (Amoore, 2000:1).

The issue of matriculation exemption has been universalised as a social norm which has incontestable value for higher education. This is regardless of the fact that there are wide variations in the quality of learning in preparation for it. There are discrepancies in whether matriculation exemption prepares one for university study or not and whether it prepares one for particular fields of study. There is however consensus that preparation for matriculation exemption is content heavy and light on many critical cognitive skills required in higher education (Alexander, September 18, 2000: personal communication).

The requirement insisting on a matriculation exemption overlooks those members of society who may be better prepared for higher education in terms of experience and maturity and therefore fails to recognise that there is a range of educational attributes which might lead to success at higher education in a range of disciplines.

The introduction of RPL at UWC presented a conflictual moment between the university and the Matriculation Board since RPL effectively disregarded the regulatory power of the Exemption Committee to determine who will be admitted to the institution and who will not.

UWC went a step further and made it public that it is committed to 'provide access to all students who have the potential to succeed' and includes RPL as one of the options through which students may gain entry (UWC, undated). Regarding access to RPL, the UWC *General Information for Applicants for Undergraduate Programmes* states that:

> Candidates without a Senior Certificate, but with extensive work experience, ... *may be admitted through RPL.* You will need to demonstrate that you have achieved sufficient learning outside the formal education system to cope with university studies (UWC, undated, emphasis added).

The introduction of RPL at UWC has transformed the university's admissions policy. This strategy has also required some administrative changes in terms of how students are registered.

The reason for this is that RPL candidates do not apply for admission into the university when they apply to participate on the RPL programme. Accordingly the university has not developed an administrative system to record RPL candidates. The RPL office is currently keeping all this information in a temporary database. There is clearly a need to develop an administrative system which will record all RPL applicants on a central administrative system because if there are disputes in the future regarding how these

students entered the UWC system or disputes regarding fairness initiated by the RPL candidates, UWC can always go back to its official administrative system to clarify these kinds of issues.

Since UWC is interested to know how RPL students are progressing academically, the RPL Office needs to track these RPL students within the UWC system. During the initial attempt to ascertain who the RPL students were, the RPL Office found it almost impossible to identify them within the system since the same code that applied to the senate discretionary students was used to code RPL students with the administrative system. Senate discretionary students are those students without a matriculation exemption who did pass Std. 10. Generally these students would be between 18 and 20 years of age. Conversely, RPL students may not have reached Std. 10. They gained access to the university through the different RPL options.

After consultations between the RPL Office and Mr. Vincent Morta from the Office of the Registrar, Mr. Vincent Morta agreed to develop a distinctive administrative code for RPL students. In addition he designed the administrative system and process to be followed by RPL candidates from application to admission. This code will make it possible to track all RPL students and since the RPL Office is responsible for monitoring student progress, it will become easier to identify RPL students who need academic or other support.

In addition to the need to track RPL students within the administrative system for the purpose of monitoring academic progress and problems, the RPL Project identified additional reasons why an accurate record of RPL candidates is necessary:

> The Matriculation Board and the Department of Education require this information. … In addition, the university needs to establish record keeping systems that categorise RPL students as a distinctive and important group. A complete record of RPL candidates and students will also help to establish where in the institution RPL is being practised and whether appropriate levels of quality are being maintained (Volbrecht and Hendricks, 2001).

The university has decided that all RPL related queries and initial screening of RPL candidates should be channelled through the RPL Office. RPL staff discussed the wisdom of that decision since they were of the opinion that RPL practices should be integrated into the operational plans of faculties. However, they also conceded that since RPL is new at the university, the advocacy role of an RPL Office is crucial for the sustainability of the RPL Project in the short-term.

Thomas (1998: 340) supports this view and argues that it is desirable that RPL should be integrated and assimilated within the regular operations of faculty. However, he warns that integration and assimilation should not occur too quickly since RPL needs 'advocates' especially when the practice is new and not as yet fully accepted (Thomas, 1998: 340).

In the next section, some of the impacts of RPL on the status of the Academy and on sanctioned knowledge are explored.

4.8 The Academy: forging a closer relationship with society through RPL

Barnett (1994) argues that when universities started, they positioned themselves in a way that retained definite separation between the university, society and knowledge. The university valued its autonomous status to create and disseminate knowledge, independent from influences emanating from society. RPL transforms this relationship in two ways.

Firstly, RPL demands that knowledges generated outside of the Academy are valued as legitimate. RPL demands that learning acquired non-formally and informally is worthy of credit within the Academy, thus forcing the intersection of the knowledge created with the academy and knowledge created within society.

RPL at UWC also signals that the university succumbed to the marketisation of its services and accordingly bought into the discourse of globalisation which has marketisation and competitiveness as fundamental characteristics. The marketing of RPL at UWC brought another dimension into the equation. That is the issue of outsourcing of services and the issue of what is core services for the Academy[3].

UWC contracted an external agency to design a marketing campaign to advertise the RPL services offered at the university. Having been briefed by the Public Affairs Department at the university, the agency went ahead and designed an advertising campaign for radio and the print media. The significance of the relationship between the marketing company and the university was that the Academy 'trusted' the marketing company to present a public communication that would make academic sense. The Academy conceded and recognised that the skills and knowledge to run a successful RPL marketing campaign are

not to be found inside the Academy but rather outside within society. Alternatively, even if these skills existed within, they assigned the task to a commercial company.

With the central message of the RPL adverts, the university once again acknowledged the symbiotic relationship it has with society. "What you have learnt throughout life is sufficient for our recognition; socially useful knowledge, created in social interaction is valued by UWC".

The simplicity of the marketing message also had its drawbacks and promised too much. A number of people, who inquired about the RPL programme, had at times, unrealistic expectation of what UWC can offer them. Those with these 'unrealistic' expectations had to be advised out of the programme by the UWC advisors. However, the issue this section wishes to emphasise is the trust the institution had had in an agency not from within the Academy.

4.9 Staff Development

Maggie Challis emphasises that staff development should precede any implementation of RPL because the introduction of RPL 'may create great insecurities for staff whose traditional role has been that of teacher' (1993: 117-118). It is not only academic staff that need to be orientated to RPL, on the contrary, administrative and support staff also need to be familiarised with the demands that RPL places on their area of specialisation.

Within the UWC, *Recognition of Prior Learning Policy, Procedures and Practices* draft document, the university commits itself to provide education and training related to RPL to develop the capacity of staff.

> As part of staff development policy, the university will provide training and development opportunities to staff in relation to RPL, in particular with regard to counselling and mentoring, assessment and curriculum development (Volbrecht, 2000).

However, apart from the *RPL Assessment Workshop* conducted by the visiting RPL practitioner and learning theorist, Professor Elana Michelson on October 7-8, 2000, no systematic training took place as required by the policy. Staff within the RPL Project expressed their concern about the lack of staff development.

Staff within the RPL project were to some extent available to counsel advisors on a one-to–one basis. They also designed and distributed documents related to RPL as well as developed a *RPL Resource File* that was placed in the *Lifelong Learning Resource Centre*, for use by all academic staff. These initiatives all had their training dimensions, but these initiatives were not systematic, or monitored.

The RPL staff report that the first phase of implementation has indicated that all staff involved in RPL need to 'develop the necessary skills to make a success of this (RPL) innovation' especially 'staff development around RPL counselling and assessment should be a priority' (Volbrecht and Hendricks, 2001).

All faculties were invited to send staff members to the Assessment Workshop facilitated by Elana Michelson. However, only three UWC academic staff members, other than the RPL project staff, participated in the workshop. It became clear for the RPL Project staff

that whilst some academic staff recognise that they need support and training in practices of RPL, the majority seems not to be interested.

A possible explanation for the reluctance of academic staff to participate in staff development could be linked to the notion that academic staff at university are highly qualified and experts in their field of practice. Academic staff therefore assume that they do not need any further training. Indeed, at one meeting a senior academic staff member said as much:

> *We don't require any further qualifications. We are sufficiently qualified* (Personal communication).

Another explanation may be linked to the issue of 'academic workload'. Academics hide behind the Academy as the knowledge elite not because they necessarily believe it, but it is the best way that they do not increase their workload. Since academics need time for research, such research equals the high stakes, anything else is a drain on their capacity to be involve in research. Although this signals an immense self-centredness, this is how academics are valued by the Academy.

On the other hand, Challis argues that the reluctance of academic staff to participate in staff development related to RPL may signal their total rejection of the idea of RPL (1993: 118).

Challis continues and explains why many academic staff reject RPL:

> … not only because it may imply, in their minds, a reduction in the level of skill involved in their area, but also because it takes away from them control

> that they are accustomed to have in their own domain. There are, of course good reasons given why APEL [Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning] is inappropriate in particular areas ... but may often be a smoke-screen for fear of yet another reorganisation being imposed from above with no apparent relevance to current practice (1993: 118)

To reverse the reluctance of academic staff to interact with RPL, the RPL Project staff at UWC initiated a plan to discuss the philosophy underpinning RPL and the UWC RPL policy at faculty level. Initial meetings were held with all faculty deans and faculty officers to put such a plan in motion.

Up to now, no attempt has been made at staff development for administrative and support staff. This obviously is a major limitation that the UWC RPL Project staff need to remedy. Arguments for why this has not happened include the fact that the initial RPL recruitment was conducted by the RPL Office. The RPL Office thus handled all administration up to the point when candidates were provided with access to the university. Only when RPL candidates had to register with the institution, did they approach the central administration of the university.

This way of handling of the administration related to the recruitment of RPL candidates seems to be a short-term strategy. In the long-term, it will be the responsibility of the university's central administration to deal with all administratives matter related to RPL.

Challis suggests that administrative staff need to be made aware of the enrollment process since it will change if RPL issues are considered; RPL may result in a new fee structure,

as well as procedures to track student attendance and progress, amongst others (1993: 121).

The reluctance of academic staff to participate in staff development opportunities may suggest the level of ignorance about RPL and its practices that they may not even realise they need development. Perhaps, this indicates that the advocacy dimension of RPL precede staff development.

4.10 Equity - access with success

Redress is one of the key principles of the National Qualifications Framework, and RPL seems to be an essential mechanism through which the NQF proposes to effect redress. But is there any evidence that RPL contributes to social equity?

The profiles in terms of population groups of those who applied to the UWC RPL programme suggest that RPL does contribute to social redress. The overwhelming majority of RPL candidates who registered in the UWC programme were Coloured and African candidates with an 87.6% and 9.7% representation respectively. Furthermore, 89.4% of these candidates were older that 30 years of age and 61.9% of these candidates had less that a Grade 12 qualification.

In Section 4.5 of this dissertation it is argued that especially Africans and Coloureds were prevented from pursuing formal education and training opportunities primarily because of structural distortions and inequality in society. The analysis of statistics in the same Section concludes that the dropout of pupils at Std. 7 and Std. 8 were disproportionally high for Africans and Coloureds in particular. The researcher went further and suggested

that pupils who were successful pupils in their final years of study, whether at Std. 7, 8, or 9 should be the target group of higher education RPL programmes.

The high percentage of RPL candidates without a Grade 12, as well as the fact that more than 80% of RPL candidates were 30 years of age or older, supports an earlier assertion that the target group for RPL ought to be those candidates disadvantaged by the education system due to structural distortion and inequality within the system. And indeed, those recruited to the UWC RPL programme show that the majority were members of the target group identified above. Hence, it may be argued that RPL at UWC is making a contribution to social redress and equality in South Africa through providing access to non-traditional students.

However, in terms of gender representation, 62.8% of candidates were male whilst 37.2% were female. Perhaps suggesting that in terms of gender equality, RPL is not as yet contributing to social redress[4]. The RPL Project staff express their concern with the state of affairs.

> We note that women are under represented in the group, which is uncharacteristic for further studies programmes. Normally it is women who are more likely to return to formal study after a period of absence (Volbrecht and Hendricks, 2001).

Furthermore, the categorisation of 'deferred beginners', 'returnees', 'developers' and 'enrichers' which the National Institute of Adult Education (NIACE) has chosen to describe mature adult students in Britain seems not to apply these RPL candidates (Lueddeke, 1997: 212-213, citing NIACE, 1993). This is so primarily because these RPL

candidates were unable to pursue higher education studies earlier because they did not matriculate. So most of these RPL students could be viewed as 'deferred beginners'.

RPL candidates at UWC were given access to all faculties within the university except for the Faculty of Dentistry who did not receive a request for access. Although one RPL candidate was given access to the Faculty of Science, he did not take up the offer.

The Law Faculty provided access to 13 RPL candidates who registered for the first year. RPL students within the Faculty of Law gained an averaged final mark for the first semester of 61, 96 percent. This mark was 5,6 percent above the class average of 52,2 percent. One of these RPL students who only had a Std. 7 qualification received firsts for all the subjects he had registered on. Commenting on his achievements, the RPL student remarked:

> *I was surprise to have done this well! No one expected me to do this well. I did not expect to do this well. We, the RPL students competed with students who matriculated and we have shown we are their equals* (RPL student 1, January 19, 2001).

The results of RPL students in other faculties were not presented in a manner that allowed for comparative analysis. However, the results were as positive as the results for the Faculty of Law. In the Faculty of Arts, RPL students passed 48 modules out of a total of 61. This is a success rate of 79 percent. Some of the RPL students in the Faculty of Arts did exceptionally well.

Similarly in the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences, with four RPL students who registered in the in Department of Nursing and one who registered in the Department of Social Work. The results of the Nursing RPL students seem in general to be weaker in comparison with RPL students in other faculties. All the RPL students in the Nursing Department failed the modules Anatomy 111 and Computer Literacy. However, they passed thirteen modules out of a total of fifteen modules taken, excluding the Anatomy 111 and Computer Literacy modules.

Since all these RPL students failed Anatomy 111 and Computer Literacy the researcher inquired about the performance of the other students who took the same course. The results of the investigation revealed that less than 25 percent of students who took the Computer Literacy Module passed the module. The results for Anatomy 111 were similar. It seems that the problem of RPL students not succeeding in these two modules may not rest with the students but rather with the way these modules are offered within the Department of Nursing.

The RPL student who gained access to the Department of Social Work also did exceptionally well with at least four Firsts in the examination.

Eleven RPL students gained access to qualifications offered by the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education within the Faculty of Education. Nine of these students registered on the *Higher Certificate ETD: Adult Learning*. The average mark for the RPL students on this programme was 4 percent above the class average.

One RPL student gained access to the *Higher Diploma ETD: Adult Learning* and her average mark was 80 percent. Finally, one RPL student gained access to the *Advanced Diploma for Educators of Adults*. Her average mark was 83 percent.

The section focussed on the contribution of RPL to social equity. It should be remembered that social equity is one of the criteria that determine whether transformation has occurred. If social equity is solely defined in terms of providing access to an institution of higher learning then it must be concluded that the UWC RPL programme is contributing to social equity. However, providing access without ensuring academic success is meaningless. Again the UWC RPL findings suggest that the cohort which was part of this research are succeeding academically.

The next chapter examines whether the knowledges which RPL candidates bring to the Academy are treated equitably.

4.11 Conclusion

This chapter provided a description of the RPL programme and analysed practices linked to RPL at UWC. The chapter identified and discussed two key factors that facilitated RPL at the university. It became clear in this chapter that to insure the institutionalisation of RPL at UWC, the RPL programme must pay more attention to RPL advocacy amongst academics, only then would staff development be taken seriously. Furthermore, the researcher argued in this chapter that the role played by the university leadership was crucial in facilitating the institutionalisation of RPL.

It was found that RPL at UWC does contribute to social equity and redress since the RPL programme was able to recruit non-traditional students who are members of the socially marginalised groups in society. Furthermore, the academic results for the first semester of these RPL students have shown that they are succeeding on average above the class average.

In addition, this chapter analysed and discussed the implications of the dominance of English as the language of learning and teaching at UWC. It recognised that language choices are contentious. However, by recognising the languages of students and allowing them to learn in these languages UWC will further contribute to social equity. The researcher found that RPL at UWC has not challenged the use of English as the only language of learning and teaching at the university.

It was found that the narrative approach to portfolio development may be transformative in the sense that it allowed the voices of the RPL candidates to be heard within the Academy as well as allow the different knowledges of RPL candidates to be articulated, RPL at UWC was limited to access and does not include providing advanced standing.

ENDNOTES

[1] Draft RPL Policy is included in this research report as Appendix A.

[2] Black is a generic term referring to the 'racial' classifications as defined during the Apartheid dispensations, namely Africans, Coloureds and Indians

[3] 'Outsourcing' and 'core services' are words closely associated with the globalisation concept. These words, only a few years ago would have been foreign at this university.

[4] Anecdotal evidence suggests that during the start of the schooling year women with families sacrifice their educational opportunities to see to the needs of their children. Only by April they start thinking about themselves. This anecdotal evidence seems to be supported by the profiles of UWC RPL PDC that started in July 2001. With this intake, more than sixty percent of RPL candidates were women.

CHAPTER 5

KNOWLEDGES AND REALITIES AS ARTICULATED BY THE RPL CANDIDATES

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is focused on how RPL candidates presented their knowledge and skills for assessment purposes. It examines the data contained in the autobiographical life history narratives submitted as part of candidates' portfolios. These narratives form part of the life history approach to portfolio development, and this strategy is compared with approaches that require the matching of individual competences against predetermined standards or specifications, such as the Academic Counselling and Assessment (ACA) approach employed by UWC.

In addition, this chapter examines the nature of the UWC RPL assessment practices in deciding to provide access for the RPL candidates to the different university programmes.

5.2 Locating the Autobiographical Life History Narrative conceptually

One of the two approaches to RPL adopted by the University of the Western Cape (UWC) was the portfolio development approach. Candidates applying for access through RPL were required to either participate in the Portfolio Development Course (PDC) or the battery of tests within the Academic Counselling and Assessment (ACA) model. This section focuses specifically on the PDC, and seeks to ascertain the different knowledges which are produced by different communities of social practice.

The PDC at UWC required that candidates write an autobiographical learning history narrative within the supportive environment of a four-week course. Although RPL is normally associated with assessment, the PDC was designed to facilitate further learning which would also form part of the evidence for assessment learning rather than focusing on assessment.

The PDC included workshop sessions interspersed with individualised advising, mentoring and counselling sessions and written feedback. These workshop sessions examined the different modes of learning and focused on what is meant by learning, including experiential learning. Furthermore, the workshop sessions highlighted what kinds of evidence must be identified and suggested ways of how it could be presented. One could argue that these sessions, namely the workshop and individualised sessions, started to frame the experiences of RPL candidates in a particular way, mostly the hegemonic way, however, social knowledges were also included into the frame. Further, the workshops introduced candidates to the discourse of producing an autobiographical learning history narrative; and finally, one of the sessions orientated candidates to the skills associated with reading and writing for academic purposes which included strategies to access and evaluate information from an academic library and the internet.

The discourse of the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), of which RPL is a key principle, requires that qualifications be defined in terms of general and specific competences. However, the NQF discourse does not problematise competence; it takes competence as desirable and value-free. Amina Barkatoolah questions competence specification as value-free. She sees competence as a 'cognitive and social construct'

indicating a 'complex and organic (dynamic)' totality that includes components such as 'cognitive skills, capability, motivation, values …' (Barkatoolah, 1996: 3).

In addition to being value-laden, definitions of competence are contentious because these definitions are designed by elites to reproduce their dominance in society. However, those who are excluded through a specific definition of competence very seldom challenge these definitions particularly when trying to become part of a system from which you are excluded. In trying to understand this seeming contradiction, Preece (2000: 3) explains that people are so caught-up in the hegemonic belief system that they seldom question the value system, which privileges the dominant. They do not even 'realise how much they themselves are naturalised in them' (Preece, 2000: 3).

The autobiographical learning history narrative, as practiced at UWC, makes a fundamental departure from the common RPL practice of articulating learning in relation to pre-determined competence specifications. The PDC introduces RPL candidates to the concepts associated with competence and the desirability of defining learning in relation to competence standards within the discourse of the NQF. However, the PDC did not make it a requirement that RPL candidates include in their autobiographical learning narratives an analysis of their experiences in order to articulate their learning in relation to competences. On the contrary, the autobiographical learning history narrative provides the space for RPL candidates to write about their situated, localised and partial experiences. The learning history approach challenges the dominant discourse that 'perpetuates the *status quo*' and particular power relations, which make it 'difficult for

those already silenced to get their voice heard' (Preece, 2000: 4). It is the role of the assessor to link these narratives with competences required.

Taking the life history route was a conscious move and is based in an understanding that learning acquired by adults is structured in inequality – experiences are defined within a social context ensuring that some groups of people have access to particular experiences whilst others do not. The UWC RPL Project staff saw within the 'life history approach' a strategy to recognise those experiences which are structured in inequality. The life history approach explores the life history of a candidate and provides a strategy of 'contextualising learning and experience with a social framework, and in particular individual experience' (Stuart, 1996: 11). The life history approach celebrates individual difference instead of conforming to the common norm as defined by competence specifications. This approach recognises and 'acknowledge[s] people's identities as an integral aspect of learning' (Preece, 2000: 4).

5.3 The relevance of particular knowledges to academic study

There is a symbiotic relationship between learning and knowledge if knowledge is equal to that which 'human beings have learned and internalised' (Gustavson, 1999: 1). Thus the project that is interested in recognising learning is also, by implication, interested in recognising the different kinds of knowledges created in different contexts and for different purposes.

The autobiographical learning history narratives provided a picture of 'how people's past histories have been shaped and shape their present attitudes' (Preece, 2000: 4). For example the following RPL candidate introduces his autobiographical learning history

narrative by declaring that his family background 'can be traced back to the disenfranchised community'. He describes the context and purpose of his learning:

> *As a community worker in Bluedowns and Blackheath areas, I have been instrumental in setting up ratepayers associations, ad-hoc committees to champion the plight of our people. This has led to a confrontational situation involving several parties namely financial institutions, property developers, local authorities, police services, the messenger of the court and attorneys where residence rights had been violated by not adhering to the due process* (RPL candidate 5, January 28, 2001).

Being shaped by a history of being excluded, this RPL candidate makes it his life project to defend and protect those who share his fate. In pursuance of his project, he learnt about how marginalisation, or belonging to a particular social group due to poverty, results in being constantly at the receiving end of the 'establishment'. He must also have learnt that such a situation cannot be natural or normal for him to have positioned himself as the champion of people on the receiving end.

Not only did this RPL candidate learn about the formal processes of dealing with the institutions which he mentions, but he also learnt about the social implications of being dispossessed of your house or belongings. He learnt about the social implications of having one's father, mother or breadwinner imprisoned.

Knowing and understanding the social implications of marginalisation may not be knowledge that is valued by the dominant in society. Therefore it is not part of the

formative formal curriculum nor is it valued as equipping a person for academic study. However 'marginalisation' became the core component of this RPL candidate's informal curriculum. No one can deny that the community within which this RPL candidate provides this service values knowledge about social marginalisation. (It is also ironic that a number of academic courses are set out to study this knowledge as the object of study. Here comes your RPL student with direct experience of it, but he/she is excluded.)

Within the PDC, the life history and lived experiences of the individual become the central content of the curriculum. This immediately opens the possibility of acknowledging individual difference and different social networks instead of expecting the transmission of the dominant 'wisdom'.

A number of RPL candidates celebrated the learning they have acquired in alternative social networks such as the liberation movements, the trade union movements and the civic movement:

> *Frustrated with the labour conditions within the company, I gathered a few workers and started applying to the union. The union was established within the company and I became the chairperson of the shopstewards.*
>
> *The co-operation of the workers with the FAWU union brought about many changes, including wage increases and wage negotiations, ...*
>
> *My time as a shopsteward empowered me intellectually with regards to labour relations and the rights of workers. I felt most empowered when I was empowering my fellow workers with regards to their rights as workers*

and their positions within the workplace (RPL candidate 6, January 28, 2001).

Besides being significant learning in its own right, the context of the social curriculum for this candidate becomes the context of trade union organisation. In addition, this content area, namely, labour law is generally regarded as a specialised field within a tertiary qualification. However, access to the knowledge related to labour issues is crucial to workers since it may result in the difference between continued employment and unemployment which would lead to further marginalisation. In this sense, in creating access for this candidate to this body of knowledge has social transformative potential.

The union movement as a social movement, in terms of knowledge and learning for the RPL candidate, 'makes power visible' and 'challenge the dominant meaning systems or symbols of contemporary life' (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: 48). This is evident in the candidate's assertion that 'the workers was severely oppressed and exploited by management due to their (workers') lack of knowledge …' (RPL candidate 6, January 28, 2001).

Eyerman and Jamison (1991: 57) argue that 'knowledge creation is a collective process' as opposed to knowledge as the 'discovery of an individual genius'; they also assert that knowledge is not necessarily the result of 'systematic' research. On the contrary, knowledge is:

> … the product of a series of social encounters, within social movements, between movements, and even more importantly perhaps, between

movements and their established opponents (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: 57).

The argument being constructed by Eyerman and Jamison (1991: 57) suggests that knowledge creation is a negotiated interaction between different role-players. A critique of such a view would conclude that the precondition for negotiations over definitions of knowledge is that opponents are privileged to different knowledges because of their different realities.

The trade union example shows that workers have a different reality and thus different knowledges from the reality of management and its knowledge regarding working conditions at the factory. Such knowledge is partly transferable, but knowing marginalisation from the inside is almost impossible if one is not marginalised.

The question is: 'Whose knowledge would and should be privileged within the context of higher education?' This question points to the reality that definitions of knowledge are implicated in the power arrangements between different social groups pursuing different ideological agendas.

The autobiographical learning history narratives provided the space for RPL candidates to engage with what Preece (2000: 5) calls, (following hooks (1994), the 'confessional narrative'. Quoting hooks, Preece asserts that:

> Students want us to see them as whole human beings with complex lives and experiences rather than simply as seekers after compartmentalised bits of knowledge (Preece, 2000: 5).

The 'confessional narrative' and the desire to be seen as 'human beings with complex lives and experiences' was a common theme across most autobiographical learning history narratives. The following example should provide evidence of this phenomenon:

> *... This took me to the heart of my soul. The question of my father's inability to be a father started my interest in the psychology of maleness and my own relation to my world as a man. Men's relationship[s] to women, their violent nature, their aggressive nature, their inability to show emotion, their inability to relate to their personal experiences with each other and psychological abuse. I inherited all of this. The question of maleness and being male in society brought me answers that dealt with many other questions. To name a few, how did apartheid contribute, my peers, my environment or lack of thereof, or my gutter education* ...(RPL candidate 7, January 24, 2001)

The autobiographical learning history narrative allows the candidate to express his or her experiences without the requirement that the candidate needs to reflect and analyse the experiences. The narrative approach recognises that contextual, situated experience is learning in its own right. Whilst being specific and recognising that experiences are products of ideological and historic influences, it is conceivable that through encountering a number of similar or closely similar experiences, the 'learner' would be able to generalise those specific experiences. However, generalisation would not be a requirement of the narrative. It is clear from the following quotation of an RPL candidate

that she has acquired valuable skills and knowledge although the candidate has not analysed and extracted specific 'learnings' through reflecting on her experiences.

> *In dealing with the day to day soft issues in Human Resources, I have furthered my skills in dealing with all levels of people and now report to the Executive Committee. For example: When a director feels the need to reduce staff in his division, he would approach me and expect me to advi[s]e him on the best route to pursue in order to make the reduction in staff as smooth and trouble free for both the company and the employee. Which means I have to be very sure that when a position becomes redundant I have explored all avenues within the Group to place the employee concerned and that retrenchment is definitely the last option. And should that employee take the case to the Commission for Conciliation Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) the company has enough evidence to substantiate its actions* (RPL candidate 8, January 25, 2001).

An assessor familiar with South African labour legislation and accompanying regulations would recognise that the above RPL candidate possesses the knowledge and skills to interpret and implement the provisions of the *Labour Relations Act* of 1998. This is clearly a specialised skill and the candidate also shows in her narrative that she understands the implications of different options open to the employer and the employee.

Skills and knowledge created by 'ordinary' workers and people are valued for their social usefulness by themselves. They do not require the sanction or the 'stamp of approval' of the Academy to validate their knowledge. On the contrary, their knowledges are useful in its own right. The following RPL candidate says as much:

> *The research skills I acquired in my union activities I will keep with me for the rest of my life, as I believe one cannot present good argument without substantiating your claim or argument. These problem solving and negotiating skills I have learnt through my practical experience in the union and the workplace. I have learnt to contact people more knowledgeable about certain issues or cases for references, or read about it or [dig] into archives for old agreements or policies related to a particular case. When I'm busy researching I also deal with a lot of people telephonically and this has improved my communications skills considerably* (RPL candidate 9, January 28, 2001).

The candidate above has acquired the skills and knowledge informally, in other words experientially. Alternatively, this candidate could have acquired skills and knowledge because she consciously wanted to learn these and the social context of the union allowed her to. A closer inspection of the specific skills and the approach adopted by the candidate to gain knowledge is however a skill valued by the Academy.

On the other hand, the dominant discourse of RPL emphasises that it is the 'learning achievement' of the individual learner that is valued and/or recognised. This ignores the fact that learning in most cases is the product of collective social engagement. Learning as a social enterprise or knowledge as a collective human product was clearly evident, especially for those RPL candidates who have had a history of involvement in the trade union movement and the liberation movement. The language they use tends to be in the collective form rather than from an individual perspective. When they refer to their learning and/or knowledge and skills, they mostly talk about it using the 'we' form of pronoun rather than the 'I'. The following example was taken from the portfolio of a community activist:

> *We organised youth via social and political issues and created an outlet for young people ... We, as young people, had no social outlets and it is still the same to date in ... I became actively involved in discussions and debates. We formed different subgroups developing weekly programmes* (RPL candidate 10, January 25, 2001).

The articulation of knowledge and skills in the collective concurs with Eyerman and Jamison's argument which portrays social movements as a 'process through which meaning is constituted' (1991: 94). The individual through her activism contributes to the 'formation of the movement's collective identity' (Eyerman and Jamison, 1991: 4). Even the way the experience is spoken of differs from the Academy.

The autobiographical learning history narrative as a strategy to recognise, value and acknowledge learning acquired by RPL candidates reveals the high levels of intellectual and emotional commitment candidates have had to invest in declaring and/or claiming their learning. The following RPL candidate signals the nature of the emotional and intellectual investment and the fact that much learning is gained in reflecting and making sense of hardship:

> *The disruption came when I finally found the courage to speak to my mother about my stepfather's abusive behavior. Two years before my graduation from high school, the trauma of dealing with my stepfather's constant abuse and sexual advances became too much for me to handle. Speaking about the problem I experienced to my mother, she refused to believe me and acknowledge that he needed help. My stepfather could not bear facing me – he sent me packing at the age of seventeen into an unknown world. This disappointment made me realise that adults are not always right. If I had continued to live in silence I would have been a disturbed child with no will to live. This experience made me strong and gave me the determination to take on the world and deal with this by doing research and seeking answers* (RPL candidate 11, January 25, 2001).

This section started with an assertion that knowledge is equal to that which 'human beings have learned and internalised' (Gustavson, 1999: 1). The autobiographical learning history narratives revealed that ordinary workers and people have learnt in

different context for different purposes due to different realities and thus have access and control over particular kinds of knowledges. However, the Academy tends to disregard the knowledge created outside of the formal education system. RPL practices which are transformative should not only recognise the different contexts of learning but they also need to recognise knowledge for its difference.

5.4 Assessing the Autobiographical Learning History Narratives

Once the RPL candidate and her advisor/mentor were satisfied that the portfolio was complete and that the candidate has presented sufficient evidence of her learning, the portfolio was submitted for final assessment. A panel of experts, members of the faculty to which the candidate seeks access, assessed the portfolio. Generally, the RPL candidate is also invited to present her portfolio orally and to answer questions the assessor may seek to clarify. No predetermined criteria were specified against which the knowledge and skills of the candidate are to be measured. The knowledge and skills as presented in the autobiographical learning history narrative were to be judged in their own terms.

The dominant practice of RPL assumes that assessment can only occur if and only if the RPL candidate has identified the learning. This identification happens through the extraction of learning from experience, which is arrived at through a systematic process of reflection (Evans, 1992: 67). However, the autobiographical learning history narrative does not facilitate the process of reflection and extraction of learning by the RPL candidate. On the contrary, it is the assessor who does the reflection and extraction and makes an inference about learning.

The assumption that if an RPL candidate has not identified his or her learning explicitly then there is 'no learning to assess, however, important to the individual that experience may have been' (Butterworth, 1992 quoting Evans 1988) is challenged in a number of learning history narratives. For example the following RPL candidate, after explaining that she was elected onto the national executive of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO) as the secretary for the Pioneer Organisation, explains the role she played in the organisation:

> *I interacted with local, national and international organisations working and dealing with children, namely the ANC Youth League (still banned) UNICEF, Molo Songololo, Children's Resource Centre, etc. I had to develop programmes and activities for children. I organised national and local workshops to get people to understand why we need the pioneer organisation. ...*
>
> *I had the honor and privilege to represent South Africa, under the leadership of the ANC, at various international gatherings, e.g. in Cuba, France, Holland, Zimbabwe, Botswana, etc. This was one of the highlights of my life and I also got a much broader perspective on national and especially international politics* (RPL candidate 13, January 27, 2001).

The narrative above does not explicitly reflect on the value of these experiences, however, an assessor should not find it too difficult to recognise the candidate's organisational and

management skills. The assessor should also be able to infer from the text the nature of her 'broader perspective of national and especially international politics', or understand it through probing the candidate in an interview.

Working with RPL candidates in his capacity as an RPL advisor, the researcher became aware that it is not an easy task for candidates to recognise their learning through a process of systematic reflection and analysis. Especially if the candidate is immersed within a community of practice he or she is narrating and the candidate is an 'expert' practitioner. This seems consistent with the view of James Gee (1990: xvi) who suggests that when a person becomes an expert practitioner, he or she often cannot say what he did, how he did it, or provide a reason as to why it is done in a particular way. The reason for the expert practitioner being unable to explain meta-knowledge about the 'practice' and/or reflect on the practice, may be found in the nature of becoming apprenticed within different forms of social practices.

Gee (1990) suggests that enculturation (apprenticeship) involves both acquisition and learning. He makes a distinction between acquisition and learning and defines acquisition as the process of acquiring something subconsciously whilst learning is viewed as a conscious process of gaining knowledge through teaching, 'although not necessary from someone officially designated a teacher' (Gee, 1990: 146).

Gee continues:

> … we are better at what we acquire, but we consciously know more about what we have learned. … What is said here about second languages is true, I believe, of all Discourses: acquisition is good for performance, learning is good for meta-level knowledge (Gee, 1990: 146).

Following Gee (1990, 1991) it becomes more obvious as to why RPL candidates are unable to analyse what they have learnt. Most of these candidates have been apprenticed within their social practices primarily through acquisition and not through a process of teaching. They are thus better at performing the tasks associated with the social practice, whether these tasks are practical or theoretical, rather than talking about how they perform these tasks.

One of the RPL candidates made a powerful critique of the practice of assessment. The candidate concludes his autobiographical narrative by critiquing and indeed pre-empting the power of the assessor to decide whether what has been presented is worthwhile knowledge and skills. Not only is the candidate addressing the power question explicitly, he goes a step further and declares his experience as legitimate, indeed openly challenging the assessor to disagree. He then continues and suggests that the power of the collective goes far beyond a decision that is to be taken within a moment in history.

> *I have been refused many things many times in my past for reasons beyond my control. I am presenting you an honest* ***look into my world****. When* ***one has to decide on the fate of anyone*** *who presents a portfolio that argues* ***the legitimacy of their existence,*** *I ask that* ***every avenue is explored to add***

> ***value to this presentation. Our*** *lives do not end here* (RPL candidate 7, January 24, 2001, emphasis added).

The view expressed by the RPL candidate indicating the power dynamics of assessment is similar to that held by Michelson who argues that assessment is not neutral since assessment is a human activity informed by the assessor's values and cultural biases (1997: 151). In a later article Michelson explains the contentious nature of assessment which reflects the RPL candidate's critique of the assessment practice that was about to follow.

> For learning to be recognised, someone must define 'legitimate' knowledge, the knowledge that 'counts'. Someone must be judged by someone else according to standards that somebody has set (1999: 100).

Recognising that standards are being set by assessors, the RPL candidate challenges the unilateral appropriation of power by the assessor. The candidate finds it unethical that the assessor has the right to de-legitimate a valued existence, especially at the moment when the assessor was allowed into his world.

The autobiographical learning history narrative approach has provided assessors access into the worlds of RPL candidates. This approach revealed the context within which these candidates develop their learning; it exposed the knowledge acquired by RPL candidates as being different from academic knowledge in that the knowledge is localised, situated and

gained through acquisition rather than as generalised knowledge gained through teaching, which is currently favoured by the Academy.

However, this should not be a contradiction since RPL is not about denying academic forms of knowing. On the contrary, supporters of transformative RPL (Michelson, 1996, 1997; Johnston and Usher, 1996) would argue that academic ways of knowing are different from situated ways of knowing. However, this does not suggest that the one should be favoured over the other. Instead situated, contextual ways of knowing and academic modes can and should complement each other. Johnston and Usher (1996) go a step further in their suggestion that RPL is potentially transformative in that RPL may create a bridge between experiential knowledge and academic knowledge. RPL may provide a 'framework and [the necessary] tools' to understand and 'represent' and 're-present' experiences in a way that is acceptable to the Academy (Johnston and Usher, 1996: 7). Similarly, RPL becomes a vehicle through which academics may learn about 'specific contexts and complexities of everyday life and issues' (Johnston and Usher, 1996: 7). This interaction and symbiotic relationship between experiential ways of knowing and academic ways of knowing will ensure that 'more grounded' decisions are made which will contribute to 'social and national transformation' (Johnston and Usher, 1996: 7).

The RPL assessment experiences at UWC suggest that institutionalising RPL is not only about developing a set of technical assessment guidelines, it is far more involved. The views expressed by Mandell and Michelson (1990), two academics from the United States of America, seem to concur with the UWC experience in part:

> … beneath a well-earned pride in our new policies and practices lie deeper questions and important philosophical issues that hold no ready answers. We have had to respond to particular configuration of academic strength and weaknesses that adults often bring with them when they return to school. We have been pushed to articulate, question and remold the way we define and evaluate knowledge. We have had to step back and examine our tacit understandings of what constitutes college education and its role in society. And we have had to wonder, perhaps more fundamentally than ever, about the level, relevance and structuring of the body of knowledge that we want our students to master. In many exciting ways and demanding ways, the practice of prior learning assessment and the diverse clientele of adult students it serves has provided a critical occasion to reflect on what we do and why we do it (1990: viii).

Although assessment is being viewed as an objective and neutral practice, this section highlighted the reality that assessment is implicated in the process of distributing power and privilege. It is not the responsibility of the RPL candidate to analyse his or her experiences or to extract learning from these experiences. Rather, since the assessors are 'standing outside' of the experiences narrated by RPL candidates they are in a better position to infer which skills and knowledge have been acquired. Transformative RPL needs to value and recognise that there are a number of knowledges which are useful within different context. Therefore RPL assessment needs to explore ways of

recognising and valuing knowledges and skills for their difference rather than their similarity.

5.5 Conclusion

The narrative approach to portfolio development at UWC provided a voice for RPL candidates to articulate their localised, situated and partial experiences as valid and worthwhile for recognition. An analysis of the portfolios produced by RPL candidates revealed how the knowledges and skills of RPL candidates have been shaped by their past histories. In most cases these knowledges and skills were ignored by the Academy since these were not valued by the dominant groups in society.

This chapter presented an argument that there are different knowledges created within different contexts because of different realities. For RPL to be transformative it needs to respond to the question of whose knowledge would and should be privileged within the context of higher education. Responding to such issues at UWC revealed that RPL is not limited to devising technical guidelines for assessment, since assessment is not an objective or neutral activity. On the contrary, assessment is implicated in the distribution and the maintenance of power and privilege. Hence, assessment and by implication RPL practice is confronted with 'important philosophical issues that hold no ready answers' (Mandell and Michelson, 1990.viii). However, RPL that is transformative needs to value and recognise not only academic ways of knowing but also the knowledges that are marginalised within the Academy.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the conclusions on the extent to which RPL in higher education promotes social transformation which arises from the UWC case study.

Within this chapter the researcher summarises the conclusions reached in his analysis of the UWC RPL intervention. Furthermore, the researcher reviews the lessons extracted from the case study and summarises his conclusions in relations to RPL policy and implementation at higher educational institutions.

Finally, tentative suggestions are made for possible further research which may lead to strengthening the RPL transformative project.

6.2 Conclusions from the case study

The aim of this dissertation was to explore the extent to which RPL can be a transformative practice within higher education by using the UWC RPL programme as a case study. This is the main issue this section addresses. However, before proceeding with the issue of the extent to which RPL in higher education is transformative, it is necessary to highlight a few significant contextual factors that facilitated the introduction of RPL at the University of the Western Cape.

Key amongst the factors, which created the context for the introduction of RPL, was the location of RPL within the discourse of lifelong learning. RPL was viewed as an important component of the university's mission to transform the institution into a lifelong learning institution. This was not only because RPL was perceived as integral to the university's strategy to contribute to social transformation, but also because RPL at UWC was pivotal in terms of 'making lifelong learning opportunities available' to students (Michelson, et al, 1999).

Another factor that facilitated the introduction of RPL at UWC was the rapid decline in student numbers between 1996 and 1998 and the realisation that the university's traditional 18 to 21 age cohort had not shown any growth from 1991 (Koetsier, 1998: 63). This prompted the university to consider the recruitment of non-traditional mature adults to its learning programmes. Within the strategy to recruit non-traditional students, RPL became an important element.

UWC was able to give serious consideration to RPL as an access strategy because the national education policy and legislative environment started to encourage higher education institutions to consider RPL as a mechanism to provide access to mature adults within a broader programme of social equity and redress.

Although the policy and legislative environment encouraged the introduction of RPL at institutions of higher education there was no assurance that RPL will be welcomed at institutions of higher education. Indeed, a research report presented by the Education

Policy Unit suggests that there existed little evidence of RPL at higher education institutions (Breier, 2000: 2, citing Ogude, 2000). One of the reasons why RPL was considered and welcomed at UWC may be associated with the declining numbers and the university's concern to increase student numbers to ensure the long-term sustainability of the institution. In addition, RPL as a strategy for social redress and broadening access to higher education was also consistent with UWC's mission to transform itself into a lifelong learning institution.

The implementation of RPL at UWC illuminated a number of issues regarding the practices of RPL at UWC including the issue of the extent to which RPL contributed to social transformation. Through an analysis of the RPL practices at UWC, the researcher was able delineate the extent to which the intervention was transformative.

An analysis of the profile of the candidates recruited to UWC RPL programme revealed that the majority of these candidates were members of the African and Coloured population groups who were over the age of thirty. In addition, 61, 9 percent of RPL candidates have had qualifications below Std. 10 and 27, 4 percent had Senior Certificates without matriculation exemption. According to the Matriculation Board regulations, these RPL candidates would not have been admitted to any university for degree level qualification through the traditional route since the requirement for university access was matriculation exemption.

The profile of UWC RPL candidates was significant because it revealed that an excessive number of African and Coloured pupils left formal schooling either after they have completed Std. 7 or Std. 8 because of structural distortions and inequality within the South African society. Since the UWC RPL programme recruited primarily RPL candidates without Std. 10 qualifications, it may be argued that RPL at UWC contributed to social transformation through redressing historical social inequality. However, in terms of gender equality, it was found that the UWC RPL programme was not recruiting women in an equitable way.

Providing access to RPL candidates who were socially marginalised was not sufficient evidence that the RPL programme at UWC was contributing to social redress. A further consideration should include whether these RPL candidates succeed academically whiles studying at the university. It was found that RPL students were successful students, in general and that they were performing on average better in comparison with those students admitted through the traditional route.

The profile of the UWC RPL candidates, the extent of the structural distortion and inequality in society as well as the evidence that UWC RPL students are succeeding academically may have implications for higher education RPL policy. In this instance it may imply that the pool of potential RPL candidates is much larger than figures provided by the *National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa* since these figures were based on adults with Senior Certificates but without matriculation exemption (Ministry of Education, 2001: 23).

A key approach to RPL at UWC was the portfolio development course (PDC) approach. An analysis of the PDC revealed the transformative nature of the UWC RPL programme. Firstly, the PDC was more concerned with learning than with assessment. The curriculum of the PDC was the life history of each individual RPL candidate. This approach to RPL although not unique, went against the dominant practices of RPL which required that predetermined criteria be specified against which the competences of RPL candidates be assessed. The autobiographical learning history narrative, a component part of the learning portfolio revealed that the nature, content and contexts of RPL candidates' knowledges and skills were so diverse that assessing their learning achievements against predetermined criteria would not only have been limiting for the candidate but also for the assessor. The university would have been unable to predict beforehand the learning achievements of the RPL candidates to specify these within competence or outcome statements.

Secondly, the autobiographical learning history narrative revealed that the RPL candidates have experiential knowledge and skills which were different from academic modes of knowledge. However, these were not less valuable. Furthermore, the autobiographical narrative approach to portfolio development created the space for the Academy to listen and recognise those marginalised voices in society. These voices articulated knowledges that were specific to particular contexts, localised, situated and experiential.

The portfolio development approach to RPL at UWC was transformative in the way that it reclaimed knowledges that already existed. RPL candidates were provided the space to articulate these existing knowledges within their learning portfolios thus enhancing the status of different marginalised knowledges.

Whilst it was found that UWC acknowledged and recognised the knowledges created by people outside the Academy for access purposes, there was no opportunity to investigate whether the university would also recognise that these marginalised knowledges for academic credit purposes.

Finally, the PDC provided some insight into the language question. An analysis of the language usage within the PDC revealed that English was the preferred language of learning and teaching. It was found that a number of RPL candidates struggled with English. However, the PDC did not make provision for other languages other than (occasionally) Afrikaans. This seems to have been a major limitation of RPL at UWC. The tacit message the PDC was sending to RPL candidates was that English is the language of the Academy. Implicit within this was the message that proficiency in English equates to higher levels of cognitive development. The insistence on English as the language of learning and teaching reinforced the dominance of those competent in English not only as a language but also as an expression of culture. Accordingly, the insistence on English increased the marginalisation of RPL candidates whose mother tongue was not English. This was evident in the number of candidates who left the PDC due to limited proficiency in English. Again, the issue was not limited to a recognition or

non-recognition of a language *per se* but rather it included the privileging of particular cultural practices whilst denying others.

Introducing an innovation at a higher education institution is difficult at the best of times. Academic and administrative staff at UWC did not support the introduction of RPL universally. Hence, it was found that the leadership role played by the university's senior administrators during the introduction of RPL at the university was decisive. Without the active support of the senior leadership it would have been more difficult to convince especially academic staff of the need for RPL at UWC.

Although the university's senior administrators actively supported the introduction of RPL at UWC one needs to ask what motivated them to do so. It was argued in this dissertation that the drastic decline in the student population between 1996 and 1998 at UWC as well as the changes in the national education policy which encouraged higher education institutions to admit non-traditional students, mature adults without a matriculation exception, to university were two significant factors which prompted the UWC leadership to support the introduction of RPL at the university.

It was found that the academic staff at the university were not familiar with the practices of RPL. However, they were also not aware that they needed to know and learn about these practices. This was evident when only three academic staff members attended an *RPL Assessment Workshop* organised the UWC RPL Project staff. Although staff

development is key in ensuring that RPL become institutionalised at UWC, this research found that advocacy is perhaps more critical in the earlier periods of implementation.

The adoption of the Draft *Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Policy, Procedures and Practices at UWC* as a framework for RPL implementation by the Senate of the university indicated the determination of the institution to institutionalise RPL. This draft document had a number of purposes. Firstly, the *RPL: Policy, Procedure and Practices* articulated the standards for good practice. Secondly, the policy document may also be viewed as an advocacy intervention at UWC since it acquainted academic and administrative staff with the rationale, purpose and principles which inform and guide RPL practices at UWC. And finally, the policy document addresses how the university intended to resource the RPL innovation.

Although universities historically positioned themselves in a way that keeps a definite separation between the university and society (Barnett, 1994), RPL implementation at UWC presented evidence that the institution was moving closer to society. This transformative shift is evident in the Academy valuing non-formal and informal learning as legitimate and worthy of formal recognition with the Academy. Furthermore, UWC contracted a commercial agency to market the RPL programme. Through this act, the university recognised that certain valuable knowledge and skills, which the Academy requires for its continued sustainability, are to be found in society.

RPL at UWC confirmed the views held by Mandell and Michelson (1990) regarding RPL and assessment. RPL and associated assessment are implicated in the distribution and maintenance of power and privilege. The key issue that the Academy is confronted with is to decide whose knowledge and the nature of knowledge that would be privileged. The knowledges and skills presented by UWC RPL candidates were diverse because these knowledges were created in different contexts and because of diverse realities. Some presented their knowledge as products of social collective action. In other instances it became clear that the knowledge created due to social marginalisation was a product of how RPL candidates were shaped by their history. Their ways of knowing, which are localised, contextualised and situated, seem to be foreign to academic modes of knowing which are generalised and decontextualised. The UWC RPL, through its narrative approach adopted a transformative stance in that it recognised both margianlised knowledges as well as academic modes of knowing for purposes of access.

A limitation of this research was that the research did not investigate the nature of support RPL candidates require to adapt to life within the Academy. It may legitimately be assumed that whilst RPL candidates are strong students in general, they may need support, advice and guidance in specific areas to orientate them to academic life.

6.3 Further research possibilities

In the course of evaluating the case study of the UWC RPL programme it has become evident that those RPL students admitted to the institution will need advice, guidance and support as they navigate their way within academy.

In terms of research, this suggests that much could be learnt from making public the nature and content of a support programmes for RPL students.

This research has indicated that women were not well represented in the in the first UWC RPL cohort. It would be valuable to investigate why women are not responding positively to transformative opportunities and what needs to change to ensure that women take up these opportunists.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented the conclusions on the extent to which RPL in higher education promotes social transformation which arose from the UWC case study. It concluded that in general the UWC RPL programme was transformative in the sense that knowledge that emanated from the marginalised groups in society was included in the definitions as to what count as 'legitimate knowledge' as well as in the sense that RPL at UWC resulted in institutional changes which were structural in nature. However, regarding the language through which RPL candidates articulated their knowledges and skills, this research concluded that UWC maintained the *status quo.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES

1. Alexander, D. and Martin, I., (1995), Competence, Curriculum and Democracy, in Mayo, M. and Thompson, J. (Eds.) *Adult Learning, Critical Intelligence and Social Change*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England.

2. Amoore, H.T., (2000), *South African Vice Chancellor's Association: Senate's Discretionary Conditional Exemption,* Exemption Committee, Matriculation Board, Pretoria.

3. Barkatoolah, A., (1996) APEL in Higher Education (France), *International Case Study Evaluations* commissioned by HSRC, UCT and Peninsula Technikon, unpublished.

4. Barnett, R., (1994), *The Limits of Competence: Knowledge, Higher Education, and Society*, Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press, Bristol, USA.

5. Breier, M., (2000a) *Recognition of Prior Learning at the Peninsula Technikon,* Report prepared for the Joint Education Trust, Education Policy Unit, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

6. Breier, M., (2000b), *Draft Proposal for Research on and Development of Prior Learning at the University of the Western Cape,* Education Policy Unit, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

7. Budler, L., (1993), The Assessment of Prior Learning: Relating Experience, Competence and Knowledge, in Calder, J. (Ed.), *Disaffection and Diversity: Overcoming Barriers for Adult Learners*, Farber Press, London.

8. Butterworth, C., (1992), More than one bite at the APEL – Contrasting models of accrediting prior learning, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Vol. 16, No. 3.

9. Calder, J., (1993), Adult Learning and Success, in Calder, J (Ed.) *Disaffection and Diversity: Overcoming Barriers for Adult Learners*, Farber Press, London.

10. Central Statistical Services, (1997), *South African Statistics: 1995*, Central Statistical Services, Pretoria.

11. Challis, M., (1993), *Introducing* APEL, Routledge, London.

12. COSATU, (2000), *Learning and Work: RPL – Recognition of Prior Learning*. COSATU supported by GTZ, Johannesburg.

13. Department of Education, (1995), White Paper on Education and Training, Department of Education, *Government Gazette, Vol. 357, No. 16312*, Cape Town,

14. Department of Education, (1997), Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education, Notice 1196 of 1997, http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/white_papers/highred.html.

15. DLL, UWC, (1999), *Recognition of Prior Learning at UWC,* Draft Discussion Document, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

16. Edwards, R., (1997), *Changing Places? Flexibility, Lifelong Learning, and Learning Society*, Routledge, London.

17. Evans, N. (1988), Prior learning Assessment in the United Kingdom: Institutional Models, in Simosko, S. (ed.) *Assessing Learning: A CEAL handbook for Faculty,* Ceal, Columbia, Maryland.

18. Evans, N. (1992), *Experiential Learning: Assessment and Accreditation*, Routledge, London.

19. Eyerman R. and Jamison A., (1991) *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*. Oxford Polity Press.

20. Fraser, W., (1995), Making Experience Count … Towards What? in Mayo, M. and Thompson, J. (Eds.) *Adult Learning, Critical Intelligence and Social Change*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England.

21. Gallacher, J. & Crossan, B., (2000) Lifelong Learning and Learning Careers in Further and Higher Education, *Paper presented at the International Conference on Lifelong Learning, Higher Education and Citizenship*, October 2000, Cape Town.

22. Gee, J.P., (1990), *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology and Discourses,* The Falmer Press, London.

23. Giovannoli, R., (2000), *Essay 2: The Narrative Method of Inquiry*. http://www.sonic.net/~rgiovan/essay.2.html.

24. Groener, Z., (2000), The Politics and Social Context of Adult Education and Training in South Africa, in Indabawa, S., Oduaran, A., Afrik, T. and Walters, S. (Eds.) *The State of Adult and Continuing Education in Africa,*

Department of Adult and Nonformal Education, University of Namibia, Windhoek, Namibia.

25. Gustavsson, B. (1999) *Three Forms of Knowledge,* Seminar presented in Common Room, Faculty of Education, University of the Western Cape, Friday, February 16, 1999.

26. Hartshorne, K., (1991), The State of Education in South Africa: Some Indicators, in Millar, C., Raynham, S. and Scafffer, A. (Eds.) *Breaking the Formal Frame: Readings in South African Education in the Eighties*, Oxford University Press, Cape Town. (Originally published in 1985).

27. Harris, J., (1999), The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): introducing a conceptual framework, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 13, No. 2.

28. Harris, J., (2000), *Recognition of Prior Learning, Power, Pedagogy and Possibility: Conceptual and Implementation Guides*, HSRC, Pretoria.

29. Hendrick, N., (2000), *Prior Learning Accreditation and Recognition (PLAR) Conference Report*, Division for Lifelong Learning, University of the Western Cape.

30. Hendricks, N., Himulchu, L., Samll, J. and Volbrecht, T., (2001), *Recognition of Prior Learning: A Training Manual for ABET Practitioners*, European Union Technical Support Project to the South African Department of Education, Pretoria.

31. Janks, H., (2001), Critical literacies: Models, methods and motivations, *Paper presented at the 46th International Reading Association Convention,* New Orleans, Louisiana, April 29 – May 4, 2001.

32. Johnston, R. and Usher, R., (1996), *Learning from Experience – reviewing different contexts of practice*, HSRC, UCT and Peninsula Technikon, South Africa.

33. Koetsier, J., (1998), *Lifelong Learning at UWC: A study of the part-time accredited programmes*, University Mission Initiative on Lifelong Learning (UMILL), University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

34. Luckett, K., (1999), Ways of recognising the prior learning of rural development workers, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 13, No.2.

35. Lueddeke, G. (1992) The Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning in Higher Education: Discourse on Rationales and Assumptions, *Higher Education Quarterly,* Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 210 – 224.

36. Lugg, R., (1997), The NQF, Reconstruction and Development, in Walters, S. (Ed.) Globalisation, *Adult Education and Training: Implications and Issues*, Zed Books, London.

37. MacEwan, A., (1999), *Neo-Liberalism or Democracy: Economic Strategy, Markets and Alternatives for the 21st Century*, Zed Books, London.

38. Mandell, A., and Michelson, E., (1990), *Portfolio Development and Adult Learning: Purposes and Strat*egies. CAEL, Chicago.

39. Mayo, M., (1995), Adult Education for a Change in the Nineties and Beyond: Towards a Critical Review of the Changing Context, in Mayo, M. and Thompson, J. (Eds.) *Adult Learning, Critical Intelligence and Social Change*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England.

40. MacEwan, A. (1999) *Neoliberalism or Democracy: Economic Strategy, Markets and Alternatives for the 21St Century*, Zed Books, London.

41. McKelvey, C. and Peters, H., (1989), *APL: Equal Opportunity for All?,* Routledge, London.

42. Michelson, E., (1996a), *International Case Study on Prior Learning Assessment: Empire State College, State University of New York*, HSRC, UCT and Peninsula Technikon, South Africa.

43. Michelson, E., (1996b), Usual Suspects: Experience, reflection and (en)gendering of knowledge, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, Vol. 15, No. 6. pp. 438-454

44. Michelson, E., (1997*),* The Politics of Memory: The Recognition of Experiential Learning, in Walters, S. (Ed.*), Globalisation, Adult Education and Training: Implications and Issues*, Zed Books, London.

45. Michelson, E., (1999), Social Transformation and the Recognition of Prior Learning: Lessons for and from South Africa, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 13, No. 2.

46. Michelson, E., Walters, S. and Hendricks, N., (1999), *Draft Discussion Document: Recognition* of Prior Learning a*t UWC.* Unpublished.

47. Millar, C., (1983), Educational Case Studies: An Introduction to a Research Perspective, in Steinberg M. (Ed.), *Research Methods for Higher Degrees*, Faculty of Education, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.

48. Ministry of Education, (2001), *National Plan for Higher Education in South Africa*, http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/misc/higheredu1.html.

49. Myers, M.D. (2001) *Qualitative Research in information Systems,* wysiwyg://15http://www2.auckland.ac.nz/msis/isworld/.

50. National Commission on Higher Education, (1996), *An Overview of a New Policy Framework for Higher Education Transformation*, http://www.polity.org.za/govdocs/policy/educ.html.

51. NECC, (1992), *National Education Policy Investigation: Post Secondary Education,* National Education Co-ordinating Committee, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

52. Osman, R. and Castle, J., (2001), The recognition of prior learning: early lessons, challenges and promises, *South African Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 15 (1).

53. Phillopson, R., (1992), *Linguistic Imperialism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

54. Pokpas, L., and Wood, T., (2000), Equitable Access through Enrolment Management, *Project Proposal to the Department of Education as part of the South African Norwegian Tertiary Education Development Programme (SANTED),* University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

55. Preece, J., (2000), Changing the Discourse of Inclusion and Exclusion with off Limits Curricula. in *Working Papers Supporting Lifelong Learning*, The Open University, Festival of Lifelong Learning and University of East London, UK.

56. Raue, G., (1999), *Approaches to Research: Narrative Inquiry*, http//labweb.education.wisc.edu/cni916/project/narratv.htm.

57. Scott, M., (1998), An overview of Transformation Theory in Adult Education, in Scott, M., Spencer, B., and Thompson, A. (Eds.) *Leaning for Life: Canadian Readings in Adult Education,* Thompson Educational Publishing, Toronto.

58. Simosko, S. (1988) Experiential Learning and Assessment, in Simosko, S. (ed.) *Assessing Learning: A CAEL handbook for Faculty*, CEAL, Columbia, Maryland.

59. South African Qualifications Authority, (1998), Regulations under the South African Qualifications Authority Act, 1995 (Act No. 58 of 1995), *Government Gazette*, Volume 393, No. 18787, Pretoria

60. Stuart, M., (1996), *Discursive Trains of Power - The Academy, Credits, Assessment and Recognition of Prior Learning: A case study form Sussex,* Britain, HSRC, University of Cape Town and Peninsula Technikon, South Africa.

61. Thomas, A., (1998), The Tolerable Contradictions of Prior Learning Assessment, in Scott, M., Bruce, B., and Thomas, A. (Eds.), *Learning for Life: Canadian Readings in Adult Education,* Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc, Toronto.

62. Thomson, J., (1995), Preface, in Mayo, M. and Thompson, J. (Eds.) *Adult Learning, Critical Intelligence and Social Change*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, England.

63. UNESCO Institute of Education, (1997), *Fifth International Conference on Adult Education in Hamburg,* Germany 1997.

64. UNESCO Institute for Education and UWC, (2001), *The Cape Town Statement on Characteristic Elements of a Lifelong Learning Higher Education Institution*, UNESCO Institute for Education and University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

65. Usher, R., and Johnston, R., (1996) *Experiential learning – some critical reflections, International Case Study Evaluation,* Commissioned by the HSRC, UCT and Peninsula Technikon, South Africa.

66. UWC, (2000a), *University of the Western Cape: Draft Strategic Plan 2001-2005*, 20 November 2000, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

67. UWC, (2000b), *Introducing the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) at UWC*, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

68. UWC, (undated), *University of the Western Cape: General Information for Applicants for Undergraduate Programmes*, University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

69. Volbrecht, T., (2000), *University of the Western Cape, The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL): Policy, Procedures and Practices at UWC,* University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

70. Volbrecht, T. and Hendricks, N., (2001) *University of the Western Cape. Recognition of Prior Learning Report on First Phase of Implementation: 2001, Report to the DLL Board,* May 2001.

71. Working Group 9, (1995), *The Recognition of Prior Learning: Current Thinking and Status in South Africa*, National Training Board, Pretoria.

72. Wood, T., and Pokpas, L., (2000), *Outline of an Assessment Strategy.* University of the Western Cape, Bellville.

73. Yin, R.K., (1994), *Case study research: Design and Methods* (2nd ed.), Sage Publications Newbury Park, CA.

74. Zucker, D.M., (2001), Using Case Studies Methodology in Nursing Research, in *The Qualitative Report*, Vol. 6, No.2, http://www.nova.edu/sss/QR/QR6-2/zucker.html

Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL):

Policy, Procedures and Practices at UWC (#2)

1. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to provide a framework for the implementation of RPL procedures at the University of the Western Cape.

2. What is RPL?

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) is the formal acknowledgement of the knowledge and capabilities that people possess as a result of prior learning. The process of RPL acknowledges that this learning may have occurred through formal, informal or non-formal means – through study, work or other life experiences.

RPL is the practice through which learning in the workplace, in the community, in organizational and cultural activities, is assessed for access and accreditation purposes.

RPL rests on the assumption that socially useful learning is not reserved for formal learning institutions. It assumes that valuable knowledge is produced by human beings in many different contexts, and that such knowledge can be articulated, assessed and recognized.

3. Varieties of RPL

3.1 In a sense, mature age exemption (with different criteria for exemption at ages 23, 34 and 45) is a form of RPL, but RPL proper entails the demonstration of learning achievement, e.g. through the presentation of a relevant academic record and/or portfolio of evidence of learning.

3.2 The practice of providing access to university through the mechanism of Senate discretion to applicants who are freshly out of school and do not have matriculation exemption is also a limited form of RPL. It involves the assessment of students' suitability for access and may require certain limitations or additions to curricula students may follow.

3.3 Access to postgraduate studies through Senate discretion is common practice at many universities. It usually entails candidates producing evidence of learning achievement through work and/or other experience.

3.4 *Credit transfer*: This is the formal recognition of credits attained for learning in other formal contexts such as another higher education institution. It may also include accredited courses provided by professional bodies, voluntary associations, enterprises, private educational institutions, trade unions, government agencies and/or other providers recognized by the university.

3.5 Recognition of *academic readiness for purposes of access* to a module or programme of study, regardless of how this readiness was achieved. This may be called *general credit*. For example, a person with a Masters in English may be admitted to a Masters in Linguistics without having formal qualifications in Linguistics. Or the person's knowledge acquired through informal or non-formal means may be proved to constitute academic readiness for the same Linguistics degree.

3.6 Recognition of *academic readiness for purposes of advanced standing*, which may involve exemption from parts of a programme of study (recognition that prior learning includes knowledge that is equivalent to knowledge that would be attained through formal learning in a proposed module of a programme of study).

3.7 Recognition of prior learning that lies outside the competences identified as comprising a particular UWC qualification. In such a case experiential learning would be at a requisite level in the qualification and receive credit without neatly substituting for a component of the learning programme. Such credit may be assigned against "open" modules, i.e.modules, usually elective, whose "content" is the experiential learning of the RPL candidate rather than a prepared "package " of knowledge delivered by the university. An example would be the awarding of credit at a particular level for "management skills and techniques" to a candidate with experience of managing NGOs. Recognition of such knowledge and learning may be part of the customizing of a learning pathway for an individual or group.

4. Contextual Preamble

International Context

RPL has been practised in some other countries such as the USA for several decades, but it is new to South Africa. There are two main reasons why RPL is burgeoning internationally. One relates to the emergence of the discourse of lifelong learning which calls for widening access to higher education for mature-age students, both because this contributes to personal and social development, and because rapid change in the "knowledge-based" society and economy requires regular upgrading of knowledge and skills. The other relates to the increasing recognition that universities do not have a monopoly over high-level knowledge production – that the modes and sites for such

knowledge production are becoming increasingly diverse and/or integrated. The growing recognition that there are multiple literacies and that academic literacy should not necessarily be the only way of demonstrating competence is also part of this trend.

National Context

Numerous national policy documents advocate RPL as part of an over-arching vision of lifelong learning. This includes a commitment to widening access and improving institutional responsiveness to mature-age learners. National policy also advocates the integration of education and training, as well as flexible curricula and portability across institutions. The concept of competence-based education being promoted in national policy documents calls for a comprehensive revision of assessment practices, including the introduction of RPL.

RPL at UWC

UWC's mission statement declares its commitment to lifelong learning. The university's three-year rolling plan states that "Increased access to a diverse range of students will occur through alternative admissions, which will include testing for academic potential and recognition of prior learning." The university aims to be a pioneer "with regard to access by 'non-traditional students'". The rolling plan states that access will be facilitated through the design of customized learning pathways that meet the needs of diverse ranges of backgrounds, age groups, lifestyles and socio-economic circumstances". The university will endeavor to ensure that RPL is a strong feature of such learning pathways. RPL is central to UWC's strategies for increasing student access and success at UWC.

UWC is embracing RPL because it is committed to equity and redress and to valuing diversity in modes of learning.

5. Principles

5.1 UWC's approach to RPL is "learning-centred". This means that it seeks a balance between the educational objectives and values of the university on the one hand, and of the learner(s) on the other, with the promotion and quality of learning being maintained as the primary focus.

5.2 RPL at UWC will adhere to sound assessment practices, i.e. fairness, validity, reliability, transparency and practicability.

5.3 In the case of RPL for core modules of a programme/qualification, strongly commensurate learning outcomes will be required. i .e. the learning outcomes demonstrated through RPL will closely resemble those envisaged for a module of study.

5.4 In the case of RPL for elective modules, learning outcomes need not match exactly.

5.5 All learning should be assessable in terms of content and level.

5.6 In accordance with SAQA regulation No. R452 of 1998, the award of a qualification at UWC "may be achieved in whole or in part through the recognition of prior learning" (Government Gazette Vol. 393, No. 18787.)

5.7 RPL assessment will take cognizance of different assessment methodologies and select those that are appropriate to the particular instance.

5.8 Successful RPL candidates will not be discriminated against once admitted to programmes offered by the university.

5.9 RPL may be applied at all levels of study.

6. Procedures and Practices

RPL will require the ongoing development of procedures and practices at the institutional, faculty and departmental levels. In the interim, these may be listed as follows.

6.1 The procedure for the assessment of prior learning as the basis for credit in a course or module offered by the University is determined by the faculties within the framework provided by UWC admissions and RPL policies and by Senate discretion guidelines.

6.2 RPL for access is carried out prior to enrolment. RPL for advanced standing may be carried out prior to or after enrolment.

6.3 *RPL for access to undergraduate studies*

RPL may be used to grant access to a degree programme without providing any credit towards a qualification. RPL may be used to ascertain whether the candidate has attained the equivalent of formal requirements for admissions such as matriculation exemption, or a grade 12 or FET certificate. RPL may include internal faculty evaluation of additional qualifications such as one- or two-year certificates attained through accredited professional bodies or private providers. The faculty must determine the status of the education provider with SAQA, the curriculum content of the qualification, the duration of the qualification, the assessment methodology and the NQF credit value of the qualification being evaluated.

RPL is the only route that is recognized by the university for access without a senior certificate.

Assessment for access will be based on assessment criteria that have been defined against those generic outcomes that are seen as constitutive of school-leaving competence (or competence at level 4 of the NQF). Thus the student would need to demonstrate the appropriate level of literacy, numeracy, problem solving ability, general knowledge, and so forth. These explicit criteria will be made available to all those doing RPL assessment for this purpose.

6.4 *RPL for credit towards an undergraduate degree*

In the case of credit transfer, this includes the formal recognition of courses passed at other educational institutions as recognized by Senate in terms of rule A.7.

In the case of recognition of prior unaccredited learning, credit may be awarded for advanced standing if the candidate submits relevant evidence which is assessed by properly qualified university assessors and external moderators.

Assessment for advanced standing will only be undertaken where it can be rigorous and supportive of the individual student. In order to be rigorous, the assessment, whether done through examination or though a portfolio, must be based on assessment criteria that are derived from the outcomes of the curriculum component for which credit is to be awarded.

RPL for access to or advanced standing in a postgraduate qualification

According to Senate Discretion Rule A.4.3, Senate may admit a candidate who in its opinion has attained the appropriate level of competence, to post-graduate

studies. When an application is made in terms of rule A.4, Faculties and Departments should follow the Senate guidelines, though they may tailor the procedures to suit their purposes. Admission remains the prerogative of Senate, and departments and faculties may not admit candidates on their own authority.

As in the case of RPL for access to or advanced standing in undergraduate studies, RPL for access or advanced standing in a postgraduate qualification must adhere to rigorous, criterion-referenced assessment practice.

6.5 *Inquiry prior to application*

Anyone wishing to ascertain the feasibility of making an RPL application should seek advice at the Division for Lifelong Learning. The DLL may then refer the candidate to a particular Faculty or Department.

6.6 *Application*

Anyone wishing to seek RPL will be required to make a formal RPL application to a relevant Faculty at an appropriate time.

6.7 *Clearly defined procedures for each stage in the RPL process*

Departments, faculties, programmes and other units in the university will develop clearly defined procedures for candidates in relation to their involvement in the stages of the RPL process: inquiry, application, initial counselling, ongoing mentoring and assistance in the compiling of a portfolio of evidence, submitting evidence for assessment, and appeal. The relevant academic and other units will also make clear to prospective RPL candidates the university's requirements regarding payment of fees.

6.8 *Dissemination of information*

Information on the University's RPL policy and procedures will be made available through: Faculty prospectuses and programme/departmental brochures; the university brochure on Part-time and Continuing Education courses; the publication of university brochures and information sheets on RPL.

6.9 *Guidelines for staff and students*

The university, through the Division for Lifelong Learning, will provide guidelines for staff and students regarding the steps required in the RPL process.

6.10 *Staff development*

As part of staff development policy, the university will provide training and development opportunities to staff in relation to RPL, in particular with regard to counseling and mentoring, assessment and curriculum development.

6.11 *Implications of RPL for staff workload*

Because RPL is labour-intensive, the university will establish the implications of practising RPL for staff workload and make the necessary adjustments to current policy in this regard.

6.12 *Roles and functions of personnel involved in RPL*

The university will make arrangements regarding the roles and functions of centralized and faculty based units involved in RPL. Such arrangements will be subject to regular review.

Deans, Department Heads and Programme Leaders will, through consultation, define and allocate roles, functions and workloads for staff in RPL assessment, counselling, administration, public relations, marketing, networking, advocacy and staff development.

6.13 *Resources for RPL*

The university will calculate what resources are needed for the effective implementation of RPL, and will generate and allocate funds accordingly.

6.14 *RPL and partnerships*

The university will make RPL integral to collaboration and partnership with other HET institutions, with workplaces in government and the corporate sector, and with organized labour.

6.15 *RPL and curriculum*

Departments, faculties and programmes will explore the transformative potential of RPL in curriculum innovation and development through, for example, the creation of customized learning pathways as indicated in the 2000—2002 Three Year Rolling Plan. Faculties will explore the possible integration of credit-bearing RPL/Education Planning modules into programmes.

6.16 *RPL and Credit-value*

Credit-value assigned through RPL should not be less than the credit-value that can be attained through completion of the smallest unit of curriculum in the university.

6.17 *Monitoring and evaluation*

The university, through collaboration between departments, faculties, programmes and the Division for Lifelong Learning, will ensure that the implementation of RPL

at UWC is monitored and evaluated, so that RPL features in the Quality Assurance policy and procedures of the university.

7. Implementation and development of policy

The university, through the Division for Lifelong Learning, has developed a detailed project proposal to ensure the effective implementation and development of institutional RPL policy. This includes the following:

The introduction of RPL pilots to explore the potential of two approaches to RPL, which can be broadly characterized as the Academic Counselling, Mentoring and Assessment (ACMA) approach and the Education Planning Module (EPM) approach. Only the latter makes provision for including a credit-bearing RPL module as part of the curriculum. The former is primarily concerned with (a) establishing, through interviewing, counselling and testing, whether RPL applicants meet the academic requirements of a particular programme of study at the university and (b) providing ongoing support to students through mentoring. It is envisaged that recruitment for the ACMA pilot will commence in September 2000, with RPL being implemented in February 2001. Similar timelines are envisaged for the EPM pilot.

The development of marketing and recruitment strategies.. These are already under way, with a focus on recruiting students from the fields of education, nursing and correctional services.

Staff Development activities. Workshops regarding RPL assessment and counselling training as well as implications of RPL modules for curriculum development are currently being planned for October 2000. The possibility of accredited training in RPL for those centrally involved in the RPL project is also being investigated.

Advocacy strategies and activities. In addition to staff development activities, which are viewed as a form of advocacy, planning is in process for the use of seminars, conferences, flyers, information sheets and a variety of other media including electronic discussion and user groups. The Lifelong Learning Resource Centre in the Division for Lifelong Learning will gather and make available relevant literature on the theory and practice of RPL.

Monitoring and evaluation through participatory action research. The DLL in collaboration with Pilot teams will design and co-ordinate action research-based monitoring and evaluation plans. The SAB RPL Task Group will act as the critical reference group for this research. The plans should be ready by November 2000.

Allocation of responsibilities regarding project management and co-ordination.

The university has already seconded Terry Volbrecht from the Arts Faculty to the Division for Lifelong Learning as manager and co-ordinator of the institutional RPL Project. Other staff in the DLL are also playing defined roles in project management, co-ordination and implementation.

Micro-planning including timelines, activities and products. The initial microplanning process was completed by the end of August 2000. Ongoing microplanning will respond to changes or unforeseen circumstances in the policy environment as these arise.

Budgeting and funding. In addition to university funds committed to the RPL Project, the DLL has also secured funding from JET and the Anglo-American Chairman's Fund, and there is a strong possibility of further funding from the Norwegian government. It is

hoped that funding arrangements and budgeting for the first phase of the project will be finalized by the end of August.

Contributors to this document: Prof Sandy Lazarus, Prof Shirley Walters, Prof Elma Kortenbout, Dr Tahir Wood, Natheem Hendricks, Vincent Morta.

Terry Volbrecht

RPL Project Manager and Co-ordinator

Division for Lifelong Learning

31 October 2000

APPENDIX B

RPL Research Questionnaire
RPLed students
September 8, 2001

1. What would you say were the main influences on your learning during the time you were first involved in formal education? You may consider family, friends, particular teachers, mentors ect.

---

2. What prompted you to leave school/formal studies

---

3. After you left school, what were your hopes and dreams for your future?

---

4. What did you do in the period after you left school up till you return to formal studies? You may consider what you did in terms of occupation/s community/organisational involvement, personal interest and hobbies.

---

5. What are the most important things you have learnt during this period? You may consider the knowledge, skills, understanding and wisdom you acquired in this period. What would you consider as your most notable achievements?

---

6. What made you decide to return to formal studies? What made you choose UWC?

---

7. How have you found studying at university after your period of absence from formal study? You may consider past learning that have help you to adjust, particular difficulties you have faced, particular surprises and pleasures.

---

8. Do you have things in particular to say about the recognition of prior learning (RPL)?

Appendix C

RPL Research Questionnaire
Academic staff who have interacted with RPL Students
September 8, 2001

1. What were your expectations of the RPL students?

---

2. To what extend have these expectations been met? Have your views on RPL changed in any way since working with these students?

---

3. Judging by your experience of the RPL students you have encountered, do you think RPL is worth pursuing at UWC? Can you cite any example of students' work that stood out for you?

Appendix C

UNIVERSTIY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE

Nature and purpose of portfolio

1. List of contents

Purpose: to give a clear overview of what the assessor can expect to find within the portfolio and where.

2. Introduction

Purposes:

- to present and promote yourself as a candidate worthy of serious consideration for access.
- to inform the assessor as to why you intend returning to formal study as well as why you believe you have the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in your intended field of study.
– to explain why you want to embark on a programme of study you have chosen.

3. Curriculum Vitae

Purposes:

- to provide a bird's eye-view of your life, learning and achievements;
- to demonstrate your ability to select and prioritise those aspects of your C.V. that are relevant to your study goals;
– to demonstrate your ability to organise and classify information in a systematic way.

4. Autobiographical learning history

Purposes:

- to identify relevant learning experiences and to extract relevant learning achievement from these.
– to identify and prioritise relevant generic learning and competences;
- to identify and prioritise field specific learning and competences;
- to demonstrate your ability to give a clear, concise and convincing written account of specific learning situations and an insightful account of what you have learnt in those situations.

5. Evidence

Purposes:

- to demonstrate your ability to select relevant evidence of learning achievements (e.g. certificates, testimonials, minutes of meetings; examples of work done);

- to demonstrate your ability to correctly relate learning claims to the evidence for that claim.

6. Summary and critical discussion of text related to future study

Purpose:
- to demonstrate you ability to identify and find a text that is relevant to your area of intended study and of an appropriate level of complexity.
– to demonstrate your ability to summarise a suitable text;
- to demonstrate your ability to understand, interpret and critically engage with a suitable text.

7. Reflection on feedback received during portfolio development process

Purpose:
- to demonstrate your ability to respond and learn from feedback;
- to implement insights that that might have been learnt from feedback in the revision of your written draft;
- to demonstrate your ability to write reflectively on feedback you have been given.

8. Appendix

– to demonstrate your ability to differentiate between relevant evidence that is central or peripheral to your learning claims.