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THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL): AN EMERGENT FIELD OF ENQUIRY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Ruksana Osman

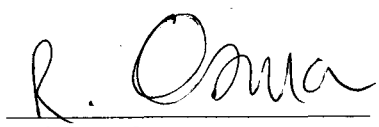
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Education

JOHANNESBURG

January 2003

DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other university, nor has it been prepared under the aegis or with the assistance of any other body or organisation or person outside the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.



Ruksana Osman

___day of_____, 2003

ABSTRACT

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is framed in the discourse of equity and redress. It is tasked with transforming education and training and bringing about opportunities of access to those whose educational paths were disrupted by apartheid. While policy in higher education has a vision, conditions on the ground remain unexamined, bringing to the fore complex challenges which relate to prior knowledge on the one hand and its capacity to compete with academic ways of knowing on the other, begging the question: Can RPL deliver on espoused goals of equity, access and redress?

This research utilises critical education theory and qualitative research to enquire into participants', recipients' and implementers' perceptions of RPL programmes. In particular the research probed the epistemological and philosophical framings of such programmes, participants' perceptions of the capacity of RPL to deliver equity and redress in education and their ideas for changes and improvements to future RPL programmes and practices.

The predominant research method consisted of in-depth interviews with 37 respondents in five RPL projects within four institutions of higher education in South Africa, 14 of whom were academics who implemented RPL, and 23 of whom were RPL students who were the recipients of RPL. In addition, scholarly articles and reports written by the academics as well as RL portfolios, compiled by the students were used as source material. The research results are reported as institutional case studies reflecting the initial responses to RPL in higher education and the ideas, beliefs and perceptions that animate them. The case studies provide a picture of the institutional environment in which RPL operates, and highlight the different levers that are shaping and influencing the practice of RPL in South Africa.

The research results show that RPL in practice raises personal questions for those who implement it and for those who receive it – questions about themselves as

raced, gendered and classed actors. Different academics have responded to these personal questions in varied ways resulting in contending versions of RPL propelled by different epistemological orientations. On another level the research results show that RPL in practice requires institutional support from senior managers in particular, that such support needs to be driven by an institutional vision and an institutional champion. In the institutions in this study these variables were largely absent. Equity and redress on their own have not been the levers for the implementation of RPL in higher education in South Africa.

Keywords: Access; Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning; Equity; Higher Education; Recognition of Prior Learning; South Africa

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Without the parental devotion and love of my exceptional parents, **Omar and Gigi**, much of this would not have been possible.

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DEDICATION

For KC, Imaan, Salmaan, Layla

and

Omar and Gigi

ABBREVIATIONS

APEL	Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
JCE	Johannesburg College of Education
JET	Joint Education Trust
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
PLA	Prior Learning Assessment
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SAQA	South Africa Qualifications Authority
UFS	University of the Free State
UWC	University of the Western Cape
WHEP	Workers Higher Education Project
WITS	University of the Witwatersrand

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECLARATION ii
ABSTRACT iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v
DEDICATION vi
ABBREVIATIONS viii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM 1
1.2 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES 7
1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH 8
1.4 THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY 10
1.5 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS 11

CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH DESIGN

2.1 INTRODUCTION 13
2.2 THE RESEARCH PARADIGM 13
2.3 RESEARCH SAMPLE AND PROCEDURES 19
2.4 INTERVIEWS 24
2.5 CASE STUDIES 28
2.6 DOCUMENT REVIEW 32
2.7 ISSUES OF VALIDITY AND GENERALISABILITY 36
2.8 CONCLUSION 37

CHAPTER THREE: CONTEXT AND CONCEPTS OF RPL - A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

3.1 INTRODUCTION 39
3.2 THE CONTEXT OF RPL IN HIGHER EDUCATION 40
3.3 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND RESEARCH 47
3.4 COMPETING CONCEPTS OF RPL 53
3.5 INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF RPL 72
3.6 CONCLUSION 76

CHAPTER FOUR: INTRODUCTION TO THE INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDIES AND THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN TWO DEPARTMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

4.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDIES 78

4.2 THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND 83

4.2.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND (WITS) 83

4.3 RPL POLICY INITIATIVES AT WITS 85

4.4 RPL RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT WITS 87

4.5 RPL IN ADULT EDUCATION 87

4.6 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE 89

4.7 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN ADULT EDUCATION AT WITS 92

4.8 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL AT WITS 98

4.9 AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN ADULT EDUCATION 99

4.10 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL 104

4.11 SUMMARY 106

4.12 RPL IN TEACHER EDUCATION 107

4.13 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE 108

4.14 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN TEACHER EDUCATION AT WITS 112

4.15 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL . 119

4.16 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN TEACHER EDUCATION AT WITS 121

4.17 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL 125

4.18 SUMMARY 126

4.19 CONCLUSION 126

CHAPTER FIVE: THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

5.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE (UWC) 131

5.2 RPL POLICY INITIATIVES AT UWC 135

5.3 RPL RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT UWC 141

5.4 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE 141

5.4.1 RPL ASSESSMENT 146

5.5 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL AT UWC 149

5.6 SUGGESTION FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL ... 155

5.7 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL AT UWC 157

5.8 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL 161

5.9 CONCLUSION 162

CHAPTER SIX: THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE JOHANNESBURG COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

6.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE JOHANNESBURG COLLEGE OF EDUCATION (JCE) 165

6.2 RPL RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT JCE 169

6.3 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE 170

6.4 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCE OF RPL AT JCE 176

6.5 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL . 182

6.6 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF RPL AT JCE 183

6.7 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL 187

6.8 CONCLUSION 188

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

7.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE (UFS) 192
7.2 RPL POLICY AND RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT UFS 194
7.3 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE 197
7.3.1 ASSESSING RPL CREDITS 206
7.3.2 STAFF DEVELOPMENT 208
7.4 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCE OF RPL 209
7.5 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL .214
7.6 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL AT UFS 214
7.7 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL 219
7.8 CONCLUSION 221

CHAPTER EIGHT: RPL AS AN EMERGING FIELD OF ENQUIRY AND PRACTICE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 INTRODUCTION 224
8.2 PARTICIPANTS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF RPL 227
8.3 DOES RPL DELIVER ON ITS POLICY GOALS OF EQUITY? 250
8.4 PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL 258
8.5 CONCLUSION 261

REFERENCES 264

APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEW GUIDE 280

LIST OF TABLES AND DIAGRAMS

TABLE ONE: OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH SAMPLE 21

DIAGRAM A: GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS 31

TABLE TWO: BREAKDOWN OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE IN TERMS OF INSTITUTIONS, ACADEMICS AND RPL STUDENTS 81

TABLE THREE: BREAKDOWN OF STUDENTS IN TERMS OF INSTITUTION, RACE AND GENDER 82

TABLE FOUR: BREAKDOWN OF STAFF IN TERMS OF INSTITUTION, RACE AND GENDER 82

CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

> *Policies are best understood in terms of practices on the ground, rather than in terms of idealist statements of intention or blueprints for action.*
>
> (Christie, 1997: 121)

1.1 THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Recognition of Prior Learning[1] (RPL) as a policy goal in higher education in South Africa has emerged in a context of educational change and wider social transformation. Among other changes RPL is posited as a key mechanism for educational redress for those whose education was disadvantaged under apartheid. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) has been introduced as a framework that facilitates an integrated approach to education and training - a framework that is meant to overcome the deliberate knowledge and skills divide nurtured by apartheid. The White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995: 15) states:

> It [RPL] will open doors of opportunity for people whose academic or career paths have been needlessly blocked because prior knowledge has not been assessed and certified, or because their qualifications have not been recognised for admission to further learning, or employment purposes.

[1] Assessment of Prior and Experiential Learning (AP(E)L) in Great Britain; Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the United States of America; Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in New Zealand, Ireland and Australia; Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in Canada and Validation of Professional Learning (VAP) in France.

An integrated approach to education and training, linked to the development of the new NQF and based on a system of credits for learning outcomes achieved, will encourage creative work on the design of curricula and the recognition of learning attainments wherever education and training are offered.

Similarly, the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001: 23) concerned with the decline in student numbers in higher education, states:

> [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.

RPL is identified in a number of different national policy documents and is represented as a significant mechanism that facilitates equity, access and redress for unequal educational practices of the past, and simultaneously, as a pathway to increase the knowledge and skills base of the workforce in the interest of global competitiveness. These education-economy intentions link RPL to social justice, on the one hand, and to lifelong learning on the other (Castle and Attwood, 2001). RPL's prominent place on the national policy agenda links it to globalisation, as well as to pressure to transform the education and training system locally, making it one of several imperatives competing for attention from senior administrators in higher education.

While RPL is proposed as a cornerstone of change and transformation in an emerging education and training system as a whole, it is new and remains an untested policy in higher education in South Africa. Very little is known about RPL practices either within or across institutions. In 2000 when this research project was launched there were no national guidelines for the implementation of

RPL, nor any documented research on student or staff experiences of RPL. Furthermore, policy documents referring to RPL have not distinguished between RPL and RPEL, that is, recognition of prior learning as a form of credit transfer between institutions and recognition of prior experiential learning, that is, recognition of learning from non-formal and informal sites[2] of practice.

Many institutions of higher education in South Africa already engage in credit transfer, in which the receiving institution awards a student credit for a course completed at another institution. Many institutions perceive this credit transfer as a form of RPL. Yet RPL (as espoused in the policy documents mentioned earlier) is meant to provide opportunities for adults (younger than 45) who do not have a general education certificate or equivalent to obtain recognition for learning acquired in informal and non-formal contexts of learning. Learners should be able to obtain part of or a whole qualification through RPL. The absence of a clear distinction between RPL and RPEL means that higher education institutions have few meaningful incentives to implement RPL, other than compliance with policy mandates. Furthermore, the present legislative framework governing admission to higher education (matriculation exemption)[3] restricts RPL as a mechanism for undergraduate admission, and universities still largely determine admissions to undergraduate qualifications on school-based qualifications.

So, while the vision for RPL to facilitate access and equity for adults is a noble one, this brings to the fore a variety of complex issues which relate to the individual nature of experiential learning on the one hand, and its capacity to compete with academic learning as the dominant discourse of the university on the other.

---

[2] For example learning non-formally from short courses or informally through on the job experience and civic engagement from daily life, reading and hobbies.

[3] Admission to university is largely determined by a 12-year school-based qualification. In the twelfth year of study (which is matric) a candidate is required to pass six subjects on the higher grade to obtain a matriculation exemption, which is the basic requirement for admission to university.

It unsettles the familiar divisions between formal and informal knowledge, and challenges academe to consider multiple knowledges emanating from countless sites of practice. Given these gaps between policy and conditions on the ground, some caution, "the danger exists that some institutions and workplaces will implement RPL in a very narrow and technicist manner which will not realise the spirit of redress" (Buchler, 1999: 5). Still others point out that RPL along with lifelong learning "...is in danger ... of becoming both a cliché and an empty rhetorical label..." (Frost and Taylor, 2001: 51).

The researcher participated in a national research and development project on RPL in higher education. The project was facilitated and funded by the Workers Higher Education Project (WHEP) at the Joint Education Trust (JET), a nongovernmental organisation, which supports RPL research initiatives in South Africa. The stated aims of the WHEP are:

> To support organisations and institutions which seek to pilot projects that will contribute towards the accelerated development and implementation of adult learning programmes based on the principles established in the National Qualifications Framework.
>
> To support the development of assessment standards and the capacity to assess learning acquired through work or life experience for academic credit.
>
> To develop the capacity of South African institutions, labour and corporate organisations to implement new projects and strategies for adult learning and RPL.
>
> (Ballim, Omar and Ralphs, 2000: 193-194)

Since its inception in 1996 WHEP's interest in RPL can be described as occurring in waves. In the first wave, 1996 to 1998, much of its work was of an exploratory

nature focusing largely on seeking information on the then-current practices of access in select programmes in higher education. In the second wave between 1999 to 2001 the WHEP project identified five departments or divisions within various higher education institutions in which to undertake and pilot focused research on RPL implementation. In its third wave, 2002 to 2004, the intention has been to extend the work of the second wave by expanding research initiatives in workplace settings and other departments or divisions in higher education institutions in South Africa.

The major part of the present study was conducted in the five RPL pilot projects in four institutions of higher education in South Africa, namely the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of the Western Cape (UWC), the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) and the University of the Free State (UFS). At Wits there were two pilot RPL projects, one in the field of teacher education and the other in the field of adult education, with postgraduate admissions as their focus. At UWC there was one pilot project that explored the possibilities of providing admission to students in the fields of Nursing, Law and Arts. Unlike the Wits projects, this project aimed at undergraduate admission. Similarly, the pilot projects at JCE and at UFS directed their attention to admission at an undergraduate level and focused on teacher education and business management respectively.

In reflecting on her experience of the WHEP RPL initiative at JCE, the researcher found she placed more emphasis on meeting the institutional, departmental and study programme imperatives, than on who the adult learner was, what needs this adult learner had, in terms of both personal and career plans, and the validation of the learning acquired from other sites of practice. The RPL encounter was stripped of anything that sounded or felt personal and subjective. Performance and achievement that made sense in an academic context were valued over co-operation, connectedness and subjectivity. Little or no attention was given to the subjectively lived experiences of the RPL candidates. The process did not seek to

examine the motivations of adult learners seeking RPL, their accounts of the RPL process, the obstacles they had encountered or even the support systems they required from the institution that was undertaking to recognise their prior learning. As an academic who was attracted to the redress agenda of RPL, the researcher went through moments of doubt about her own epistemology and her own pedagogies.

These reflections raise questions about the nature of the RPL process and about the experiences of the adults undergoing this process as well as those of the academics who implement this process. They raise questions of epistemology and pedagogy, which are crucial to practitioners and institutions endeavouring to engage RPL as both a pedagogy and a philosophy for equity, access, learning and the development of adults in higher education in South Africa.

On another level, this raises questions about the capacity of RPL to deliver on the policy goals of equity and redress - questions about the nature of higher education institutions as institutions for equity and redress. For example, how does the institutional culture impact on the capacity of such institutions to be responsive? What acts of resistance are required of staff to facilitate equity and redress through education? What are the costs to staff as they come in direct conflict with normative values, beliefs and assumptions prevalent in higher education institutions? While this study may not fully answer all of these questions, it makes visible critical issues about the culture of institutions, which are inextricably linked to lived experience of academics and students alike – issues overlooked and sometimes ignored by policy formulators.

1.2 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This research sets out to investigate the impact of RPL portfolio development courses on those who experienced them first-hand - the recipients (RPL students)[4] and the implementers (academics who designed and implemented these courses). Because RPL is framed in the discourse of equity, access and redress, it intersects with the field of critical adult education, whose aims include personal empowerment, professional development, social change and emancipation, particularly for disadvantaged groups.

This research used the frameworks of critical education theory and qualitative research (discussed in Chapter Two) to pursue the following objectives:

1. To investigate theoretical perspectives on RPL and study their pedagogic implications.
2. To study conceptualisations and practices of RPL in four institutions of higher education in South Africa and through case studies, to illuminate the contextual and epistemological features shaping the emerging practices.
3. To examine RPL students' experiences of the RPL process and those of academics (who designed the RPL courses in the four institutions).
4. To investigate RPL students' and academics' perceptions of the capacity of RPL to deliver policy goals of educational access, equity and redress.
5. To record RPL students' and academics' ideas for improving RPL practices in higher education.

[4] In this thesis the terms RPL student and RPL candidate are used synonymously and refer to those who were the recipients of RPL portfolio courses in various higher education institutions.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

If as Jarvis believes, RPL and the learning of adults "....is located at the interface of people's biography and the socio-cultural milieu in which they live, for it is at this intersection that experience occurs..." (1992: 17) investigating the lived experiences of recipients and implementers of RPL is necessary, challenging and crucial. It presents an area of inquiry and scholarship that has rarely been explored in higher education in South Africa or internationally. Trowler points out "...so far there has been almost no attempt to substantiate or refute claims through a careful study of the students' experiences of APEL or to identify how students respond to different ways of implementing the process" (1996: 25). Even where there have been studies that discuss RPL in relation to students' or staff experience, such studies do not have participants' experiences as their focus, and usually talk about these experiences rather than allowing participants to speak for themselves (Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997).

In South Africa very few institutions are actively exploring RPL, and even fewer have students who have undergone RPL. A survey conducted by Breier and Osman in 2000 showed that only three institutions out of 32 had draft RPL policies in place. There is a dearth of research on existing RPL programmes and nothing on the experiences of people who participated in such programmes, that is, implementers and recipients.

This research sets out to change this state of affairs by investigating participants' first-hand experiences in five pilot RPL projects in four South African institutions of higher education. In this way it presents an important first step in filling the empirical and theoretical gap around an under-researched phenomenon, by providing data generated at the level of implementation. It offers a rare opportunity for people on the receiving end of policy to evaluate its capacity to deliver on espoused goals of equity in education.

At the time when the researcher began her study in 2000, these were the only projects in the country that began a focused exploration of the possibilities of RPL in a variety of degree programmes at undergraduate and post graduate level in higher education. They provided ready sources of information, at a time (1999 to 2001) when such knowledge and information was still in the process of being made, making them, in Merton's (1987) terminology, "strategic" projects.

Because of the pilot status of the RPL projects, the number of RPL candidates and the number of academics participating in these projects was small. The five pilot projects utilised RPL portfolio development courses for the admission of students into the university, and this provided an ideal opportunity to examine the nature of the RPL practices that emerged in different institutional and epistemological contexts, and participants' experiences of them.

Further reasons for representing these five RPL pilot projects was that all of them had two years of experience in RPL implementation in higher education. The institutions in which these pilots were located represent a spectrum of universities in South Africa, from historically advantaged institutions (Wits, JCE and UFS) to historically disadvantaged institutions (UWC), and from English-language institutions (Wits, JCE and UWC) to Afrikaans (UFS).

Given the paucity of literature and research, the findings of this study will make an original contribution to the practice of RPL in higher education in South Africa, by aiming to document emerging practices responsive to adult learners, as well as identifying institutional variables for the implementation of RPL. The framework of adult education, which places the adult learner at the centre of its theorising and practices, provides an ideal framework for understanding RPL in South Africa, and for developing RPL practices that are responsive to adults and their prior learning.

1.4 THE THEORETICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The field of adult education, and adult educators irrespective of paradigmatic orientations, have always had adult learners as the centre of their gaze (Oliver, 1999; Stuart and Thomson, 1995). The aims of this field include the personal development and well being of adult learners, their needs and desires for professional development and their agency in social change and transformation.

Critical adult education is well placed to provide the theoretical basis for this study pertaining to RPL. It focuses on the learning of individuals and groups who have been excluded from formal education and draws on the rich traditions of student-centredness for its pedagogical underpinning. It questions dominant forms of knowledge and it questions the "....status of the definitive, the certain and the proven" (Usher, 1992: 210). Critical adult educators base their life's work on reversing practices, attitudes and beliefs that serve to limit the potential and status of people in society. They are propelled by a passion to create a just society – "one that ...links struggle to a new set of human possibilities" (Giroux, 1983: 242).

Critical adult education has always taken sides with social movements to influence equity and justice in a democratic society. It connects with the material realities of ordinary people's lives (Apple, 1993). It is "... an integral part of the struggle for democracy and social justice" (Martin, 1999: 181) on the one hand, and about giving learners another chance on the other.

These aims intersect with RPL, which in South Africa is framed in the discourse of equity, redress and a second chance for learners whose educational paths were disrupted. Castle and Attwood (2001: 64) point to other similarities between RPL and adult education. They point out that adult education and RPL recognise the educative value of experience obtained from everyday life, work and community. Both acknowledge that such experience is made of knowledge and skills, but also

of traits such as focus, self-discipline and self-knowledge. These attributes form the basis for further growth and development. They point out that both RPL and adult education espouse personal and collective empowerment and social change for disadvantaged groups. This is particularly valuable in South Africa where RPL is strongly linked to imperatives of social justice in education. Exploring the lived experiences of participants in RPL programmes may map the path for higher education in a more meaningful way than that which has been provided by policy imperatives.

1.5 OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is divided into eight chapters, which correspond with the steps suggested in the research aims and objectives listed above.

Chapter Two presents an account of the research design including the rationale for selecting a qualitative research paradigm. It accounts for the ways in which the sample emerged as well as the way in which interviews, documentary evidence (sources) and case studies were used to gather and interpret data.

Chapter Three critically reviews research and literature relevant to the study. In particular it explores competing theoretical perspectives of RPL that have emerged from literature. The next section of this chapter critically reviews a variety of institutional variables considered to be essential for the implementation of RPL. Overall, this chapter provides the theoretical underpinning for each of the chapters that follow, and supports the research findings in Chapter Eight.

Chapters Four to Seven contain case studies of five RPL pilot projects in four institutions of higher education in South Africa. Each chapter begins with a brief background to the institution, for the purpose of situating the RPL projects. This is followed by an explanation of the origins of the RPL projects, followed by an in-depth analysis of respondents' experiences of RPL - that is, both recipients and

implementers of RPL, exposing contending versions of RPL propelled by different epistemological and philosophical orientations.

Chapter Eight concludes the thesis with a discussion of the major findings of this research. Using the research questions posed in this study as an organising device, this chapter focuses first on participants' personal experience of RPL, then on the capacity for RPL to deliver on equity and finally on participants' suggestions for the practice of RPL in higher education.

CHAPTER TWO
RESEARCH DESIGN

> *Do we treat the people we study as lollipops; as all brain and no body? Or do they have their feet on the ground, a ground that is both epistemological and ontological, the ground that culture and tradition provides for us? We tend to forget this ground because it is always with us, but then we misunderstand what happens in educational settings.*
>
> (Packer, 1993: 264)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

While the previous chapter introduced the aims and objectives of the research, the purpose of this chapter is to describe the way in which the research was planned and implemented. This includes a discussion of the following points:

- a discussion of the research paradigm;
- the manner in which the sample emerged;
- an account of the methods used to collect, analyse, interpret and present information;
- a consideration of the issues of generalisability and validity.

2.2 THE RESEARCH PARADIGM

The literature on research methodology is vast, and there is general consensus that particular frameworks of thinking inform research methodology and approaches to educational research. It seems appropriate at this point to distinguish between

different frameworks of thinking, as each of these provides a different meaning for research methodology and educational research.

A dominant research paradigm of the last two hundred years is positivism, which describes, predicts, controls and then explains a phenomenon. It utilises a largely quantitative research methodology that sets meanings apart from an individual's subjective interpretations, consciousness and intentions. Such research draws on neutral, objective or statistical language to draw conclusions (Kelchtermans and Schratz, 1994) and the role of the researcher is detached, in order to minimise disturbance of the phenomena under investigation. A method often used for data collection with human subjects is a questionnaire driven survey.

In contrast, an interpretive research paradigm has been gaining prominence for the last twenty to thirty years. This paradigm can be described as "qualitative" and is distinguished from other paradigms by its use of "archival, narrative and observational knowledge". This paradigm documents "episodes of lived experience representing as closely as possible how people feel, what they know, and what their concerns, beliefs, perceptions and understandings are" (Castle, 1996: 15). In this paradigm, educational research is seen to involve human practices, practices that cannot be quantified or predicted; and the human being is viewed as a subject capable of rationality, reflection, communication and social interaction (Kelchtermans and Schratz, 1994: 244). Research discourse in the interpretive tradition draws on narrative, and methods used for data collection include interviews and observations.

In the first chapter of this thesis the researcher proposed that critical education theory would provide the philosophical and methodological framework for this study. Critical adult education theory was outlined in the introduction (Chapter One) and there it was shown to be a theory that provides us with a resource both to criticise and to change the world. It goes beyond interpretive aims to understand educational practices and instead proposes to change educational practices in a

way that transforms the context of these practices. It does not produce a theory, but instead develops theories particular to specific contexts. Tierney and others have described the aims of critical education theory when they assert that such research seeks to transform society and individuals because it does "...not merely analyze or study an object to gain ...understanding, but instead struggle to investigate how individuals and groups might be better able to change their situations" (1994: 99).

Central to this critical approach is rationality, which implies a clear articulation of issues and attuning oneself to the world where "...possibilities may be sought, reflected upon, transformed and deepened" (Taylor, 1985: 139). This means preparing oneself for the possibility of changing others, and being open to self-change. This orientation, with rationality as a significant element, implies that our interpretations and knowledge are articulated to research participants and others in a clear and unambiguous way. Not only do researchers communicate the aims of their inquiries and their findings, but they also search for other voices and other interpretations.

Rationality in the critical approach also implies that researchers pay close attention to individualistic and specific aspects of the context. As Hermes points out research foci should move to "research that serves a specific purpose ... of the community within which it is situated" (1998: 158). Lastly, implicit in this pedagogy is that researchers need to make research a positive encounter for the participants and to care in their interactions with one another (Dewey and Bentley, 1989, in Waghid, 2000; Noddings, 1986). The researcher identifies with Van Manen who points out that "rationality expresses a faith that... experience can be made intelligible" but that as researchers, we need to recognise that "human experience is more complex than the result of any singular description" (1990: 16).

Educational research within a critical education paradigm, with rationality as a significant, constitutive part, is compatible with the qualitative research paradigm, and these together provide an appropriate research framework for this study. Bringing these two paradigms together not only ensures compatibility but also facilitates the deepening of the theory and practice of qualitative research in education. Qualitative research provides insider perspectives on lived experience of a process. Finch makes the point that it makes "visible the consequences of decisions made by the socially powerful about the socially less powerful" (in Burgess, 1985: 113).

Maykut and Morehouse (1994: 43-47) offer the following as key characteristics of qualitative research:

- the study has an exploratory and descriptive focus, the outcome of which is not the generalisation of results, but a deeper understanding of experience from the perspectives of participants selected for the study;
- inquiries are made in natural settings as researchers are interested in understanding people's experiences in context;
- the data of qualitative inquiry is often people's words, and useful ways of gathering this form of data are in-depth interviews, group interviews and the collection of relevant documents;
- participant perspectives are continually studied for their meanings;
- the results are presented within a rich narrative, sometimes referred to as case study.

In her choice of a research paradigm the researcher identified with Bannister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall, who assert that "the aim in qualitative research is not so much replicability as specificity" (1994: 11-12). Furthermore, the aim is to "provide an in-depth understanding of the meanings at work, rather than to skim over as wide a surface as possible". As Van Manen says "generalization about human experiences are almost always of troublesome value,

and they prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience" (1990: 22).

Riddell (1997) and others have asserted that there is a paucity of research that places student experience at the centre of research dealing with educational change and reform. The researcher suggests that the approach taken in this study, which places student experience at the centre of educational research and reform, may prove a fruitful direction for future research on education and change in South Africa. Such an approach will also enable the researcher to say something meaningful about RPL practice and to speak to the experiences of RPL candidates, academics implementing RPL programmes and institutional managers experiencing this new and complex process in higher education in South Africa.

South African studies employing qualitative research methods have been carried out by Bozzoli (1991), Castle (1996) and Dhunpath (1998) amongst others. The study by Castle has particularly informed this study. She examined participants' perceptions of affirmative action programmes in South Africa. Affirmative action, like RPL, was driven by moral and political imperatives, and was a major challenge facing South African business and society after the democratic elections of 1994. The study used the frameworks of critical education theory and qualitative research to inquire into past and present contexts of affirmative action in South Africa. It explored international models of affirmative action and possible lessons for South Africa. Thereafter, the study explored the social background as well as the perceptions of participants engaged in affirmative action programmes, and the impact of these programmes on individuals, organisations and wider society. The research results show that affirmative action programmes have not proven themselves to be effective methods for transformation in South African business as was intended. Instead, the programmes can at best be described as mild reform initiatives to bring black managers into business.

Bozzoli (1991) explored the life trajectories of a small group of rural black women in Phokeng, a platinum-rich area in South Africa. In this study, Bozzoli meticulously makes visible the conditions that characterised the lives of these women from girlhood in Phokeng, to motherhood in Johannesburg to old age back in Phokeng, each phase characterised by poverty, violence and exclusion. She then goes on to show the strategies and techniques employed by the women to overcome the odds that life under apartheid has stacked against them. The strategies show the power of individual and collective agency in the face of structural adversity, and the resilience of women to claim their legitimate place within a repressive society.

Dhunpath's study of teacher education in Natal through the eyes and experience of a teacher attempts to give voice to teachers serving under apartheid education, by providing a narrative of a person in a real school with critical issues. This study provides the reader with an intimate look into the individual agency of a teacher in overcoming "multiple layers of institutional and structural constraint" (1998: vi). On another level, this study creates a space in which teachers can tell their stories about teaching and learning - a space in which teachers can tell how they come to know what they know and how this knowledge can be as legitimate as theories of education. This study is of value to those who wish to explore ways in which the theory-practice divide has informed and continues to inform the discourse on teacher education in South Africa.

Schratz and Walker (1995: 167) caution that while there is still place for qualitative research, "a new orthodoxy threatens to emerge", where the nature of the data changes, but the research methods remain the same; where we adopt paradigms that appear to fit our research needs, but then we fail to act consistently. They suggest that research within a qualitative framework needs to be written in ways that are "penetrable" and that such research needs to translate into change and action. Cohen and Mannion (1989) caution against heavy reliance on any particular research approach and suggest triangulation of sources and methods.

Such triangulation, which involves combining different methods and different sources of information, "helps reveal the richness and diversity of social setting" (Newman, 1994: 336). Such an approach is a useful way to proceed in researching RPL, which is an emergent field of inquiry in higher education in South Africa, presenting itself in a context where a strong knowledge and information base still needs to be established and where "...the practice is under-researched" (Harris, 2000: 127).

In this thesis, the framework is qualitative: the study is small due to the scarcity of RPL programmes and of students who have undergone RPL in higher education in South Africa. But a small study allowed in-depth examination of experience. Interviews were used to document the experiences of participants in the RPL courses in the various RPL pilot projects. The study examined five RPL projects not as objective data, but more as a context in which to explore RPL participants' experiences of them. Individual life and work history interviews gave the researcher a nuanced sense of the life world of the recipients of the RPL courses.

The interviews engaged candidates in a process of reflection on their life experience and on their experience of RPL - a process that undertook to recognise such experience. Similarly, the interviews engaged the academics in a process of reflection on their epistemological and philosophical orientations to RPL. The participants (both recipients and implementers) in RPL projects were in a sense co-researchers in this study and their insights are essential, since they have first-hand experience of the RPL process. Interviews were also used to glean information from participants about the capacity of RPL to deliver equity, and also their creative ideas to inform RPL practice in higher education.

2.3 RESEARCH SAMPLE AND PROCEDURES

First, suitable participants (students and staff) were sought across the five RPL projects. These participants were the recipients and the implementers of the

portfolio development courses presented in the pilot projects, and were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study. The study therefore makes no claims to statistical rigour in terms of sample membership. Thirty-seven people participated in this study, 14 of whom were academics who designed and implemented RPL courses in the four institutions, and 23 who were students and the recipients of these courses.

Next, information about students' experiences of RPL was assembled by means of in-depth interviews with individual students in each of the pilot projects. Information about their experiences was also obtained by examining student portfolios (which were the products of the portfolio development courses). Information about the academics' experience of RPL was assembled by means of individual interviews with each academic as well as by examining scholarly articles and reports for JET written by academic staff. Interviews with all the participants were utilised to assemble specific information about RPL for equity and redress and for documenting ideas for change to RPL practices. Because of the interrelated nature of the research questions, the information gleaned from these methods contributed to research objectives 2 to 5 (What is the nature of the portfolio course? What are participants' experiences of these?; Does RPL deliver on change?; and What ideas do participants advance to improve RPL practices?)

The aim of using these procedures was to obtain "comprehensive subjective descriptions that provide the foundation for ... a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essence of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994: 13).

Table One provides an overview of the research sample and suggests the chronology of data collection. It lists the participants in the study grouped under the institution in which the RPL course was implemented. The location and date of each interview is given, along with the method of recording the interview (tape recording and/or longhand notes).

TABLE ONE: OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH SAMPLE

Institutional case study	Participant	Date and location of interview	Interview record
University of Witwatersrand (Adult Education)	Gillian Attwood (Staff)	15 August 2001, in her office at Wits	Tape recording and notes (G)
	Jane Castle (Staff)	15 August and 16 November 2001, in her office at Wits	Tape recording and notes (J)
	Makhethe Lepheana (Student)	18 and 19 October 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (ML)
	Mimi Mthethwa (Student)	3 and 4 October 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (MM)
	Luxi Mokwena (Student)	26 and 27 September 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (L)
	Dan Tobias (Student)	3 October 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (D)
University of Witwatersrand (Teacher Education)	Elizabeth Lebese (Student)	3 and 4 October 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (E)
	Themba Ngoma (Student)	2 October 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (T)
	Julia Ramathepe (Student)	3 October 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (J)
	Yael Shalem (Staff)	24 August 2001 and 20 June 2002, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (Y)
	Carola Steinberg (Staff)	24 August 2001, in a seminar room at Wits	Tape recording and notes (C)

University of the Western Cape	Gregory Adams (Student)	24 October 2001 and 2 August 2002, telephonic interview 28 August 2002, in a dining area at UWC	Notes (G)
	Natheem Hendricks (Staff)	16 August 2001 in a seminar room in Braamfontein, 6 November 2001 at researcher's home in Johannesburg, and 25 May 2002, in a telephonic interview.	Tape recording and notes (N)
	Tina Hendricks (Student)	17 October 2001 , 2 August 2002 and 28 August 2002 telephonic interviews	Notes (T)
	Ebrahim Ismail (Student)	26 October 2001 telephonic interview. 29 August 2002, in a dining area at UWC	Notes (E)
	Bernadette Job (Student)	23 October 2001, telephonic interview 28 August 2002, in a dining area at UWC	Notes (B)
	Dominique Savio-Monterio (Student)	24 October 2001 and 2 August 2002, telephonic interview 28 August 2002, in a dining area at UWC	Notes (D)
	Zelda Scheepers (Student)	17 October 2001, 2 August 2002 and 28 August 2002 telephonic interviews	Notes (Z)
	Terry Volbrecht (Staff)	16 August 2001 in a seminar room in Braamfontein, 25 May 2002 and 19 June 2002, in telephonic interviews	Tape recording and notes (T)

Johannesburg College of Education	Marian Baker (Staff)	6 and 7 June 2002, in her office at JCE.	Tape recording and notes (M)
	Rene Ferguson (Staff)	6 and 7 June 2002, in her office at JCE.	Tape recording and notes (R)
	Himla Kathawaroo (Student)	5 and 6 October 2001, in a seminar room at JCE	Tape recording and notes (H)
	Viv Linington (Staff)	6 and 7 June 2002, in her office at JCE.	Tape recording and notes (V)
	Emma Magadla (Student)	18 October 2001, in a seminar room at JCE	Notes (E)
	Morgan Mathebe (Student)	29 September and 11 October 2001, in a seminar room at JCE	Tape recording and notes (M)
	Salma Mayet (Student)	5 and 6 October 2001, in a seminar room at JCE	Tape recording and notes (S)
	Dirk Postma (Staff)	30 May and 5 June 2002, in his office at JCE	Tape recording and notes (D)
	Wilhelm van Rensburg (Staff)	10 June 2002 in his office at Rand Afrikaans University	Tape recording and notes (W)
University of the Free State	Benny Anderson (Staff)	8 and 9 July 2002 in his office at BankCity, Johannesburg.	Tape recording and notes (B)
	Bobby Bobeje (Student)	3 and 11 June 2002 in his office at Telkom, Pretoria.	Tape recording and notes (BB)
	Deon DuPlessis (Student)	3 and 11 June 2002 in his office at Telkom, Pretoria	Tape recording and notes (DD)
	Janet Kay (Student)	14 and 26 June 2002 telephonic interview, and 10 July 2002, electronic interview.	Notes (J)
	Thato Mokoena (Student)	14 and 26 June and 8 July. Telephonic interviews	Notes (T)
	Deon Niewoudt (Student)	7 July 2002 telephonic interview and 9 July 2002 in the researcher's office.	Tape recording and notes (DN)
	Alta Sharp (Staff)	13 June 2002, telephonic interview. 14 June and 21 July 2002 electronic interviews.	Notes (A)
	Albie Topkin (Student)	8 and 9 July telephonic interviews.	Notes (AT)
	Marna Wessels (Staff)	13 June 2002 telephonic interview. 14 June and 12 July electronic interviews.	Notes (M)

2.4 INTERVIEWS

As discussed earlier on, because of the subjective, personal, descriptive and exploratory nature of the inquiry, the primary method for collecting data was in-depth interviews with individuals. A further method of collecting and validating information, Document Review, will be described in a later section of this chapter under 2.6.

Lever (in Newman 1994: 336) notes that "variation in results yielded by different methods, far from being an unwanted source of error or bias, can be an additional source of data". Interviews have been recognised as an important method in qualitative research because they provide crucial background information on the participants. Furthermore, interviews enable the researcher to access information that relates to the authentic feelings of the participants, which is not accessible through observations or questionnaires (Yin, 1986).

Because semi-structured interviews "provide greater depth" (Fontana and Frey, 1994: 365) and facilitate greater flexibility, these were used to explore the lived experiences of participants. Furthermore, Jones (1991: 204) points out that semi-structured interviews enable the interviewer to draw on a schedule of questions, pre-arranged in themes and consisting of broad areas to be covered, but they also allow the interviewer an opportunity to probe and pursue other relevant areas which may emerge from individual interviews. The semi-structured interview is known to lend itself to researching perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and the formation and emergence of ideas and world views (Allan, 1991: 177). Semi-structured interviews were based on structured open-ended questions around the issues under discussion, which encouraged participants to elaborate on their experiences. The researcher intervened only to request clarification or elaboration. Follow-up interviews were used for probing and seeking clarification on the responses of the participants. This allowed for the participants to speak

freely as individual recipients and implementers of a process. The interview guide is presented in Appendix One.

In order to establish a relationship and rapport between the researcher and the RPL participants and also to facilitate greater scope for observation, the researcher interviewed the participants at their places of work whenever possible and desired by participants, or at venues recommended by the participants. Furthermore, the researcher began each first interview session with a brief self-introduction and rationale for the research.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984: 93) in their discussion about interview situations point out that in qualitative interviewing "the interview is relaxed and conversational, since this is how people normally interact... it is only along the lines of natural interaction that the interviewer can tap into what is important to people". It is along these lines that the researcher aimed to explicate participants' lived experiences of RPL.

The researcher sought the permission of the participants to record and transcribe the interviews verbatim by means of an audio-tape recorder and to take longhand notes. Almost all of the interviews were recorded. Participants were put at ease with the assurance that the information they gave on their subjectively lived experience of the RPL process would be handled in a confidential manner and that they as individuals could remain anonymous if they wished.[5] Furthermore, after transcribing the tape recordings of the interviews, copies of the transcriptions as well as the longhand notes were sent to the participants to see if the researcher had represented their experiences as they intended, and thereby not violated the personal meaning of each participant's experiences. This enabled participants to be co-researchers and not merely objects in the research, which is significant in a study of this nature, where the field is open and untested, and which aims to

[5] The participants had all agreed at the outset of the study to be identified. With permission, all the students and the staff are clearly identifiable and are referred to by name rather than number in this study.

explore a process (RPL) that intends to deliver on equity and emancipation through education. This cross-checking process served to validate the interviews, or as Gadamer (1975, in Van Manen, 1990: 100) describes it, to practise "the art of testing" (to be discussed in a later section of this chapter).

After the transcriptions were returned by each participant, the researcher reported tentative interpretations and conclusions to each participant for feedback, in the form of institutional case studies. The draft case studies were also sent to other academics working in the field of RPL to ascertain the perceived plausibility and accuracy of the descriptions, the interpretations and the conclusions. All of this was an attempt to strive for a "continuous dialogue with the empirical data" (Becker, 1998: 109) and to enhance the internal validity, accuracy and plausibility of the findings generated in this research.

Taylor and Bogdan (1984) point out that people's views of the world stem from distorting lenses, and they caution researchers about uncritical acceptance of participants' description of events or experiences. On this point it is worth quoting Benny and Hughes (in Taylor and Bogdan, 1984: 82) who assert "every conversation has its own balance of revelation and concealment of thoughts and intentions: Only under very unusual circumstances is talk so completely expository that every word can be taken at face value". Arguing in a similar vein, Castle (1996: 27) refers to Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) who "insist on a rigorous examination of experience which explores the boundaries of a particular position, and extends the insights beyond the limits of particular experience".

An important aspect of critical practice is for researchers to place their interpretations and biases before others for scrutiny. Usher and Bryant (1989) suggest that to meet this need a researcher should present her practices for wider examinations by colleagues working in similar contexts. This process facilitates interpretations being scrutinised for accuracy and validity. In this study, tentative interpretations and conclusions were not only discussed with the participants in

the research individually, but were also presented to other academics and practitioners in the field RPL in higher education, to probe alternative interpretations and conclusions. Similarities and differences between participants' experiences and conceptual and epistemological grounding of knowledge claims were also explored in the process.

Lincoln and Guba (1985: 14) say:

> Member checking is both formal and informal, and it occurs continuously. Many opportunities for member checks arise daily in the course of the investigation.... insights gleaned from one group can be tested with another.

The use of recording notes and mechanical devices in interviews is debated. Some see their use as obtrusive and having the potential to alter the research (Douglas, 1976: 53). Others question whether observers can remember details of what happens (Swartz and Jacobs, 1979), especially in group discussions. Potter and Wetherell (1987: 165) argue that by not recording "the transcriber is struggling to make clear decisions about what exactly is said, and then to represent those words in a conventional ...system". In this study interviews were recorded and verbatim transcription as well as longhand notes were given back to participants to ensure that their views had been represented accurately.

Truth value is attained by triangulation, member checking, peer examination and structural coherence. The researcher triangulated the data from the interviews with the data from the scholarly articles, JET reports and student portfolios. Furthermore, participants were given longhand summary notes and verbatim transcriptions of the interview to review for fair representation. Initial findings in the form of draft case studies were shared with participants and peers from the University of the Western Cape (Alan Ralphs), the WHEP at JET (Michelle

Buchler), State University of New York (Elana Michelson) and a consultant in the field of RPL (Enver Motala).

Consistency is attained by dense description of research method, triangulation and peer examination. The researcher suggests that these criteria are met in this research (as discussed above).

2.5 CASE STUDIES

Yin (1986: 22-23) identifies the case study as any empirical inquiry that examines a recent or contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence. A case study is appropriate when the phenomenon cannot be separated from the context in which it operates. Merriam (1998: 26) points out that case studies "especially qualitative case studies are prevalent throughout education" and are commonly used for investigating the implementation of innovative procedures or programmes, or the implementation of a particular policy. In each one of these instances where a case study is utilised, there is a sense that the case "is a bounded system" (ibid: 27) where the boundaries of the case are clearly definable, and that these boundaries are able to indicate that data collection will not be infinite and that the number of people to be interviewed will be finite. Given that RPL is emerging in institutional contexts undergoing several changes, case study allows for "interpretation in context" (Merriam, 1998: 29) and allows for insights obtained from the study to serve as "tentative hypothesis" (ibid: 41) which may assist future research in RPL and in adding or extending the knowledge base of RPL in higher education in South Africa.

Merriam (1998: 33) cites Sanders (1981) who says "case studies help us to understand processes of events, projects and programmes to discover context characteristics that will shed light on an issue or object". This methodology is particularly appropriate for an analysis of RPL, which is a new field of scholarship, because it produces "thick descriptions" and is appropriate to

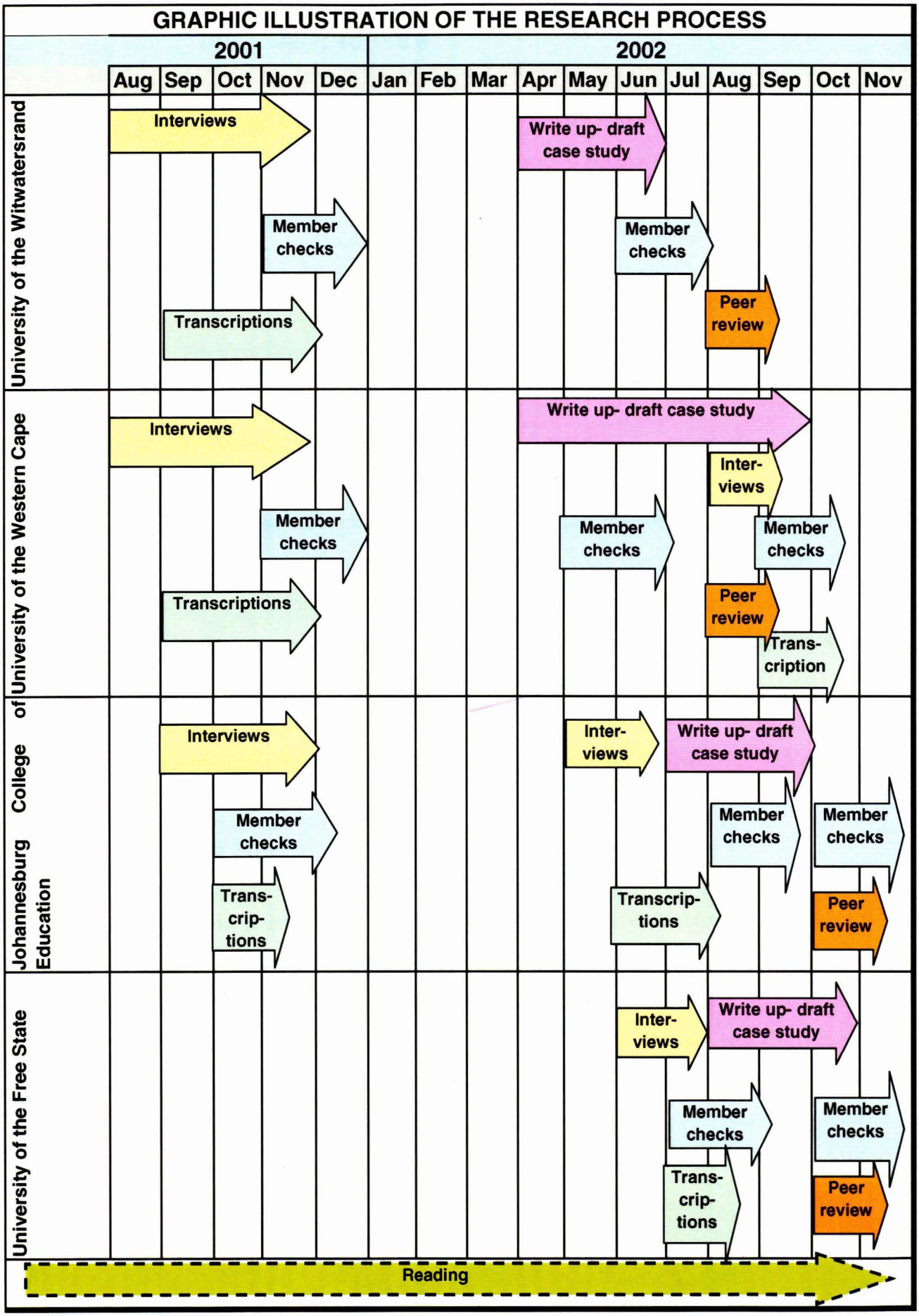
answering questions of "why" and "how" which were central to this study (Miles and Huberman, 1994 and Yin, 1994). Given the under-theorised nature of RPL in higher education (Harris, 2000) cases studies is an appropriate method to expand and even build theory (Yin, 1994).

In this study, over a period of twelve months the researcher interviewed participants in the RPL pilot projects, and examined student portfolios and academic articles written by staff as well as reports written by staff for JET and their relevant institutions. From these sources she constructed five case studies "to give the reader a feeling of what the experience and learning were like for those who lived them" (Foley, 1999: 13). To create this picture the researcher probed why academics designed particular types of portfolio development courses, and examined the epistemological orientation of these courses. She also asked about the pedagogical struggles encountered by the academics in the design and implementation of these courses. From the students she asked how these courses were experienced, and how their prior knowledge fared. The researcher also asked participants whether RPL could deliver equity and access in education. The case studies attempted to map the nature of the RPL practices emerging in the five RPL projects within four contexts of higher education and, importantly, to delineate the variations and commonalties in the experiences of the implementers and the recipients of RPL.

Significantly, given the critical education focus of this study, participants were considered to be self-directing, capable of making sense of their own experience in an interview process where self-reflection was vital. The case studies provided academics with an opportunity to re-examine, and in some instances confirm and validate, their epistemological and philosophical orientation as educators, as well as recognise the political nature of their work. It provided students with an opportunity to examine their own assumptions about what it means to be a learner with prior learning and the value of such learning in higher education, and to harness their capacity, potential and action to make sense of the multi-layered

environment in which they live and learn (Brookfield, 1991 and 1993; Freire, 1985; Giroux, 1983).

Case studies have been critiqued for giving rise to "false coherence", "...with the danger of imposing a conceptual order upon an empirical chaos" (Millar, 1983: 121, in Hendricks, 2001). To mediate this problem and to engage the participants in critical reflection, a draft version of the relevant institutional case study was sent to each participant for his or her views and comments, and to ascertain the accuracy of descriptions and findings. The case studies were also sent to other academics to test the researcher's interpretations and conclusions for plausibility and accuracy. These views and comments were confirmed through follow-up telephone calls or electronic mail messages. After this process of member checking, the case studies were rewritten, and each case study was situated within the broader institutional context in which RPL was implemented so as to provide a base from which the reader can examine five responses to RPL within four institutions of higher education in South Africa (Chapters Four to Seven). Diagram A, on the next page provides a graphic account of the research process described and discussed in this chapter.


GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS
2001
2002
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
Dec
Jan
Feb
Mar
Apr
May
Jun
Jul
Aug
Sep
Oct
Nov
University of the Witwatersrand
Interviews
Member checks
Transcriptions
Write up- draft case study
Member checks
Peer review
University of the Western Cape
Interviews
Member checks
Transcriptions
Write up- draft case study
Inter- views
Member checks
Member checks
Peer review
Trans- cription
Johannesburg College of Education
Interviews
Member checks
Trans- crip- tions
Inter- views
Write up- draft case study
Member checks
Member checks
Transcrip- tions
Peer review
University of the Free State
Inter- views
Write up- draft case study
Member checks
Member checks
Trans- crip- tions
Peer review
Reading

2.6 DOCUMENT REVIEW

The researcher examined a variety of "texts" such as RPL reports prepared for JET, portfolio development course outlines, scholarly articles and conference papers written by the academics in the RPL projects represented in this study and students' RPL portfolios, not as objective data, but to lend insight into participants' experiences of them. All of these texts were ready sources of information and were used as source material for interviews with participants. The documents are important sources of triangulation to confirm or disconfirm information gained from interviews. They also complemented the data collected in interviews about participants' experiences of RPL.

Merriam (1998: 126) points out that documentary data are a good source of data and " ...can be used in the same manner as data from interviews... and can furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypotheses... ". She posits documentary data as useful and valuable in qualitative case studies "because they ground an investigation in the context of the problem" (ibid: 126). Lincoln and Guba (1985: 234) point out that analysing data from documentary source "lends contextual richness and helps to ground an inquiry in the milieu of the writer".

Scholarly articles

When this project was launched in 2000 there was no published literature that pertained to the pilot projects examined in this research. However, at the time when the bulk of the data was collected in 2001 and at the time of writing, late in 2002, there were five published articles on four of the five projects (Wits teacher education, Wits adult education, JCE and UFS). These are as follows:

- **Wits - Teacher Education:** Shalem, Y. (2001) "Recognition of Prior Learning in and through 'the field' of academic practice". Perspectives in Education, 19 (1): 53-75.

- **Wits - Adult Education:** Castle, J. and Attwood, G. (2001) "Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for access or credit? problematic issues in a university adult education department in South Africa". Studies in the Education of Adults, 33 (1): 60-72.

- **JCE and Wits Adult Education:** Osman, R. and Castle, J. (2002) "The Recognition of Prior Learning: A soft option in higher education?" South African Journal of Higher Education, 16 (2): 63-68.

- **JCE and Wits Adult Education**: Osman, R. and Castle, J. (2001) "The Recognition of Prior Learning: early lessons, challenges and promise". South African Journal of Higher Education, 15 (1): 54-60.

- **UFS:** Anderson, B. and Maharasoa, M. (2002) "Internationalisation of higher education: facilitating partnerships between universities". South African Journal of Higher Education, 16 (1): 15-21.

These articles were a useful source of data in enabling the researcher to understand the academics' experiences of RPL in relation to the contextual, epistemological and practical challenges associated with the implementation of RPL in higher education. They provided an opportunity for critical self reflection for academics and the researcher, and made available a first-hand account of the academics' experiences of RPL in particular institutional contexts in South Africa. The articles are critically reviewed in the next chapter of this thesis (Chapter Three).

The articles were also useful in providing a descriptive account of the portfolio development courses for each of the pilot projects in this research (described in detail in Chapters Four to Seven). Reference to the scholarly articles allowed the researcher to validate data obtained from the interviews with the academics in this

study. Similarly, reference to the student portfolios that documented students' reflections of the RPL process allowed the researcher to validate data obtained in the interviews with students in this study.

Merriam alerts researchers to bring two criteria to bear in their evaluation of documentary data. The first is to judge whether "it contains information or insights relevant to the research question" and secondly "if it can be acquired in a reasonably practical yet systematic manner" (1998: 124). On both counts the researcher was able to answer in the affirmative. Furthermore, it is the researcher's contention that the documentary data sources were useful in providing information relevant to research objectives 2 and 4 (discussed in Chapter One) and in this way yielded "more data" (Dexter, 1970, in Merriam, 1998: 125). A brief description of other documentary sources follows.

The JET reports

In these reports, prepared for JET, academics made explicit (among other things) the aims of their RPL projects, the assessment approaches to RPL and some of the problems associated with the approaches in the context of higher education. The reports were:

- Attwood, G. and Castle, J. (2000) "RPL Research Project: Consolidated Report - Adult Education". Submitted to Joint Education Trust (JET).

- Shalem, Y. and Steinberg, C. (2000b) "RPL Research Project: Report 1". Submitted to Joint Education Trust (JET).

- Steinberg, C. and Shalem, Y. (2001) "RPL Research Project: Composite Report". Submitted to Joint Education Trust (JET).

- Volbrecht, T. and Hendricks, N. (2001) "Recognition of Prior Learning: Report on First Phase of Implementation". University of the Western Cape: Bellville.

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

- Osman, R. (2000) "JCE/RPL Research Project: Composite Report". Submitted to Joint Education Trust (JET).

RPL portfolio development course outlines

These outlines reflected overall objectives of the RPL portfolio courses, and the specific activities that RPL candidates needed to complete within the portfolio development course, as well as the duration and methods of assessment employed in the courses. (The portfolio courses are discussed and described in Chapters Four to Seven).

RPL student portfolios

All the portfolio development courses examined in this study culminated in a student portfolio. These portfolios were prepared by the RPL students who participated in the five pilot projects. Information gleaned from these portfolios provided useful source material to prepare the researcher for the interviews with the RPL candidates on their work and life histories. Such information was used to illustrate and illuminate material gleaned from the interview.

2.7 ISSUES OF VALIDITY AND GENERALISABILITY

The aim of this research was to explore the participants' experiences of RPL using different data-collecting methods (in-depth interviews, case studies and analysis of documents), and different sources of information (sources from different RPL portfolio courses and at different levels within the course, that is recipients of the programme and designers of the programme). This approach provides a form of triangulation, which according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) contributes to the trustworthiness of data, and in this way addresses the questions of validity and reliability of the information emanating from such methods.

On questions of validity and reliability Deautscher (in Taylor and Bogdan, 1984: 7) points out that these are over-emphasised in conventional social research where there is a "concentration on consistency without much concern about whether we are right or wrong. As a consequence we may have been learning... how to pursue an incorrect path with precision".

There is general agreement among researchers that the validity and the generalisability of research within the qualitative framework is built on a strong theoretical framework. Such research derives from rigorously constructed methods which are explicitly stated, and data which is systematically obtained, described, analysed, argued about and subjected to open-ness (Jaeger, 1988; Le Compte and Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998).

Qualitative research can only claim "high internal validity derived from its data collection and analysis methods" (Le Compte and Preissle, 1993: 341) and from a clear and complete open-ness in the rendering of the findings, and for this whole process to be placed within a rigorous theoretical framework. Silverman (1993) and others note that validation is an ongoing process of reasoning and not just a process restricted to the end of the research.

It is the researcher's contention that the explicit process in which the data was gathered and analysed in this research enhances the validity of the study. From the beginning and throughout the study, the participants were seen as co-researchers since they were the people who were either receiving or implementing RPL. The experiences of the co-researchers were taped and longhand notes as well as verbatim transcriptions were given to them to assess if their experiences were fairly represented. Initial findings, in the form of draft case studies, were meticulously documented and discussed with the RPL students and the academics as well as colleagues in the field of adult education and RPL. Such openness in the rendering of the findings enabled the researcher to seek alternative accounts or explanations for the findings. Furthermore, such member checking is described as "...the most crucial technique for establishing credibility" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 315).

The researcher identifies with Patton (1990, in Merriam, 1998: 209) who asserts that qualitative research should "provide perspective rather than truth, empirical assessment of local decision makers' theories of action rather than generation and verification of universal theories and context-bound extrapolations rather than generalizations".

2.8 CONCLUSION

While the researcher is confident that the research design and methods employed in this study were well suited to answer the research question, there are limitations. The in-depth analysis was limited to the experiences of students and academic staff and did not include the experiences of faculty administrators or senior administrators within the institutions. With hindsight, the experience of administrators is important to the smooth implementation of RPL. RPL is not only about epistemological and pedagogical issues; but administrative features like entry and progression rules for students, course codes for RPL portfolio courses, fee structures for such courses, processing of assessment, and evaluation

of student progress are central to process of educational inclusion or exclusion and therefore to RPL. It became clear that academics themselves were constrained and shaped by these administrative requirements.

Despite this limitation it is the researcher's contention that RPL is about challenging and changing taken-for-granted approaches to knowledge, teaching and assessing. Similarly, a qualitative design shaped by critical education theory offered an appropriate framework wherein such a challenge could be rigorously mounted and executed in a way that was valuable to the context and the aims of this study.

It is appropriate at this point to turn our attention to the theoretical underpinning of this study as a whole and, therefore, for each of the chapters that follow. In particular, the next chapter examines various conceptualisations of RPL and reviews literature relating to the theory and the implementation of it.

CHAPTER THREE
CONTEXT AND CONCEPTS OF RPL: A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE[6]

> *...so far there has been almost no attempt to substantiate or refute claims through a careful study of the student's experiences of APEL or to identify how students respond to different ways of implementing the process.*
>
> (Trowler, 1996: 25)

> *It is particularly important to continue... to research in the field of RPL... because the practice is under-researched...*
>
> (Harris, 2000: 127)

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter is in three sections. In the first section the policy context in which RPL has emerged in higher education in South Africa is discussed. The next section will critically review related literature and research on RPL by examining contrasting conceptions or models of RPL. These models show that RPL is by no means a clearly defined concept, and instead is one that is variously figured within competing epistemological and philosophical traditions. While these models of RPL provide a conceptual framework for RPL, they operate at a level of abstraction that fails to capture recipients' and implementers' lived experience. So this study, which aims to engage participants in an exploration of their own experience, contributes to an area of research which has not yet been undertaken

[6] Material from this chapter is forthcoming in 'The recognition of prior learning in higher education: new challenges for teaching and learning'. In Gravett, S and Geyser, H (Eds) Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. Pretoria: Van Schaik, in press.

in South Africa. The final section of this chapter examines the literature which identifies institutional variables that contribute to and condition the successful implementation of RPL in higher education. It emerges that irrespective of the model or approaches selected, higher education needs to be mindful of particular institutional requirements for the successful implementation of RPL.

A review, which unravels the epistemological, pedagogical and institutional challenges associated with RPL in higher education, provides a coherent framework against which participants' experiences of RPL can be described and analysed. Such a review makes explicit not only the different ways of *talking* about RPL but also the different ways of *doing* RPL.

3.2 THE CONTEXT OF RPL IN HIGHER EDUCATION

RPL internationally is seen as a mechanism for accrediting the prior learning of individuals within higher education.[7] It is used to broaden access to education for mature adults, and recognises that people learn throughout their lives in varied contexts different from those of higher education and that such learning may be equivalent to that gained formally (Davies, Gallacher, Reeve, 1997; Harris, 2000; Michelson, 1997b). These contexts range from learning informally through work, watching television, reading and hobbies, to learning nonformally, outside the formal education system, through short courses and workshops, leading Marsick and Watkins (2001) to conclude that nonformal learning involves structured learning experiences and informal learning includes less structured learning activities.

Recognition of learning acquired in these varied contexts may be granted in the form of access to a qualification, where the prospective adult student lacks the usual entry requirements, or as credit within a qualification, where the adult

[7] See Evans, 2000 for a detailed account of RPL internationally.

student is awarded advanced standing, or exemption from a part of the qualification. In this way RPL intends to open pathways and increase the participation of adult learners with prior learning in higher education. It intends to provide access to a range of certification opportunities in education for a variety of social purposes ranging from access to equity to social justice.

Two thrusts become evident in the history of RPL. What started out in the 1970s as a humanistic vision of allowing adults to return to university, or making university education more available, is now driven by the purpose of making those same adults more employable. This second thrust is propelled by a breakdown in lifelong job security and globalisation (Evans, 2000). Adult workers are under increasing pressure to become employable and to respond to the demands and volatile changes in an unpredictable globalised economy, and RPL is seen as one of the solutions. What was once an educative opportunity to think and explore one's prior learning can now be used to assess and attach a trade value to an adult's skills in a globalised and ever-changing market. The influence of this second thrust is beginning to be felt in the more instrumentalist conceptions of RPL reviewed in a later section of this chapter (under 3.3).

Here in South Africa, RPL is driven by moral and political imperatives to broaden the participation in higher education of adults who were excluded from it and disadvantaged by apartheid, and at the same time it is driven by an economic imperative to enable adults to compete in the global economy, pitting social justice against international competitiveness. Can RPL deliver on this redress agenda? That is a question taken up in this research.

Origins of RPL on the South African education policy agenda

In South Africa, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) has emerged in the context of wider societal change. In particular RPL appeared on the African National Congress (ANC) policy agenda after firm proposals from the Congress of South

African Trade Unions (COSATU) in the early 1990s to make good on the rights of workers to education and training. COSATU believed that through RPL workers could improve their wages and job grading. To this end COSATU influenced proposals made in the White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995), released by the post apartheid government. In particular the union called for restructuring and transformation of the education and training system, which under the apartheid government had served to systematically entrench racial inequalities both in terms of access to education and better paying jobs. The trade unions proposed RPL as an intervention through which a large number of experienced workers could be assessed for their prior learning, be granted formal qualifications for such experience and then be able to obtain better wages through this new opportunity for education. RPL was seen as a tool to narrow the wage and education gap left by the apartheid education system (Cooper, 1998).

During apartheid[8], the majority of South Africans were prevented from access to quality formal education. Systematic policies of injustice and unequal distribution played out in every sphere of life including education. Education under apartheid was used to maintain and justify oppressive practices, which prevented access to education and helped perpetuate the racial wage gap. Legislation introduced by the apartheid government after 1948 governed every aspect of people's lives from employment, to education, to where one could live.

To illustrate, the Bantu Urban Areas Act of 1945 was introduced to prevent blacks from coming into the cities to seek work. The Group Areas Act ensured that black people could reside only in designated areas, usually far from cities and places of work. The Registration for Employment Act of 1945 and later the In-Service training Act of 1979 effectively excluded blacks from opportunities to advance in the jobs that they occupied. The Extension of University Education Act of 1959 ensured that students in South Africa could only attend universities designated for

[8] Discriminatory practices and other imbalances in South African society were present from pre-colonial times through to the industrial period. However, the focus in this chapter is on the imbalances and injustices of apartheid policies and practices based on race.

different race groups. This act meant that a black student could not register at a white university without ministerial consent, and could be prosecuted if the requirements of this act were ignored[9].

So while 1994 brought the first democratic general election in South Africa and a president revered by the world, for the majority of South Africans the economic and psychological damage caused by apartheid education still linger (Seepe, 2000; Odora Hoppers, 2001). Seepe cites Steve Biko[10] who reflected on the psychological damage of apartheid education: "In order to destroy completely the structures that were built in the African society and to impose their imperialism with unnerving totality the colonialists were not satisfied merely with holding a people in their grip and emptying the Native's brain of all form and content, they turned to the past of the oppressed people and distorted, disfigured and destroyed it" (Seepe, 2000: 53-54). Apartheid education policies systematically ensured economic damage (the results of which still linger today) by under-funding education for blacks and by making education compulsory for white children but not for black children.

The Nationalist Party government of the apartheid era (1948-1992) created a system of schooling, which produced unskilled and semi-skilled workers to serve the labour requirements of an unjust society based on differences of race and class (Christie and Collins, 1984). This systematic policy of inequality in education, coupled with a policy of undermining the very fabric of African society, has resulted in psychological and economic damage to a point where the majority of South Africans have had an incomplete primary and high school education and poor chances of competing in the job market.

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[9] In this study the term "black' is used in the context of apartheid and it refers to Africans, Coloureds and Indians (people who were classified as non-white under apartheid).

[10] Steve Biko, a medical student, was the charismatic leader and founder of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. He spoke out about the evils of apartheid and the need for black people to free themselves, economically, psychologically and socially, from the shackles of colonial and apartheid domination. So compelling and unifying was Biko as a leader and Black Consciousness as an ideology, that the apartheid police detained him. He died in detention as a direct result of police brutality in September 1977.

Discriminatory practices were mirrored in the workplace, where a policy of job reservation ensured that only whites could occupy higher-level skilled occupations. This policy of job reservation also prevented black workers from obtaining on-the-job training and restricted the mobility of black workers in favour of white workers.

The effects of apartheid education policy, which reserved educational opportunities for whites and deliberately wedged a knowledge and skills gap between whites and blacks, complemented this job reservation policy, and contributed directly to a wage gap. The gap in wages thus reflects a gap in education (both formal and informal) and perhaps in identity, confidence and the self-esteem of people - all of which are relevant to a discussion of RPL in higher education in South Africa. The legacy of apartheid can still be felt today as this young democracy tries to meet imperatives of global competition and social justice. While South Africa is trying to face up to an ever-growing unemployment rate, it is the semi and unskilled workers who bear the brunt of job losses in an economy that favours skilled labour and alliances with big business.

COSATU's proposal for RPL should be seen as a strategy for narrowing this education and economic gap, and for enabling workers to regain their dignity through recognition of knowledge and skills acquired in the workplace and elsewhere. COSATU's proposal should therefore be seen in the context of this broader vision, a vision that sees education and training as an integrated system that allows workers mobility from workplace into the university and back into the workplace with improved wages and job prospects. COSATU envisioned an education and training model wherein workers could access education and training in institutions of learning that would recognise the knowledge and skills they had acquired in contexts other than formal education. Its vision validates workers' knowledge as worthwhile knowledge, worth accrediting in formal contexts such as higher education.

The 1995 White Paper on Education and Training represented the democratically elected South African government's commitment to redress the economic and education inequalities of the past by committing itself to Recognition of Prior Learning. The White paper undertook to "open doors of opportunity for people whose academic or career paths were needlessly blocked because their prior knowledge has not been assessed or certified" (DoE, 1995: 15).

Through the White Paper the government signalled that RPL was not just another innovation in education, but was one of the key mechanisms that would bring about educational and vocational redress and contribute to social justice. The National Qualifications Framework (NQF), an accreditation framework designed to improve access to and learner mobility within a single integrated system of education and training (Christie, 1997) has been introduced as another key mechanism to contribute to and facilitate equity and redress in education.

One of the 13 principles of the NQF is that through assessment prior learning can be recognised and accredited within this apparently seamless framework. To further facilitate learner mobility within the education and training framework, the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) was introduced to "develop, register and quality assure national standards for vocational, professional and academic qualifications" (Castle and Attwood, 2001: 62). SAQA requires that all qualifications be registered on the NQF, and that all qualification can be obtained in part or in whole through the recognition of prior learning (SAQA, 1997: 16).

In the White Paper 3 (DoE, 1997: 17-18), RPL moves beyond "opening doors of opportunity" and is now seen to facilitate access and "...remove obstacles which unnecessarily limit learners' 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". What

are the implications of these policy moves for higher education, and are conditions on the ground conducive for implementation?

Changes in higher education in South Africa

Higher education in South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, is under pressure to reinvent itself. Traditionally it has enjoyed the financial support of the government and has also enjoyed an autonomous existence. However, policies have required that universities respond to a National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001) that commits universities to become cost effective, streamlined institutions that compete for a dwindling pool of school-leavers who qualify for admission. Universities are required to generate strategies that broaden access routes for disadvantaged groups and at the same time consider curriculum strategies that ensure success to such groups after access. In addition to these daunting challenges, the higher education sector has experienced a decrease in government funding and an increase in government control. Policy calls for institutions that are responsive to the academic and vocational needs of the economy and society. At the same time public universities in South Africa compete with private institutions and with overseas universities that have established themselves in South Africa.

In response to these contextual circumstances, universities across South Africa are having to consider the introduction of vocational qualifications to complement and replace traditional discipline-based academic qualifications. Implicit in the introduction of vocational qualifications has been the necessity to engage with the idea of "other" knowledges entering into the university, such as practical and experiential knowledge and the acceptance of "other" students into the university. This is in sharp contrast to the more elite traditional model of university education in South Africa. Castle and Attwood point out that the "dominant model of education in the majority of residential institutions remains the three year, full time, specialist degree which relies on expert/novice forms of presentation

(lectures, seminars and laboratory demonstrations) and on established frameworks of disciplinary knowledge and understanding." (2001: 62). And in this context of policy changes, decline in student numbers, decrease in government funding, and competition from overseas universities, RPL is beginning to rise on the agenda in higher education.

However, concern has been expressed (Buchler, 1999; Michelson, 1999; Benton and Benton, 1997) that institutions may use RPL as a competitive tool which enables the institutions to meet their own student registration targets and economic imperatives but overlook the redress and social justice agenda that RPL should bring. As Michelson points out "the wedding of RPL to a progressive social vision is not automatic" (1999: 100).

These then are the contextual features that are shaping the development of RPL in higher education in South Africa. What are the academic debates on RPL, which is driven by moral and political imperatives and promises to challenge the traditional practices of universities?

3.3 REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE AND RESEARCH

Although RPL is a national education and training policy imperative, it is new and remains an untested policy in higher education in South Africa. Not surprisingly, there is a slender body of local research and literature on RPL. In particular, there has been no published research in South Africa on the efficacy of particular assessment methods and approaches to RPL, and nothing on experiences of people who have participated in RPL programmes in higher education.

So far research in South Africa has focused on conceptualising RPL (Breier 1998; Gawe, 1999; Harris, 1999b and 2000); RPL and workplace experience (Lugg, Mabitla, Louw and Angelis, 1998); RPL for transformation (Michelson, 1999; Harris, 1999a; 2000); RPL and policy development (Geyser, 1999; 2001); RPL for

rural workers (Luckett, 1999); RPL and the challenges in higher education (Osman and Castle, 2001; 2002); assessing prior learning through an academic field of practice (Shalem, 2001); RPL for access or credit (Castle and Attwood, 2001) and the prior learning paths of mature students (Castle, 2002); and the post-entry-demands of RPL students (Breier, 2001). The work of Breier (2001), Castle and Attwood (2001), Harris (1999a; 1999b; 2000)[11], Osman and Castle (2001; 2002), and Shalem (2001) has direct relevance to this study and will be reviewed here.

A trend in RPL studies in South Africa (Breier, 2001; Shalem, 2001) has been to focus on the epistemological challenges of RPL. Shalem and Breier present academic and experiential learning in dichotomous terms. Others such as Osman and Castle (2001; 2002) and Harris (1999a; 2000) show that tensions between academic and experiential learning are not insurmountable, and these weaken when educators are able to work with fluid relationships and combinations of university learning and work-based and experiential learning. Osman and Castle argue that this fluidity is increasingly becoming a feature of institutions committed to the principle of lifelong learning and to new approaches to learning and teaching.

Shalem (2001) begins by problematising the social relationship by which knowledge is assessed and accredited. Using a Bernsteinian[12] framework for her analysis, Shalem challenges the site of knowledge production (everyday life and workplace), the nature and quality of the knowledge produced there and its currency in higher education. She questions whether it is possible to recognise the experience of others from a different field of practice. She points out that because

[11] The contribution of Harris (1999a, 1999b, 2000) in conceptualising RPL is critically reviewed in the next section when we examine different models of RPL.

[12]Bernstein (1999: 159) points out that characteristic features of a horizontal discourse are that "it is likely to be oral, local, context dependent and specific, tacit, multi-layered and contradictory across but not within contexts". In contrast a vertical discourse is characterised by a "coherent, explicit and systematically principled structure, hierarchically organised...takes the form of a series of specialised languages with specialised modes of interrogation and specialised criteria for the production and circulation of texts as in the social sciences and humanities".

of the difference between the academic field of practice and other fields, academics are constrained in recognising and accrediting prior experiential learning for purposes of further study. Curiously absent from such theorising about RPL is reference to theories of adult education and adult learning that are central to international literature and research on RPL. The use of a Bernsteinian analysis in RPL is a South African phenomenon, and does not appear in international literature on RPL.

Like Shalem (2001), Breier (2001) uses an analytic framework that draws on the work of Bernstein to argue that academic and experiential learning are different. She maintains that students who are most likely to benefit from RPL are those who have had access to formal schooling and exposure to other formal discourses. She argues that RPL policy in South Africa promises more than it can deliver in that students who do not have exposure to formal schooling and formal discourses will not succeed in higher education.

Of concern in the position taken by Breier is her passive acceptance of the privileged position automatically accorded to academic knowledge. There is a tendency to emphasise assessment over process, glossing over the "equity principles [in RPL] which demand that certain aspects of tertiary education be reflected upon and modified to allow education to perform its ... task" (Jones and Martin, 1997: 13). Both Breier and Shalem are well versed and knowledgeable about the epistemological and pedagogic character of academic knowledge and approach their work in RPL primarily from a sociological perspective. While such a theoretical orientation is useful to distinguish broadly between forms of knowledge in "everyday life" and "schooling" and may therefore be appealing and persuasive to many in higher education, it is limiting as the only lens in theorising about RPL because RPL challenges more than the differences between forms of knowledge and how to match different knowledges. It challenges what forms of knowledge are validated, who validates them, the criteria that are brought to bear

on such a process, and the impact of this process on the disadvantaged adult students for whom it is intended as well as on the academics who implement RPL.

In South Africa these questions are particularly significant and some of them are taken up in the present study. These questions bear investigating in practice because RPL is posited as one of the ways in which the majority of people can regain part of their dignity through recognition of their prior learning and experience. These questions allow us to begin to examine RPL from both lenses of the epistemological binoculars, lenses that see different knowledges and how these knowledges are structured in inequality in South Africa and elsewhere in the world.

Another important contribution to the literature on RPL in South Africa comes from Castle and Attwood. They question whether RPL in higher education should focus on access or credit[13]. Like Shalem they are cautious about RPL and the difficulties associated with finding broad equivalencies "between the different kinds of experience, knowledge and learning adults may have acquired" (2001: 61). Recognising that RPL students in South Africa are likely to have been recipients of an inferior education system, they argue that students would stand to lose even more when they are given credit for courses. Giving students credit deprives them of the opportunity to contribute to and participate in courses, removing them "from sites of learning which develop a deeper sense of empowerment..." (ibid: 67). Castle and Attwood (2001) present RPL for access as a viable option for students, staff and institution alike.

[13] RPL for access is used to provide students, who lack the usual pre-requisite qualifications or entry requirements, an opportunity to access a qualification on the basis of their prior learning. In contrast, RPL for credit is used to award a learner credit or exemption from part(s) of a qualification on the basis of prior learning. In these two ways RPL is meant to provide routes into and through higher education for mature adults, enabling them to build on their prior learning and avoiding repetition (Castle and Attwood, 2001: 61).

The question of credit or access is one of the crucial issues facing academics and RPL practitioners because it is in the awarding of credit or the refusal of credit that the value-laden nature of knowledge comes to the fore. It is worth noting that this question has not been raised in the international practice of RPL and Harris (2000) points out that the distinction between credit and access in RPL is an artificial divide. It seems that such a dichotomy is more troublesome than helpful, because it could discourage institutions from exploring the full implications of RPL such as curricular and institutional change (to be taken up in a later section of this Chapter) usually required in RPL for credit. Castle and Attwood express an ambiguous approach to prior learning. On the one hand prior learning is celebrated and valued in relation to what it gives the adult learner, yet as academics they remain cautious about accrediting it even within the confines of their professional discipline and institutional context.

Osman and Castle (2001 and 2002), drawing on the field of adult education, have concerned themselves with the implications of RPL in higher education, and they alert their readers " ... that RPL seeks to reshape fundamental values, beliefs and paradigms in higher education" (Osman and Castle, 2002: 67). They argue that such reshaping challenges academics to consider ways in which "subjective" and "objective" ways of knowing can interface. With this as the starting point they make a case that RPL generally and portfolio development courses in particular have the potential to be a "solid option in higher education", an option which can be intellectually rigorous and socially inclusive.

Elsewhere, Osman and Castle (2001), arguing largely within the discourse of liberal humanism, posit RPL as an innovation in higher education that requires a variety of shifts. They argue that if RPL is given a chance in higher education it requires an institutional culture that is responsive to adult and experiential learning, an orientation not commonly found in South African universities. They argue that RPL calls for academics who understand both experiential and academic knowledge, who can span the boundary between these and then assist in

a viable collaboration between different forms of knowledge. Like most of the literature on RPL, this position makes broad recommendations about RPL at a philosophical level and leaves much to the reader or the implementer as far as a pedagogy for RPL is concerned.

A limitation in the small body of literature on RPL in South Africa is the lack of theorisation about the equally complex processes that characterise experiential knowledge systems and knowledge in informal and social contexts, even though South Africa seems to provide a rich site for such theorisation. The present preoccupation with the epistemological character of academic knowledge results in research which talks about RPL and talks to people about RPL with no opportunities for students and staff themselves to talk about their experiences of RPL and its capacity for redress.

Another related limitation is that the available literature tends to focus on the epistemological challenges that RPL throws up in higher education, neglecting to include reference to the inequalities that contributed to the privileging of academic ways of knowing. Some writers (Harris 2000; Osman and Castle 2002) are attempting to open the way for emancipatory ways of knowing by considering possibilities in which the role of both academic and experiential knowledge can be understood, so that alternative definitions of knowledge can emerge in the public debate about RPL. How successful they and others will be remains to be seen.

In contrast to the situation in South Africa, a review of international literature reveals that most research on RPL has concentrated on the methods and the structures used for its assessment (Cohen and Whitaker, 1994; Evans, 1992; Simosko, 1988; Toop and Burleigh, 1993; Whitaker, 1989) and less on the issues of knowledge, power and the academy, with a few exceptions (such as Fraser, 1995a; Michelson, 1996a; 1997b; 1999; Stuart, 1995; and Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997). The work of these theorists is taken up in the next section, which reviews conceptual models of RPL.

The international literature on RPL is limited by a lack of systematic studies of RPL implementation as well as a lack of longitudinal data and of comparative case studies. Similarly, there is a dearth of literature on students' and academics' experiences of RPL, the focus of the present study. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) in America completed a benchmarking study in 1999, which highlights best practices in adult learning yet says little about RPL or about students' and academics' experience of RPL (Flint and Associates, 1999).

In spite of differences in approach, it is clear that RPL has become part of a discourse that talks to issues within competing discourses. While the international approach to RPL is framed largely within the discourse of individual empowerment, individual growth, self-esteem and self worth in the face of global economic and political imperatives, in South Africa RPL at a policy level is philosophically framed within the discourse of group or collective liberation, empowerment, access, equity and redress of past educational inequalities.

This framing is driven by moral and political imperatives and was of interest to the researcher, who questioned the capacity of RPL to contribute to redress and equity. At the implementation level, she wondered about the epistemological, ideological and institutional challenges of RPL for students as recipients, academics as implementers and higher education institutions as sites for implementation. These are some of the questions and issues that are taken up in the institutional case studies that follow (Chapters Four to Seven).

3.4 COMPETING CONCEPTS OF RPL

The literature on RPL reveals that three broad models or perspectives of RPL emerge: the credit exchange model, the developmental model, and the radical or

transformational model of RPL[14], each with different views of knowledge, learning and experience. Butterworth (1992: 40) distinguishes between a "credit exchange model" of RPL and a "developmental model" of RPL. She points out that both these models have distinct views of knowledge, and this has implications for the way the RPL student experiences the RPL process.

Harris (1999a: 127) identifies the credit exchange and the developmental models of RPL as "Procrustean" and "Learning and Development" RPL respectively, and introduces the "radical" or "Trojan Horse" model of RPL. Each of these perspectives will be critically reviewed to seek an understanding of their different meanings. It is worth noting that in this typology, notions of credit exchange, development and transformation are best understood as models or ideal types. In "real-life" settings RPL practices may oscillate between models or perspectives. Nonetheless, the models provide us with a useful device for describing and mapping out RPL practices in varied epistemological and institutional contexts and the experiences of the participants of these practices.

The credit exchange model of RPL

This model, also known as the recognition of prior accredited learning, is largely instrumental and assessment based. The RPL student provides evidence of having achieved the skills and knowledge prescribed for a university course or qualification and the institution assesses the adequacy of the evidence supplied. In this model knowledge, power and inequality are not on the agenda. Knowledge is regarded as universal, neutral and uncontested, and experience is considered to be "asocial, and apolitical" (Harris, 1999a: 127) - a sort of commodity which can be traded. The emphasis is on method and efficiency rather than on purpose and the approach is limited to "how to" instead of "why should". This preoccupation with

[14] Luckett (1999) draws on the work of Harris (1999a) and has come to describe these three perspectives of RPL as the Technical, Hermeneutic and Critical paradigms of RPL. Also, Habermas's (1972) three processes of inquiry, technical, practical and emancipatory have resonance here, although these processes of inquiry were not formulated in relation to RPL, but in relation to broad human interests and action.

efficiency and method downplays or ignores the value-laden nature of knowledge and knowledge production.

Butterworth and McKelvey (1997) note that the credit exchange model is an instrumental procedure which does not require the student to reflect on previous experience, nor does it consider the significance of prior learning from experience for the individual, the profession or the institution. Students simply provide evidence of having achieved the skills and knowledge prescribed for the course or qualification for which credit is being sought.

This model is also referred to as "Procrustean"[15] RPL (Jones and Martin, 1997: 16; Harris, 1999a: 127) where students' knowledges are forced into uniformity to be matched with learning outcomes expressed in unit standards, or in academic curricula. In this approach RPL is depoliticised, and is predicated on a model of individual achievement ignoring societal inequality. Accordingly, knowledge acquired outside the education system would not be easily recognisable as valid, and less so if that knowledge was gained within a different community of practice. This approach assumes that what was learnt in one context is easily transferable to and able to be assessed in another context.

This model appears to be attractive to administrators and assessors because the RPL process is seen as a set of unfolding steps that are controllable and measurable. This gives a deceptive sense of clarity and orderliness, because students follow a format prescribed by the institution to which they are applying for credit. The format usually consists of writing a letter of application, submitting testimonials and transcripts, and collating evidence of previous qualifications and achievements. Assessment methods used in this model of RPL include standardised tests, examinations and performance-based testing. In South Africa the credit exchange process is facilitated by accreditation agreements that

[15] Procrustes, in Greek mythology, could fit anyone into his bed - irrespective of size and shape. If people were too short he placed them on a rack and stretched them. If they were too tall, he chopped off their feet to make them fit.

already exist between academic institutions and agreements brokered by national and international professional associations. As discussed earlier, the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) and the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) are in place to facilitate the articulation of qualifications, but whether this happens remains to be seen.

The credit exchange model draws heavily on Human Capital Theory (HCT) (Ashton and Green, 1997; Dore and Oxenham, 1984). Within this framework skills are commodities, and students are consumers who are investing in their education (skills) so as to enhance their opportunities in the job market (Usher, 1999). The theory posits that an investment in skills will be taken up in the market place because economic advances demand an advanced (skilled) workforce. Learning is seen as an instrument and investment in the career development of disadvantaged groups - a worthwhile investment where costs are recovered through increased productivity and efficiency. Furthermore, the investment in education is worthwhile because it enables disadvantaged groups to earn wages comparable to higher earners and the better educated.

The assumptions of this theory and the perceived link between education and economic growth have been challenged on several counts (Little, 1984), the most relevant to this study being that HCT does not recognise the social context in which these skills have been acquired, nor the inequalities that characterised its structuring (Nasson and Samuel, 1990). The main concern is with the product rather than the process, emphasising the quantity of skills learnt over the quality. Learning is seen as a narrow process and the individual's ability and capacity to succeed are valued, ignoring the socio-economic political and gender variables that shape such ability, capacity and identity (Chisholm, 1983; 1997).

Despite these criticisms, in South Africa where RPL is a policy imperative designed to recognise and compensate learners for past structural inequalities, some institutions find the credit exchange model of RPL, framed in the discourse

of Human Capital Theory, attractive. This approach to RPL could appear to be meeting policy imperatives and representing ways of responding to apartheid's inequities. It apparently allows institutions to implement RPL without having to change their existing standards of assessment or their epistemological framing of curricula. It allows for the belief that what was learnt in one context is easily transferable to and able to be assessed in another context, perpetuating the assumption that knowledge is universal and neutral, and that those who assess this knowledge are rational and objective in the assessment process.

A criticism of the credit exchange model of RPL is that it makes little contribution to equity and redress in education in South Africa because the students who qualify for credit exchange are already advantaged by their previous education. According to Benton and Benton (1997) and, later, Buchler (1999: 5), a danger exists that "some institutions will implement RPL in a very narrow and technicist manner which will not realise the spirit of redress". Furthermore, this model is also not likely to deliver on equity and redress because it is not likely to put any pressure on existing curricula within the institution, nor is it likely to challenge the nature of knowledge, what counts as knowledge, or who produces such knowledge (Michelson, 1999).

Butterworth (1992: 51), drawing on the work of the curriculum theorist Stenhouse (1975), critiques this model by suggesting that reducing learning to skills and defining these in "behavioural terms" reduces learning to something that is "trivial". Research conducted by Butterworth at the University of Greenwich, in England, confirms that if skills and performance alone are used as evidence to assess prior learning "...the assessment may distort the picture of the individual's ability and professional experience...". She points out that this distortion is aggravated if such assessment occurs in professional areas such as teaching, which require people to make complex decisions and judgments, skills that are not picked up in such instrumentalist approaches to RPL. Fraser points out that "the very notion of counting experience" is more intricate and complex than it is made

out to be and in fact counting experience, as in this model, serves to assimilate RPL students " ...within a restrictive societal conformity" (1995a: 138). "Societal" here can be taken to include "institutional".

Besides embodying a highly technicist process, this model of RPL may be critiqued because the assessment process does not actively involve the learner and the learner "risks feeling alienated from the assessment process" (Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997: 172). Such performance-oriented assessment is conducted in an environment where tutorial support from the institution is largely absent because the activities of the educator are "...governed by managerialism and the criteria of efficiency..." (Usher, 1999: 74) rather than by the criteria of student learning and growth. In his earlier work Usher critiques this approach to RPL because it turns prior learning into an object, with discrete pieces. This results in learning which is "...lifeless, inevitably narrow and distorted in its meaning and significance, made into a commodity to be sold and bought in the higher education market-place" (1992: 208).

It is the researcher's contention that although the credit exchange model of RPL has been cast as a conservative and instrumental practice (Harris, 1999a; 2000; Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997), it could serve two purposes well. It offers a relatively swift and less invasive way of gaining access and credit within a specific programme for students who know what they want to study, and what they bring to the field of study. In South Africa at the present time, where many candidates hold qualifications of uncertain value in higher education, and students themselves doubt the value of this learning, the credit exchange model can serve a diagnostic purpose for both the institution and the student alike.

This argument may be critiqued on the ground that it loses sight of RPL for redress and educational change. Such a critique would ignore a diagnostic opportunity that would enable learners to position themselves advantageously within the institution, because the credit exchange model would enable them to

assess what they have and what they need to succeed in the existing learning system. This could be a modest but nevertheless effective way in which to give "voice"[16] to those learners whose knowledge and skills are of dubious value to themselves, and in universities that see themselves as world class and with the best students.

The philosophical orientation of the credit exchange model of RPL can be likened to what Jarvis, Holford and Griffin have described as "non- reflective learning":

> In the wider social context ...skills learning represent[s] a process of social reproduction. Society and its structures remain unquestioned and unaltered. ...people learn to fit into the larger organisation or the wider society. They are, as it were, learning their place.
>
> (1998: 54)

This orientation links the credit exchange model of RPL to the technological discourse of adult education, where education is understood in terms of input and output and learners (defined as consumers) and educators (defined as providers) are operating in an educational market-place. Adult education is reduced to skills development, skills assessment and economic prosperity, ignoring the gap between those who have qualifications and those "outsiders" who have historically been excluded from education and therefore who have no qualifications to trade in this "market place" (Collins, 1986; Martin, 1999; Trorey, Cullingford and Cooper, 1999).

[16]Similarly, Usher (1999: 79) posits the notion of "efficacious knowledge" that is both "participative and performative". He points out that in instances where knowledge is valued for its performativity alone (as in credit exchange) it is seen only in terms of a product, but if such knowledge is also seen as signifying efficacy, than the knowledge is performative and also participative on the part of the learner. The learners have more power and say in the evaluation of their learning.

The credit exchange model of RPL framed in the discourse of Human Capital Theory may have something to offer the practice of RPL in South Africa, if the purpose of RPL is clear and if this model is used in conjunction with other models of RPL, to which we now turn.

The developmental model of RPL

The "developmental model" of RPL poses more challenges than the credit exchange model because evidence of experience, on its own, is not sufficient for the award of credit. In this model, through critical reflection and being challenged to question their values and assumptions, students are required to assess and evaluate prior learning acquired through experience. This process is facilitated by a mentor who invites a "personal statement of learning" (see Mandell, and Michelson, (1990) for an alternate interpretation of the developmental model).

This personal statement distinguishes the developmental model of RPL from the credit exchange model of RPL, which, as we have seen, requires no personal expression of prior learning and places no emphasis on personal and professional development (Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997: 157). The underlying assumption of this model is that the RPL student is a storyteller who is able to experience, to transcend the experience and to reflect on the experience in a generalised and disembedded way. This emphasis on reflection draws on the work of Kolb (1984), who posited an experiential learning cycle as the basis of adult learning. He suggested that adult learners engage in a process that takes them from a concrete experience to reflection, to drawing inferences and making generalisations on the basis of experience and then testing these inferences by engaging in a new experience.

While the developmental model acknowledges that RPL candidates' knowledges may be distinct from academic habits and ways of knowing, and there is recognition that learning can occur in a variety of contexts, the essential questions

relating to whose knowledge is privileged and validated, and whether knowledge outside of the disciplinary boundaries can be recognised by the discipline, are not actively taken up in this model. Knowledge is seen to be hierarchically structured and discipline-based, and experience must be reconfigured into knowledge that is recognisable through particular epistemological and disciplinary lenses (Harris, 1999a; 2000; Luckett, 1999; Trowler, 1996). It encourages "separate knowing", an epistemology that values impersonal authority and rule systems for establishing the truth, where knowledge is invisibly constructed and presented as absolute (Chiseri-Strater, 1991: 146).

Harris points out that in institutions where knowledge is strongly classified, such as universities, RPL is contested because it exposes the interface of experiential and academic knowledge (1999a). "However, in less strongly classified areas (which could be within the same institution) there is more of an acceptance that learning from experience ...has a role to play" (ibid: 131). Similarly, the position taken by Breier (2001) and Shalem (2001) in the debate on RPL in South Africa (discussed earlier) shows that when academics begin their theorising about RPL with fixed boundaries around what constitutes valid knowledge, then such epistemological preferences constrain which knowledge can be recognised for credit.

Assessment methods used in the developmental model include interviews, reflective writing tasks, portfolios of learning and portfolio development courses, with portfolios of learning and portfolio development courses playing a significant role. Typically such portfolios require students to reflect on prior experience by analysing learning moments and events that were significant to them. This usually culminates in a reflective essay where students move beyond description of experience to analysis for learning that emerges from such experience. (Castle and Atwood, 2001). Students then assemble evidence that supports such claims of learning from experience, which includes certificates of formal learning and project work done by the student as well as testimonials from the workplace. An

alternative to the reflective essay would be a task that requires students to reflect on their prior learning and represent this learning in a way that would be comparable to competences set for the courses in which access or credit was being sought.

RPL practices in this model rely on experiential learning methods and students are encouraged and actively supported to focus and direct their attention to their prior experience, to become aware of this experience and then to articulate it as learning.

This model draws on traditions in liberal humanism where education is meant to enable individual learners to actualise their human potential and lead full and worthwhile lives characterised by personal autonomy and empowerment (Aloni, 2001: 24). Education is seen as empowering individuals by enabling them to understand their own learning processes and challenging them to question their own assumptions and values. Such an education is particularly appropriate for individuals who have the time and leisure to study at university and it aims to "liberate the individual from the fetters of ignorance ... prejudice...the present and the particular" and the individual tends to be presented in an abstract and decontextualised way. (ibid: 24). A key pedagogical tool in this framework is the acculturation of the student into the dominant ways of knowing, in particular of those held in high esteem within the university. These aims and endeavours of education are considered independent of the larger socio-economic, political, racial and gendered contexts in which individuals make their lives (Brah and Hoy, 1989).

Whatever the approach, whether reflective essays or matching experience with course competences, the emphasis is on learning from experience rather than experience per se. Challis, for example, points out that "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" (1993: 40). Similarly, Whitaker states unequivocally that "...experience is good for many things, but ... credit should be awarded ... only for *learning* and not for experience" (1989: 11) (emphasis in original).

This model of RPL may be critiqued on several counts. It can be argued that such a modernist framing of RPL does not recognise that experience and learning are defined by actual social relations and social practices in a variety of contexts, and that these contexts give rise to particular experiences and learning. Distancing experience from knowledge and learning will not bring the desired outcomes of rationality or objectivity (New London Group, 1996). Usher and Johnston point out that separating the two results in knowledge and learning that are "stripped of history, specificity and ... context" (1996: 1). Or worse, that students through reflection are encouraged to shun parts of what defines them and select the parts that are recognisable to academic assessors as learning. (New London Group, 1996).

Fraser (1995a) critiques the developmental model on the ground that it deprives the RPL candidate of a significant voice in the assessment process and that experience is seen as neutral raw material ready for "excavation". Others (Michelson, 1997b; 1998a) argue that the reflective, autobiographical modes are not appropriate for all candidates and may inadvertently silence them. Furthermore, learning does not happen only in a cyclic way, but there are many other ways of constructing knowledge that may be more "real" to candidates.

These writers make the case that knowledge and therefore experience are situated, and even the student is not an objective knower given the contextual nature of knowing. And similarly, academic knowledge is also seen to be defined by subjectivity, constructed by the situated knower (academic) in a particular time and space.

Like the credit exchange model, here, too, the threat is that learners are alienated from their experience, albeit for different purposes. In the credit exchange model it was to trade the experience in for access or credit; in the developmental model a distance is created between learners and their experience so that such experience is made "neutral" and "ahistorical". Students are required to reflect on experience, to articulate and reconfigure it, to re-present it as knowledge and learning that corresponds with the academic texts or academic outcomes, also for access and credit - a process which "distorts experience" (Usher, 1989: 72).

Usher (1989) critiques this model with its emphasis on articulating learning with outcomes and competences and suggests that this smacks of behaviouristic approaches to assessment. What starts out as a student-centred model turns quickly into an assessment-centred model. He points out that the assumption is if students are not able to re-configure experience then no learning has taken place. Still others argue that the "student-centredness" central to the developmental model is in fact masking "... a reality of widening surveillance and control" serving to restrict student movement and thought (Trowler, 1996: 23).

Feminist scholarship from various positions, liberal and radical, challenge the value given to reflection as the process for "knowledge validation" (Collins, 1986: 16) and see it instead as a controlling device. Instead experience or "experienced reality" is posited as "... a valid source of knowledge" on its own - a source that does not need reflection for its validation (1986: 30).

Others point out that reflection distinguishes worthwhile from less worthwhile knowledge, and defines worthwhile knowledge as objective, and that which "corresponds to the truth of reality" (Usher, 1989: 75).

Kemmis (1985) goes further and points out that although reflection is seen as the rational, abstract and meaning-making process that turns experience into learning,

RPL in the developmental frame fails to recognise that reflection is situated, just as is experience.

The philosophical orientations of the developmental model of RPL can be succinctly found in Michelson:

> It [the developmental model of RPL] does not challenge academic claims either to privilege knowledge or epistemological authority; it posits academic knowledge as the norm around which judgments of inclusion and exclusion can be written, ...and calibrates the legitimacy of students' knowledge according to sameness and correspondence.
>
> (1996a: 193)

What philosophies of adult education are linked to the developmental concept of RPL? A liberal humanist discourse of adult education provides a good fit with the aims and ideals of this perspective of RPL. Adult education framed in the discourse of humanism reflects an understanding of adult learners as mature, experienced and motivated people who are competent to take responsibility for their own learning (Knowles, 1980). Such an approach to education nurtures and facilitates opportunities for individual growth, development and empowerment, and individual agency is seen as significant for individual freedom and well-being.

It is the researcher's contention that this perspective of RPL, framed within the liberal humanist tradition in adult education, has much to offer RPL students in South Africa. The emphasis, in this model, on individual well-being, respect for experience and individual empowerment through education, is a significant change for students who were the recipients of a system of education under apartheid, which undermined learners' sense of self-worth and well-being. In this sense the developmental model may give back to learners what was taken away

under apartheid, contributing to what Visvanathan calls "cognitive justice" (Odora Hoppers, 2001: 8) and social inclusion (Harris, 1999a).

Harris (1999a; 2000) cautions that if RPL in the developmental model is to contribute to social inclusion then students' prior learning will need to be explored as a text in itself, and not for the ways learning can be extracted from it nor for the extent that it can match existing course outcomes. This challenge resonates with the claims made in the radical model of RPL to which we now turn.

The radical model of RPL

This model casts doubt on the myth of the autonomous subject (knower), highlighting instead that "... each of us, though unique as individuals, is positioned within society, along hierarchies of power constructed around ... class, caste, race, gender, age and sexuality" (Brah and Hoy, 1989: 71). It argues that knowledge produced in different social contexts is valuable and legitimate, and posits that what is learned experientially is not a disembedded skill that can easily be matched with the contents of an academic programme. It aims instead to value the diversity and richness of individual and collective experience, which are lost in the credit exchange and developmental models of RPL. In addition to valuing the knowledge from other sites of practice, it also calls for acknowledgment and recognition that such knowledge represents the material positions of its practitioners in terms of race, class and gender. In many ways this model seeks to find a meeting place for the different traditions of knowledge emanating from different sites of practice.

From this perspective of RPL fundamental values, beliefs and practices within institutions of learning come under scrutiny, making explicit that knowledge produced 'everywhere is not the same'. The starting point for radical theorists is an awareness that experience by its very nature is inconsistent and open to varied interpretations, and at the same time can be seen as a particular kind of knowledge

- "knowledge which is ...local and partial" (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 7; Collins, 1986).

In contrast to the credit exchange and developmental models of RPL, the radical model foregrounds the politics of difference and the struggle over legitimate knowledge. Knowledge, power and inequality are firmly on the agenda. Non-formal and experiential learning are recognised on their own terms and as valid as academic knowledge. There is no need for such knowledge and learning from experience to be articulated and matched with knowledge prevalent in the receiving institution, or for such learning to be framed in "expert" definitions of it. In many ways it forces the world of experience and the world of academia along the same path. It pushes the boundaries so that the academy is not only a site, which defines and constructs knowledge, but also one which examines and engages with knowledge created in other sites of practice.

The radical model of RPL creates opportunity and space to talk about and include other collective knowledges generated outside the academic institution. To this end the model proposes curricula that are sensitive to the experiential world in which students' knowledge is constructed. Teaching and assessment practices are selected for their capacity to take into account indigenous and collective forms of knowledge - knowledges that are usually invisible in the institution. Various methods are used and include focus group discussions, talking and listening, argument and speculation, collages, dialogue, narrative, life histories and other forms of self-expression such as music and dance. Whatever the method selected, sharing and reciprocity are the underpinnings rather than domination and authority. In addition, students themselves are encouraged to engage with the contested nature of knowledge.

This model draws on social constructivist theories of knowledge, which pointedly assert that "all knowledge is constructed and the knower is an intimate part of the known" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986: 137). Knowing is not

an objective procedure (as implied in both the credit exchange and developmental models of RPL), but instead a process that weaves the private and public lives of the knower into integrated and whole realities. Such theories call into question dichotomies between theory and practice, academic and experiential and universal and situated.

Social learning theorists such as Lave and Wenger (1993) and Wenger (1998: 4) introduce the notion of learning in "communities of practice" which focus on learning as social participation. They assert that our interaction with others in a community of practice "shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do". A community of practice is a way of naming the "community" created by people working together, and practice is always socially and historically specific. Theories of situated cognition offer an egalitarian way of viewing knowledge, and sites other than the university become significant and legitimate for knowledge production. They allow us to broaden the boundaries that define valid knowledge and procedures and recognise the methods used in such legitimation.

Such inclusive definitions capture both the contributions of the collective and the individual to knowing where "mutual engagement involves not only our competence, but also the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don't do and what we don't know - that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others" (Wenger, 1998: 76). The influence of social constructivism on this model makes this approach to RPL one that is open to compromise and to ideals that are not always workable. In this sense there is a high tolerance for ambiguity, fluidity and the recognition that knowledge in the "everyday world... [is] problematic" rather than objective, neutral and definable (Smith, 1987).

This radical or transformational model has been critiqued by some (Usher, Bryant and Johnston, 1997) who argue that it does not have the capacity to challenge

dominant and hegemonic discourses and bring about the social transformation and inclusion it espouses. Others like Shalem (2001) have cast doubt on the appropriateness and capacity of academic ways of knowing to meet and recognise other ways of knowing. Shalem argues that if the claim in this model is that all knowledges are equal, then there is no logic in seeking recognition of prior learning in academia. Still others like Gore (1993) and Ellsworth (1989) have cautioned radical discourses against becoming "regimes of truth" which then lose their capacity for empowerment, and where "empowerment becomes something done "by" liberated pedagogues "to" and "for" the "as-yet-unliberated" (Usher, 1992: 211).

Like the technicist and developmental models, the radical model is not monolithic, and for the purposes of this review, we turn our attention to the "Trojan Horse"[17] model of RPL (Harris, 1999a), which accepts the principles of the radical model of RPL, but presents a pragmatic approach to the hegemony of institutional discourse. It is optimistic about the incremental effect of change.

Harris (1999a; 2000) points out that this variant to the radical model is "aspirational" and "in the making'. The approach in the Trojan horse model is to push for curricular change and not broader structural change to start with. It is at the level of curriculum change that institutional change can be effected incrementally.

Harris points out that this model can be implemented with relative ease in institutions where there is a "history of curriculum flexibility and where knowledge boundaries are weakening... and in contexts where there is strong pressure for ...change" (Harris, 1999a: 134-135).

[17] Trojan horse, in Greek mythology, was a huge wooden hollow figure of a horse used by the Greeks to enter Troy. The Trojan horse was used as a trap to undermine the enemy.

She points out that in this model prior experiential learning should be accepted for itself and a space created for it to be articulated and accredited broadly as a "general credit" in a curriculum (2000). In contrast, "specific credit" could be awarded when students' learning can be matched against specific programme outcomes. By using the notion of "general credit" Harris makes space for RPL students' knowledge, usually rendered invisible when compared to fixed outcomes. This general credit allows for students to show what they have brought with them into the institution. One would need to take a cautionary stance on this variant of the radical model of RPL because it could inadvertently reinscribe academic ways of doing and knowing, if the purpose of RPL is unclear within the institution and if such an initiative is not coupled with strong support from management in the institution.

The philosophical orientation of the radical model of RPL can be found in the following account by Michelson:

> [It] recognises that knowledge is gained in concrete human activity, not in socially isolated contemplation. Moreover, it challenges the monopoly to 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.
>
> (1997b: 143)

Radical adult education appears to provide a good fit for this orientation to RPL, where the struggle for social justice and "adult education of engagement" are at the core. It is an orientation that is driven by emancipatory interests, with respect for the collective and individual experiences of people's lives. It recognises adults as capable of evaluating their own knowing and "... as activists..." (Martin, 1999:

183). Social change and the centrality of human agency in such change epitomise this form of adult education.

By now it is clear that RPL can be a minor administrative and bureaucratic procedure or a potential force for institutional and educational reform. This review does not intend to mislead by appearing to present an easy dichotomy between the credit exchange and the developmental model as bad orientations and the radical or transformational model as a good orientation. Nor is it the intention to posit these models as opposing and exclusive positions on RPL. Instead this review demonstrates that in epistemological debates (Shalem, 2001; Breier, 2001; Usher, 1989) there is a tendency to operate at the poles, while RPL in practice represents complexities and challenges that inscribe contradictory and varied positions.

It is exactly the tensions in the different models, the different aims and understandings that make RPL particularly challenging in higher education. It appears that all three models and the discourses that underpin them need to be engaged with in the face of the broad promises and claims made for RPL in government policy in South Africa. Such hybridity may have something to offer the theory and practice of RPL emerging in South Africa. It may create an opportunity to think about negotiated responses to RPL - responses that honour both the institution and the student alike, and which are cognisant of RPL as a complex and dynamic process with strong roots in equity and redress.

So far, this chapter has critically reviewed three conceptual understandings of RPL and related them to different orientations in adult education. The concepts reflect different theoretical and epistemological roots, and different positions on the questions of knowledge and knowledge production. The credit exchange model of RPL foregrounds "objective" assessment. The discourse centres on individual students' ability to market their skills, with no regard for the structural inequalities that characterise the lives and the skills and knowledge that individual students

have. The developmental model of RPL places high value on the growth, development and empowerment of the individual student, and foregrounds adult students and their personal and educational needs. The transformational or radical model of RPL recognises the interplay of a variety of forces that contribute to inequality in society. This model foregrounds social and institutional change as a means for equity and inclusion.

While these models may allow the reader to critically examine the discourses that underpin RPL, they are presented mainly at a level of abstraction, which underestimates the role of particular institutional variables considered essential for the implementation of RPL. The following section of this review focuses on literature that provides insights into the institutional imperatives for RPL implementation, enabling us to move beyond abstraction to possibilities that become vital if RPL is to realise its potential for change and transformation in education. This section raises important questions not yet addressed in this review, by asking: What are the institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain RPL implementation? What are the variables that institutional managers need to be mindful about, and what are the conditions that could guard against RPL becoming a practice that is institutionally "othered" or marginalised in higher education?

3.5 INSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF RPL

Like the diffuse literature on RPL, the literature on the institutional implications of RPL implementation is limited. When this research project was started in 2000 there were no published guides to assist institutions that wished to implement RPL in higher education, nor a sustained treatment of the implementation issues in the literature. Broadly, the literature (Challis, 1993; Evans, 2000; Lueddeke, 1997; Merrifield, McIntyre and Osaigbovo, 2000; Thomas, 1998) identifies the importance of four variables: advocacy for RPL by a champion; the support and commitment of senior management; the need for staff development; and curriculum reform. These variables become more important if RPL is to be a long

term project within an institution. Christie reminds us that while national policy has a vision (which can also be taken to include a vision for RPL), "outlining a policy vision is not the same as developing and implementing actual policies for change" and meeting the outcomes of policy "...entails the active work of winning hegemony" (1997: 123).

According to Lueddeke (1997), Thomas (1998) and others, a major factor contributing to the success of pilot projects and the subsequent institutionalisation of RPL relates to advocacy for RPL, since it challenges academic rituals and traditions. Thomas (1998) points out that although the ideal in the long term is to mainstream RPL initiatives, this process should be done slowly, allowing RPL to establish itself firmly among academics, since the success or failure of RPL initiatives relies heavily on the support of academic staff. On the issue of advocacy, Merrifield et al (2000) emphasise the importance of an institutional champion for RPL, and argue that great strides can be made in the presence of a champion and institutional support.

On the question of institutional support, Lueddeke (1997: 222) identified a number of "essentials" for RPL implementation, including support from senior management, a fully-fledged RPL policy and financial resources:

> Senior management's commitment to establishing APEL[18] [is] a significant feature of the university's mission to enhance access;
>
> Development of appropriate policies and procedure to ensure a consistent approach across the institution;
>
> Provision of sufficient financial resources to enable the funding of pilot studies.

[18] Assessment of Prior and Experiential Learning (AP(E)L) in Great Britain.

Lueddeke argues that for RPL to be successful it must be visible within the institution, and enjoy support from senior managers. This visibility and support guarantee financial resources which largely determine whether RPL becomes an institutional project, or a minor project within the university.

Challis (1993), Butterworth and McKelvey (1997) and more recently Merrifield et al (2000) and Evans (2000) alert us to another essential for RPL implementation, namely the importance of staff development. Challis argues that staff development should take place long before the implementation of RPL, because RPL "creates insecurities for staff whose traditional role has been that of teacher" (1993: 117-118). She identifies staff development as a significant variable that determines successful or unsuccessful RPL, pointing out that reluctance on the part of academic staff usually indicates their rejection of RPL altogether. Evans states unequivocally that " ...good staff development and preparation is a requirement. It is not an optional extra" (2000: 19).

Butterworth and McKelvey (1997) point out that insecurities in staff are intensified when they are required to assess learning that seems different from that of their mainstream students, or when RPL is perceived as being imposed from the top. Challis suggests that insecurities usually result in staff rejecting 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" (1993: 119).

Challis also warns that while academic staff are the key to successful RPL implementation, the role of the administrative staff or faculty administrators must not be underestimated, since they have the power to institutionalise RPL by making changes to institutional registration procedures. This is essential if RPL students are to be accommodated on the main student database and if records to track student attendance and progress are to be kept (ibid: 121).

Michelson (1996a; 1999) and Harris (2000) argue persuasively that curriculum change and development are essential for RPL implementation. Harris points out that curricula should be designed in a way that "...allows non-traditional configurations of knowledge to come to the fore" (2000: 111). She offers the idea of "open spaces" in the curriculum where learners "can consolidate the coherence of their prior and new learning... to make critical links between prior learning and curriculum" (ibid: 111). Michelson (1996a and 1999) argues for a more radical approach and suggests that students' prior learning is the source or starting point for curriculum development. In keeping with adult education principles, she emphasises the necessity for those involved in RPL planning and implementation to adopt a mindset which is open to varied ways of knowing, which allows other knowledges as well as academic knowledge to inform a curriculum relevant to experienced adult learners. According to Usher, adult education is explicit in that teaching is not about imparting knowledge to passive learners, but "...something created in the learning process where teachers, learners, bodies of knowledge and experiential meaning interact" (1992: 211). This kind of interactive, flexible curriculum design is a remote ideal rather than the norm in many higher education institutions, and therefore such flexible design could be the focus of staff training and development.

This brief review of requirements for RPL implementation shows that there is a high degree of agreement among writers, who recognise RPL to be a contested and controversial practice that is value-laden. Thus they identify the need for support from senior management, strong champions who can win support from academics on the ground, staff development, and the need for curriculum change to facilitate adults' entry into the university. A variable that is not identified in the literature, but which emerges in the institutional responses studied in this research (Chapters Four to Chapter Seven), is the need for academics to assess their epistemological orientations before embarking on RPL. RPL calls for the development of an epistemological framework within which different knowledge traditions can be drawn on, and within which different knowledge forms can

operate equitably. RPL is unlikely to be taken up by those who have drawn firm boundaries around what constitutes valid knowledge and in institutional environments where many of the requirements for implementation are absent.

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the context in which RPL emerged in higher education and then focused in some detail on the origins of RPL in South Africa. It then critically reviewed related literature that posits contrasting conceptions or models of RPL reflecting different epistemological and theoretical traditions, and different views about the purpose of RPL. These models in turn are related to varied orientations in adult education. The review then turned to the essential institutional requirements for the implementation of RPL.

What emerges from the review is the notable absence of literature in which participants - both recipients and implementers - are allowed to talk for themselves about their lived experience of the epistemological, practical and institutional challenges of RPL - a gap which has been taken up as the focus of the present study. By analysing the different forces driving RPL, and then clarifying the different orientations to RPL and then identifying the institutional variables for implementation of RPL, the literature review has served as a useful backdrop against which to examine four institutional responses to RPL. The purpose of the review is to provide the reader with an overview of the competing discourses in which RPL is located, and to use this overview as base from which to examine participants' responses to RPL in higher education in South Africa.

The next four chapters (Four to Seven) in this thesis present recipients' and implementers' experiences of RPL. Many of the issues raised in the present chapter, particularly those around theoretical models of RPL, institutional variables and epistemological orientation, will be taken up in the chapters ahead.

The findings from these chapters will be discussed in the final chapter in this thesis (Chapter Eight) in the light of the literature reviewed in the present chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR
INTRODUCTION TO THE INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDIES AND THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING IN TWO DEPARTMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND[19]

Being a regional or civic university is compatible with being world class and of international stature.

(Duke, 2002: 34)

4.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE INSTITUTIONAL CASE STUDIES

What has been presented thus far has of necessity focused on theoretical and methodical issues pertaining to this study. The literature review presented different models of RPL - models that are decontextualised and located within different philosophical traditions.

In contrast, the case studies to be presented now aim "to give the reader a feeling of what the experiences and learning were like for those who lived them" (Foley, 1999: 13). They are contextualised and personal experiences of participants, both academic staff and students, in RPL pilot projects at various higher education institutions in South Africa. These experiences were examined using various sources of information combined with different data collection methods, and the case studies that follow allow respondents to speak for themselves about RPL.

The case studies provide a sense of the initial responses to RPL in higher education and the ideas, beliefs and perceptions that animate them. They provide a base from which the reader can examine five responses to RPL within four

[19] Material from this chapter has been published in "The recognition of prior learning: early lessons, challenges and promise". South African Journal of Higher Education, 15 (1) 2001: 54-60.

institutions of higher education in South Africa, some responses being more tentative and provisional than others. Only after respondents have had an opportunity to talk about their experiences of RPL will the researcher look across the case studies (in Chapter Eight), to see how the empirical findings relate to the models and practices of RPL developed in earlier research and literature, and then to identify the learning points from this research for RPL implementation in South Africa.

In constructing the five case studies that follow, the researcher aimed to examine participants' lived experience of RPL. She asked questions about respondents' experience of RPL through the portfolio development courses. She also probed respondents' perceptions of the capacity of RPL to deliver on access and equity, and their ideas for improving RPL practices. The researcher also sought to construct a picture of the institutional environment in which RPL operated, to begin to grapple with the different levers that were shaping and influencing the practice of RPL in South Africa. She asked about the challenges and the problems associated with the implementation of RPL.

Each case study contains a brief background to the institution, followed by a discussion of the scope of RPL policy developments within the institution. This is followed by an in-depth analysis of respondents' experiences of RPL, that is those who designed and implemented RPL portfolio courses (academics) and those who were the recipients of these courses (students).

As discussed in detail in Chapter Two, background information for the case studies came from interviews conducted with academics and RPL candidates. Because the RPL projects were a handful of new initiatives, and because it was mainly the students and academic staff who were at the interface of such projects, this study focused on their experiences, and has not explored the experiences of faculty administrators or senior management.

This information, from the interviews, was augmented with RPL reports and scholarly articles written by the staff that designed and implemented the RPL portfolio development courses. In addition to this, information also came from portfolios that students compiled as products of the RPL portfolio development courses.

The names of the institutions in which these case studies were conducted, as well as the names of the students and staff, are supplied in the text, with permission from the interviewees. Because RPL is an emerging practice, this openness allows an opportunity to showcase and engage with the emerging challenges.

Between 1999 and 2001, the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of the Western Cape, the Johannesburg College of Education and the University of the Free State piloted RPL portfolio development courses within particular departments. All of these pilots were funded by the Joint Education Trust (JET) and were part of a national research and development project coordinated by the Workers Higher Education Project (WHEP) at JET. In all of these pilots academics experimented with particular approaches to RPL within various qualifications. The institutions that have piloted RPL projects have included both historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged institutions. Most of these are residential campuses catering mainly for the school-leaver.

The case studies are not presented in any specific order, because each case highlights particular issues pertinent to RPL practice and all these issues together begin to tell the story of RPL in higher education in South Africa. In the words of a noted feminist scholar, all the case studies "evince an accent of urgency that bespeaks engagement" (Fraser, 1989: 3).

This chapter starts with RPL at the University of the Witwatersrand, and the next chapter deals with RPL at the University of the Western Cape. Chapter Six is on

RPL at the Johannesburg College of Education and Chapter Seven is on RPL at the University of the Free State.

Table Two provides a breakdown of the research sample in terms of institutional affiliation, academics and students who were interviewed.

TABLE TWO: BREAKDOWN OF THE RESEARCH SAMPLE IN TERMS OF INSTITUTIONS, ACADEMICS AND RPL STUDENTS

Institutions	Academic staff interviewed	RPL students interviewed	Total population in each case study
University of the Witwatersrand (Adult Education)	2	4	6
University of the Witwatersrand (Teacher Education)	2	3	5
University of the Western Cape	2	6	8
Johannesburg College of Education	5	4	9
University of the Free State	3	6	9
Totals	**14**	**23**	**37**

Table Three provides an overview of the race and gender distribution of the students interviewed in the four institutions in this study.

TABLE THREE: BREAKDOWN OF STUDENTS IN TERMS OF INSTITUTION, RACE AND GENDER

Institution	Total students interviewed	African		Coloured		Indian		White	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
University of the Witwatersrand (Adult Education)	4	1	3						
University of the Witwatersrand (Teacher Education)	3	1	2						
University of the Western Cape	6			3	3				
Johannesburg College of Education	4	1	1			0	2		
University of the Free State	6	0	1	3	0			1	1

Table Four provides an overview of the race and gender distribution of the staff interviewed in the four institutions in this study.

TABLE FOUR: BREAKDOWN OF STAFF IN TERMS OF INSTITUTION, RACE AND GENDER

Institution	Total staff interviewed	African		Coloured		Indian		White	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
University of the Witwatersrand - Adult Education	2							0	2
University of the Witwatersrand - Teacher Education	2							0	2
University of the Western Cape	2			1	0			1	0
Johannesburg College of Education	5							2	3
University of the Free State	3							1	2

4.2 THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

> *To view knowledge as the priestly domain of warrior scholars is to forfeit the possibility of questioning the normative and political nature of the knowledge and social interests they legitimise.*
>
> (Giroux, 1983: 183)

4.2.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND (WITS)

The University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) is an English medium university situated in southern Africa's economic heart, Johannesburg. It provides internationally recognised qualifications, and graduates who are readily absorbed into foreign economies. Wits University attracts not only local school-leavers, but a variety of students from developing countries as well. While Wits offers a vast range of academic qualifications, the majority of them are offered as fulltime programmes, most suitable for young school-leavers.

However, part-time initiatives are growing. The Centre for Part-Time Studies of the university, also known as "Wits Plus" is one such initiative. Established in 1999, its aim is to open access to undergraduate studies for working adults. In 2002, its third year of operation, it offers two degree programmes for adults, a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelors of Commerce (Castle and Munro, 2002: 2).

INSTITUTIONAL SNAPSHOT

Founded	1922
Location	Johannesburg
Number of students in 2002	20 456
RPL policy status	Draft RPL Policy
Highest qualification offered	PhD.
Web page	www.wits.ac.za
RPL pilot	1999-2001

The university has a proud history of resistance to apartheid and in particular a commitment to disadvantaged students. During the early 1980s the university defied apartheid policies and began to admit a small number of black students, which grew as the years passed. In its strategic plan submitted to the Ministry of Education (Wits, 2001: 1), Wits commits itself to "broadening access for students from disadvantaged communities who have the potential to succeed academically", and to play a "leading role in addressing historical disadvantages in the education of the majority of the population of South Africa".

Like all other institutions of higher education in South Africa, Wits is undergoing restructuring and rationalisation processes which aim to produce a productive, efficient and competitive institution, with a broader financial and client base, oriented to research and postgraduate education. These changes have resulted in the reduction in faculties from nine to five, embracing 33 schools. This restructuring has been influenced by pressures from national policies, such as the Higher Education Act of 1997 and the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001). The Higher Education Act calls for higher education institutions to merge with one another, with the intention of creating a lean grouping of higher education institutions that have particular foci; while the National Plan demands that higher education institutions broaden access for "disadvantaged" groups by attracting adult learners and developing RPL paths. In line with these policy

imperatives Wits has incorporated the former Johannesburg College of Education (a case study which will be presented in Chapter Six). The university has developed a draft RPL policy, but the pressure to implement it seems to have slackened, perhaps due to an increased full-time student intake in 2001 and 2002 and to the internal restructuring process and the incorporation, which absorbed many resources.

4.3 RPL POLICY INITIATIVES AT WITS

In September 2000 the Senate of the university appointed a task team on RPL to examine the implications of RPL at Wits in view of new government regulations. These require firstly that all qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) must make provision for the qualification to be able to be achieved in part or in whole through the recognition of prior learning, and secondly that learning howsoever acquired must be able to be recognised for purposes of that qualification.[20] The researcher was a member of this task team.

The task team completed its report in December 2000 and made its recommendations to the Senate Committee on Teaching and Learning. The report begins by reminding the readers of the university's strategic plan, which commits the university to improving student access and to promoting flexible curriculum design, with multiple entry points and possibilities for fast tracking. The report reminds its readers further that the university's strategic plan commits itself to identifying strategies for reviewing mechanisms, rules and requirements affecting student entrance, registration and progression (Wits, 2000: 9).

[20] NSB regulation of the South African Qualifications authority (SAQA) Act, (Regulation 6140 of the Government Gazette 18787 of 28 March 1998) defines the Recognition of Prior Learning as the previous learning and experience of a learner howsoever obtained. This learning can be matched against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification. Once the learning matches the outcomes of the qualification such learning can be accepted for purposes of granting the qualification to the learner.

Interestingly, all the commitments that the university makes in the name of remaining a relevant and responsive institution of higher education resonate with the commitments necessary for successful implementation of RPL. In fact, up to the time of writing this thesis (late in 2002) RPL has remained a marginal activity in this institution, and although alternate access and flexible entry requirements are part of the university's strategic plan, these are not invoked for purposes of RPL except in some isolated cases.

The task team began by examining present RPL practices at the university by requesting information from faculties about RPL initiatives for access or credit. The findings from this exercise revealed that most faculties interpreted RPL as credit exchange, that is, recognising qualifications from other institutions of higher learning, and not as recognising learning from experience.

The task team recommended that the university act on its commitments as set out in its strategic plan, and recognise "the potential of RPL to promote equity and redress in a framework of lifelong learning" (Wits, 2000: 4). It could do this by developing RPL initiatives at Wits that include research in particular areas of high demand and setting up administrative structures that support these initiatives. In addition to this, the report identified a need for staff training for those who would be involved in these initiatives.

The report recommended further that as RPL practices evolve, they should inform the development of a Senate discretionary admissions policy for this category of learners. In spite of these recommendations, that attempt to honour both the institution and the RPL candidate, there has been very little if any movement on RPL within the university. This lack of movement may be attributed to various contextual issues within the university, ranging from restructuring to the desire to preserve its image as an institution with high academic standards, to the poor circulation of the task team's report.

From the recommendations of the Wits task team it becomes clear that RPL will require considerable investment in RPL research, policy development and advocacy across the university. These prerequisites are echoed in the international experience of RPL implementation in higher education (Evans, 2000; Thomas, 1998) and in the implementation of RPL in the workplace in South Africa (Lugg, Mabitla, Louw and Angelis, 1998).

4.4 RPL RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT WITS

The Joint Education Trust funded two research projects on RPL in the School of Education during 1999 and 2001. One project had adult education as its focus and the other centred on teacher education. The first section of this chapter captures the experiences of adult educators and RPL candidates and the second section examines the experiences of teacher educators and their RPL candidates.

4.5 RPL IN ADULT EDUCATION

Adult Education was a small division within the Faculty of Education. With restructuring of faculties into schools, the division has been absorbed into the newly formed School of Education, but it still manages to function as a programme area within the school and to maintain its adult education focus and ethos.

The division was originally established in 1983 to provide programmes mainly at undergraduate level. In time, graduate and postgraduate programmes grew and in 2000 adult education programmes ranged from a Bachelor of Education (Honours) through Master of Education, to Doctoral level. The key focus of these qualifications is the personal, professional and academic development of practising adult educators and trainers. This division has a diverse staff and student body, not only in terms of cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but also in terms of race, gender and work backgrounds. All of the students in this division

have full-time jobs and come to the university from throughout the southern African region for residential sessions at designated times of the year.

Given this student body, programmes are designed to enable students to develop knowledge and expertise relevant to their roles and work in communities and organisations. Furthermore "programmes are based on the assumption that students have diverse occupational experiences and interests, and that this diversity is an asset which enriches the course" (Attwood, Broekmann, Nicholls, and Castle, 2002: 3). In line with the humanistic philosophies and principles of adult education, course content is open to students' scrutiny both in terms of design and implementation. In many ways the perceived challenges posed by RPL seem to have already been part of the challenges and experiences that this division has been engaging with since its inception. It would appear that the lecturers could engage RPL because RPL gives expression to the principles of open and lifelong learning, which are fundamental to adult education. Experiences emanating from this division's initiative in RPL are rich in the traditions of adult education, and are vital to any institutional policy decision on RPL.

The adult education division has always granted access to undergraduate qualifications for students who have a mature age matriculation exemption[21] and relevant work experience. However, it must be noted that the number of students coming in on this route is not large in relation to the rest of the university. The point here is that the ethos and activities of this department seem to respect and value the learning of adults, but at the same time recognise the knowledge and skills that these adults need to succeed in their studies in higher education. To this end the division has established links with the Wits Writing Centre and the School of Education Academic Development Officer. A writing initiative in the Master

[21] A certificate of conditional exemption may be granted by the Matriculation Board functioning under the auspices of the South African Universities Vice-Chancellors Association (SAUVCA), to a person aged 23 and over based on the attainment of a Senior Certificate with passes in four subjects, including English and with at least one subject on the higher grade.

of Education programme was a direct outcome of the RPL pilot project, and was aimed at enabling and developing the RPL candidate's writing.

4.6 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE

A strong adult education discourse informs the practices in this unit, which has traditionally adopted facilitative approaches to learning. Learning from experience is seen as an important feature of learning and teaching. Such learning, although produced in a site other than higher education, is seen as having the capacity to inform theory and formal learning. This adult education orientation becomes clearer in the remark of one of the staff members, who said:

Students have a richness of experience to bring to the class. (G)[22]

A brief overview of students' learning and career paths is presented in this case study and the case studies to follow. A motivation for presenting these is that RPL is very new to South Africa and very little is known about who RPL students in higher education are likely to be, what kinds of learning they bring with them or what attitudes and beliefs they hold about both their prior learning and future learning. Another motivation for presenting an overview of students' learning and career paths is that they hint at individuals with a strong sense of agency, then individuals who were passive victims of a racist education system. These insights provide a useful lens by which to understand their experiences and responses to RPL, which are discussed and reflected on in this case study and the in the case studies that follow.

[22] With permission, all the respondents, both students and staff, are clearly identifiable and are referred to by name rather than number in this study. The researcher has used the first letter in the respondents' names by which to identify them. Where respondents' names began with the same letter (as with Makethe and Mimi in this chapter and Deon and Dion in Chapter Seven), the researcher used the first letter from the name and the surname, to distinguish one respondent from the other. The full name, surname and institutional affiliation of each respondent appears in Chapter Three of this thesis (Table One).

Twenty two students completed a portfolio development course in RPL in 1999, and four of these students, Dan, Mimi, Luxie and Makhethe, were interviewed for the purposes of this study. All four are practising educators or adult educators, having been experienced primary school teachers. Teaching in night schools and adult centres, initially to supplement their incomes, led to a change in career paths from primary school teaching to the education of adults, for three of them. Dan is the principal of a night school for adults in Daveyton, Gauteng. Mimi is a school principal in rural KwaZulu-Natal, while Luxie is an educator at the Mercy Community College in Winterveldt in Pretoria. Makethe is an educator in an adult centre near Matatiela, a rural area, where the borders of Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Lesotho meet.

Born between 1952 and 1962, the RPL candidates were educated under Bantu Education that largely served to institutionalise unequal education and associated life chances (Dube, 1985). None of the students interviewed completed their first 12 years of schooling uninterrupted. Unemployment and poverty in the family remain two of the central reasons for the interruption in the schooling of the students interviewed. In spite of inadequate and inequitable provision of education, and in spite of their economic and social circumstances, the students overcame the odds that life and education under apartheid had stacked against them, and obtained their senior certificates (matric) through distance study or night school.

All of the students have previous qualifications, mainly in the field of teacher education, which were pursued while working, through distance education institutions such as UNISA (University of South Africa). This mode of study, which spanned several years, required the candidates to be disciplined, self reliant and focused learners, traits that are serving them well in their present studies. All of the RPL candidates interviewed have spoken about the important role that family support, financial and moral, has played in enabling them to continue their studies.

All of the students have found studying at Wits challenging - intellectually and financially. They expressed difficulties with the volume of work associated with study at Wits, as well as the demands of critical thinking and independent work. The financial challenges revolved around high transport cost to the university from home as well as high tuition fees. These challenges were compounded by the personal challenges associated with balancing the demands of work, home and study.

The four students interviewed were all black; three were women and one was male. Presently, three of the RPL candidates are part of Master of Education degree programmes in Adult Education, two at Wits and one at the University of Natal. The fourth student is considering a career move and is therefore not furthering her studies for a while.

An RPL Portfolio Development Course was developed and implemented by Jane and Gillian as one of a suite of courses in the second year of a part-time, Honours level Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree. The portfolio course was developed around students' dual roles as learners in a BEd course and as practitioners of RPL in their respective workplaces. This was the only portfolio development course, in this study, that focused on the dual roles of students as RPL candidates and as RPL practitioners. As practitioners in Education, Training and Development, the students had to develop and deliver RPL opportunities to other adults in various communities and workplaces. As students in adult education at Wits, they had to engage with the issues of RPL in terms of policies and practices.

The main intention of the course, as expressed by the lecturers, was to develop students' capacity to reflect critically on their prior experience by analysing learning moments and events that were significant to them. This reflection was done through class discussions with peers and staff, and culminated in the writing of a critically reflective essay, "designed as a structured, recursive writing task, in

which students were asked to move beyond description of an experience to analysis of the learning which came of it" (Castle and Attwood, 2001: 65).

In the next stage of the course students were required to assemble evidence that supported their claims of prior learning. The evidence could include certificates of formal learning, project work done by the RPL candidate and testimonials from the workplace. Thereafter, students were given an opportunity to assess each other's RPL applications, so as to gain insights into the challenges of assessment and to come up with explicit criteria in RPL assessment. Finally, students participated in a simulation game, which required them to design a policy for RPL in the institution in which they worked. The aim of this game was to enable students to experience first-hand the challenges and complexity of RPL.

The portfolio development course ran for a whole year and students and staff met for four one-week sessions over the year. In addition to the formalised contact sessions, students also contacted staff for individual consultations.

4.7 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN ADULT EDUCATION AT WITS

It is against this institutional, departmental and programmatic backdrop that the academics' experiences of RPL are analysed. The analysis reveals that various internal factors seem to impinge on the capacity of adult educators to inform practice within the institution. These factors range from epistemological differences to an institutional culture that is not adult-friendly.

Institutional context and faculty support

The experiences of the adult educators from the pilot project in RPL fed into the report of the RPL task team generally, but their experiences in working with adults, developing and offering adult friendly programmes in an environment that

respects adults, have not been tapped into. This may be attributed to the university seeing itself as catering for the school-leaver, and that the adult learner is not its main client. Hence the experiences of adult education and adult educators are not considered valuable in this context. It may also be that the university sees itself as an institution that reserves places for the best school-leavers, and that if the university were perceived as engaging with RPL, it might lose its status as an international university with the best students. But more importantly it may also be attributed to a lack of communication both within the hierarchy of the university management and even within and across schools and faculties.

This issue of communication (or lack thereof) becomes apparent when one discovers that there is little sharing of information on RPL within the university and even within the same school. This point was made poignantly when the researcher discovered that the two programmes funded by JET within the same school knew little about each other. In addition to this the pilot research project was perceived as an initiative of value only to the individuals and their students. Furthermore, JET also had a tendency to work with each pilot project within the larger research and development project as a separate and distinct entity. This approach was not conducive to information dissemination or sharing across the larger research and development project. An RPL conference organised by JET in 2000 as well as cross project-discussions attempted to remedy this problem of isolation. As the two staff members reflected:

> *It felt a bit lonely sometimes - it seemed we were sort of marginalised. (G)*

> *Perhaps its also painful to see the real limitations of your institutions - it can give you opportunities and limitations. And for me this came through starkly through the RPL project. (J)*

The university's restructuring process included the rationalisation of both staff and programmes. In addition to this, in 1999 and 2000 the university and the adult education unit were facing a serious decline in student enrolment. Offering credit to students for learning acquired through experience seemed to add to the problems of the university, because it would be closing down on a potential source of revenue and income from fees. Furthermore, RPL was perceived as posing curricular challenges in that it required flexible entry and exit points into and out of a qualification. In the face of institutional cost-cutting, RPL projects became the initiatives of individuals rather than an institutional priority.

In addition to this, respondents found some faculty administrators were not familiar with RPL, the policy imperatives surrounding RPL or the administrative implications of having RPL students on the university books. They appeared reluctant to register RPL candidates whose applications had been approved by academic staff members. Their job was to uphold university rules, not to seek ways around them. The flexibility required for research in RPL was not easily found in what was experienced as a rule-bound administrative system.

> *The rules of the institution drove faculty administrators to be obstructive rather than helpful. It made me think of these big rusty old leaky tankers, half beached on sand bars and then you've got to turn them around with a few oars to push off with, and it's just not enough. You need a new engine, you need it to be overhauled in some other way, from the inside out. (J)*

This move on the part of faculty administrators is not surprising, given that the RPL projects were research projects of individuals rather than projects supported by the institutional management or even visible within the wider university.

As mentioned earlier, Wits University has an established reputation of educating hand-picked matriculants. The prospect of bringing into the institution skilled,

experienced but underqualified adult students may be interpreted as a threat to the institution's reputation and the standards that the university upholds.

> *I get a sense of growing awareness in the institutions about the possibilities of RPL. But I get a louder sense of academics' concern about the identity of the university, and whether we want to touch something like RPL - it's a little bit messy and maybe those are not the kind of students we want to take. (J)*

> *We should try to find some way that it doesn't just drop off the agenda, that it finds some way to compete with the other debates and pressures and challenges that are flying around. (G)*

RPL for access and credit

The educators in this unit are vocal about RPL for access versus RPL for credit. They argue that RPL for access allows for both the personal and academic development of the RPL candidate, whereas RPL for credit exempts a person from learning. It deprives the RPL candidate from "process learning, depth of understanding, relational and critical perspectives" (Castle and Attwood, 2001: 67). RPL for credit seems to promote a position that prior learning is a commodity which can be exchanged for something, in this case credit, and credit implies that "learning is a product of experience rather than a process accompanying it" (ibid, 2001: 67).

> *We question what people stand to lose when they gain credit for courses.* (J)

> *Also learning in this case feels like a series of things you have to tick off rather than a process. (G)*

Capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

Government policy on RPL in South Africa assumes that RPL is inherently good and that it will bring about equity and access for all South Africans. The academics in this case expressed hope rather than belief that RPL can bring about equity and access in higher education. There was recognition that RPL is a complex and contextual practice, that it is by no means a politically neutral process.

> *It has the potential to deliver on access - but in order to handle access responsibly, you have to recognise that inequities exist in students' preparation for university. (J)*

There was also the acknowledgement that RPL is heavily dependent on the political will and capacity of the institutional environment.

> *Once you admit RPL candidates in numbers you're compelled to address developmental and curricular issues. The changes made in curriculum are what eventually facilitate access. (J)*

The question of who benefits from RPL was also raised:

> *Credit privileged the socially advantaged, that is those who were already familiar with higher education, therefore it fails in its claim for equity. (G)*

RPL is pedagogically challenging

The academics recognise and experience RPL to be pedagogically challenging. They find the assessment of prior learning, particularly through portfolios of learning, time-consuming for the assessor and the candidate alike. They pointed

out that the assessment process is pedagogically challenging because they experienced the assessment of prior learning to be different from more traditional assessment procedures, since students needed intensive writing support.

> *I think it made us aware of how much more work we were going to have to do in the event once we awarded access to some students. We started a writing initiative to support students' writing and learning through writing. I think largely on account of our now in-depth knowledge of about half of the students in the 2000 MEd group who were regarded as not having sufficient writing skills to cope with the demands of postgraduate research. (J)*

Experiential learning and academic learning

The practices of the academics as adult educators seemed to impact on their views and experiences of the collaborative nature of experiential and academic knowledge and learning. They pointed out that RPL would be enriched through crossing the divide between experiential and academic knowledge and learning. It would also be enriched, they said, by those who are able to span the boundaries between such knowledge and learning.

As one of the respondents points out:

> *In the field of education and with students who are education practitioners, I believe that people need to theorise about their life, about their work experience, rather than to see and really maintain a stark distinction between academic theory and their work. If they experience these as two totally divorced things, then what's the use of the academic world?...Academic learning is almost like a sort of an adjunct to it [experiential learning]. (J)*

This position may suggest that the link between academic knowledge and experiential knowledge is less problematic for adult educators because their work is in professional training and education, which assumes collaboration between academic and experiential knowledge and learning.

Given these experiences what were the suggestions that the adult educators made?

4.8 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL AT WITS

The academics in this case seemed very clear about what could be done to inform RPL practices at Wits. They reflected an awareness of the broader issues facing higher education, and seemed to recognise that RPL is just one of many imperatives competing for the attention of institutional managers.

They suggested that RPL must be implemented in a way that is valuable to both the institution and the RPL student, and pointed out that this requires an orientation that favours learners whose knowledge emanates from sites of practice other than the university.

> *RPL must be seen as something potentially worthwhile doing, for both the university and the student. It's not simply an academic exercise or a policy exercise. (J)*

> *RPL needs people with a certain kind of orientation, an orientation that people can be helped and that learning happens in many places. (G)*

The respondents suggested that student support was part and parcel of any RPL initiative, as their experiences led them to conclude that:

If people are serious about RPL, then they need to employ people who are going to look at RPL and the issues of student support seriously. (G)

...and build on and respect adults' experiences. (J)

The academics' experiences with the faculty administrators seem to suggest that faculty have a bigger role to play in RPL than they did in this pilot project. As one lecturer suggested:

Administrative staff need to see that it's not just a policy and extra burden but that they need to live that policy. (G)

The staff suggested that RPL should be seen in an affirming way, rather than in a deficit way, which foregrounds the students' weaknesses and lack of preparation for what happens in the university. As these respondents suggest,

RPL students need to be seen as shining potential. (J)

Instead, RPL students are seen as substandard. (G)

The experiences of the academics in this case alert us to the interplay and interconnection between individual agency, curriculum and institutional change and transformation in the RPL process, issues that are taken up in the final chapter of this thesis (Chapter Eight).

4.9 AN ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN ADULT EDUCATION

The students in adult education perceived RPL as a useful tool for adult educators who wished to improve their qualifications and their remuneration, and for people

in rural areas entrenched in the cycle of poverty. In this case it begins to emerge that RPL is linked not only to educational empowerment, but also economic empowerment. This was noted by Michelson when she wrote about RPL in South Africa: " Here as elsewhere, the goal of greater social justice appears merged with the goal of economic development" (1997b: 147).

> *RPL needs to be taken forward at Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) centre level. (L)*

> *RPL needs to help those in rural areas to become economically independent. (D)*

Preparedness for university learning

The students believed that their portfolio development course prepared them for future university learning and writing.

> *My prior learning portfolio actually helped me to write my assignments and meeting those requirements of the university. (D)*

The students' experiences of the need for support structures corroborated the lecturers' suggestion that support in writing and reading was vital to RPL initiatives. As the students explain:

> *The facilitators were very helpful with writing and in helping us put our portfolios and our journals together. (D)*

> *Support was excellent - at other institutions I was a number, here I was a person. (L)*

The support you need depends on the environment you come from, rural or urban - some need more, some need less. (ML)

The experiences that the person would have is not enough for coping in the university. I believe there should be bridging and support so that the person is at the same level with others who have been in the tertiary institution. (MM)

Capacity of RPL to bring equity and access

The students expressed pessimism about the capacity of RPL to deliver on its policy promise of equity and access:

RPL is not going to do what it promises to do. (L)

I don't think RPL can bring access and equity, because the university will always be in a position to sit down and decide on certain requirements that might exclude other people. (MM)

Students' experiences seem to hint at an awareness that RPL and equity require an interplay between individual agency and institutional change, and that the need for gaining self-esteem and confidence through education are prized over other outcomes.

I think a lot depends on the person, the individual rather than a policy coming in saying we have to do that and that and that. (ML)

It cannot really bring about equity and access, because you have to undo the past and first be able to make people feel confident about themselves and realise that they do have the potential. This is a big task already. (ML)

You see it's nice that people are being given access into the university, but at the end of the day, what if people are not able to cope because of big differences in their prior learning? First people [RPL students] need to cope and feel that they can cope. (MM)

RPL for access and credit

The students' comments highlight the arguments pertinent to both sides of the issues relating to RPL for access and credit. Their comments are particularly valuable because they have arrived at their positions by experiencing a portfolio development course, and not merely through abstraction.

I think both [access and credit are important]. (D)

Credit for experience is important, because what I know cannot be shown on paper only! (L)

By going back to the classroom instead of being accredited with that part of the course I think I gained more by going to the classroom rather than missing that part of it, coming into contact with lecturers. RPL for access is fine, but credit can be a problem. (ML)

Most valued experience

Interestingly, in this case, all the candidates valued the RPL process in terms of what it offered to them as people, not necessarily as students in an academic environment. The RPL process was of value to them at a personal level and for what it did for their confidence and self-esteem. This experience is corroborated

in international literature where students speak of the personal value of RPL (Butterworth, 1992; Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997).

> *The RPL process has motivated me to function effectively as a person as an educator.* (D)

> *Through RPL I realised my potential. The RPL process made me find the real me and what I have achieved in life. I have a personality whereby people don't understand me very easily. Through my portfolio I have noticed myself and accepted myself as I am and see the capabilities and the potentials that I have. I found the reflection and the writing activities for the portfolio very emotional, I put everything of myself into it. (ML)*

> *It gave me a second chance at learning. The portfolio saw me as a whole person and academically, it has allowed me to be sure of myself as an educator. (L)*

> *RPL makes one realise one's goals. It makes one feel that self-esteem grow and a more clearer vision in life. (ML)*

Barriers encountered

Students did not experience RPL to be an easy way into higher education. Students found that the portfolio development course placed a range of demands on them.

> *A lot of work, sleepless nights, visits to libraries and the weight of the course. (D)*

Evidence is sometimes difficult to gather and the portfolio requires this. (L)

I disregarded my day-to-day activities and experiences and emphasised formal learning. Maybe I emphasised certificates in my portfolio because I live in a world of certificates. I also emphasised certificated learning because brochures at university emphasise certificated learning. (L)

One student pointed to the emotional demands of the portfolio when she said:

Sometimes you need the courage to write down the personal things in a portfolio. (ML)

4.10 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

What do the RPL students in the adult education unit propose as a way ahead? Respondents in this study made suggestions about RPL at a broad and programmatic level. Their suggestions hint at a sophisticated understanding that RPL brings various players into the game, such as the university, employer, private sector and the individual student. At the same time they seem to be realistic about broad-based policy claims made for RPL about "opening doors of opportunity".

Adults need to understand RPL, know what it is about and what RPL is there for, then RPL will start making meaning to people and then RPL will start opening up peoples' eyes. (ML)

RPL is a new thing, and employers, private sector and university need to work together to push RPL forward. (D)

Start by being very practical, get people to engage informally with what I can and cannot do. An interview should be the first step to help the learner assess if they will cope or not. (L)

Standardise the requirements for people with different backgrounds. We all need bridging courses, if you come on the RPL route, especially in English and in writing. (MM)

I think this RPL process should be practised, not left on paper. It can make people see that what they have learnt in life, is important even if it is not certificated. (ML)

These responses are interesting. All of the respondents recognise that RPL has a role to play in the lives of adults, but that this role is played out in a terrain (like higher education or the university) that could be harsh if students did not have what it takes to succeed in higher education.

Students felt strongly that adults and their experiences are not homogeneous. People had varied experiences and were at different levels in terms of experience, skills and competences. This is corroborated in international literature, which cautions against homogenising adult students, their learning and their needs (Aarts, Blower, Burke, Conlin, Howell, Howorth, Lammare and Van Kleef, 1999).

These are the suggestions students had to make in this regard:

Everyday experiences of students are different, so individuality must be accounted for in the portfolio. (L)

RPL is an individual process. (L)

You know people have big differences in their prior learning. (M)

Other students felt that RPL portfolio courses required a mechanism, which first assessed the level of students' prior experience before all the students did a generic portfolio course.

As one student pointed out strongly:

> *The university would have to sit down and decide upon certain requirements to make sure everybody who enrols for the portfolio is exactly at the same level. (M)*

4.11 SUMMARY

The experiences of the adult educators at the University of the Witwatersrand suggest that RPL provided them with an opportunity to re-examine and validate their epistemological and philosophical orientations as adult educators. RPL seems to have given expression to the principles of open and lifelong learning which are fundamental to adult education principles.

> *We were emboldened by our RPL research projects and how it related to our work as adult educators. (J)*

The experiences of adult educators indicate that RPL places pedagogical demands on lecturers, and even additional demands, because of the support needs of some students. The experiences of adult educators suggests that their RPL pilot project was perceived as a marginal activity within the university. They experienced an overall lack in communication across the university on the question of RPL. Their experience seems to confirm to them that although the university commits itself to "opening access", RPL is not likely to be a significant tool for fulfilling this commitment.

The experiences of RPL students suggest that RPL was not an easy way into higher education. They pointed out that the portfolio development course placed a range of demands on them, which were not always straightforward or easy. This insight is particularly important since these candidates were speaking as learners and as educators, as both subjects and objects of teaching and learning. Furthermore, their experiences reveal a pessimistic view about the capacity of RPL to bring equity and access as espoused in national policy, because of the perceived power of entrenched practices in the university and the apparent support needs of some students.

While this section focused on RPL in the adult education unit, the next section focuses on RPL in teacher education at Wits, where there were different ramifications for participants and for the institution.

4.12 RPL IN TEACHER EDUCATION

Like the previous case study the RPL pilot project in teacher education was located in the Wits School of Education. Like all the projects studied in this research, this project was part of a national research and development programme funded by JET. The academics piloted an RPL portfolio course in the Bachelor of Education degree (BEd). The level of the qualification was the same as that of the students in adult education discussed earlier. The BEd is a postgraduate qualification developed and presented to experienced educators on the assumption that educators registering for this course would have basic theoretical knowledge and academic skills to engage with the reading and writing demands of an Honours level qualification (Steinberg and Shalem, 2001).

The BEd presented a useful space in which to pilot an RPL project, because it was one of the qualifications that saw a decline in student enrolment in the year 2000. While it was ideal in this regard (because RPL could potentially bring in students and boost student numbers), it posed other challenges to the academics. Since the

BEd assumed knowledge of educational theory and required an advanced level of reading and writing skills, if students entered the BEd on the RPL route and did not have the theoretical and academic skills, the academics "needed not only to assess [prior learning] but also to teach [educational theory and academic skills]" (Steinberg and Shalem, 2001: 9).

4.13 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE

The two academics, Yael and Carola, designed and presented an RPL Portfolio Development Course. The product that would be assessed was a portfolio in which each student documented prior educational experiences and the learning gained from these experiences. "We wanted students to bring their knowledge, skills and understanding developed through professional experience into the classroom" (Steinberg and Shalem, 2001: 8).

Like the lecturers in the adult education, both the lecturers in teacher education were interviewed for the purposes of this study. One of them (Shalem, 2001) has written a scholarly article on RPL, in which questions about the epistemological challenges of RPL are raised, questions that are crucial to the future practice of RPL in South Africa. In particular she has questioned whether academics from a particular field of practice can recognise learning gained from a different field of practice. This dilemma becomes clear when she points out, "although I deeply believe that as an educator I am obliged to open the boundaries of my practice and to attune to the practice of the other, nevertheless the logic of academic practice refuses a great deal of what I am expected to do" (ibid: 54).

The academics experienced that as assessors of prior learning, their actions were regulated by principles and tools in their field of practice, and they made these tools and principles explicit. The respondents claimed to have difficulties when having to work with their field of practice and the students' field of practice in a fluid way. They pointed out that to work with the two fields in this fluid or hybrid

way would be "denying the truth about their field" (ibid: 67). It seemed that when they made the logic of the field, which governed their actions, explicit, they found that their field could only read the other field (of students) with the tools and logic that were available and relevant to their own field. This, they argue, should not be construed as "hidden forms of hegemonic domination" (Shalem, 2001: 67); instead they are being "open and sincere about their modus operandi" in the act of recognition (Shalem, 2001: 70).

Six students registered for the RPL portfolio course; however, due to pressures at work and personal problems, two students dropped out of the RPL course in the initial weeks, leaving four. For purposes of this study, three students were interviewed. They were black; two women and one man.

The students, Themba, Elizabeth and Julia, were primary school principals in Mamelodi, Pretoria. Elizabeth had a previous degree and so was eligible for access into the BEd, while Julia had a three year diploma, and would have had to complete another diploma or degree to qualify for access into the BEd. Themba had a combination of a three year diploma and a Further Diploma in Education, and through this combination he may have been able to access the BEd. The learning paths indicate that students would have qualified for access to Wits, and that two of these students would have qualified for access to the BEd. However, the students agreed to go through an RPL portfolio course, in spite of having the qualifications to enter the Bed.

Born in three different decades, Julia in the 1940s, Elizabeth in the 1950s and Themba in the 1960s, all three students show similar lack of educational opportunities and economic hardship. Over three decades, little had changed in terms of educational, social and economic opportunities. While Themba and Elizabeth were able to obtain their senior certificate (matric) at secondary school, Julia obtained hers through adult night school. All three have lived in an urban area - a township - Mamelodi in Pretoria. All three completed their teacher

qualifications through part-time distance study at Vista and SACTE (South African College of Teacher Education), while working full-time as teachers and bringing up their children and supporting their families. Like the RPL students in adult education, this form of study required dedication, motivation and discipline. For all three students the RPL portfolio course and the subsequent BEd would be the first time that they were studying at Wits, and they felt that this was an honour and privilege. It seems that being at Wits offered them status and confidence. In the words of one of the students:

> *When we came to Wits, we had qualifications from other colleges and universities where the standard was not high as the standard here at Wits. Some of these institutions were doing an injustice to the students and were issuing diplomas and degrees with no regard for standards. We remember [know] that we are in the best university in the country, and everything that we do here is valuable. I think I am a much more developed person than before I came to Wits University. (T)*

The portfolio course ran for six months, made up of 26 contact sessions in which students responded to academic articles in the context of their experiences as teachers, managers and principals. The theme of the course was Teaching, Management and Professionalism from the Perspective of Accountability. The theme emerged from discussions that the academics and RPL candidates had before the portfolio development course was presented. These discussions centred on questions and issues pertaining to authority, leadership, accountability, teacher knowledge and educational change (Steinberg and Shalem, 2001: 10). The choice of issues and the theme is not surprising, given that all the students who participated in this project were either school principals or deputy principals.

The first session of the 26 introduced students to the notion of RPL and the research agenda of the academics. Students and academics discussed the RPL path and some of the implications of this for them as students.

In the second session the students and the academics watched "The Lion's Den", an Open University video, which depicts the experiences of a new teacher. After watching the video, students responded to a series of questions set by the lecturers, who required the students to respond in writing to ensure that the tasks were "clear, detailed and logically organised" (Shalem and Steinberg, 2000b: 5).

In the third session students and staff discussed areas of experience that students could reflect on for a portfolio activity. Students could select any topic that reflected their strengths as educators. Only one student completed this task, while the other students did not feel confident to take it on.

Session four was devoted to enabling the other students to select a topic that would best highlight their strengths. The topics that students selected for their portfolio activity included: Transforming the Management of Schools; What Constitutes a Good School?; Professionalism and Discipline and Moving Towards an Inclusive Education System. The next eight sessions were used to assist students to read two articles that highlighted issues of accountability and school culture in education. Students were required to reflect on their experience as educators in the context of the two academic articles.

In the next four sessions, students presented their reflections in the context of the theory they had explored, and these presentations were supported by group discussions. The last ten sessions of the portfolio course focused on intensive individual feedback on each student's reflective activities (Steinberg and Shalem, 2001: 10). "We made it explicit that the portfolios needed in some ways to refer to the academic articles, as that would indicate to us [the academics] whether

students were able to use academic discourse to further their own understanding - a basic requirement for BEd Honours students" (ibid: 11).

Students were assisted to compile a portfolio consisting of three chapters, on the history of the students' professional development, documenting their knowledge about the field of professionalism and accountability, and finally a chapter on providing evidence of their knowledge and skills in professionalism and management (Steinberg and Shalem, 2001: 12). Each chapter in the portfolio required students to reflect on their own experience in the context of the two academic articles presented and discussed in the course.

The portfolios were assessed for academic literacy, which was a criterion for awarding access to the BEd, while substantial knowledge of the field was the criterion for awarding advanced standing. None of the three students interviewed was successful in obtaining advanced standing within the BEd.

4.14 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN TEACHER EDUCATION AT WITS

Institutional context and faculty support

According to the lecturers, the administrative environment did not seem to understand or sympathise with RPL. This became apparent when lecturers tried to get RPL students registered in the middle of the academic year - an option that is not possible at Wits given that all registrations take place at the beginning of each year. The response of the faculty administrators is not surprising given that registrations occur once a year and the administrative structures are arranged accordingly. The role of faculty administrators in the implementation of RPL emerges here, suggesting that they are key players from whom support is vital for successful implementation.

Admin was utterly inflexible. I think any RPL venture has to be quite sure that it knows all the regulations of the institutions and that they do everything by the book. (C)

RPL for access and credit

The academics in this case are as vocal as those in adult education on the issue of RPL for access and credit. While the latter foregrounded issues of student growth and development that are compromised when RPL for credit is used, the teacher educators highlighted the conflicting role of the assessor when prior learning is being assessed for access and for credit. They also perceived that the aim of the portfolio to be different when RPL is for access and when it is for credit. They suggest that when RPL is for access the RPL portfolio process may have a built in component that also socialises the candidate into a learning course. However, when RPL is for credit, the portfolio should be seen purely as an assessment instrument, pointing out that in this case there is no attempt to socialise the student. The academics point out that such socialisation brings with it intervention from the lecturer, which assists the student to bring coherence, structure, and logic to experiential learning. These tensions were articulated thus by the different lecturers:

Both the role of the assessor and the assessment is quite different when RPL is for credit and when RPL is for access. If it is for access there is space for assessment and for socialising and mentoring. If it's for credit it is a clean cut and straightforward process. (C)

If you think that you have to socialise the person then you are saying there is no room for that person to get any credit, because this is much more than assessment. (Y)

I would be much harsher if the student wants credit, because this he must do on his own. I would have said here is a portfolio development course, I will give some input on what portfolios are, how they work and maybe some input on language issues, and then they will have to do it and I will spend time on the assessment. I am not sure that it will empower them, but from the point of view of the university it will be more efficient and realistic. (Y)

These experiences suggest that the lecturers seem to emphasise RPL as an outcome rather than a process.

Capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

The teacher educators seemed to appear ambivalent about the capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access. They felt that even if RPL candidates won access into the university, there would be a need to support them so that they could succeed in an environment of new learning - one distinct from work and home. They believed that if this support was not available, a student might have gained access, but not equity. The researcher noted with interest that the need for support of students was assumed by the adult educators at Wits, a response that was different to the one expressed here by the teacher educators who were making a special case of support for RPL students. Also of interest is that Wits in its vision and mission commits itself to support students, to open up access and facilitate success, an imperative considered important if universities are to be relevant and responsive to the South African population. Student support is an important ingredient in higher education, not a special need for RPL implementation.

I think that if the university will pretend that the students came in from outside, and now that they are in they are the same, then what you have is physical access but not epistemological access. There

will be a need for support to bring about epistemological access. (Y)

RPL is pedagogically challenging

The academics in this case were vocal about the dilemmas and tensions inherent in RPL. They argued that there is a hidden "pedagogical complexity" (Shalem and Steinberg, 2000a: 24) in assessing experiential learning. They experienced a tension and conflict between their role as assessors of prior learning and their role as teachers who socialise students into an academic course. As one of the lecturers pointed out:

> *In the RPL course there was a need to bring something of the future, into the present and this gave me a conflicting role as an academic. By this I mean when assessing prior learning, you can't just assess off the top of your head, neither can a student present her [prior] learning off the top of her head. There has to be a context. The context we presented was certain academic texts. We did not want the student to learn the contents of the text but rather the texts provided the context for presenting prior learning. But to enable the student to present this prior learning I had to teach some concepts and skills. So in this way I am bringing future learning on the part of the student, and future teaching on my part, into the present process of assessing and recognising prior learning. This gave me a conflicting role as an academic. (Y)*

And another of the lecturers said simply:

> *It was a complete confusion about whether we were teaching or assessing. (C)*

Coupled with the apparent conflicting roles that RPL presented for them as academics, they tended to distinguish between two levels of action in the assessment process, that is, the "retrospective action" - when one assesses the past learning of a candidate, and the "prospective action" - when one assesses the candidate's capacity to learn in the future, once access has been obtained (Shalem and Steinberg, 2000a: 5). Both of these actions are seen to be vital to assessing prior learning, but the academics seem to also experience them to be in tension. The academics are critical of advocates of RPL (such as Michelson, 1999) generally and experiential learning in particular. They suggest that advocates of this paradigm "wish away the prospective action" in RPL and tend to focus only on the retrospective action in RPL. They argue further that RPL advocates emphasise the constraints on the RPL candidate in the assessment process, but not the constraints on the assessor as they have experienced RPL. The major constraint that they seemed to have experienced is that as assessors they had to find broad equivalencies between academic and experiential knowledge, something they found difficult to do. They only way they seemed to be able to do this was through active mentoring, but this too was not without its problems, as one of the academics said:

> *What RPL assessors are doing is that they are taking glimpses of experiential knowledge from RPL candidates, they clean it up, they put structure and organisation to it. What does this do to the knowledge they want to recognise and whose knowledge is it now? Now that it is clean and structured and organised? (Y)*

It seems that because the pedagogical conflicts were so overwhelming, the academics resorted to doing what they do well. They lost faith in the "retrospective action" because of their unfamiliarity with prior learning and allowed themselves to be guided by the "prospective action', something they do as educators and teachers of academic courses on a daily basis. Taking this approach seemed to cohere with what they saw as their role - to induct and socialise

students into "academic ways of knowing", into a community of practice which "discourses through writing" (Northedge, 2001: 308).

Why is it that these tensions and contradictions were not so sharply experienced by the lecturers in adult education? It may be that the tensions for the adult educators were less pronounced because adult educators seem to traditionally draw on experiential learning practices in the courses they teach. These practices seem to be informal, and include facilitative approaches to learning where the boundaries between tutoring, assessing and supporting and between theoretical and applied knowledge are blurred. An alternative explanation could be that the adult educators accepted at the outset that RPL "requires a different kind of commitment: a commitment to learning as necessarily unpredictable and provisional" (Nixon, Martin, McKeown and Ranson, 1997: 12). In contrast the teacher educators had certain epistemological preferences that governed and even inhibited them from exploring "other ways of knowing". They believed strongly "that academic discourse give coherence, gives order, gives meaning" *(Y)*. This belief seems to have prevented the academics from looking beyond particular "legitimised" forms of knowledge and overwhelmed them when they attempted to explore experiential knowledge and learning.

Experiential learning and academic learning

In addition to experiencing pedagogical challenges, another challenge for the teacher education project was how to interface experiential learning with academic learning. While academics in the adult education case also appeared to have experienced this challenge, their response to it seemed to have remained grounded in their disciplinary background, namely adult education. Instead the teacher educators were uncomfortable and even compromised by such interfacing or "boundary crossing" (Giroux, 1992). They appeared to be grounded in their role of socialising students into academia. They worked with the tools of the field they knew best (that is, critical reading of academic texts, academic forms of

communication) and used these tools to make sense of the other field, in this case experiential learning. They expressed having experienced a sense of "powerlessness" and even a sense of being overwhelmed by students' accounts of their prior learning, because students' accounts were not tight narratives with a beginning, a middle and an end. Using a Bernsteinian analysis they pointed out that such accounts were characterised by a horizontal discourse which is "segmental" and "context dependent", and this discourse was unable to interface with the vertical discourse of the university, which is characterised by a "specialised language" and conceptual categories for describing reality (Bernstein and Solomon, 1999: 273-274).

> *We felt imprisoned in their stories. I felt I have to control the discourse because I am getting overwhelmed by it. (Y)*

> *We framed their stories, even put them into theoretical context. (C)*

It seems that teaching an RPL course sharpened the distinction between academic and experiential learning, rather than bridging or blurring this distinction. The academics in this RPL project were not able to allow interconnectivity to be part of their disciplinary identity, and they seemed unable to make connections among multiple ways of learning and knowing. In fact the RPL course and its inherent tensions enabled one academic to recognise the boundaries between discourses when she said:

> *I confirmed to myself through this process of RPL that academic discourse gives coherence, gives order, gives sense, gives meaning to items that are made into a body of knowledge, and in fact if I don't have that I am lost. (Y)*

One wonders about the persuasiveness of the positions that the academics in this project have taken about experiential and academic knowledge. More so in the

context of this project, where all the RPL students could be considered qualified (academically and professionally) to engage in the discourse of the university. All three students have previous qualifications, two of them a diploma in teaching and one of them a degree. Furthermore, the students represent a professionally homogenous group as teachers. International experience in this regard suggests RPL to be fairly straightforward where student groups are professionally homogenous (Merrifield et al, 2000; Peters, in press). It seems that lecturers were evaluating the quality of the prior qualifications rather than the prior learning of the students in this project.

4.15 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

The lecturers made suggestions about the need for student support, curriculum change and faculty administration, with some suggestions being more tentative than others. On the suggestions about student support, they tended to emphasise the need for RPL candidates to have access to a writing and critical reading course, acknowledging that such a course requires resources of time and money. They suggested that this writing and reading course should be separate from the RPL process, as RPL students are at different levels and need to be assisted in a way that takes individual difference into account.

To this end they suggested that this is a commitment that the university needs to make if it undertakes to recognise the prior learning of students. They remain sceptical of the university's capacity to make such a commitment in the face of cost cutting and restructuring.

As one staff member suggested:

When you take people in you have to find ways to make them grow, such as support. But support can only come outside the course [RPL]. If it is part of the RPL course what are you going to do with better students who will have to sit in class and wait while you work with the others to try to decode a paragraph? (Y)

Why is it that this lecturer sees this dilemma as unique to RPL? Surely, every teacher faces the dilemma of what to do with students that are different and have different academic needs.

Another lecturer suggested that academics initiating RPL projects should familiarise themselves with all the rules and regulations governing the institution and the course offerings, as their experience taught them that faculty administrators can be difficult to influence when rules have to be bent. She suggests thus:

Get to know your institution and its rules well and before you start your RPL project. This avoids many problems for both students and staff alike. (C)

A tentative suggestion from the same lecturer was on the issue of curriculum change. It seems that her experience in RPL created an awareness that RPL brings with it a diverse population and this necessitated changes to the curriculum.

Curriculum change is part of and a response to a changing student population. Something that needs to be taken on when implementing RPL. (C)

4.16 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL IN TEACHER EDUCATION AT WITS

Preparedness for university

Students' experiences seemed to suggest that the portfolio course re-inscribed the academic values of the university and academic ways of knowing. It would appear that students worked out that academic literacy and knowledge of education theory provided the currency they needed to succeed at Wits, as their comments point out:

> *For me this RPL programme really helped me to write my assignments correctly. I was not going to make it without this RPL Programme. (J)*

> *This RPL programme helped me to learn to write to the point with no repeating. It introduced me to the systems and the styles of the university. (E)*

> *The RPL programme assisted us to know the standard of Wits. It assisted us with academic writing, on how to approach assignments, on avoiding plagiarising and so on. RPL contributed to my broader understanding of what is needed at Wits university. (T)*

Capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

As with the students in adult education, this group also expressed pessimism about the capacity of RPL to deliver on policy goals of equity and access:

It can't really bring access or equity because the standard at this university is too high. (J)

This student seems to be suggesting that RPL will only deliver on equity and access for a student who is already familiar with the demands of university and who has obtained a previous qualification. She was one such student, with a previous qualification, and yet she had this to say:

It can only bring equity and access if it is used to upgrade people who already have a qualification. It won't really help someone who has to be orientated to the university first. (E)

RPL for access and credit

Like the responses from the students in adult education, these students' responses reflect both sides of the issues relevant to the question of whether RPL should be used for access or credit. This student seems to be implying that in addition to being a mechanism for access, RPL could also be an intervention that teaches the student to write well. She seems to have internalised the portfolio development course and its emphasis on writing. She now appears to have recognised that the skill in writing well is valued in the university environment. This is what she expresses in this regard.

RPL is useful for access, especially if you come without a degree. RPL should give background to the students to get used to the writing styles and orientation. (E)

This student seems to be pointing to the idea that access students have reached a certain level and that credit students are at another level. One could speculate that the levels may be referring to as writing competences.

Whether you give access or credit depends on the level at which the student enters the university. (J)

The responses also seem to point out that students' experiences of the RPL course had made them privilege the knowledge and skills acquired in the university. The students came to believe that what they received at Wits was always of value, even more valuable than their own experience. Preece points out that students and individuals rarely question or challenge a system from which they have been excluded, and more so if they are trying to access such a system (2000: 3).

Even if I am a manager, I don't mind if I don't get credit for that knowledge and have to do a course in management because that course is still useful. (E)

I don't mind if I have to do a course in something I have experience in because I realise there were some things I was doing wrong. (T)

Most valued experience

In contrast to the adult education students who valued the RPL process in relation to themselves as people rather than students in a university, the students in this case valued the RPL process in terms of the academic skills that it offered them, and the opportunity to acquire skills that had so much currency in the university.

The reading and writing tasks were very useful, they prepared me for further study at the university. (T)

Remember we are in one of the best universities in the country, everything we did was valuable. (T)

I found the team work very useful in the RPL process. (E)

I feel I know what the university wants. (J)

Barriers encountered

Students experienced the insensitivity of the faculty administration first-hand. Each one of the students was vocal about the inflexibility of the overall administrative culture in the faculty.

> *Because we were the pilot group of students, I could see these people who were helping us also did not have answers to some of the questions like are we going to get credit at the end of the course and other administration questions. (J)*

> *Also at times we had questions for the administration, they could not answer us because we were not real students to them. One would wonder who really knows us. Who initiated this RPL course? Administratively, they must get their calendars right, it is very complicated. (E)*

> *At the administration and at the fees office there was confusion, they did not have a code for RPL. (T)*

One student's comment hints at the marginal status of the RPL projects within the university and within the Faculty of Education when he said:

> *It felt like we were a group of students belonging to two lecturers of ours. They were the only ones who understood our plight. (T)*

4.17 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

Like the RPL candidates in adult education, the students here also made suggestions that related to RPL on a broader level than at a programmatic level. It is possible that students did not comment on the particulars of the portfolio course because they were satisfied with what they perceived themselves to have obtained from the course - preparation to study at "one of the best universities in the country'.

The students' suggestions show a need for a clear-cut approach to RPL, one that empowers students to plot their paths in higher education.

> *If the university is going to do this RPL, let there be a policy which is straightforward so that if people want to register for this RPL course they should know what is required of them and when to register and the levels that people need for RPL. (E)*

> *The university must structure the RPL course in a straightforward way and the calendar needs to be more simple. RPL needs good planning and the university should look at lecturers whose job is RPL, not lecturers who have to do RPL and teach Masters students and so on. (T)*

These suggestions are corroborated in the literature on RPL, which considers an RPL policy and clear information on RPL as essentials for successful implementation (Lueddeke, 1997; Thomas, 1998).

This student seems to be suggesting that RPL is valuable for students and the university needs to find ways to carry on with the RPL initiatives:

> *RPL is good and the university must not just leave it. (E)*

4.18 SUMMARY

What do the experiences of students and staff in the teacher education programme tell us about RPL at Wits? It seems that the academics have foregrounded the epistemological challenges of RPL by showing the conflict and tensions they experienced in the implementation and the assessment of the portfolios, which created a conflict between their traditional role as teachers and facilitators of learning with that of assessors of prior learning.

The RPL candidates' experiences appear to suggest that RPL and its processes, administrative and otherwise, need to be carefully thought out. Students experienced the portfolio activities, which emphasised the reading and writing skills, as valuable. They seemed to have worked out that these skills are highly valued in an academic environment. The students' responses tend to show a keen awareness of the institutional requirements, and the need to comply with the requirements for future success at Wits.

In the words of one RPL student interviewed:

> *When we first came to Wits we had qualifications from other colleges where the standard was not as high as the standard at Wits. Now RPL, the first year of our RPL assisted us very well in the sense that we were acquainted to the style of the university, the standard the university needs, you know the type of lecturers the university has and the type of marking. (T)*

4.19 CONCLUSION

The pilot projects at Wits, in adult and teacher education, were tentative and experimental explorations of RPL. The experimental nature of these projects means that there is no firm institutional RPL policy to guide the practice, no

communication strategy to showcase the developments in these pilots, no administrative basis for monitoring the progress of RPL students and no real post-pilot strategy for the implementation of RPL across other departments or schools within the institution. It comes than as no surprise that the lecturers felt that their projects were marginal and did not enjoy visibility and status within the university. This apparent lack of visibility is also not surprising given that researchers within the same professional school, conducting research in the same field and funded by the same donor agency, did not know much about each other's projects.

Is it only about the absence of policy and lack of communication? Could there be other reasons why these pilots were marginal and largely invisible projects within the institution? One could speculate that the university is deliberately overlooking RPL because it is perceived as a taint on the institution as a world class one. Alternatively, one could posit that because the years 2001 and 2002 have seen a trend of increased student intake, the attention of the university is directed to its main clientele - the school-leavers.

At the level of the portfolio courses the experiences of the academics in the two RPL projects suggests that approaches to RPL, even in the same professional school and within the same institution, can be quite diverse. Although both projects were RPL projects in the field of Education, they varied in terms of their aims, content and pedagogy. Overall the two RPL projects reflected different values and practices with respect to RPL. These different orientations become clear in the words of one lecturer from adult education when she questioned:

> *In the field of education and with students who are education practitioners, I believe they need to theorise about their life and about their work experience.... If they experience these two things as totally divorced things, then what is the use of the academic world? (J)*

And in the words of one lecturer from teacher education when she stated:

> *I felt I had to control the discourse. I confirmed to myself through this process of RPL that academic discourse give coherence, gives order, gives meaning. (Y)*

It seems that such paradigmatic differences may also have weakened the status and visibility of the RPL projects, as experienced by the educators. These differences seem to have compromised the RPL initiatives at Wits and may even undermine the coherence and credibility of future RPL initiatives.

In spite of these differences, the experiences of the lecturers suggest that RPL placed a range of burdens and demands on the staff, ranging from intensive tutoring of students, to counselling students, individually and in groups. As one of them stated:

> *It [RPL] made us aware of how much more work we were going to have to do. We started a writing initiative to support students' writing and learning. (J)*

It seems that if Wits wishes to move beyond the pilot projects it may need to learn from the experiences gained in the pilots. The experience of the academics suggests that the "feedback loops" (Coffield, 2000: 30)[23] between practitioners of RPL and those who are and will be formulating RPL policy need to be more effective than they were during the pilot phase. One of the academics said:

[23] Coffield (2000) points out that educational reform is plagued by the lack of communication between practitioners and those who formulate policy within institutions. This absence of "feedback loops" is identified as a major "weakness" that hampers educational reform.

At Wits, decision-making around RPL policy at an institutional level is divorced from initiatives at departmental and school level. (G)

Another way in which Wits could learn from the experience in the pilots is to consider pursuing its future RPL initiatives in the context of the Wits Plus Centre for Part-Time Studies (discussed earlier in this Chapter). Wits Plus is perceived to have an adult learner focus (Castle and Munro, 2002), somewhat different from the wider institutional focus on the school-leaver. Here the adult educators and adult education seem well placed epistemologically to provide the direction for future developments in RPL, because adult education and RPL seem to be compatible. In the context of Wits Plus, this option is viable, because unlike the wider institution, here adult education is perceived as powerful and prestigious enough to drive an initiative like RPL. However, simply moving RPL to Wits Plus, or merely creating places in the university for RPL students, will not change the nature of their participation in higher education, as seen in the experiences of students. Strategic action at Wits may need to recognise and respond to significant changes to teaching and learning, student support, support in career guidance and financial support for RPL students.

Yet, of interest is that students do not seem to expect such changes. They appear ambivalent about the value of their own prior learning, and seem to have accepted that they will have to adapt and change and not the institution. As was pointed out by a student:

I think the student must adjust to the university, so that we don't drop standards, so that we are able to compete internationally, and our university can compete internationally. (T)

Another striking aspect about students' experiences of RPL at Wits hints at students feeling that the institution as a whole, and the faculty administrators in particular, were resistant to RPL. As one student commented:

We were not real students to them [faculty administrators]. (E)

The experiences of both staff and students suggest that RPL is going to have a difficult passage at the University of the Witwatersrand, particularly as neither of the two RPL projects has produced an "agent" or "champion" to take RPL further in the institution. Yet RPL is one of those innovations that can enable institutions to arrive at a greater understanding of themselves and their place in a transforming society, if the challenges and tensions are approached head-on.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

...higher education today has an opportunity unique in its history to contribute to our society.

(Braskamp and Wergin, 1997: 62)

5.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE (UWC)

The University of the Western Cape (UWC) is located in Bellville, on the outskirts of Cape Town. While Johannesburg is set in the economic heartland of South Africa, Cape Town could be considered the cultural and aesthetic heartland of the country, boasting the bounty of both the sea and the mountains, and a rich cultural and ethnic diversity. To build on this rich heritage, the Departments of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Tourism have been exploring the idea of "preparing the Western Cape for the Knowledge Economy of the 21st Century" (Volbrecht, 2002: 304).

INSTITUTIONAL SNAPSHOT

Founded	1959
Location	Bellville
Number of students in 2002	10 414
RPL policy status	RPL Policy strongly linked to the admissions policy
Highest qualification offered	PhD.
Web page	www.uwc.ac.za
RPL pilot	1999-2001

UWC started out as a university college catering to the needs and development of "coloured" students. In 1959, through legislation, the then University College of the Western Cape was established as a constituent college of the University of South Africa. Its course offerings were limited and related to training in professional areas, like teaching and nursing, that would enable the students to serve a separate coloured community, in line with the overall policy of apartheid and separate development.

However, in the 1970s and 1980s students at UWC rejected the apartheid ideology on which the university was established, and the university adopted a policy of non-racialism in terms of both student and staff composition. During this period the university embraced an open policy on admissions, resulting in many African students accessing UWC (a university intended for coloured students only). Because of its sympathy and commitment to social justice and inclusion, UWC became known and was identified as the "intellectual home of the left" (UWC Prospectus, 2001/2) and "the people's university" (Volbrecht, 2002: 316). This orientation to the "left" or to "the people" has also been strengthened by the university's community education projects, in various faculties. It is no surprise then, that the RPL project at UWC has been largely framed within this tradition of social justice, inclusion and community participation.

UWC consolidated its commitment to inclusivity and access by establishing a University Mission Initiative on Lifelong Learning in 1996 and the Division for Lifelong Learning (DLL) in 1998 (Volbrecht, 2002). Both these initiatives coincided with a drastic decline in student intake at UWC during this period. The decline was a result of the institution's inability to carry the student debt caused by non-payment of fees, as well as the government's decision to reduce funding of teacher education programmes (Volbrecht, 2002: 319). This cutback in funding of teacher education programmes, coupled with negative media publicity about the teaching profession, depleted the Faculties of Arts and Education of students, leading to a drastic decline in student numbers at UWC. While this was a trend

that was not unique to UWC, it affected UWC negatively because UWC did not have financial reserves to reverse this trend.

These three factors, that is the decline in student numbers, the generation of a Mission Initiative on Lifelong Learning and the establishment of the Division of Lifelong Learning (DLL), have given shape to and have influenced the RPL initiatives at UWC. It was believed that the Mission Initiative and the Division of Lifelong Learning were explicit ways in which the university could turn the tide of student decline, as they opened the way for adult students to access the university and boost its student intake. These internal initiatives, coupled with the university's orientation to left-wing politics, were given credence by a proliferation of national policies which have highlighted the need for institutions of higher education to transform themselves in the new democratic dispensation, by widening access.

In many ways the university responded to its decline in student numbers, which could have resulted in its demise, in a positive way, by reinventing itself and promoting its image as an institution of lifelong learning committed to access and equity. The 2000s has seen the university market itself as a university of and for "lifelong learning". With this identity, the university has a three-year rolling plan for the years 2000-2002. Part of the plan has been to finalise its policy on RPL, which it accomplished in the year 2000, and to launch a "project for the systematic implementation of RPL", which it accomplished in 2001 (UWC, 1999).

To this end the university has attracted funds from outside agencies and allocated funds from within the university. The rolling plan targets the administrators of the university, RPL students and assessors for such funding. In terms of the administrators, the aim seems to be to create the necessary administrative structures that are enabling and facilitative of RPL. In so far as the students and assessors are concerned, the rolling plan aims to ensure that assessors have the assessment and counselling skills needed for RPL, and that students have the

assistance and support to complete portfolios of evidence of prior learning. Other key aims of this rolling plan are to develop marketing and recruitment strategies, advocate RPL across the university, implement staff development workshops on RPL, and finally monitor and evaluate this rolling plan to meet the quality assurance requirements of UWC.

Aspects of this plan, like staff development, have been criticised by some (Volbrecht, 2002) who point out that the plan is not explicit enough about who will facilitate the staff development, how it will be implemented and who are the main beneficiaries. Such a weak approach to staff development could result in this aim not being met at all.

UWC's bold and ambitious approach seems to have been influenced by larger developments within the provincial departments of Economic Affairs, Agriculture and Tourism, which aim for the province of the Western Cape to become:

> ... a leading learning region which successfully equips its people and businesses to acquire and apply knowledge effectively in a rapidly changing world;
>
> ... an outward looking region, linked to the rest of South Africa, Africa and the world, and capable of competing successfully in the global knowledge economy;
>
> ... a leading centre for entrepreneurship and innovation;
>
> ... a Cape of Good Hope for all, capable of promoting sustainable growth, equitable development, economic empowerment and an improved quality of life for all .
>
> (Volbrecht, 2002: 304).

In contrast to the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), UWC appears to have the edge in that it has a well-thought-out plan of action for RPL. It is clear from the university's description of its rolling plan that RPL seems to be recognised as a priority by administrators at UWC, and that training, development, resources and

communication are seen to be essential ingredients for the university to meet its commitment to RPL. And these plans dovetail with initiatives at a provincial level to turn the Western Cape into a "learning region". According to Volbrecht a major challenge facing the UWC and the provincial departments to turn the region into a learning region are the "stark levels of inequality of living conditions... and low participation rates in higher education in the region" (ibid: 307-308).

5.2 RPL POLICY INITIATIVES AT UWC

In this research, UWC was the only institution that has an RPL policy in place; it is therefore described in detail to give the reader a contrast with what was discussed earlier, in Chapter Four, and with what is still to come in Chapters Six and Seven. The significance of an institutional policy has emerged as essential both in the literature (Lueddeke, 1997; Thomas, 1998) and in this study (discussed in Chapter Eight).

Unlike Wits, where RPL was largely an exploratory initiative within the School of Education, at UWC RPL promised to guarantee the survival of the institution, and it was linked to lifelong learning and is one of the flagships of the university (Volbrecht, 2002: 337). In addition to this the DLL was tasked with the advocacy and the management of the RPL process across the entire university. Other tasks relate to increasing the participation of adult students, customising learning pathways for these students, introducing resource based learning, developing an entrepreneurial culture and developing flexible qualifications that are modularised. The DLL appears to be clearly positioning the university to respond to the broad economic, social and "learning" imperatives of the Western Cape region. In the words of one respondent in this study:

> *UWC is clearly using lifelong learning to carve a distinctive niche in the learning market. (T)*

The DLL in its RPL task developed a portfolio development course (which is discussed in detail later on in this chapter), and an RPL Policy, Procedures and Practices document, both of which have the backing of senior management including the Vice Rector, Academic Affairs, who is driving RPL at UWC.

The Policy, Procedures and Practices document is presented as a broad framework for the implementation of RPL at UWC. The policy has been finalised and is strongly linked to the admissions policy of the university.

The Policy, Procedure and Practices document defines RPL as:

> ...the formal acknowledgment of the knowledge and capabilities that people possess as a result of prior learning. The process acknowledges that this learning may have occurred through formal, informal and non-formal means - through study, work or other life experiences.
>
> (Volbrecht, 2000: 1)

The policy goes on to distinguish between different forms of RPL including recognition of prior experiential learning (ibid: 2). The following forms of RPL are presented:

> ...mature age exemption
>
> ...senate discretion (a limited form of RPL)
>
> ...senate discretion for access to postgraduate studies
>
> ...formal recognition of credits from other institutions, such as credit transfer
>
> ...recognition of academic readiness for purposes of access
>
> ...recognition of academic readiness for purposes of advanced standing

...recognition of prior learning acquired experientially.[24]

It is interesting to note that the different types of RPL mentioned here resonate with the different perspectives or models of RPL discussed in Chapter Three. These models range from technical approaches to RPL to transformatory types of RPL. The broad and flexible approach taken here suggests that the university would consider different types of RPL being practised within various departments across the university. If this is the case the university may experience less internal resistance to RPL, because these different types of RPL seem to create a space for diversity in the practice of RPL. However, if the practices go unchecked and are not driven by a common vision and a clear purpose, it is possible that some quick-fix approaches to RPL may loose sight of its redress agenda.

Further on in the document the context for RPL at UWC is presented. The document identifies the national policy imperatives, as well as the institution's broader vision and mission in lifelong learning, as two contextual features influencing the move to RPL. It is interesting to note that the policy does not directly identify the issue of the drastic student decline at UWC as a reason for implementing RPL because it brings in students. Instead it justifies RPL as a strategy for widening access to UWC and identifies RPL as a policy imperative of the new government seeking to transform education and training.

The policy document then goes on to commit the institution to nine RPL principles:

> RPL will be a "learning centred" philosophy that will honour both the institution and the student.
>
> Assessment practices will be fair and open.

[24] Credit could be awarded for learning that is different from the competences prescribed for a particular UWC qualification. In such a case experiential learning would be credited in the qualification even if such learning does not "neatly substitute' for a component in the learning programme or qualification. Harris (2000: 113) refers to this type of credit as "general credit". She contrasts it with "specific credit", where credit is only given if students' learning is evaluated to be the same as the learning in the course for which credit is being sought.

> If RPL is used for credit for core modules, that is those modules considered essential to the qualification, prior learning will have to match course outcomes in which credit is being sought.
>
> If credit is being sought in elective modules, course outcomes do not have to be matched.
>
> All prior learning must be assessable.
>
> RPL assessment will be appropriately selected.
>
> A qualification may be obtained in whole or in part through RPL.
>
> Candidates who are successful in their RPL applications will not be discriminated against once they have entered a programme of study.
>
> RPL is applicable to all levels of study.
>
> (Volbrecht, 2000: 3-4).

The last section of the document defines the procedures and practices necessary for RPL, and makes clear that the process of developing them will be ongoing at various levels within the university, from senior management level to faculty level to departmental level (Volbrecht, 2000: 4-5).

In so far as the practice of RPL goes the document distinguishes between practices relevant to RPL for access and RPL for credit, in both undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications:

> Assessing prior learning for credit will be decided by the faculties concerned, and the faculties will be cognisant of the broader RPL principles and framework of the university.
>
> Assessing prior learning for access is done before the candidate enrols for a qualification, and assessing prior learning for advanced standing could be administered before or after a student has enrolled at the university.
>
> RPL can be used for access to an undergraduate qualification. Assessment for access means that a student would need to be

> assessed for competences that are expected from school leaving students.
>
> RPL can be used for credit in an undergraduate qualification. This can take the form of credit transfer, that is, accepting courses obtained from other higher education institutions.
>
> RPL can also be used for accrediting informal learning, if the candidate is able to provide the "relevant evidence which is assessed by properly qualified university assessors and external moderators".
>
> (Volbrecht, 2000: 5)

The document cautions that RPL for credit can only be practised if the assessment process is "rigorous and supportive of the individual student" (ibid: 5). It is explicit that "rigorous" requires the assessment criteria to be relevant to the outcomes of the course for which credit is being sought.

The meaning of "rigorous" is elaborated thus:

> In order to be rigorous the assessment, whether done through examination or through 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 or credit in a postgraduate qualification is governed by the discretion of the University Senate.
>
> (ibid: 5).

With respect to RPL procedures, the document provides a step-by-step guide for the new RPL applicant (Volbrecht, 2000: 5-6).

> The DLL is the first port of call for the RPL candidate inquiring about RPL.
>
> The DLL would then refer the candidate to the relevant faculty, where an application for RPL would be lodged.
>
> Faculties and departments are required to have clear and explicit procedures that inform the student about the expectations of the

> university, but also about the support that students can expect through the RPL process.
>
> Faculties and departments in turn can expect guidelines regarding the steps required in RPL as well as staff development in RPL from the university, through the DLL.
>
> The University through its Deans and Heads of Departments will explore the workload implications of RPL for staff in terms of "assessment, counselling, administration, public relations, marketing, networking, advocacy and staff development".
>
> (ibid: 6)

The section on procedures commits the university to raise the funds calculated as necessary for the implementation of RPL, and to monitor the implementation process "so that RPL features in the quality assurance policy and procedure of the university" (ibid: 7).

UWC's strategic policy on RPL is distinct from the Wits policy response to RPL that consists of recommendations rather than firm policy. As discussed earlier, the UWC response must be seen in the context of a decline in student numbers, but also in the context of a firm vision and mission of broadening access, and thereby being responsive to the majority of South Africans hitherto denied opportunities to participate in higher education. The arrival of RPL on the higher education scene has provided a space and an opportunity for the university to commit itself to lifelong learning and to demonstrate its commitment and responsiveness to disadvantaged students.

Volbrecht cautions that while UWC seems to have the enabling conditions for the uptake of RPL there is no guarantee that this will happen. He points to the weak approach taken on staff development and the understaffed DLL as two of the main stumbling blocks (2002: 335). Furthermore, UWC seems to take a cautionary stance on RPL for credit and this contrasts with the radical rhetoric of the policy document as a whole.

5.3 RPL RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT UWC

The Joint Education Trust (JET) funded the RPL research project for the period 1999-2001. Additional funding was also received from the South Africa/Norwegian Tertiary Education (SANTED) programme. The initial intention was to develop a portfolio development course, which came to be known as the PDC, in a series of partnerships between the DLL and Faculties of the University. Due to various problems associated with the funding as well as finding an appropriate person to manage and lead the RPL project, the DLL designed and implemented a portfolio development course. The year 1999 focused on conceptualising RPL and the RPL policy. The year 2000 saw the finalisation of the RPL policy and the conceptualisation and marketing of the portfolio development course. The year 2001 saw the implementation of the PDC course to the first intake of RPL students at UWC.

5.4 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE

The university has an RPL policy that is designed to ensure that RPL takes place across all the departments within the university. As part of its access initiatives, UWC offered two main routes to students. One was a battery of academic tests administered by the Academic Planning Unit (APU), and the other was a Portfolio Development Course (PDC) administered by DLL, and presented twice a year, from June to August and again from September to November.

The DLL advises students on which of the two routes is appropriate for the RPL candidate. Students are advised about the time-saving nature of the academic tests because they consist of activities which enable a student to display academic potential, whereas the PDC may be a vehicle for understanding and expressing past learning and experience (Volbrecht and Hendricks, 2001: 4; Volbrecht, 2002: 358).

113 students applied to the University for access through RPL, 29 of whom participated in the APU tests while 84 participated in the PDC. While 18 of the 29 students passed the APU tests and were recommended for access, 45 of the 84 students completed the PDC, and 34 were recommended for access. The majority of the students who applied for access through RPL were males (67%), with females at 33%.

Trends in 2002 have indicated the PDC to be the popular choice of students who have extensive work experience and are over thirty years of age, while the APU is the choice of students who are under thirty with less work experience, but more formal schooling, that is those with a matric or standard nine pass. Of interest is the fact that students who are unsuccessful in the APU tests are eligible for the PDC and vice versa. At the time of writing, in late 2002, this opportunity had not been taken up by any student at UWC. The overall cost to the student, of both the PDC and the APU tests, was pegged at one hundred rands each. However, costing in 2002 has changed, with the PDC pegged at three hundred rands and the APU tests at one hundred and fifty rands. Because the focus of this study is on the experiences of participants in RPL programmes, this chapter has examined the experiences of the participants in the context of the PDC rather than the academic tests.

Six students were interviewed for the purposes of this study. Zelda, Ebrahim and Tina applied for access to the Bachelor of Law degree programme, while Gregory and Dominic applied for access to the Bachelor of Arts degree programme, and Bernadette applied for access to the Bachelor of Curation degree programme. All six students were successful. Presently, three of the students are continuing with their studies (Dominic, Gregory and Bernadette), while Zelda completed the first year of study and has not been able to return to her studies due to financial problems. Tina has not been able to take up the offer of access due to the financial implications of studying at university. Ebrahim has also not taken up the offer of access due to personal and financial problems. The irony here is that even

though RPL seems to promise redress in terms of past educational inequalities, poverty still remains the major cause for educational deprivation and disadvantage in South Africa.

Born in the 1960s and 1970s, four of the six students (Zelda, Ebrahim, Dominic and Gregory) dropped out of school in grade nine, due to poverty. Of interest is that each of these students completed that year of study successfully. This strongly suggests that these were not weak students who dropped out of school due to failure, but rather due to economic hardship that characterised the lives of each of the students interviewed. Some of them carry these economic strains with them today and are once again unable to take up offers of access, through RPL, because they simply cannot afford to pay the tuition fees associated with study in higher education.

All four students had to find employment to be able to supplement the family income. Zelda worked for the Road Accident Fund as a claims handler, a job she has held for many years, while Ebrahim managed a petrol station for many years. Dominic has worked as a child care worker in a boys' reformatory and has held this job ever "since he knows himself", while Gregory worked as a beach constable and a dance teacher at a primary school. Tina and Bernadette are the only two students in the group who obtained senior certificates (matric) without exemption, the mandatory requirement for admission in a South African university. While Tina has worked as a diamond buyer in one of the largest jewellery companies in South Africa, Bernadette has always worked as a nursing assistant in the spinal unit of a public hospital.

Of the six students interviewed, three are male and three are female and all are black.

The two academics, Natheem and Terry, who were largely responsible for the design and implementation of the portfolio development course, are employed in

the DLL. Both have experience in teaching adult education courses either in mainstream programmes or web-based programmes. They seem to be firmly committed to the need for academics to develop multiple literacies so as to be responsive to diverse students accessing the university. They appear to work comfortably with the idea that as academics they need to find and promote inclusive forms of knowledge production and develop open and transparent methods for teaching and learning. They appear to view education as an important part of the larger project aimed at political, social and economic justice. With this orientation the portfolio development course (PDC) was mounted at UWC.

The PDC was offered for the first time to the first intake of RPL students in January 2001. The faculties that gave access to students on the basis of prior learning were the Faculties of Law[25], Arts, Education, and Community and Health Sciences.[26] Faculties or Departments were also able to administer any other test they saw fit once students had gained access into the faculty or department through the PDC.

The PDC required RPL candidates to write a curriculum vitae, to present an autobiographical learning history, to provide evidence for claims made in the learning history, to select a text relevant to the field they were applying for and to present a critical discussion of the text. Interestingly, while the academics in the teacher education RPL project at Wits selected the readings for the students (see Chapter Four), at UWC *students* selected their own texts. The academics (designers of the PDC) were confident that students had a knowledge of the field they were seeking access to. This belief in the learners resonates with the

[25] Interestingly, the Faculty of Law at UWC has not suffered a decline in student numbers when compared with the other faculties. In fact Law has seen an increase in student numbers when the rest of the university was facing a decline. Academics at UWC suggest this trend could be attributed to the perception among students that law as a field of study holds a high social status and is therefore a sought-after qualification. In addition to this the Faculty of Law has been open and proactive to the idea of widening access to students without a matric exemption. So broadening access coupled with the perceived status of the qualification ensured a healthy student intake each year.

[26] In the Faculty of Community and Health Sciences it was the Department of Nursing and Social Work that offered access to RPL students.

epistemological orientation and pedagogical approach and attitude of the staff in the adult education project at Wits. It is interesting to note that the staff of the DLL at UWC who were instrumental in the RPL project were drawn from that institution's Centre for Adult and Continuing Education.

> *The format we chose for the portfolio gave us an opportunity to interrogate some of the dominant ideas in international and national RPL practice. (T)*

The PDC course ran for three weeks. Students were guided through the process by mentors from the DLL and others from the university. In the first session students were introduced to the notion of RPL, and were encouraged to examine their motivations for seeking RPL. Students were then encouraged to identify examples of learning acquired in formal and informal contexts that would be of value to their new learning at UWC. Students were assisted in this activity by mentors, who also provided students with examples of such learning.

After this activity, students were introduced to the PDC and the activities that constituted the portfolio, namely the curriculum vitae, autobiography, evidence in support of learning claims, and critical reading of a relevant text. Students were given a task to complete for each of these activities and they were assisted by a mentor.

Once students were satisfied with the outline of the PDC they began to work on their portfolios. Students were allocated to mentors who would assist with advice on how to compile the portfolio, and how to manage their time between work, home and university effectively.

In the second session staff presented the students with examples of appropriate portfolios, which included assessors' responses to such portfolios. After reviewing these specimen portfolios, students were encouraged to present their

draft portfolios to the student group. Upon presentation students received feedback from both the mentors and their peers on how to improve the portfolio.

At the end of this session each student was required to consolidate the suggestions and feedback they received from mentors and peers on their portfolios, and to write a reflective account on what was outstanding before they finalised their portfolios. This reflective account had to be included in the final portfolio submitted by the student.

In the third and final session of the PDC students submitted their portfolios. In this session students in pairs role-played the portfolio assessment process; that is one student played the role of the assessor while the other the role of the RPL candidate who was presenting the portfolio for access to a particular department. This role-play enabled the students to begin to consider ways to defend their portfolios and the evidence of learning.

5.4.1 RPL ASSESSMENT

The DLL provided assessment guidelines for assessors to ensure that the assessment process was fair to both the assessor and the student alike. Assessment of the portfolios was conducted by members of the faculty in which access was being sought.

The guidelines for assessors encouraged them to use an interview format, which creates an opportunity for the RPL candidate to explain the contents of the portfolio to highlight appropriate knowledge and skills acquired through experience.

The guidelines also reminded assessors that the RPL student is seeking access to a qualification and not advanced standing. The guideline therefore alerts the assessor to evaluate the candidate's readiness to begin a particular programme,

and not to focus on advanced skills and competences. Assessors are advised to seek internal and external evaluations of their assessment of a portfolio, and once this process of evaluation has been finalised, the assessor completes a report that either recommends or withholds access.

Like the lecturers in both Wits RPL pilot projects, the academics in the DLL at UWC were clear that RPL students needed to be supported through the RPL process, both at the point of access and once students were in the programme. Where there are differences from the teacher education project at Wits is that academics at UWC did not experience a "conflict" or a dilemma in their assessor and mentoring roles (or "socialising" as it was referred to by academic staff in the teacher education project). It is possible that this was not a dilemma because the academics in the DLL were preparing students for access into a variety of faculties. The academics in the DLL were not familiar with the epistemological orientations of these faculties, and this lack of awareness may have freed them to support and mentor students in their quest for access into the university. In addition to this, the academics at UWC were convinced from the onset that the PDC was a tool for students to gain access to the university. A clear RPL policy supported them in this conviction. This clear starting point enabled the lecturers to suffer less conflict in their assessor/mentoring role than those in teacher education at Wits.

Although the academics in teacher education (Wits) also separated the mentoring and assessment roles, a dilemma arose from the fact that they were mentoring and preparing students for a faculty whose epistemological orientation they knew intimately. Their observation about the skills and orientations that RPL students required (and did not have) to study in such a faculty may have resulted in the conflict between their roles as mentor (socialiser) and assessor. This dilemma was compounded because they were seeking to give access and credit in the same RPL pilot project.

It could also be suggested that the academics at UWC did not experience the same "dilemma" or "academic struggle" as those in teacher education at Wits, because the academics at UWC have a different philosophy and orientation to assessment of adult learners. This orientation becomes clear when both of the UWC academics pointed out:

> *Surely your objective in RPL and in education is not only about assessing, but also about student development and growth and that's what you do in a learning programme whether it's RPL for access or credit. (N)*

> *I think whether a student is seeking RPL for credit or RPL for access, the students should be supported through the RPL process - there should be mentor support. After all, even postgraduate and PhD students receive supervision and mentoring, and such mentoring will shape the overall product [research report or thesis]. (T)*

A similar orientation is expressed by an adult educator at Wits:

> *I think the assessor role is actually secondary... assessment must be subordinate to what one's overall aims are in education, and my overall aims in education and training are to bring students into a learning experience. The assessor should know that the aim is to bring people in, to develop them rather than to exclude them. (J)*

These orientations to adult learning and assessment contrast sharply with the orientation of the teacher educators at Wits, who stated:

> *What RPL assessors are doing is that they are taking glimpses of experiential knowledge from RPL candidates, they clean it up, they*

put structure and organisation to it. What does this do to the knowledge they want to recognise and whose knowledge is it now... that is clean, structured and organised? (Y)

And:

I would be much harsher if the students want credit, because this he must do on his own. I would have said here is a portfolio development course, I will give some input on what portfolios are, how they work and maybe some input on language issues, and then they will have to do it and I will spend time on the assessment. I am not sure that it will empower them, but from the point of view of the university it will be more efficient and realistic. (Y)

It seems that this educator sees a clear distinction between teaching and assessing. She seem to think that mediating or facilitating learning is devious, misleading and possibly unfair, more so if the learner is to get credit for learning from experience.

5.5 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL AT UWC

What do the experiences of academics and students at UWC tell us about RPL? An analysis of their views is presented, as in the Wits case study. Many of the issues raised here resonate with the tensions associated with RPL models and practices reviewed in Chapter Three.

Institutional context and faculty support

In 2001 UWC was of one of a few institutions of higher learning (three out of 36) in South Africa that had a formal RPL policy in place. The consequence of this is

that UWC is seen as publicly committing itself to a set of aims, goals and action. The experiences of both staff and students suggests that UWC is engaging in RPL in response to a decline in student numbers, but it is also because of its historical commitment to broadening access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. As one academic commented:

> *It's not only about numbers. Anyone who knows the history of UWC will know that UWC is the intellectual home of the left, and in fact many UWC academics were part of the movement for change in South Africa. Furthermore, UWC sees RPL as central to its role as a university for the working class. (N)*

And one RPL student stated:

> *UWC has always had the concern of the disadvantaged student at heart. (D)*

Both academics agreed that because the office of the Vice Rector, Academic Affairs, was driving RPL initiatives within the university, they enjoyed more success than RPL initiatives in other universities. Furthermore, because of this support from senior management within the university, the academics could come up with an RPL Policy and Procedure document that would apply across the whole institution.

> *The positive role played by the university leadership was crucial in facilitating the institutionalisation of RPL. (N)*

Although this case was different from the Wits scenario with respect to support from institutional management, interestingly, this project, like the two at Wits, also witnessed rigidity and inflexibility from administrative staff at faculty level.

A possible reluctance of staff at faculty level could be that staff see themselves as highly qualified to deal with students and do not see a need for further training in working with RPL students. (N)

Challis (1993) offers another reason by suggesting that RPL sometimes unsettles staff (academic and administrative) resulting in reluctance to get involved with something that is unfamiliar.

RPL for access and credit

Although the university policy upholds RPL for access and credit, in practice RPL has been used only for access and not credit. Some of the academics and central administrators of the university felt that because RPL was in the initial stages of implementation, introducing RPL for access rather than credit offered a straightforward and relatively simple way to administer and implement RPL, and the success in this initial initiative would pave the way for implementing RPL for credit in the future.

Perhaps this strategic decision was relatively straightforward at UWC because it was concerned with undergraduate admissions and was therefore able to take such a clear line on the question of RPL for credit and access. In contrast, Wits was concerned with access to more advanced levels of study, and therefore issues of relating the value of experiential learning to academic learning were not easily sidestepped.

RPL for access was a strategic move on the part of the university. RPL for access allowed students to access the university and it gave the university an opportunity to monitor the students' progress at university. The information about student progress can be used to advocate for the implementation of RPL for credit. We

first wanted to get access right and then to showcase the students' performance on this RPL route to advocate RPL for credit. (N)

I have no problem with RPL for access or credit. If a student can demonstrate the knowledge and the skills required for a course or qualification, they should get access, and if they have the knowledge and skills in an area then these should provide the student with credit. (T)

Capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

The lecturers distinguished between RPL as an exercise to determine knowledge equivalence and RPL to provide economic opportunities for adults who were deprived of such opportunities due to apartheid policies. They raised the issue of the economic benefits of RPL by pointing out that if RPL was merely an exercise to assess how people translate one type of knowledge into another, then the possibilities for access and equity are slim, because the hegemony of the university and of academic knowledge prevails. However, if adults could improve their wages and their future job prospects through RPL then it has the potential to redress past inequalities and bring about equity, as espoused in policy documents.

If RPL is about knowledge equivalence then it will not bring about access or equity because university knowledge cannot meet other knowledges on equal ground and university knowledge is too entrenched and well established for other knowledges to compete with it. (T)

If RPL improves their [students'] job opportunities then it could bring about equity. (N)

Many students' autobiographies show that they had to leave school at an early age and join the job market accepting unskilled and semi-skilled positions just to bring income into the family. Many of these students were high achievers in their class and at school. (N)

These experiences contrast with those of the teacher educators at Wits, who felt that equity could be achieved only if students were provided with the necessary support structures to cope and succeed Wits in the same way that mainstream students succeeded. The educators at UWC felt that equity could be attained if students could get better jobs. While the educators at Wits foregrounded success with access as an indicator of equity, the educators at UWC foregrounded better job prospects as a sign of equity through RPL.

RPL is pedagogically challenging

The academics felt that RPL, like any innovation in the practice of teaching and learning, is challenging. The challenge related to enabling adult students to function effectively in an environment that is designed mostly for school-leavers. For academic staff the pedagogic challenges relate to having learners in class from whom lecturers could learn a thing or two. Academic staff in this case expected and accepted RPL to be problematic, messy and challenging. Like life and life experience, they expected unclear boundaries and narratives that did not have a neat beginning, middle and end. Like the academics at Wits in adult education, the academics at UWC foresaw the challenges for the candidate, the academic department and the institution's administration. Unlike the Wits project in teacher education, the academics in the UWC RPL pilot did not experience the same dilemmas on the question of assessment and the conflicting role of the academics as assessors and mentors.

RPL, like any other teaching and learning activity, is challenging, more so if you wish to bring it into the mainstream. (N)

Experiential learning and academic learning

The lecturers did not see academic learning as being on a collision path with experiential learning. They suggested that although they started on the RPL process at UWC with a principle that experiential learning should be seen as worthwhile on its own without having to be comparable to academic learning, they have changed their position and are looking for ways in which the two knowledges could interface but also to show the power-laden nature of knowledge. They believed that experiential knowledge could not oust academic knowledge, and that RPL students wanted access to, and valued, academic knowledge. The academics seem to be caught in a tension of having to valorise experiential knowledge over students' needs and desires to access academic knowledge. Their experience with RPL seems to have convinced the academics that both knowledges are important, and if they over-value experiential knowledge, this move could exclude and distance students even further from academic knowledge. They seem to be struggling with the knowledge paradox - if they value experiential knowledge only they marginalise the students in a university environment where academic knowledge is powerful. If on the other hand they render experiential knowledge invisible then they are contributing to the dominance of academic knowledge in the academy.

> *I found that RPL candidates want access to academic knowledge. They are not setting up their knowledge in opposition to academic knowledge. When I started out on this RPL project I was interested in indigenous knowledge, now I am more interested in the way different knowledges talk to each other. (T)*

> *The two can and should complement each other. RPL is not about denying academic forms of knowing and learning, rather it's about*

exploring ways in which experiential learning can also be part of the repertoire of students' learning within the university. (N)

5.6 SUGGESTION FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

The academics were vocal about what could inform future RPL practices at UWC and in higher education generally. They made suggestions that related strongly to the implementation of RPL at the institutional, administrative, staff and student levels.

The experience of staff at UWC shows the contextual nature of RPL. They suggest an understanding of the context and of winning support before implementing RPL. In the words of one academic at UWC:

Get to know the institution. Learn to strategise and form alliances with senior members of faculties as well as academic planners within the university. (N)

A similar suggestion was made by one educator in the Wits teacher education project.

Any RPL venture has to be quite sure that they know all the regulations of the institutions and they do everything by the book. (C)

The lecturers pointed out that RPL should be a mainstream activity of the university, although they recognise that advocacy plays a crucial role in this regard.

Advocacy is very important in the early stages of implementation of RPL. (N)

There is clearly a need to develop an advocacy strategy among academics at UWC. (T)

With regard to the Portfolio Development Course, one academic said:

I would like to give voice to collective knowledges in the PDC before we go into individual knowledges. In fact RPL provides a space to examine localised, situated and contextual knowledge as worthwhile knowledge. (N)

We need to seek answers to the language question, that is what do students need, especially those who do not speak English as a first language? We found many students dropped out of the PDC once they realised that English was the main language for mentoring and assessment and they realised they would not cope. (N)

With regard to the administration system of the University, one respondent said:

We need to create an administrative system that allows RPL students on the same database as mainstream students, just to ensure that future disputes within the university or with students, can be resolved with all the information at hand. Presently information relating to RPL students is being recorded on a separate database in the DLL. (N)

On the need for staff development both academics pointed out:

RPL needs staff development for both support staff and administrative staff, something that needs attention at UWC. (N)

Staff development is vital to institutionalise RPL. (T)

Interestingly, the issue of staff development did not come up as a suggestion at Wits. One could speculate that the staff do not think of staff development as an important ingredient for RPL, or that staff development is not part of the overall ethos at Wits.

5.7 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL AT UWC

The capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

Students expressed confidence that RPL would deliver on equity and access. This was in contrast to the views of students in both Wits projects. There could be a variety of reasons for this view, ranging from the age and sophistication of the students at UWC, the belief and orientation of the lecturers, the status and support that the RPL project received within the institution, and finally to the type of portfolio development course that students experienced.

I think most definitely, RPL can bring about equity and access. (D)

Yes, through RPL, people can improve academically as well as their lifestyle as well as the community they find themselves in. (E)

It's a tool for access, and can bring about equity. (T)

It most certainly can provide equity and access. In my case all I needed was access. (G)

It can do both. (Z)

RPL gave me a chance to improve myself, it gave me access and equity. (B)

RPL for access and credit

It was interesting to note that RPL students at UWC, like their counterparts at Wits, were not uncritical of RPL for access and credit. Their responses show an awareness of the complexity of RPL. They point out that credit should only be awarded if the prior learning is relevant to the qualification that the student wishes to access. They also point to the need for quality assurance when prior learning is recognised and accredited.

RPL is a great key for access into the university, but it must have checks and balances. (T)

I think a person with the necessary prior learning should gain entrance to the university. However he should only get credit for diploma or certificate courses done that are relevant to subject he wants to do. (D)

RPL for credit must be investigated carefully and I also realise that RPL for credit will be difficult because how do you value a person's learning from experience? (G)

I think RPL for credit must take place. (B)

Most valued experience

The students in this case pointed to the process being valuable personally, academically and for developing a future career path. Like the students in the Wits teacher education project, the UWC students valued the RPL process for the academic benefits it afforded them.

> *The orientation to the portfolio development course, such as critical thinking and basing your argument on solid evidence prepared me and made me focused and motivated. (D)*

> *The portfolio course was a good initiation into academic life. It showed the importance of writing in a university setting. (G)*

> *The portfolio development course really prepared me for university life, something I could not and did not have from experience. (B)*

Like the students in the Wits adult education project, the UWC students valued the process because it improved their confidence and sense of personal identity.

> *I found the building of my own profile in the portfolio development course a valuable exercise. (E)*

> *The portfolio course made me realise that I could have a chance to further my studies. The RPL process has given me a sense of hope. (T)*

> *I have become a lot more conscious about my prior learning. The portfolio made me select important aspects of my prior learning and this made me feel confident about myself and my learning. (G)*

The students in this case felt that the RPL process enabled them to plan a career and learning path for themselves.

> *The portfolio development course makes you see who you really are and where you're heading. It helped me to put my life and career back into perspective again. (D)*

> *I always knew who I was, but the portfolio connected for me where I wanted to go. (G)*

> *I made me decide clearly what I wanted to do. (T)*

> *It assisted me in deciding what was important to me. (Z)*

Barriers encountered

Some of the RPL candidates experienced difficulty in gathering evidence for portfolio assessment.

> *The only real difficulties I experienced is finding the correct documents from institutes that I was employed at 5-6 years ago, and also from places that I worked at for short periods of time. (E)*

> *Evidence is not always easy to get hold of. (D)*

> *Going back, finding evidence was difficult. (G)*

All the students, like those in the adult education case, were conscious of the heavy demands of university life and of portfolio courses, as two students pointed out.

I found the portfolio course intimidating and heavy in the beginning, but this was professionally eased off by good facilitators. (T)

There were a lot of assignments to finish and this was sometimes frightening with work, family and university. (D)

5.8 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

Unlike the students at Wits, who had many suggestions to make, the students in this case made few suggestions and the suggestions were specific and directed to the portfolio course. Students agreed that the RPL portfolio course gave them a chance to present their prior learning effectively and that they were provided with the necessary support to complete their portfolios. Suggestions for improvement centred around the portfolio:

I would extend the duration of the portfolio course, as time was too short. (D)

Would test for a person's knowledge of prior learning because it is not always possible to get proof from a company that states a person's knowledge capabilities. (E)

Use students who have experienced the RPL portfolio course to mentor new RPL students. This can be valuable to the new student and it assists the experienced student because it involves you in campus life as an adult learner. (G)

Give students some academic guidance but also financial guidance, because after access you have to see if you can financially afford to come to the university. (T)

5.9 CONCLUSION

In the words of one of the academics interviewed in this study:

> *The RPL programme at UWC was conceptualised as an intervention to contribute to social transformation and aimed to increase student numbers by widening access to higher education. (N)*

In the words of the coordinator of part-time programmes at the university:

> *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. (Koetsier, 1998: 63).*

These positions clearly describe the major factors shaping RPL at UWC. While these were the forces shaping RPL, they operated in a contextual environment that was conducive to the uptake of RPL. UWC is well known as a community-oriented university, which has openly committed itself to a flexible admissions policy, to social justice and to equity in education. Furthermore, it has an ideological orientation that has characterised it as the "university of the left". These contextual influences coupled with the factors described earlier have worked together to shape UWC's response to RPL. The University has taken RPL head-on when compared with the University of the Witwatersrand. UWC has experienced a decline in student numbers, but it developed a vision to open access to previously disadvantaged students into higher education, and RPL created the space and the opportunity to deliver on both these imperatives.

RPL is being implemented as part of a three year rolling plan for the years 2000-2002. The leadership at the university tasked the DLL to formulate an RPL policy

as well as design and implement a portfolio development course. An important feature of the plan is that it aims to introduce RPL at the level of administration and at the level of individual departments. This two-pronged approach attempts to ensure that RPL policy and practices permeate all the levels of the institution, and that the channels of communication are open to all. The "strategy for channelling RPL communication through the offices of the Vice-Rector, Academic Affairs facilitated the smooth introduction of RPL at UWC" (Hendricks, 2001: 55).

In addition to ensuring that there was a free flow of information and communication on RPL and its policy process within the university, the UWC RPL Forum ensured the free flow of information to outside constituencies, like the unions, the department of education, prospective RPL students and other interested parties. The policy, procedure and practices relating to RPL have been strongly linked to the admissions requirements of the university as well as in quality assurance procedures. Furthermore, UWC has undertaken to market RPL, recruit students, and develop capacity among academics and administrators around issues of RPL implementation. Importantly, UWC is on an advocacy drive to make students and staff aware of RPL and the possibilities it offers to both students and staff alike.

A major challenge to the university is implementing the policy across the whole institution and getting commitment from departments who do not have to attract students.

> *The success or failure of RPL is dependent on the support of the academic staff members, and support needed was definitely not universal amongst academic staff. (N)*

> *There is clearly a need to develop an advocacy strategy amongst academics at UWC. (T)*

A second challenge is to facilitate success once students have gained access to the institution, and this challenge is intensified since UWC has committed itself to becoming an institution of lifelong learning and such a commitment promises to bring in diverse students with varying needs.

> *We [in the DLL] worked with the assumption that students need assistance, guidance and support, [but] most academics seem not to have read or engaged with what the RPL policy might mean for their practice and there is very little interest shown... in developing expertise in RPL assessment. (T)*

An associated challenge is to explore RPL for credit at UWC. Thus far UWC has engaged in RPL for access only. Although its policy document is explicit about RPL for credit, UWC still has to tread this path. This path will be complicated because UWC has managed to accept "other knowledge" as valuable and valid for access, will it be able to accept such knowledge as valid for academic credit?

> *There is evident reluctance to move from RPL for access to RPL for credit or advanced standing. (T)*

A final challenge is to see if the university can sustain the pace of change that lifelong learning and RPL demand when its funding from external agencies declines. It is at this point that the power of the DLL for change and transformation will be put to the test:

> *While it is clear that the JET / SANTED project can make a significant contribution to the implementation of lifelong learning and RPL at UWC, it remains to be seen whether practices established can be sustained... when the project comes to an end. (T)*

CHAPTER SIX
THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE JOHANNESBURG COLLEGE OF EDUCATION[27]

Equity is a tall order. If your heart as an institution is not in it, don't do RPL because it will be resisted and equity will evade you.

(Wilhelm, Academic staff: 2002)

6.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE JOHANNESBURG COLLEGE OF EDUCATION (JCE)

The Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) was a well-established English-language teacher education college. The Higher Education Act of 1997, which aimed to transform the higher education terrain into a lean grouping of institutions, stipulated that all single focus institutions, like the college, should close down or merge with existing universities. In view of this regulation the College Council investigated the possibilities for JCE to merge with the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), an institution with which it had enjoyed a long and "cordial" relationship (Boyce, 1999).

In 1999 a Joint Working Group made up of representatives from Wits and JCE explored the possibilities for such a merger. The researcher was a member of this Joint Working Group. After long deliberations, the Joint Working Group acknowledged that the Faculty of Education at the University of the Witwatersrand and the Johannesburg College of Education jointly would be able to offer valuable programmes in education.

[27] Material from this chapter is forthcoming in 'The recognition of prior learning: An emerging field of enquiry in South Africa'. In Mandell, A and Michelson, E (Eds) (2nd Ed) Portfolio Development and Adult Learning: Purposes and Strategies, in press.

To this end the Joint Working Group recommended that the Wits Faculty of Education should be reconstituted to consist of two separate entities, a College of Education and a School of Education, with the former focusing on pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes and the latter focusing on postgraduate studies in education, adult education and teacher education.

During this same period Wits University was engaged in an internal restructuring process and the Faculty of Education was incorporated into the larger Faculty of Humanities. It became the School of Education in 2000. Following the recommendations of the Joint Working Group, JCE was incorporated into the University of the Witwatersrand and in particular into the Faculty of Humanities, and was renamed the College of Education at Wits, in 2001. Both the College of Education at Wits and the School of Education are now housed on the former JCE campus in Parktown, Johannesburg, and this campus has been renamed the Education Campus of the University of the Witwatersrand.

INSTITUTIONAL SNAPSHOT

Founded	1909
Location	Johannesburg
Number of students in 2002	1213
RPL policy status	No policy
Highest qualification offered	Bachelor of Education
Web page	www.jce.ac.za
RPL pilot	1999-2001

In its early days the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) was a college of education catering to the teacher education needs of white students, as legislated under apartheid. The college has always had teacher education as its core business, and was opened in 1909 as the Johannesburg Normal College in downtown Johannesburg, boasting just 67 students and three academic staff.

From these humble beginnings the college grew in student numbers, necessitating a move to larger premises in downtown Johannesburg.

The late 1930s and early 1940s saw yet another move and two name changes. This time the move was to Braamfontein and the name changed to Johannesburg Teachers' College, and later in that decade to the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE). The move to Parktown occurred in 1978 and the present campus has been the home of teacher education ever since (Boyce, 1999: 75). The college academic programme changed from a two year diploma, to a three year diploma to a four year diploma and degree, with the latter being a combined qualification taught by Wits and JCE staff on the Parktown Campus.

Before its incorporation into Wits in 2001, the college always enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with Wits (Boyce, 1999). The two institutions had jointly issued teaching diplomas from the 1970s and college courses had always been recognised for degree purposes at the University. Furthermore, a Bachelor of Primary Education degree introduced at Wits in 1980 has been taught by college lecturers on the college campus since its inception. The college, which operated as an institution of the then provincial Department of Education, was restricted in its intake of black students, since it was set up to serve white students. The first black student was admitted to the Bachelor of Primary Education in 1982.[28] The college was reprimanded by the white provincial department for diverging from its policy of separate education for separate races. As time wore on more black students registered at the college, but it was only in 1994, after the democratic

[28] The Bachelor of Primary Education (BPrimEd), a degree designed specifically for the teaching profession, was introduced at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) for the first time in 1980. Because Wits and the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE) were already collaborating in the field of teacher education and were issuing diplomas jointly, it was decided that the BPrimEd degree was best suited to be taught at JCE. The Education Department at Wits has always collaborated with the Education Department at JCE in the teaching of educational theory in the BPrimEd, but all the other courses in this degree have been taught by the staff at JCE. In 2003 the BPrimEd and the Higher Diploma in Education (HDE) are to be phased out and replaced by a Bachelor of Education, once again to be taught mainly by the staff of the College of Education at Wits, with some input from the staff of the School of Education.

general elections, that the Johannesburg College of Education became a non-racial college for teachers (Boyce, 1999).

The college offers a Higher Diploma in Education (HDE) for in-service and pre-service teachers as well as a Bachelor of Primary Education (BPrimEd) for pre-service teachers only. The HDE is offered in two modes, part-time and full-time. In both programmes there has been an increasingly diverse student body, not only in terms of students' racial and linguistic backgrounds, but also in terms of their previous qualifications and work experience. The HDE in-service programme has approximately 200 students registered and of these about 180 are black. In this programme a growing number of students are practising educators who choose the two year part-time, in-service HDE programme over the traditional four year full-time pre-service mode of study in order to upgrade their existing qualifications.

In terms of opportunities for upgrading, the college has entered into an agreement with the provincial Department of Education to upgrade teachers' qualifications in the province. In all three programmes, HDE (full-time), HDE (part-time) and the BPrimEd, students specialise in primary school education (foundation, intermediate, and senior phase) or secondary school education (further education and training). Students in the part-time HDE are experienced working adults who hold a previous two-year teaching diploma. These teachers are considered underqualified by the South African Council of Educators (SACE), which has pegged qualified teacher status to a four-year qualification. It was in this HDE part-time programme that RPL was piloted, in Educational Studies and Studies in English.

Educational Studies and Studies in English are courses in the HDE, pre-service and in-service and the BPrimEd. In both courses students undertake to study a variety of topics, which are equally weighted in terms of contact time across the years of study (four years for the full-time programmes and two years for the part-time programme). In-service teachers who already hold a previous two year

teaching diploma may enter the third year of the HDE and complete their HDE over two years of part-time study and thereby obtain qualified teacher status.

The curriculum of the HDE is not modularised and has very little space for free modules or elective study. In such a tightly structured curriculum there are few possibilities, if any, for experiential learning or learning acquired elsewhere. It is also a complex task to match students' prior learning with course structures that are composite and hierarchically organised. In addition to the constraints of a tightly structured curriculum, RPL raised the issue of alternative pedagogies and the discourse of adult learning and development, a discourse that is unfamiliar to the some of the staff at the college who have been teaching pre-service programmes mainly to 18 year old school-leavers. This overall lack of experience with adult learners, with RPL and a tightly structured curriculum resulted in a small scale investigation in two departments described below.

6.2 RPL RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT JCE

In 1999 and 2000 the concept of RPL was still very new to the college. Attempts to develop an RPL policy were not actively taken up, because this was the period in which the Joint Working Group was exploring incorporation possibilities with Wits. An RPL task team at the university was already working on a draft RPL policy (discussed in Chapter Four under RPL initiatives at Wits). Working on a policy at JCE would have been futile in the face of its imminent incorporation into the university. So at the policy level, the researcher, a representative from the college, served on the university's RPL task team.

Thus the RPL pilot project at JCE focused on the practice of RPL, in the absence of an RPL policy, and a pilot project was initiated within two departments at JCE, Education and English. As was the case with the pilot projects at Wits, the Joint Education Trust (JET) funded this project as part of a larger national research and development project. Unlike the Wits projects, where projects in adult education

and teacher education were conceptualised, implemented and managed separately, the JCE project in two departments was conceptualised and implemented as a single project.

Because RPL was new and untested, the intention was to develop a departmental, rather than an institutional, approach to RPL since such a devolved approach would allow for in-depth exploration of practice within small units of the college. The overall collaboration between the two departments could be attributed to a variety of issues, ranging from the fact that the project was overseen by a single coordinator and a single site manager. The coordinator had to lead the developments, conceptual and practical, in both departments, and the site manager had to oversee this process. Another reason was that some of the individuals involved in the RPL projects had a history of collaboration in other research activities. A further aspect that facilitated this collaboration was that while Educational Studies was a compulsory course in the HDE, Studies in English was not, and all the students who enrolled for English were Education students. Such an arrangement facilitated collaborative sessions in the RPL portfolio course, to be described in detail below.

6.3 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE

A portfolio of work experience was implemented in both departments. Although some of the sessions were shared, such as mapping of previous learning from formal, informal and non-formal contexts, other sessions which required students to relate learning from experience to theory were done in separate sessions, where Studies in English and Education were treated as separate areas of study.

The aim of the portfolio of work experience was to record learning experiences in order to reflect on and integrate these experiences with other ideas about teaching and learning. It aimed also to encourage personal growth and nurture professional consciousness. It was an attempt to validate private personal thought that could

become part of teachers' professional education and practice. The approach embodied in this portfolio course provided an opportunity and a means for RPL students to express themselves in a creative, narrative mode, which is different from conventional modes of assessment such as essays and examinations. It also distinguished itself from other forms of teaching and assessment in that it had a strong commitment to in-depth reflection on past experiences.

The academics, Dirk, Marian, Rene, Viv and Wilhelm, who implemented the RPL course at JCE, like their counterparts at Wits and at the University of the Western Cape (UWC), were well-versed in the issues surrounding RPL. During the pilot period they met once a month to discuss issues surrounding the conceptualisation and implementation of RPL. These discussions were led in part by the RPL coordinator and in part by facilitators from JET, on topics related to portfolio development. It was from these discussions that the two departments decided to pilot a developmental portfolio of work experience in 2000.

As practising teacher educators, all the educators who designed and implemented the portfolio course also taught on the HDE and the BPrimEd. These are undergraduate teacher programmes that have a strong emphasis on teaching practice or school experience. Student teachers go out twice a year for three weeks at a time to complete a school experience session.

The teacher educators at JCE are required to supervise students at schools during these sessions. These teaching practice sessions generally result in close teacher-student relationships and dialogical pedagogy, with blurring of academic and experiential learning. As academics they go into schools and observe and mentor students in a different site of practice from their own, recognising that teaching practice provides students with an opportunity to learn experientially.

The seventeen students who participated in the portfolio of experience were all practising teachers. Four who had English and Education as their common

courses were interviewed in this study. They were also the only four students who did not meet national and college requirements for access into the HDE programme. All the other learners had diplomas as their previous qualification and were accessing the Higher Diploma by meeting all the entry requirements. From this perspective they most certainly were traditional students in that they had previous qualifications and previous exposure to tertiary study.

Morgan, Emma, Salma and Himla, however, did not possess diplomas and therefore could not proceed to the HDE. Although they had exposure to tertiary study, they had not completed their previous qualification, the diploma, and therefore could not access the HDE. Himla and Salma complicated the picture more because they were attempting to access the HDE and the college without a senior certificate (matric), which is the minimum admission requirement for both.

All four are practising teachers. While Emma, Salma and Himla are primary school teachers, Morgan teaches in a high school. While Morgan and Emma obtained their senior certificates (matric) through adult night schools, Himla and Salma obtained junior certificates (standard eight) only.[29]

Born in two different decades, Himla in the 1940s, Morgan, Emma and Salma in the 1950s, all four students showed similarities in terms of attempting to obtain their initial teacher qualifications through distance study, a form of study requiring discipline, motivation and commitment. Emma started her diploma at Lyceum College, which offers teacher education programmes through part-time study. She dropped out after completing four courses, because she felt completely isolated

[29] A junior certificate is an exit from formal schooling after 10 years whereas a senior certificate (matric) is an exit after 12 years of schooling. Generally, under apartheid an exit with a junior certificate (standard eight) enabled black students to pursue a profession in nursing and teaching, which were low-paying jobs with few opportunities for upgrading these qualifications. Hendricks points out that because the majority of black students lived in poverty and in families with high unemployment, they grabbed these opportunities to obtain qualifications in nursing and teaching so as to alleviate the socio-economic circumstances that faced them. He argues that the apartheid regime set "low targets by inviting citizens willingly to co-operate and remain poorly educated" (2001: 68).

and out of touch with the course. She pointed out that she was in search of a programme that would offer her opportunities to interact with fellow students and staff. She took leave of one year from her school, to be able to study at JCE.

Himla and Salma started their teacher qualifications with SACTE (South African College for Teacher Education), also a distance study institution, and like Emma dropped out after completing some of the courses. Like Emma the isolation associated with distance, part-time study became unbearable. They saw an opportunity for RPL at JCE and decided to complete the last few outstanding courses of their diplomas there. Morgan completed most of his courses with Vista College, on the East Rand, and decided to take up the option of RPL offered at the JCE to complete the last few courses in the Diploma in Education. Like Emma, he took a year off from his school.

Given their chequered learning backgrounds it was a complex task to match learners' previous coursework with course structures at JCE, which are composite and hierarchically organised. This effort shows that even the credit exchange model of RPL (discussed in detail in Chapter Two) which merely compares qualifications obtained at one institution with another for purposes of credit is not a straightforward process in South Africa[30]. And this was only the starting point of RPL at JCE. Also the qualifying requirements for obtaining qualifications at JCE were different from those at Lyceum, Vista or SACTE. For Emma, coming to JCE to complete her qualification put her in a worse position because at JCE she was required to complete more courses than she would have at Lyceum to obtain a Diploma in Education.

[30] The National Qualifications Framework (NQF) as a reform strategy in South Africa, is an accreditation framework designed to facilitate learner mobility and course transfer within a single integrated system of education and training (Christie, 1997). Yet, the courses that Emma brought to JCE from another institution were not easily recognised at the receiving institutions, showing clearly the resilience and even the resistance of academic structures and courses to the NQF, signalling that an integrated framework is no guarantee for learner access and mobility.

In many ways each one of these students required a customised learning path, something that was very difficult to achieve in the context of the programmes at JCE. So much so that only two of the four students (Himla and Morgan) met the requirements of the diploma and were awarded this from JCE. Salma and Emma completed the courses that they could in one year of study at JCE and went back to Unisa and Lyceum, respectively, to try once again to complete their diploma studies. While Salma is in the process of completing the courses required for the award of the Diploma in Education, Emma has not managed to summon up the energy to complete her diploma.

All four RPL students lived and worked in urban areas for most of their lives, Salma and Himla in Johannesburg, and Morgan and Emma on the East Rand. The RPL portfolio course and their subsequent registration at JCE would be the first time that they studied in a face-to-face programme that provided opportunities for group work and support groups, sorely absent when studying through distance education institutions.

As one of the students said:

> *The reason I came to JCE was to be able to talk to students and lecturers - something I missed when I studied at Lyceum. (E)*

All four students were black, three of them were women and one was male.

The portfolio of work experience consisted of a series of activities, which required students to articulate, analyse and reflect on their work experience. To enable students to do this staff and students met for two hours a week over seven weeks, and in addition to this, staff consulted with students individually if students so desired.

During the first session of the course, students were introduced to the RPL research proposal that had been submitted to JET. They were informed of the research agenda and what this meant for them in terms of their coursework, that they would be doing a portfolio of experience in place of the regular course scheduled for that term. Students were also introduced to the notion of RPL as a new policy imperative emerging on the educational scene in South Africa.

In the second session students were invited in pairs or individually to map their previous learning from formal, informal and non-formal contexts in the form of a mind map or time line. In the third session students identified and expanded on the learning associated with each item on the map, or each bold heading in the narrative, whichever mode the student preferred. The students who chose to talk through their experiences were encouraged to make notes under relevant sections that would be more telling than the headings identified. Throughout these sessions staff worked with students as a group, and students were always encouraged to consult staff for private tutorials. This offer was actively taken up by the students, and staff spent many hours assisting students with writing skills and refining their maps of experience. Like the academics at Wits, this additional student support placed a heavy burden on staff, who were also teaching other programmes and had other students to supervise.

In the fourth and fifth sessions students were asked to pair off with a classmate or to continue to work individually. In pairs or individually they were encouraged to share their maps or narratives with each other. One person in each pair then reported to the larger group on the work experiences of their partner. Those that worked on their own reported on themselves. This emphasis on biography assisted students to reflect on the significance of their past experiences in the construction of their present professional identity. It also affirmed their competencies in teaching and learning, especially in the classroom. Support was provided to students in the form of individual and group tutoring, with an emphasis on social and oral history as significant approaches to developing

narratives. The mapping of personal histories, whatever the mode selected, was carried out by all students with relative ease and confidence because of the supportive group context.

In the sixth session students were asked to relate this learning from experience to theory, especially theories related to studies in Education and English. The activity aimed to enable students to critically reflect on their learning from experience and to do so in the context of relevant theories. This was very difficult because the discourse of learning from experience did not resemble theories of education either in terms of language or coherence.

Given the challenges encountered with this activity, in the seventh session students were encouraged to make connections between everyday situations and classroom theory and to relate theory to practice. Students analysed critical incidents drawn from their classroom experiences, and were asked to select an issue that emerged in their practice on a daily basis (Osman, 2000).

This time students worked individually on their critical incidents. Each student described a critical incident and then subjected it to "why" questions to analyse aspects of the incident. Students were then given readings relevant to the issues they had selected. These reflective activities also encouraged teachers to generate their own views on what it means to teach well, and created opportunities for them to express their thoughts about teaching and learning.

6.4 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCE OF RPL AT JCE

An institution in the midst of incorporation into a research university provided the institutional backdrop for this analysis.

Institutional context and support from administrative structures

The academic staff experienced relatively few problems from the administrators at the college, especially when compared with the problems experienced at Wits. Like UWC, the RPL project enjoyed the support of senior management of the college. This could be attributed to the fact that the pilot project was initiated by the deputy head of the college, who was also the overall project manager.

> *I had no problems with the administrative structures at the College. (V)*

> *Certainly, no problems at a departmental or administrative level. (M)*

One lecturer pointed out that RPL and adult education uphold different values within the institution, for example concerning the significance of experiential learning.

> *Administrative issues are one side. We [also] need to look at the philosophy of the institution. RPL must be reflected in this philosophy. Generally, the values here and in higher education are not responsive to RPL and to its implications. (D)*

RPL for access and credit

The responses from staff reflect both sides of the debate on the question of RPL for access and credit. Like their counterparts in the adult education project at Wits, some respondents at JCE suggested that RPL for access would be more beneficial to students than RPL for credit, because access offered the students an opportunity to go through the process that built both the knowledge and skills necessary to function effectively in higher education.

Access is the key. And if credit is given it must be in line with OBE principles and therefore demonstrated performance. (V)

Rather access because it introduces them [RPL candidates] to new models of practice, new models of teaching and learning. Access also gets the student into the process of academia. (R)

I find these difficult to separate, but access is more valuable for the student and the institution. (M)

Like their counterparts at UWC, others at JCE presented a position which suggested that RPL for access and credit can and should be explored because RPL candidates are different from each other, in that some would qualify for credit and others not. And like their counterparts at UWC, they espoused RPL for credit, but this did not emerge in their practice.

In principle I think for both because RPL candidates are not all at the same level in terms of experience. (D)

Both. There are people out there who can provide you with evidence for credit and they should get it. Then there are those who cannot and they should not get credit. (W)

Capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

The academics interviewed were confident that RPL could increase access. Like their counterparts at Wits they were not confident about equity, because equity implies significant changes to existing support structures for students as well as changes to teaching and learning, career guidance and financial support.

Access is possible, but equity places enormous responsibilities, financial, academic and otherwise on the institution. (V)

Another academic pointed out that RPL can deliver on equity to students only if the RPL process is a swift and efficient one that benefits the student.

If it is to redress inequalities, it can't be as time-consuming as we experienced in the pilot project. (D)

Finally, another lecturer pointed out that equity is difficult but it could be achieved if the institution was committed to the redress agenda of RPL. This remained a crucial ingredient for being able to deliver on equity.

Equity is a tall order. If your heart as an institution is not in it, don't do RPL because it will be resisted and equity will evade you. (W)

RPL is pedagogically challenging

The responses indicate that the challenges faced were not around the issue of knowledge equivalence, but more on the issues surrounding the articulation of experiential learning, and the capacity of students to be able to write narratives of experience. This challenge was compounded by the dilemma of some academics who were unsure about the kinds of experience that could be recognised.

One lecturer said, about the challenges associated with articulating prior learning if such learning was matched with mainstream courses:

Identifying areas in which knowledge and learning can be articulated is a problem because I was trying to match this with pre-defined existing courses. (D)

Another member of staff pointed to the challenges that students faced in the RPL process when she said:

> *I found that RPL students were not always able to examine their own experience in the context of a particular perspective. I acknowledge that this is skilled work, and I may have thrown them a curved ball. (M)*

This academic reflected on the pedagogical dilemma she encountered when she tried to work with prior knowledge and future learning at the same time. She raised concerns about the validity of RPL from a more learner-centred perspective. She pointed to her need to balance recognising the prior learning of students with improving their educational practices, given that they were all experienced, practising teachers.

> *I was always concerned that by recognising learning from experience, I could inadvertently recognise experience in bad and ineffective teaching practices. So I was continuously challenged to find the balance between recognition of prior learning and reconstruction of new learning. (V)*

This pedagogical dilemma contrasts with the teacher educators at Wits who experienced an "academic struggle" when they had to play dual roles of assessor and mentor, and also when RPL required them to bridge epistemological chasms, as set up by themselves, between experiential and academic learning.

Still other staff in the JCE pilot project commented on the challenges associated with the additional support that students needed, and the associated burden on staff and student alike. Their involvement in the RPL pilot was in addition to their regular course loads, which added significantly to the demands on them.

I assumed that they [RPL students] knew more than they did, that is, I assumed that they could do critical reading of texts, but then I had to teach this skill. In view of this I found it difficult to lay bare what they lacked without impacting on their self-esteem. (R)

I had to mentor students with writing skills and I had to put them through a portfolio process in a short period of time. All of this without access to the facilities of a writing centre which could support students and ease the burden on me. (W)

Experiential learning and academic learning

Like the staff at UWC and those in adult education at Wits, the JCE staff were comfortable with the idea that experiential learning had a place in an academic institution, and that there was a relationship between the two kinds of learning and knowledge.

We must acknowledge the difference between the two firstly, and that the two can work together. We need theoretical academic learning to make sense of experiential practical knowledge. But I think what we usually do is to judge their [students'] experiences as somehow inferior. (D)

I feel the two can interface, and we see it in teaching practice. Our own mainstream students say that they learn very little, until they get out there [in the schools]. So there is a case for experiential learning having a place in academia and in teacher education. (V)

I feel the two kinds of learning can work together and should work together, it's just that as academics sometimes we are not comfortable with working with learning that has occurred

elsewhere simply because we don't know the site [of the learning] well. (W)

6.5 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

The academics' suggestions refer to the institutional philosophy, to the curriculum and to the importance of staff development. Like their counterparts at Wits in adult education, some academics also felt that it takes a particular type of institution and person to engage in RPL and its associated activities.

If peoples' minds were to change, then I think practices or the rules or regulations or structures can always be changed. (D)

It takes dedication to RPL students, and I think an RPL unit could fulfil this role of dedication to RPL. (W)

This academic pointed to the complexity associated with having to match students' prior learning with the HDE course structures that are composite and hierarchically organised. His experiences made him aware of the importance of making curriculum content and processes transparent and flexible so that the prior learning of students and the college courses could interface and be responsive to each other.

The RPL process should be standardised if we want to extend it to more people. It [the RPL process] should be explicit to the students. RPL requires a curriculum to be quite flexible. What we then need is to compare our curriculum with what practitioners need or have and to be able to incorporate it into the curriculum. So I would suggest an opening up of the curriculum. (D)

This academic made a clear suggestion from experience that RPL must be a mainstream activity of the institution, an activity which recognises the work of the academics and the contributions of the RPL students. She said:

> *RPL can't be latched on [an add on]. It must be part of the institution. RPL students and staff must have a place or a unit from which they do their work. They must have a spot where they meet, have their resources, a place that gives them a sense of well-being. That's how you institutionalise RPL. (R)*

Like their counterparts at UWC, the staff at JCE also pointed to staff development as another crucial ingredient for the institutionalisation of RPL.

> *We need staff development in terms of how to assist learners with experiential knowledge and this has implications for both the ability and the mindset of the staff. While this has financial implications, to ignore RPL is to turn your back on an enormous bank of resources. (V)*

Like their counterparts at Wits, JCE academics found that RPL had placed many additional burdens on them as academics and suggested the commitment of resources was vital:

> *As academics we need support for RPL in the form of a writing centre and access to tutors who are able to assist both the RPL student and the academics engaging in RPL. (W)*

6.6 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE OF RPL AT JCE

Like their counterparts at Wits and UWC, the students at JCE were well-informed about RPL and its implications for them as adult students in the university.

Capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

The students at the College of Education, like those interviewed in both Wits projects, were sceptical about the capacity of RPL to deliver on access and equity.

> *RPL can't bring equity or access if you are going to look only at paper qualifications like certificates. (M)*

> *RPL can bring equity and access, but it depends whom you consult. There needs to be a fundamental framework in colleges which is clear for management and students. (M)*

> *Maybe access, but equity, no! (E)*

They were despondent about the institution's emphasis on formal qualifications and valuing of formal knowledge. This contrasted sharply with students' experiences at Wits in teacher education, who read academic ways of knowing as a given and did not challenge the power implications of such valorisation. In the words of one student:

> *You see this academic record that they want at JCE, this certificate, this matric, you are no longer in line with the actual meaning of RPL. You are doing something else which is parallel to RPL. (M)*

Students also pointed to the potential of the college to design and implement a framework of RPL that could clarify the equity and redress agenda of RPL. As students pointed out:

There needs to be a fundamental framework in colleges, which is clear for management and students. (M)

They made suggestions about how such a framework could be implemented when they said:

It was a problem for me not to know the exact courses you need to meet the requirements of the qualification. So it would be important that future RPL projects are clear about what students need to meet the requirements of your qualifications at JCE. (S)

I would have been happy to know the courses I need to qualify. (E)

RPL for access and credit

Students had similar views to some of the students at UWC, who felt RPL should be used for both credit and access. They pointed out clearly, like the students at UWC, that if RPL for credit is used there needs to be a process of quality assurance in that the evidence would have to be checked for validity. Their responses also suggested that if RPL for credit was used then the process for seeking credit must be explicit to the student and the institution alike.

For both access and credit. But you need to check my evidence and my abilities. You can give me an oral on a particular concept or a particular subject and see whether I can perform. If I can't well and good no credit. But if I can, why should I stay here and spend the whole year doing what I know? (M)

For both. But when it's for credit we need to know what we need to show the college that will allow us to get credit, what is the process and how to go about it. (E)

Most valued experience

Like the students at Wits and UWC, the students at JCE valued the RPL process for the personal benefits it afforded them.

> *I found the RPL process helped me to understand myself better and even people at home. It really empowered me. (H)*

> *RPL gave me more confidence in myself and in my studies. (S)*

Barriers encountered

Students in this case were vocal about the barriers they encountered. They showed clearly they understood the institutional requirements and experienced them as barriers, and they challenged them. This contrasts with the students at Wits in teacher education. The teacher education students were aware of the institutional requirements, but they read these as given and complied with the requirements.

> *The problem at JCE is that you focusing too much on paper qualifications and you did not focus on the experience. (M)*

> *Collecting evidence is sometimes difficult, why not give me an oral? (M)*

> *Guidelines for a framework for RPL were not clear at the level of administration. (M)*

> *It was a problem for me not to know the exact courses you [the student] needed to meet the requirements of the qualification. (S)*

These experiences of RPL students were also echoed by a staff member who said:

> *At the moment we are locked in a qualification, a certificate and formal requirements. We are still ruled by paper qualifications rather than by good practice. (V)*

6.7 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

The suggestions made by students in this case were specific and related mostly to the RPL process. Firstly, they suggested that RPL requires a range of assessment methods so as to be responsive to students' needs.

> *Oral examinations and interviews are very important for RPL. These give you a chance to show yourself to the institution in a more confident way. (M)*

> *Sometimes, I need to meet you informally before I get assessed. (E)*

Like a student at UWC, one RPL student felt that if the RPL assessment process required testimonials from colleagues or seniors as evidence, then these testimonials needed to be monitored and controlled for their validity and relevance.

> *When you use referees, that is those who work with you daily, evaluate these too. Don't just accept them. (M)*

Another student felt that RPL was particularly valuable for teachers who did not have opportunities in the past to upgrade or further their studies. She commented thus:

> *Keep RPL open especially to teachers. (S)*

One student felt strongly that RPL was useful and the RPL course at college had the potential to meet the needs of adults if it was designed with a specific group of RPL students in mind, and if it was marketed to the appropriate target group.

> *You need a framework for RPL and you need to market it to people out there. If the college can make a course or product specifically for people who must undergo RPL, they market that product and then they put all those students together to work on their RPL portfolio. (M)*

6.8 CONCLUSION

What do the experiences of the respondents, both staff and students, tell us about RPL at the Johannesburg College of Education?

The academics interviewed in this study generally expressed positive views about RPL. They perceived support from the management as represented by the Deputy Head of the College, but experienced the institutional philosophy, orientation and curriculum to be at odds with RPL. The RPL project explored RPL practices with no policy in place. The downside of going without a policy has meant that there was no overall strategy to communicate about the RPL project across the college, nor to extend the pilot to other departments in the college, resulting in a marginal project.

These issues appear to be aggravated by a tightly structured curriculum governed by fixed national norms, and interpreted in a way that has made the HDE at JCE difficult to obtain and with few spaces for recognising prior learning. While the college has a supportive work and managerial environment, it has now been incorporated into Wits, where the environment at faculty level is experienced as less supportive and encouraging, as discussed in Chapter Four.

The students interviewed in this study expressed concern at the college's preoccupation with formal qualifications. They seem critical of the privileging of certificates and previous formal learning. This contrasted sharply with students in the teacher education pilot at Wits, who were grateful to get an opportunity to study at a "world class" institution, and in an RPL programme that essentially prepared them for their future studies at Honours level. The JCE students' open criticism of the college's preoccupation with formal qualification also contrasted with the view of the academics, who seemed not to allow themselves to be critical of this preoccupation, except for one of the academics who said clearly:

> *At the moment we are locked in a qualification, a certificate and formal requirements. We are still ruled more by paper qualifications than by good practice. (V)*

And another who said:

> *We need to look at the philosophy of the institution. RPL must be reflected in this philosophy. Generally, the values in higher education are not responsive to RPL and to its implications. (D)*

The students' experiences made them acutely aware of how the RPL process could and should be improved, and they remained pessimistic about RPL delivering equity and redress in education. Although they spoke about the potential of the college to design and implement a framework for RPL, they appear not to be convinced about the capacity of the institution in this regard.

As noted in the case study of UWC (discussed in Chapter Five), RPL was experienced as a process that requires a supportive environment, wherein the goals of RPL are integrated with the overall institutional goals and vision. It also requires a commitment to staff development and curriculum change. What are the

chances that RPL can be developed beyond the pilot phase within the College of Education at Wits, given the rigours of incorporation and imminent restructuring of course offerings and departments?

The academics that were involved in the RPL pilot project did so without reduction in their course loads, which added significantly to the time demands on them. It appears unlikely that staff would involve themselves in RPL in future if it was not factored into their workloads and was not considered in performance appraisal. This is not likely to happen given the incorporation of the College into Wits, where the experiences of academics has indicated that RPL is a marginal and contested activity.

Another challenge that may prevent the college from moving beyond the pilot phase is that the college has merged with a university that is regarded as a research university, which privileges contributions to practice through academic research and publications. The work of the college in undergraduate studies, and its practical work in schools, still needs to prove and establish itself as valuable in an environment and culture that seems to regard academic work as separate from practical work. In view of this orientation of the university, the teacher educators at JCE may decide that RPL is a practical and unrewarding enterprise at the university, while academic research is privileged and rewarded, resulting in few academics who may be interested in future RPL projects. Involvement in RPL seems to suggest that the risks far outweigh the rewards.

In terms of developments at the national level, the government has introduced a variety of changes to teacher education, ranging from how teachers are educated to the funding of teacher education programmes. One such change is to convert all Higher Diploma programmes for teacher, into Bachelor of Education degrees by 2003 and 2004. This implies major restructuring of existing courses, accommodating present students in the new qualification and admitting new students. Between 2002 and 2004 the college will be involved in this

restructuring, which will have to meet national imperatives as well as the imperatives of the university with which it has merged. These processes promise to absorb vast resources of time and money, leaving very little of either for taking RPL ahead in the college.

RPL may suffer yet another blow at the college. Access into the HDE programmes at the college was pegged at a senior certificate (matric) level, unlike the university sector which requires a matric with exemption to gain access. The incorporation of the college into the University may mean that some of the present and future college students will not meet the requirement for admission to the university. The College needs to make a case for the eligibility of its present and future students, once again leaving the case of admitting RPL students in abeyance.

The college, like Wits, has not allocated any funding to RPL projects. The pilot projects were funded by donor money and the additional work, in terms of teaching, assessing and support of RPL students, was carried by the individuals who participated in the pilot projects. The college has not been forced to re-examine its philosophy about adult learners with prior learning and experience. The experiences of staff and students suggest that the chances of RPL moving beyond the pilot phase seem slim at the College of Education at Wits.

CHAPTER SEVEN
THE RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL) AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE

The power to know one thing [academic knowledge] is never the power to know all things.

(Foster, 1994: 129).

7.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE FREE STATE (UFS)

Approximately five years older than the Johannesburg College of Education (JCE), the University of the Free State had humble beginnings in 1904 with just six students and a two-roomed building on the site of Grey College, a Bloemfontein school. This was the first time that students could register for a full Bachelor of Arts degree course. Two years later, in 1906, the institution was known as the Grey University College (GUC) and this separated and distinguished it from the school. As the number of students grew so did the academic programmes offered. By 1910 the university had courses in science and by 1945 faculties for the study of law, education and social sciences were established. By 1958 GUC had established a Faculty for Agriculture.

During this time the institution was moving rapidly to becoming an Afrikaans language institution and eliminating English in the institution. The first step towards making the institution more Afrikaner oriented was to change its name to the *Universiteitskollege van die Oranje-Vrystaat* (University College of the Orange Free State) and the language medium to Afrikaans. This name was later changed to the *Die Universiteit van die Oranje-Vrystaat* (University of the Orange Free State) and again in 1999, after the first democratic elections, to the University of the Free State (UFS) (Van Schoor, undated). Each name change has brought

with it a change in the overall identity of the institution, from a "Christian Afrikaans" university to a "democratic plural university" (UFS Prospectus, 2001), with the last name change implying a transformed, open and non-racial university in South Africa.

INSTITUTIONAL SNAPSHOT

Founded	1904
Location	Bloemfontein
Number of students in 2002	15 362
RPL policy status	Draft
Highest qualification offered	PhD
Web page	www.uovs.ac.za
RPL pilot	1999-2000

Presently, the University of the Free State is a parallel medium institution, meaning that tuition is provided in English and Afrikaans in its six faculties. The university has shown unprecedented growth in student numbers since the late 1990s, and presently has an equal number of black and white students enrolled. The first black students were admitted only in the late 1980s. Unlike the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) that has been consistent in adopting research as its major function, the UFS has taken more of an entrepreneurial stance. According to its prospectus the university "adopted an entrepreneurial approach in order to face the challenges of the current South African higher education market. Through marketing... the university has positioned itself to promote academic entrepreneurship" (UFS Prospectus, 2001: 1).

Unlike Wits and UWC, which have long histories of resisting apartheid, the UFS was perceived as epitomising apartheid institutions. It educated many of the apartheid politicians and members of the public service and toed the line rather than resisting the apartheid regime. Presently, it is repositioning itself to become

"a multicultural" university that has opened its doors to black students, and has even appointed a black chancellor who also happens to be the Premier of the Free State. The correct positioning and stance coupled with correct timing has enabled the UFS to reinvent itself. It seems to have managed to adapt itself to the changes that confront it rather than succumb to them. As one student said:

> *It could be seen as an institution that hunts with the hounds and runs with the rabbits. I, however, have immense respect for those academics who were able to make major shifts in their attitudes and approaches to work in this multicultural university. (J)*

During the apartheid era (from 1948) in South Africa, the UFS was the intellectual home to many Afrikaner politicians. Now, since 1994, with the ushering in of the African National Congress (ANC) government, it has become the intellectual home to many of the black politicians serving the Free State province.

This ability of the UFS to change with the times is reflected starkly in the names of the various student residences on its campus. While one residence is named after Braam Fischer, a committed communist, another is named after Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of apartheid, and another is to be named after Nelson Mandela, a freedom fighter charged with treason by the apartheid government and later the first president of a democratic South Africa.

7.2 RPL POLICY AND RESEARCH INITIATIVES AT UFS

The UFS, like JCE, has neither an RPL policy nor a draft RPL policy. Policy initiatives are just beginning to emerge, with the university management having scheduled its first meeting to discuss an institutional RPL policy in June 2002.

However, in the absence of an RPL policy, the School of Management, in the Faculty of Economic Management Science, piloted an RPL portfolio course as one

in a suite of courses in the first year of study in the Bachelor of Management Leadership (BML). The portfolio course was a compulsory course for all students, and it was only after successful completion that students could proceed to subsequent courses. The BML has multiple exit points, which enables students to obtain a Certificate in Management Leadership after the first year of study, and a Diploma in Management Leadership at the end of the second year of study. The third year of study is the final year of study towards the Bachelor in Management Leadership (BML).

The BML course was set up in collaboration with academics from the School for New Learning at DePaul University, Chicago in the United States of America "...specifically to provide leadership training to adult learners" (Anderson and Maharasoa, 2002: 19). This institutional partnership was further strengthened by partnerships with large businesses in South Africa, which employed many of the students registered in the BML programme.

As one of the academics pointed out:

> *The BML is a working partnership between the university, the world of work and the students. (B)*

One of the students said:

> *The BML gave me a true feeling of owning my learning and of being in charge of my future learning path. (AT)*

Like the RPL pilot projects at Wits, UWC and JCE, the RPL pilot at UFS was funded by JET. While Wits and JCE (discussed in Chapters Four and Six respectively) explored the possibilities of RPL within existing academic programmes, and UWC (discussed in Chapter Five) explored a stand-alone portfolio development course, the UFS set up a portfolio development course

which was a compulsory course for all students registered in the Bachelor of Management Leadership (BML). Unlike the BEd (Honours) at Wits and the HDE at JCE, the BML degree course was set up specifically for adult learners who had experience in management and leadership, but who did not possess a senior certificate with exemption, a prerequisite for entering any South African university.

In addition, the BML degree is moduralised and consists of courses that are not all hierarchically organised, thus facilitating elective study. This flexibility in the structure of the degree and the courses allowed for students' prior learning to become part of the curriculum, in that the portfolio which was part of the BML curriculum created a space for students to document their learning from experience.

Because of the adult orientation of the BML, it is possible that RPL was seen as a logical component of this qualification and an uncontroversial practice. The academics Benny, Alta and Mana seemed to work with the assumption that there can be a conversation between different ways and cultures of knowing. By having a portfolio course as a credit-bearing course within the BML degree, academics at UFS faced head-on the dilemma of knowledge equivalence experienced by the teacher educators at Wits.

The approach of academics at UFS suggests that for them RPL did not present an "academic struggle" to find valid procedures for assessing knowledge from other fields of practice. Instead their approach was to recognise that students have learned from experience, and that this learning could be accredited. It could be seen as an honest acknowledgment of difference, and an honest way of acknowledging that experiential learning was new to them as academics. The only way they seemed to make sense of such learning was by acknowledging the learning in a compulsory course for all students, where credit could be obtained

once students had met course requirements - an acknowledgement that seems less invasive on students' lives.

What appears to emerge is that the portfolio course was not an access course (as at UWC) or a provisional, experimental arrangement within professional programmes (as at Wits and JCE), but rather a commitment to admitting and developing a curriculum for a group of adult learners.

7.3 AN RPL PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT COURSE

Eighteen students successfully completed the compulsory portfolio development course in RPL in 1999, and six of these students, Janet, Albie, Deon, Thato, Bobby and Dion, were interviewed for the purpose of this study. All six students interviewed hold senior managerial positions in companies, such as Dulux (Deon), Telkom (Bobby and Dion), and government departments such as the Communications Department (Albie), the Department of Agriculture in Bloemfontein (Thato) and Musicon, a music academy, with links to the Department of Arts and Culture (Janet). Many of the students manage and lead departments or divisions with between five and 25 people.

Like the students in adult education at Wits, the students at UFS were born between 1952 and 1962. Unlike the students in adult education, all of the UFS students interviewed completed their schooling with few, if any, interruptions. All the students interviewed had senior certificates (matric), but not with the mandatory exemption required for admission to university.

The learning paths of two students showed certain challenges and obstacles. Albie was educated at a farm school. This meant that he spent a lot of his time at school in large classes that usually catered for children of different ages and standards within the same room. He remembers his first year at school, which he spent with children who were four and five years older than he was, because his particular

class catered to children from grade one through to standard three, a common occurrence in farm schools. Albie left school when he was sixteen years old. He obtained his senior certificate (matric) by studying through correspondence.

Thato remembers schooling being a scarce commodity, as her parents could not always afford to send all their children to school. Her schooling was punctuated with periods of unpaid fees and absence from school, but hard work, dedication and financial assistance from the extended family enabled her to obtain her senior certificate (matric).

All the students have found studying at UFS invigorating but demanding. They expressed difficulties with the volume of work associated with the BML programme and the impact of this on their personal and work lives. All of them found that once they had established a pattern in the first year of study they managed to balance the demands made on them by home, work and university more effectively. Like the students in the RPL programmes at Wits, UWC and JCE, motivation, focus and dedication are traits that characterised the RPL students at UFS.

The experiences and words of three of the students point clearly to these personality traits. These words and experiences also point to the different ways in which they managed their lives as working adults and students:

> *I learnt quickly that if I was to ensure that my family life, work life and university life did not suffer, I worked with a routine which usually required that once I was home from work I would spend the hours from six to nine in the evening with the family. No reading the paper or watching television - strictly with the family. By nine everyone in the family had enough of me so the next three hours I spent either completing assignments or reading for my next lectures, or doing some work from the office. (DN)*

Another student organised his life in this way:

> *Because my children are a bit older, I could spend every free moment I had, in the evening, doing reading for my courses or completing assignments. The first year was the most difficult, but thereafter I got used to the pace of things - studying, working and family. (AT)*

And another student in this way:

> *I would spend every Friday and Saturday on university work. Sundays was for family, unless I had a major assignment to hand in, and Monday to Thursday was for work. After the first year of study this became my routine and my family also began to work with it. (BB)*

Of the six students interviewed two were white and four were black. Two of the six students were women. All of the students interviewed have graduated from the BML degree and one of them (Deon) has been accepted for a Masters Programme in Business Administration, at UFS.

The procedure for admitting students into the portfolio course begins with a compulsory interview, the aim of which is to inform the student about the portfolio course and the BML. An associated aim is to enable learners to assess their own readiness for the tasks ahead. Once admitted, the student registers for the portfolio course. All the administrative tasks associated with student registration are done in the School of Management, and in particular with the coordinator of the BML programme. This means that first-time students do not have to engage with general university or Faculty administrators who have many other students to attend to. Instead students register directly with the BML

coordinator, who knows the status and profile of each of the students. This specialised approach to admission is also used for paying of fees and the use of the library and other resources, all located in the School of Management. In the words of one of the academics:

> *The coordinator's office is the one stop shop for the RPL students. (B)*

This supportive and tailored approach seems to make the UFS's approach to RPL unique, and it contrasts with the approaches taken at Wits, UWC and JCE (discussed in Chapter Four, Five and Six respectively), where the approach was more on access for the students, and once they were in the university the students were on their own and had to navigate their own paths in the institution. While a tailored approach appears supportive, it could inadvertently segregate students from the rest of the university and even from other students.

The portfolio development course consisted of four modules. Module one was at the heart of the portfolio and focused on reflective activities that enabled students to articulate their prior learning. Module two focused on academic skills such as those for the development of language and problem-solving skills. Module three introduced students to a Management Leadership Model. The aim was to enable students to get exposure to the content of some of the subsequent courses of the BML. This module also enabled students to assess themselves, set goals and plan their learning paths in relation to the certificate, the diploma or the degree in Management Leadership. This was an opportunity for students to decide which exit they wished to pursue. The fourth module provided opportunities for students to develop numeracy skills.

The portfolio course ran for six months and students and staff met every Friday afternoon for four hours and on Saturdays for six hours, to complete the requirements of the portfolio (Anderson, 1999).

Module one of the portfolio course, which was essentially the main part of the portfolio course, consisted of eight units. In unit one *(Who am I),* students completed activities that enabled them to find out more about themselves. In this unit students worked in groups and individually to define their learning needs, their personalities and their learning styles and how these three variables intersected and facilitated effective future learning.

Armed with such self-understanding, which was considered by academic staff to be crucial to future success, students proceeded to unit two (*Understanding the BML Programmes*), which introduced the BML programme and how the individual fitted into it. In this unit the aims and objectives of the BML programme were made explicit to the students, as was the curriculum and the assessment requirements. This unit presented activities that enabled students to evaluate themselves against the demands of the BML course. The unit served as an effective reality check for students about their strengths and weaknesses on the one hand, and the demands of the BML degree on the other hand.

Unit three *(Exploring my prior experience*) provided opportunities for learners to explore their prior learning. Students were invited to state what work experience they had and to extract what they had learnt from this experience. The whole of this unit privileged learning from experience and made students feel confident about such learning. The portfolio course manual contained statements such as:

> *As an adult who is contemplating entering or returning to university, you should know that one of the advantages you have over traditional aged students is your life experience (Anderson, 1999: 36).*

Further on:

UFS values and awards credits for things you have done or learned outside the classroom (Anderson, 1999: 36).

Unit four (*The portfolio process*) introduced students to constituent parts of the portfolio, which students could compile so as to claim credit for prior learning. This unit alerted students to four important tasks that needed to be completed if they were to request credit for learning. Of interest is that the portfolio to seek credit for prior learning is part of a larger portfolio development course. The constituent parts of the portfolio for credit are:

> Identification and definition of specific prior learning for which credit is being requested.
>
> An essay or narrative which explains how this prior learning was gained and how it relates to the student's future learning path.
>
> Documentation or evidence of learning acquired.
>
> A credit request which states clearly the areas of credit being sought.

Students were guided through this process by mentors who had staff training in portfolio development and experiential learning. A major part of the staff development was facilitated by academic partners in the School for New Learning at De Paul University in Chicago, which is well known for its experiential and adult focused programmes in Management.

Mentors also provided students with sample portfolios, as a way to get them started on this task. In some ways this portfolio was similar to the one presented by the DLL at UWC (discussed in Chapter Five). Both the UWC and the UFS portfolios had sections in which students could identify prior learning and provide evidence of such learning. Where they differed was that at UWC students had to do a critical reading of two self-selected texts, whereas at UFS students were required to make requests for credit in various courses and to provide evidence for such requests. Another difference is that at UWC the portfolio course in its

entirety was simply a unit in a module at the UFS. It is important to note that the UWC portfolio was for access or admission in the university. At UFS the portfolio is module one of the portfolio development course, and credit is obtained in the BML degree for those students with a matriculation exemption. For those without a matriculation exemption, who therefore did not qualify for admission, it is an alternative means of access to the university. The UFS portfolio development course has been accepted by the Matriculation Board as an alternative to the matriculation exemption, a regulatory requirement for access into a university in South Africa.

Unit five (*Relating my learning experience to the BML Programme*) required students to determine a link between their experience, as defined and described in unit three, and the domains in the BML programme. The BML programme consists of four domains or learning programmes: environmental issues; skills in management; leadership; and lifelong learning, such as computer and interpersonal skills. In unit five students are required to take stock of their prior learning and to fit it into these domains. This exercise enabled the learner to see areas of strengths and weakness in relation to the BML programme, and to decide whether the BML degree suited their educational plans and goals, or if they should do the certificate or the diploma. This unit therefore required students to examine their strengths and their weakness and to plan their career path with this information.

The next activity in this unit required students to map their career path by examining not only what they had (their strengths) but also to examine what they needed to improve on (their weaknesses) to succeed in their selected paths. This activity can be seen as yet another opportunity for students to do a reality check and to ensure for themselves that the learning path they chose, be it the certificate, the diploma or the degree, was appropriate for them. There was a strong acknowledgement in the activity that students could and should determine their

own career paths, and there was a strong sense of agency on the part of the students.

In the words of students:

> *The PDC enabled me to explore myself! I realised who I was. (BB)*

> *It [the PDC] was an opportunity for self discovery. (AT)*

> *The PDC taught me a great deal about myself and my relationships with others. (J)*

In unit six (*Defining my learning portrait*) students defined who they were as learners by exploring a variety of learning strategies that they were most and least comfortable with. This units culminates with students writing down examples of their most and least preferred learning strategies, and ways in which they could develop a positive approach to the least preferred learning strategies.

After students had defined themselves in terms of preferred learning strategies, they were required to do a critical reading of a variety of academic texts, selected by the academics. In particular the emphasis of the activity was on getting students to articulate the main argument in the articles. After the activity on critical reading, students had to write a competence statement about themselves, a statement which said what they could do and what they knew in relation to the text. Students were guided throughout this activity by mentors who also provided examples of competence statements. Here it is interesting to note that while the critical reading of texts was an integral part of the PDC at UWC, at UFS the critical reading of texts was linked to competence statements that students generated about themselves. At Wits in teacher education, critical reading of texts was the basis of the entire portfolio course.

After this competence statement, students were required to write a learning autobiography, in which they described their current educational goals and what contributed to their decision to study in higher education. Once again the purpose was to enable the learners to understand themselves as learners and to select learning programmes appropriate to their style and attitudes as individual learners. Autobiography was an important component in the PDC at UWC as well as in adult education at Wits and at JCE. Academics there used biographical maps as a tool for learners to reflect on prior learning. At UFS the focus of the autobiography was more on enabling students to choose a career path and less on reflection of prior learning.

Unit seven (*Assessing my learning experience*) focused on students assessing their academic skills in the context of the four domains (Environmental, Management, Leadership and Lifelong Learning) within the BML programme. In contrast to previous units, which explored work and personal experience, this unit required students to explore the experience they had with specific competences like reading, using English as the language for writing, basic mathematical skills, academic essay writing, note taking, taking exams and critical reasoning, and how these fit the competences relevant to the four domains in the BML programme. From this assessment of their academic competences students were required to formulate a goal statement which makes explicit what the student wishes to derive from the three years of study.

Unit eight (*My educational goal*) is the final section of the reflective component of the portfolio development course. This unit requires students to formulate a plan that enables them to achieve the goal statement formulated in unit seven. At this point students decide if they wish to exit at the certificate level or if they wish to complete the three year degree programme. At this stage they have a good idea of who they are, what they can do and what is needed to succeed in the BML programme.

Part of the plan requires students to consider how they will finance the study option they have selected as well as the articulation of the plans required for balancing their studies with their home and work lives. While students at UFS had to device an explicit plan on how they would manage their lives as adult students, this issue was also a component of the portfolio course at UWC. At UWC students were allocated to a mentor who advised them about the compilation of the portfolio and how to manage their time, taking home, university and work into account.

Module one, which is the basis of the portfolio development course at UFS, takes the student full circle, starting with "who am I" and ending with "how do I navigate my life as an adult student"? Students who drop out of the portfolio development course, which is a compulsory component of the BML degree, are allowed to register for the course again, with a new fee payable. The overall cost of the portfolio course stands at five hundred and sixty five rands, an amount which contrasts with the cost of the portfolio development course at UWC which was one hundred rands during the pilot phase and three hundred rands from 2002 onwards. Of significance is that the portfolio development course at UFS is a credit-bearing course, and the fees paid for RPL could be seen as an investment in the degree, whereas the portfolio course at UWC is a stand-alone generic course.

7.3.1 ASSESSING RPL CREDITS

At the end of the six months, when the portfolio course has been completed, students submit a portfolio that consists of the requests for credits (unit four discussed earlier). A review committee made up of the director of the BML programme, the presenter of the course in which credit is being sought, the administrator of the course and the student advisor, evaluate the portfolio. They make a recommendation that either awards or denies credit. Students are able to appeal against an unsatisfactory outcome.

Interestingly, all of the students interviewed received credit for courses done formally in other programmes and there was a relatively straightforward process of exchanging credits. It is instructive that none of the students applied for credit for learning from experience. Some of the students pointed out that they did not know how to articulate their prior learning into outcomes, as one student said:

> *Actually, I simply did not know how to put my experience into outcomes, and by the time I knew how to do this I was way beyond the portfolio development course and well into the BML. (BB)*

Another student felt he needed all that the university had to offer and did not want to lose out on any new learning that might come his way, and he said:

> *I did not want to request credit because I felt every course was going to offer me something new and I did not want to miss out on this new learning even if I had experience in that area. (DN)*

Yet another student pointed to the importance of allowing time and information before students request credit:

> *It is very difficult to request credit in such an early phase of the programme [the portfolio development course]. Most of the time you get an idea of the courses that you can request credit in, but you don't have a detailed idea of the course. It is only once you are sitting in the course later in the year do you realise "hey, I know this stuff". (DD)*

The positions that these students have taken suggest that the process for requesting credits needs to span a longer time than what was offered in the portfolio course. It also suggests that students need a detailed account of what courses entail to be

able to make a request for credit. This detailed account may give students the confidence to take on the challenge of requesting credit for learning from experience. Like the students in the teacher education pilot at Wits, the position of some of the students at UFS shows that academic learning is valued over experiential learning, and this learning is something students want. As one student said:

I believe if I got credit I will be poorer in the end. (DN)

Another student framed his position similarly when he said:

By not asking for credit I was richer in the end. (AT)

7.3.2 STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Staff development is a consistent feature of the portfolio development course and the BML. Staff are trained in assessing portfolios and experiential learning. Staff cannot hold a permanent teaching position on the BML if they have not participated in staff development. De Paul University in Chicago and the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) facilitated major staff development workshops for staff teaching on the portfolio course and the BML degree as a whole.

While staff development has been a consistent part of the portfolio course, such development was wanting at JCE, Wits and UWC. While UWC has committed itself to staff development in its three year rolling plan, in the pilot phase of the RPL project staff development was not a consistent component of the project, and it seems to be weakly conceptualised, with senior management hoping that it will happen rather than creating conditions and a climate for staff development to happen (Volbrecht, 2002).

7.4 AN ANALYSIS OF ACADEMICS' EXPERIENCE OF RPL

Academics' experience of RPL is analysed against the background of a specialised degree programme, specifically designed for adult learners.

Institutional context and faculty support

Like the academics in the DLL at UWC, academic staff in the BML at UFS appeared to have enjoyed the support of senior management. It seems this support created the space in which a handful of academics were able to explore the promise and the challenges associated with the implementation of RPL. In the words of one academic:

> *I had the complete support of the Senate of the University as well as the leadership within the University to pilot the Bachelor in Management and Leadership and the portfolio development course. This support was vital to the implementation and the success of the RPL project at UFS. (B)*

Also, like the academics at UWC and Wits, academics at UFS experienced a degree of inflexibility from administrative staff. In the words of the coordinator of the BML:

> *Administratively, nothing was geared for RPL. Any process of admission that was different to the traditional way of admissions was a threat [to the Faculty administrators]. (M)*

> *The administration of our university is not suited for the individualised and accreditation and developmental nature of the programmes, leading to frustrations. (A)*

This inflexibility played out quite differently from that at UWC and Wits in that the BML staff were able to establish an autonomous unit which was specifically geared to accommodate adult learners. The administrative unit was able to deal with applications to the BML efficiently; it was able to provide the necessary information to students timeously and generally was able to implement RPL smoothly with relatively few administrative hitches. The staff were able to sidestep administrative procedures that were not supportive of RPL largely because of the support from senior management within the university, and also because they enjoyed a commitment of resources - financial in particular. As one student said:

> *I always felt that I was treated like an adult and that the administrators of the BML knew we had jobs and a life, we were not these youngsters who only had university to think about. (BB)*

RPL for access and credit

The academics were vocal about RPL for credit. They felt that RPL for access was not appropriate for adults who had vast experience. Merely giving access to these adults would be a failure to recognise who these adults were and the experience they brought in to the university. The felt strongly that RPL should be implemented for credit.

As one academic pointed out:

> *RPL for access is an insult to adult students with experience. It's telling them that all your experience is worth to the university is to give you entrance and nothing more. Your experience is worth nothing more than a matric exemption to the university. (B)*

The coordinator of the BML felt that both types of RPL served different purposes.

Both are important to us because those with less than matric need and get access, those with more learning get credit. (M)

It is interesting to note that even though the lecturers were supportive and affirming of RPL for credit, very few students obtained credit for informal learning. Credit was largely given for formal courses and learning. Even though students point out that they did not apply for credit because they did not know how to convert experiential learning into outcomes, it is also possible that students did not apply for credit because they did not think that their prior experiential learning was related to their new qualification or that it was valuable.

Capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

The academics pointed out that although at this moment in the history of South Africa equity and redress issues frame policy initiatives, in RPL there is a need to move beyond equity for historically disadvantaged students and rather to use RPL as a tool to facilitate equity and redress for all adult learners. They cautioned that if RPL was a tool for equity and access of the historically disadvantaged only, then few years from now, the very students who got access and credit on the basis of RPL would once against be disadvantaged and stigmatised because it could be construed that RPL was a form of affirmative action and an "easy way" for students to get into university. In spite of this caution they believed that RPL has the potential to deliver on equity and access.

Let RPL be for the benefit of adult learners. Let it be a tool to facilitate access and credit thereby bringing equity to all adult learners who never had the opportunity to go to university for whatever reason. (B)

RPL should be about individuals taking control of their lives as adults, whoever that adult is. (B)

I think it can deliver on both, especially if we can facilitate a change in our educational practices. (A)

RPL is pedagogically challenging

Like the academics at UWC, the academics at UFS experienced RPL as challenging because it forced them to engage with students who were well versed in their fields of practice. Unlike the teacher educators at Wits, the academics at UFS did not seem to experience a conflict with assessing and mentoring, nor the "academic struggle" of recognising learning from a different site of practice. As one of the academics stated:

My major pedagogical challenge was that I had students in my class who knew much more than I did about certain issues. (B)

The course co-ordinator pointed out that it was a challenge for her to get students to understand that it was learning that was being accredited and not experience, and that students found it difficult to distinguish between the two.

Sometimes making learners understand the difference between experience and learning was a challenge for me. (M)

It is important to note that the BML is an undergraduate qualification and the qualification at Wits was a specialist postgraduate qualification. This difference in level appeared to have contributed to the Wits academics' "struggle" of having to mentor and support students who they believed should have had the literacy skills associated with study at a postgraduate level.

Experiential learning and academic learning

The staff felt strongly that the dichotomy between experiential and academic learning was a false one. They believed that it was a lack of knowledge and understanding of experiential learning that led to such distinctions.

> *I don't see these forms of learning as incompatible. All I see is learning, learning and learning. If anything I would admit that as academics we don't know what kind of learning we are dealing with when we deal with experiential learning. (B)*

> *I don't think in the academic field experience is excluded. (M)*

> *Many academics make experience out to be something hanging in the air. To me experience is demonstration of learning. (B)*

> *We see them as compatible. The student brings to the classroom competencies developed from experience, whilst the lecturer brings foundational academic competencies. Together through a process of collaborative learning, the reflective competencies of the learner develop, and this reflective learning is university learning. (A)*

One of the academics also questioned the assumptions and rights of academics to value one kind of learning over another.

> *You [the academic] don't know what you are dealing with [learning from experience] yet you want to go to the learner with preconceived ideas and expect to match the learners' learning with your academic outcomes. (B)*

7.5 SUGGESTIONS FROM ACADEMICS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

Although the academics did not have many suggestions to make, all the suggestions related to enabling students to meet the imperatives of life rather than the imperatives of a qualification. Their suggestions were about students' all-round well-being and not only their academic well-being.

> *We need to find ways in which more students can participate in RPL programmes. (B)*

> *RPL programmes must be holistic. They [RPL programmes] must account for students as people who have lives and jobs and who want to further their studies as well. The support we give to the student to balance these aspects of their lives remains a crucial ingredient for success at university and of RPL programmes. (B)*

The coordinator of the BML suggested a need for a flow in communication about RPL:

> *We need a constant flow of information both inside and outside the institution as to what RPL is about. (M)*

7.6 ANALYSIS OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF RPL AT UFS

The capacity of RPL to deliver on equity and access

Students were explicit that equity and access were not the automatic or guaranteed outcomes of RPL. Their responses show that they understood the complexity associated with access, and that access without support and success is worthless. Their responses suggest that students need more than RPL to cope at university,

and only if one could cope and succeed at university was equity a possibility through RPL. If access did not facilitate success then there was no equity for those entering the university on RPL. A similar point was made by the teacher educators at Wits who distinguished between physical access and "epistemological access" and pointed out that RPL did not necessarily facilitate the latter even if its equity agenda facilitated physical access.

As one RPL candidate questioned:

> *Access does not guarantee equity. We started out on this programme with 40 students, but we have 18 students now. Why did those students drop out? Maybe because university requires research skills, writing skills, computer skills... and they did not have these. Where is the equity for those who got access? (BB)*

And another RPL candidate pointed out:

> *Universities need to clearly differentiate between students who can cope at university and those who can't. So there is access but it's limited, because there is not necessarily equity! (DD)*

Another student pointed out that equity will evade black students in particular, because apartheid and job reservation policies ensured that they were usually employed in low-skilled and low-paying jobs which were not always conducive to acquiring valuable experience that would be recognised by the University.

> *I don't believe that RPL can really give equity and access for past historical disadvantages, because it was the historically disadvantaged persons who did not get an opportunity to study or learn and participate in training courses. The same applies to experience. They were kept at lower positions and so would not*

have gained the necessary learning from experience to advantage them now at University. (J)

RPL for access and credit

Like the students at Wits, UWC and JCE, the responses of students reflected both sides of the debate pertaining to RPL for access and credit. Their responses showed a sophisticated understanding of the implications of credit and access for students and their future learning. One student felt that RPL should be used for both access and credit, and that if students had relevant learning they should get the credit after such learning was assessed. This view of credit for relevant learning and for such learning to be assessed was also raised by students at UWC and JCE.

I think it should be for both, but if RPL is used for credit, the experiential learning must be assessed and tested against criteria set by the university. After all we are competing with international universities, so whatever knowledge you accredit, you must assess so that such knowledge is on par with academic knowledge. (AT)

Two other students pointed out that RPL for credit disadvantages the learner because it prevents them from new learning.

I think it should be for access, because when you give credit to the student for his prior learning you actually disempower him because you prevent him from access to new learning. (DN)

I think access is important. Although I could get credit for my learning from experience, I did not apply for because I would regret getting credit. I think by not applying for credit I would

have a much richer academic knowledge by attending the courses [for which I could get credit]. (AT)

And still another student felt that students should get credit only for courses that they have done formally.

You should get credit for courses you have done. (T)

Most valued experience

A common experience among all the students interviewed was that the portfolio development course was of immense personal value and that it enabled them to explore their strengths and discover who they were as individuals. This experience is expressed in different ways by each student interviewed in this case.

The PDC enabled me to explore myself! I realised who I was. The leadership skills made me change as a manager completely. (BB)

I learnt to understand myself and how to work with others. More importantly, previously studying was seen by me as an obstacle, now after the portfolio development course I see further study as something that is achievable. (DD)

For me the PDC brought a paradigm shift. I was brought up in a conservative Afrikaans background, but after the PDC I had a shift. Here I saw people from different racial and cultural backgrounds with whom I had a lot in common. The PDC made us work together and this gave me an opportunity to see that all this time I was thinking about others in a very narrow way. (DN)

The portfolio development course made me discover myself. It made me find my strengths and weaknesses. It was an opportunity for self discovery. (AT)

The portfolio development course gave me an opportunity to paint a picture of my life, of where I am and where I am going to and of my future learning and goals. (DN)

The portfolio development course taught me a great deal about myself and my relationships with people. (J)

My biggest gain has been confidence because I got to know myself. I now participate with confidence in work meetings. (T)

Another general experience among all the students interviewed related to the support they had received from lecturers, referring to their availability and accessibility.

Our lecturers began their lectures by giving you their phone numbers, both home and office as well as their e mail addresses. (DN)

The support we got from lecturers was very motivating. We could call them at home and even in the evening. They acknowledged that we had our jobs in the day and that the evening was sometimes the only time we had to contact them. (AT)

On many occasions I had to consult my lecturers in the evening or at home. I always had the opportunity to do so. (BB)

Our lecturers were always available, even at home. (DD)

Our lecturers treated us as adults, as their equals. I found them very accessible. (J)

They were available when I needed them. (T)

Barriers encountered

Interestingly, in stark comparison with students at Wits and JCE, the students at UFS experienced no barriers in the portfolio development course, nor in the BML, such as insensitivity from faculty, difficulty with obtaining evidence from previous employers and the preoccupation of valuing formal learning over experiential learning. One student referred to the duration of the BML as an irritation more than a barrier, when she said:

I really felt that the portfolio course did not have to be for so long - six months is a long time. (J)

7.7 SUGGESTIONS FROM STUDENTS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

The students in this case made a variety of suggestions. These ranged from ideas for enabling students to master the process required by the university to request credit, to marketing RPL, to validating experiential learning. About the process for seeking credit the students had this to say:

Teach new RPL students how to present their prior learning, especially if it's informal. Remember we don't have formal learning in the first instance, yet we are required to present our prior learning formally! (DD)

People don't understand and know how to apply for credit for experiential learning, so you may need to show the process to students. (BB)

When applying for credits guide people through this process. Show clearly what the modules contain so people can see if they can apply for credits. I sat in two courses for which I could have applied and got credit if I knew more about those courses. (DD)

On the issue of receiving credit for experiential learning, students felt strongly that experiential learning must be assessed before it can be accredited. They also felt that the university should be setting the criteria for such assessment.

As two of the students suggested:

If a person gets credit for experiential learning this learning must be assessed by the university against some standard set by the university. (AT)

All learning whether it's experiential or academic must be tested before you can get credit for it. (DN)

A student, like the one at JCE, suggested that there are many people who could benefit from the opportunities that RPL offered, but that RPL must be marketed and more people must get to know about RPL.

The portfolio course and the BML programme must be marketed so more people can benefit from it. (DN)

7.8 CONCLUSION

What do the experiences of academics and students say about RPL at UFS?

In the absence of a policy at UFS, RPL is being implemented in a specialised degree programme. The programme seems flexibly designed for adult learners and provides multiple exit points. The programme has been designed in partnership with an international university that has experience in the design and implementation of adult focused programmes. This partnership and collaboration is extended to include industries in the Bloemfontein region that employ the BML students.

The RPL portfolio course is a compulsory component in the BML programme, and appears to have the explicit support of the senior management of the university. Academics teaching the BML have managed to create what seems like an enclave in the School of Management where the BML and the needs of the adult students are the main focus. Such is the focus that RPL students are able to register with the coordinator of the BML programme and pay their fees at this office. The researcher's impression indicated that this self sustained and independent functioning of the BML appears to have ensured that students do not have to suffer administrative inflexibility at the hands of faculty staff, who usually see their jobs as upholding the rules rather than working with the rules in a flexible way.

In addition to this special approach to administration, the RPL students have access to an in-house library as well as to a writing centre and computer facilities. This means that staff are relieved of the burden of mentoring, teaching and assessing the RPL students - a common occurrence at Wits and JCE and a "pedagogical challenge" for some.

Staff development is perceived to be an important element in the RPL pilot at UFS. Staff received training from RPL practitioners from the School for New Learning at De Paul University as well as the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL).

Given this relatively smooth passage for RPL in the BML programme, can the university replicate this experience in other faculties, schools or qualifications, and what are the associated challenges ahead? One of the immediate challenges facing the university is to begin to grapple with an institutional policy on RPL. This implies that the university may need to begin to examine its own vision and mission in terms of RPL and how this interfaces or collides with national policy goals framed around issues of equity and redress. It may need to question its own commitment to widening access and the concomitant acceptance of providing support structures that facilitate success after access, across the whole institution.

An associated challenge is the capacity to replicate the portfolio development course, across other faculties, schools or qualifications. While the BML was a specific response to a specific need expressed by big business and in partnership with big business, a similar lever may not be the impetus in other faculties or schools. Furthermore, the demand for RPL in the BML, essentially driven by the demand of big business, may not be the same in other qualifications. It may happen that other qualifications or faculties will never experience the demand that the BML experienced.

Since 2000, the BML with the portfolio development course is part of a standard qualification on offer at UFS, and has approximately one thousand students registered. As a qualification within the university it has qualified for government subsidy that has accrued to the institution. In contrast to Wits and to a lesser degree JCE, RPL at UFS has the potential to bring a large number of students into the BML, and to enhance the university's ability to compete effectively in the area of management and leadership, the key focus of the BML. However, the

university is not likely to be able to "piggy back" on the BML and declare itself an institution committed to widening access to disadvantaged students - a key imperative in national policy in 2002.

CHAPTER EIGHT

RPL AS AN EMERGING FIELD OF ENQUIRY AND PRACTICE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS[31]

In the final analysis, the problem of access is not one set of procedures as against another but about attitudes and orientations.

(Usher, 1989: 77)

RPL is about my knowledge and experience, but it is also about what you [the academic] think is the value of my knowledge and experience.

(Gregory, RPL student: 2002)

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a tool for individuals to receive recognition and accreditation in formal education for learning acquired in such contexts as work and civil society. While RPL is well established in North America, the UK and to a lesser degree in Australia, it is new and untested in policy and practice in South Africa.

In such policy documents as the National Plan for Higher Education (DoE, 2001), the Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of Higher Education (DoE, 1997) and The White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995), RPL is represented as a way to increase the participation of black students in higher education, and to improve the knowledge and skills base of the workforce in the interest of global competitiveness.

[31]Material from this chapter has been published in The Recognition of Prior Learning: a soft option in higher education? South African Journal of Higher Education, 16 (2) 2002: 63-68.

This particular policy position links RPL to issues of equity and redress, which are both part of an overall aim to transform education and training, encapsulating visions of a particular moment in the history of South Africa. To date RPL is an emerging field of inquiry and its practice is developing unevenly across the higher education sector.

Few South African institutions have designed and implemented RPL portfolio development courses, and even fewer have students who have been the recipients of such courses. A survey by Breier and Osman (2000) showed that only three of the 36 institutions of higher education had draft RPL policies. There is a dearth of research and information on existing RPL projects, and published research on the experiences of people who participated in such initiatives, that is both implementers and recipients of RPL. Although the international trend in educational policy and educational theory is to put learners at the centre of change and transformation (Erikson and Schultz, 1992), very little is done in South Africa that places participants' experience at the centre of such change and reform. This is true for school and university reform.

This study has responded to this gap by asking both recipients and implementers about their experiences of RPL in higher education. These experiences were documented as institutional case studies, which show clearly how different institutions anticipated and interpreted these policy positions in a variety of contextual circumstances and visions. These case studies represent the handful of initial RPL initiatives implemented as experimental projects in higher education in South Africa. In constructing the case studies, the researcher asked among other things about the institutional environment in which RPL was located, and how this shaped the practice of RPL. She also probed the epistemological and philosophical ideas that propelled such practices. She asked whether RPL could deliver on the policy goals of equity and access, and if so, who were the likely RPL students and what was the nature of their inclusion. Finally she inquired into participants' suggestions for developing the practice of RPL.

The timing of this study is useful in that links and gaps between policy and practice can be envisaged and explored. It makes available empirical data generated at the level of RPL implementation.

Such an inquiry seeks to understand and give voice to individuals and practices that are at present marginal in higher education. It is consistent with critical education theory, which seeks ways to understand how individuals can transform the contexts in which they find themselves, so that ... "possibilities may be sought, reflected upon transformed and deepened" (Taylor, 1985: 139). Critical education theory intersects and is compatible with a qualitative research paradigm and these together provide the research framework for this study. The researcher developed a qualitative research design and conducted interviews with 37 respondents, 14 academics and 23 students, from five RPL pilot projects in four institutions of higher education in South Africa. The experiences of academics and students in the five projects were examined as valuable sources of information in a field that is embryonic and "under-researched" (Harris, 2000)

The research findings have been presented in Chapters Four to Seven of this thesis, as institutional case studies at the level of implementation. This final chapter looks across the case studies to see how the empirical findings of this enquiry relate to models and practices of RPL developed in earlier research and literature. The research questions will be used as an organising device to discuss the participants' personal experiences of RPL, the capacity of RPL to deliver equity and access, and finally the suggestions that participants made for the practice of RPL in higher education.

8.2 PARTICIPANTS' PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF RPL

This study started with the premise that the experiences of individuals who were the implementers and the recipients of RPL may have much to inform the policy and practice of RPL in higher education.

In Chapter Three competing concepts and models of RPL were reviewed, and these will be used to describe the practices that have emerged in this study. It was also pointed out that irrespective of differences in the philosophical and practical orientations of these models, certain essentials needed to be in place when implementing RPL in an institution or organisation. Most writers (Lueddeke, 1997; Thomas, 1998) point out that RPL requires commitment from senior managers within the institution and that such commitment must be part of the institution's vision to broaden access. Another essential is to develop policies and practices for the consistent implementation of RPL across the institution. Thirdly RPL requires staff development because of the "insecurities for staff whose traditional role has been that of teacher" (Challis, 1993: 117-118). These writers also emphasise the importance of a champion for RPL, more so when the practice is new and contested (Thomas, 1998). On the question of champions, Merrifield et al, point out that "...much can happen in institutional niches by committed staff as long as there is no active opposition from above" (2000: 15). The essentials outlined above seem appropriate and logical for the implementation of RPL.

By way of contrast, this research showed that in three of the four institutions studied many of the essentials were not in place. Not surprisingly, RPL is being implemented unevenly in the four institutions studied. The following section discusses variables which have contributed to success or failure in RPL implementation in these institutions, as experienced by respondents.

Policy framework and vision

Explicit policies and practices that link strongly with institutional vision and mission are cited as one of the key variables for RPL implementation (Lueddeke, 1997; Thomas, 1998). Explicit policies and practices, it is argued, are not only essential for consistent implementation of RPL, but also for communicating a broad rationale for such a project and the roles and responsibilities of all the actors. This research has found that RPL pilot projects were being implemented in the absence of clear institutional policies on RPL, and without a coherent vision of where the projects were going and how they related to the overall mission of the institution. Where the pilot projects were implemented in the absence of support from senior management and a clear policy framework, the work has not extended beyond the pilot phase, so much so that research and development in RPL has stalled.

In contrast, where RPL was part of an institution's broader aim and vision (as at UWC) and where the pilot project was guided by a policy, the pilot project has shaped the institutional response to RPL and broader educational reform around access. These combined moves, of linking RPL to its vision and having an institutional policy, signal that the institution has a clear and coherent strategy and a long term commitment to RPL. At the time of writing in late 2002 the RPL portfolio course at UWC was part of the undergraduate curriculum at UWC, and RPL is strongly linked to its admissions policy and overall mission of lifelong learning.

Support from senior management

Strong and open commitment from the top levels of management is one of the commonly cited requirements for RPL projects (Merrifield et al, 2000; Thomas, 1998). Firm support not only affects the allocation of resources, but also influences the status and visibility of RPL within the wider institution. This in

turn can determine whether RPL is a minor intervention in the institution, or potentially a major force for institutional reform. The research has found that senior management support (administrative and academic) for RPL and visibility of research and development in RPL varied sharply between institutions.

In two institutions (Wits and JCE), RPL was peripheral, a minor experimental intervention, which was externally funded and researched by a handful of individuals. These RPL projects were outside the institution's core business of catering to 18 to 24 year-old school-leavers. They did not enjoy institutional recognition or support from senior administrative managers within schools and faculties (as experienced at Wits in particular). This made these projects vulnerable in that they could easily be brushed aside. Testimony to this vulnerability came from several academics who said:

> *A project like this should enjoy a higher profile and more status to make it more credible. (D)*

> *It felt a bit lonely sometimes - it seemed we were sort of marginalised. (G)*

It is important to point out that support from management at faculty level was also hampered by massive internal restructuring at Wits and continual movement of administrative managers from one position to another, which could have resulted in RPL "falling through the cracks".

At UFS, although it was a project in one department and could be construed as a peripheral activity, RPL enjoyed strong support from senior management within the university and the faculty. This RPL project, and the academics in the project, could be likened to what Merrifield et al call "institutional niches... [with] ... no active opposition from above" (2000: 15). The significance of senior

management support in RPL cannot be over-estimated, and such support was a crucial variable for success or failure in the institutions in this study.

Mixed aims

A striking finding is that where the pilot projects were marginal and tentative, they were exploring many issues and hence did not set clear outcomes. Firstly, the pilot project framework designed by WHEP at JET was extraordinarily inclusive. Besides identifying more than 50 research questions and sub questions, JET envisaged that the research and development projects in RPL would give it [RPL] credibility in higher education in South Africa. This agenda was somewhat different from that of the academics themselves, who signed up with JET to be researchers, teachers and perhaps assessors but not institutional policy-makers.

Secondly, coupled with the outcomes foreseen by JET, the projects aimed to explore the possibilities of RPL within existing qualifications rather than to develop new courses or qualifications. This hampered creative curriculum innovation on the part of the academics, who were constrained by the rules governing the qualifications. Thirdly, through a single portfolio development course academics were exploring the possibilities of RPL for access and credit, resulting in many pedagogical tensions. As two of the academics at Wits in teacher education said:

> *It was a complete confusion about whether we were teaching or assessing. (C)*

> *We were too close, too internal to what we were doing. Also we did not really know in advance how to structure a portfolio to be able to tell them [the students] about it. We structured it as they brought the drafts in. (Y)*

An important implication from this finding suggests that because RPL can be used for a variety of purposes, academics and institutions implementing RPL may need to consider the purpose of RPL before considering the methods and tools for its development and assessment. If RPL is to remain even vaguely true to its origins in educational equity and redress, these purposes become extremely significant.

By way of example, if RPL is to be used for access, it seems appropriate to assess the students' potential to succeed in higher education rather than actual academic ability. In this instance a generic portfolio, as practiced at UWC (discussed in Chapter Five) could be a useful method. This portfolio created a space in which prior learning could be presented, and it used this prior learning as the text to assess potential. One of the indicators of potential was academic literacy, since students who were going to access the university would need to have the potential to develop this skill in order to succeed in such a textual environment. Also in this instance students were allowed to select their own texts which were used to assess academic potential. As Luckett suggests "..the purpose should define the tool, rather than allowing the tool to determine the purpose..." (1999: 69).

Another implication of this finding is that RPL project aims need to be discussed widely and explicitly across the institution as well as within the department or school concerned, or such projects will be vulnerable, lack credibility and fail. In addition, such openness can bring a variety of interests and perspectives to bear on RPL, rather than the orientations of a few. The project needs to be situated within the broader framework of the institution's plans and priorities. This type of communication and planning around RPL could assist in clarifying the aims of the RPL project as well as informing the implementation and monitoring of such a project.

RPL champions

Only two (UWC and UFS) of the four institutions had an RPL champion or produced a champion through the course of the pilot project. Thomas (1998) and Merrifield et al (2000) consider a champion essential for RPL implementation, more so when RPL is contested. This research has showed that the pilots at Wits and JCE were perceived as research projects belonging to individuals, projects that did not attract the attention of management or others in the institution. This position was further weakened by the divergent philosophical and pedagogical orientations of the academics (to be discussed later in this chapter). None of these projects was able to produce an RPL champion who could advocate RPL either in select programmes within their faculty or even across the institution.

In contrast, with support from senior managers within the university, and with RPL an explicit part of their job descriptions, champions at UFS were able to lead developments in RPL at the university by mounting a challenge to the restrictive national regulatory requirement of matriculation exemption as the criteria for admission into university. This initiative resulted in the RPL portfolio course within the BML at UFS obtaining recognition by the matriculation examinations board as an alternative to matric exemption.

Similarly, at UWC RPL was championed among academics and administrators, resulting in RPL being strongly linked to the admission procedures of the university. At the time of writing, late in 2002, RPL champions at UWC and UFS had successfully negotiated with senior university administrators to incorporate student data relating to RPL onto the central student database. This enables RPL activities and the performance of RPL students to be subjected to the same planning, monitoring and evaluation procedures that govern other university activities.

RPL at UFS started in a purpose-built niche programme - the Business Management and Leadership degree. Staff had connections in industry and were able to seize opportunities to introduce the BML degree with RPL as a key component. Here we have a good example of how support from senior management enabled a group of academics to champion RPL in a small area, with the potential to increase in volume and scale across the institution.

Staff development

This research has shown that RPL presents formidable challenges for academic staff and requires deliberate action. It brings with it moments of self-doubt about pedagogy and epistemology. Staff development has long been considered essential for RPL implementation (Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997; Challis, 1993; Evans, 2000; Merrifield et al, 2000; Trowler, 1996), yet it featured strongly in only one of the four institutions examined in this research. It appears that investment in staff development can have the effect of strengthening the hand of both RPL as a pedagogy and of those academics and administrators who are open and willing to engage in RPL.

Related to the previously expressed need for clearly identifying the aims of RPL projects is the necessity for planning on the issue of staff development. RPL projects may need to incorporate a strategy for staff development, which in turn should be part of the overall teaching and learning plan of the institution. Such an approach may provide a useful and safe environment in which academics can explore creative responses to the epistemological and pedagogic challenges that RPL poses. Merrifield et al urge that staff access to expertise within or outside the institution can go a long way to overcome some of the pedagogical dilemmas and detours that staff encounter when implementing RPL (2000: 51), and Evans states emphatically that staff development should be prioritised as a "requirement" rather than "an optional extra" (2000: 19).

We turn our attention now from macro issues relating to RPL implementation at an institutional or organisational level to the micro level. In particular, we examine the ways in which different academics' philosophies and epistemologies impact on the practice of RPL, and we try to understand why some academics were "emboldened" and others were "overwhelmed" by RPL.

A recurring issue that confronted the researcher throughout was whether differences among academics related mainly to epistemological and philosophical differences, or whether they related to awareness about the purpose and aims of RPL and academics' own prior experiences of exclusion from education. Was RPL about finding or not finding equivalence between different knowledges, or was it about widening access, about personal development and changing institutional cultures? The researcher began to understand that academics' sensitivity and openness to the diverse ways in which knowledge is understood was often limited by their own notions of knowledge, and their own epistemological preferences. And, intentionally or not, the portfolio courses they developed reflected their ideas about ways of knowing, what it means to be a knower and how learning happens. To some degree every choice or move made in the portfolio course reflected their ideas about knowing and learning.

Contending versions of RPL

The research found that the portfolio courses across the five pilot projects (discussed in Chapters Four to Seven) varied widely in their aims and approaches. In contrast to the three models or perspectives of RPL which seem quite clear cut and distinct in the literature (reviewed in Chapter Three), the RPL practices described in this study are characterised by their hybridity. While this is not surprising, the practices show that different models of RPL prevailed in the same institution, and that in real life settings divergent interpretations of "developmental RPL" were possible. The study is revealing of practices with developmental intentions having technicist effects (Wits teacher education and

JCE), and radical rhetoric and intentions resulting in and co-existing with more developmental practices (UWC); while still others implemented relatively pure developmental practices and were strongly text based (Wits adult education and UFS).

The experiences show that while some of the academics were "emboldened" by the RPL initiatives, others felt they were "drowning" and experienced intense "pedagogical struggles". The main area of contestation and debate rests on the epistemological challenges that RPL throws up in higher education. Following Harris, it appears that the "epistemological contours of formal knowledge" (2000: 48) were drawn in varied ways by the different academics in this study, showing clearly that "the academy" is not as homogenous and monolithic as it is sometimes made out to be. First, we turn our attention to the portfolio development courses, and then we examine the epistemological positions that propelled such courses.

Generally, across the five projects, there was a trend for academics to design and implement portfolio courses that were developmental in their orientations. As discussed in Chapter Three, these approaches revolve around personal statements of learning which encourage RPL students to reflect on their experience and to extract and articulate learning from it. Usually, this learning is presented in a format that relates fairly closely to the academic learning in the course for which access or credit is being sought (Harris, 2000; 1999a; Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997). In addition, experience is valued only to the extent that it can act as a resource for learning (Challis, 1993; Butterworth, 1992; Evans, 1992; Simosko, 1988).

In this perspective it is the learning acquired from experience that is valued, rather than the experience itself. Framed in the discourse of liberal humanism, one of the strengths of this approach is that students are supported and guided throughout the reflection process. The study found that variations to this approach occurred in two instances. In one case transformational intentions were driven by more

developmental practices (UWC). In another, more technicist approaches were used with more developmental intentions (at Wits in teacher education and JCE). How did such hybridity occur, what is the nature of such hybridity, and how did students' knowledge fare?

RPL practices at UWC clearly show a developmental rather than a transformative stance, in that project leaders were not able to apply pressure for curriculum change within the wider institution, or even within courses and qualifications that students were attempting to access.

However, some of the practices in the portfolio course were influenced and shaped by the transformational model of RPL discussed in Chapter Three. In this model or perspective of RPL individual and collective experience is made visible, and a space is created in the portfolio for such experience to be articulated and valued " ...in and of itself rather than solely in terms of its degree of fit with existing standards or curricula..." (Harris, 1999a: 135). Such experience does not have to be reflected upon, nor does learning have to be extracted from experience. Instead learning and experience are seen to be "always found together" (Usher and Johnston, 1996: 3-4). The one cannot be distanced from the other as required in the process of reflection.

UWC thus practised a hybrid form of RPL which drew on developmental and transformational RPL. The portfolio development course provided a space for knowledge created in community, organisational work and social knowledge created in the workplace to be presented and counted as valid or "legitimate" knowledge. Students did not have to represent their learning in the context of competences (as seen at UFS) nor in the context of particular theories (as seen at Wits in Adult Education and JCE), nor in the context of particular texts (as seen at Wits in teacher education).

The approach taken by the academics at UWC reflected their awareness that learning and experience are steeped and structured in inequality (Hendricks, 2001), and that such learning and experience have been shaped by a history of deprivation, disadvantage and exclusion in South Africa. Furthermore, students' experience was "...given its own sense of certainty, pace and place" (Preece, 2000: 8), and academics began to share their "epistemological authority" with students (Michelson, 1996a) even if only for a short time. Is it a coincidence that this orientation was adopted at UWC - an institution with first-hand experience of exclusion and disadvantage? Does this history and experience predispose institutions and individuals to particular positions on RPL?

Another hybrid form that drew on the developmental and credit exchange approach to RPL was practised in the Wits teacher education pilot project and at JCE. Both RPL projects had imported some aspects of the technical model of RPL into their practices. As discussed in Chapter Three, the technical perspective of RPL requires a prospective candidate to provide evidence of having achieved the skills and the knowledge prescribed for a university course, and the institution then assesses the adequacy of the evidence supplied. In this perspective of RPL, prior learning is only valued to the extent that it matches the skills and knowledge of a curriculum for which access or credit is sought, and assessment of prior learning rather than student development is foregrounded.

The academics who designed the RPL portfolio development course in teacher education at Wits started out with the intention to explore the nature of students' prior learning. Students were required to reflect on their prior experiences in the context of two academic texts selected by the academics. As the academics read these reflections they were overwhelmed by the "messy" nature of such experience and reflection. They experienced these reflections as unstructured, personally situated learning that did not match the learning expected of students in a BEd (Honours) course.

Not being able to epistemologically access the experiential learning of students, they turned the portfolio course on its head. Instead of attempting to recognise the prior learning of students (in terms of what they *had*) the lecturers recognised what prior learning the students did *not* have, and accordingly decided to give the students "epistemological access" to the BEd (Honours). They resorted to teaching and socialising the students in the demands and rigors the qualification that students were seeking access to, and the portfolios were assessed for academic literacy rather than prior learning. In this way the technical perspective or approach to RPL was recruited by the academics into a developmental model.

This approach was valued by the students in terms of the academic literacy it provided them with, and the confidence it gave them to take on the academic tasks that lay ahead in the BEd. But at the same time they became less confident about the value of their own prior learning. So while an academic skills programme is valuable for RPL students entering the university, the purpose of the programme needs to be clear, otherwise the prior learning of students is rendered invisible and even "distorted" (Usher, 1989) when academics are unable to access such learning.

JCE, like the teacher educators at Wits, also had a leaning towards a technical approach to RPL with developmental intentions. While the portfolio course allowed students to reflect on prior learning for access to English and Education, for all the other courses in the HDE it required students to meet both the college norms and the national norms for teacher education. These norms emphasise and value formal courses over informal courses and formal learning over informal learning. Thus in one qualification prior informal learning was both valued and devalued, resulting in confusion and mixed feelings among students about the intentions of the institution.

> *You see this academic record which they want at JCE, this certificate, this matric, you are no longer in line with the actual*

meaning of RPL. You are doing something which is parallel to RPL. (M)

It is worth noting that the academics at JCE adopted a technicist leaning, which was not arrived at from their epistemological positions, but more from the constraints of a fixed curriculum dictated in part by prescriptive national norms for teacher education (an issue taken up in the next section, below).

In contrast, Wits (adult education) and UFS practised developmental portfolios which were strongly text based. While the adult educators required reflection and then analysis and articulation of learning in the form of reflective essays, the academics at UFS required students to reflect on their prior learning and to represent this learning in a way that would be comparable to competences set for the courses for which credit was being sought. The two approaches to portfolio were practised as described in the developmental model of RPL (reviewed and discussed in Chapter Three).

A question of knowledge equivalence?

This section of the chapter now turns to the epistemological positions that propelled the variety of approaches to RPL that were implemented by academics in this study. While there is no single approach that can be deemed most appropriate, this study suggests that academics who intend to implement RPL may find it helpful to conduct what the researcher would call an "epistemological audit". This implies that academics start by questioning their own epistemological orientations as part of this audit. Such a review will also require institutions and academics to be aware of and transparent about the purpose and aims of RPL. They may need to ask whether RPL is about assimilating students into existing programmes in an existing institutional culture where the knowledge boundaries and disciplinary bases are fixed, or about a space in which new forms of scholarship about knowing through experience and knowing through action are explored. Such new forms could complement academic ways of knowing which

try to breach sedimented intellectual boundaries and overcome binary oppositions that seem to be largely ideological. An audit ultimately raises personal questions about academics as raced, classed and gendered actors.

This study shows that RPL has aroused concerns, and has the potential to divide the academic community between those who welcome the destabilisation of traditional knowledge boundaries and those who fear it for weakening the university and the specialist role of the pedagogue. For the academics at Wits (teacher education), experience of implementing RPL sharpened the distinction between academic and experiential learning rather than blurring it. Drawing on two key concepts from Bernstein, namely "vertical" and "horizontal" discourse, they point out that academic or university knowledge is characterised by a vertical discourse (which is characterised by a systematic structure), while students' prior experiential knowledge is characterised by a horizontal discourse (which is oral and tacit).

Different forms of knowledge emerge from the two discourses. RPL requires academics, who are steeped in vertical discourse, to recognise students' prior learning, which is immersed in horizontal discourse. The dilemma for some academics is that because the discourse of the communicants (academic and student) are different, academics cannot hear or recognise students' accounts of prior learning. They argue that even if they wished to recognise students' learning, they are constrained by the tools of their discourse and practice which prevent this act of recognition.

How did these academics extricate themselves from this bind? Starting out as they did, by dichotomising the experiential and the academic, left them with few moves. The boundary they set around knowledge and academic ways of knowing exalted their epistemological preference. This preference prevented them from sharing their "epistemological authority", and this authority in turn impacted on their capacity (or willingness) to epistemologically access the prior learning of

their students. Starting out with an essentialist perspective, which highlighted fundamental differences between knowledges and between assessing and teaching, resulted in the design and implementation of a portfolio development course in which the pervasive power of academic knowledge prevailed. The academy, its specialist discourse and the assessment process in RPL were foregrounded in this approach to RPL. The belief that academic discourse "gives coherence, gives order and gives meaning" (as stated by Y) prevented them from exploring the experiential or practical discourse, which is "segmental", situated and real. Apple points out that such dichotomies and distinctions are "a fiction that we tell to make our lives as educators simpler" (1994: x).

How did the academics in Wits adult education, UWC, UFS and JCE look beyond particular legitimised forms of knowledge? Why did they not experience such intense struggles as their colleagues in teacher education at Wits? Their strategy of analysis seems to be one that did not dichotomise knowledges. Their starting point was to acknowledge "...the primacy of vagueness ... as the aboriginal stuff of reality" (Chia, 2000: 515). These academics started out with an epistemological standpoint that drew on theories of adult learning and adult development in which adults' prior experience is valued and central.

They were informed by epistemologies where knowledge cannot be separated from experience, and practice-based knowledge is seen as having a complementary role to play with academic knowledge. This way of theorizing is exerting its influence in varied arenas from work place learning to service learning to education (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1986; Collins, 1986; Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Michelson, 1996a, 1998; New London Group, 1996; Usher and Johnston, 1996; Usher, 1999). The lecturers in Wits adult education, UWC, JCE and UFS argue that this inclusive and complementary approach need not compromise the assessment process, nor the specialist role of the pedagogue. Instead this wider view of relevant knowledge resonates with the broader epistemological possibilities associated with adult education theories and

practices, where knowledge and learning from different sites of practice are treated in a more fluid and permeable way. It is instructive to note that theories of adult learning and adult development are absent in theorising about RPL in the Wits teacher education project and to a lesser degree at JCE.

This study shows that for some academics permeable orientations to knowledge resulted in a theoretical impasse, paralysing their work and interest in RPL. For others such permeability allowed them to venture beyond "legitimised" notions of knowledge and to make alternate epistemological choices. It offered them more choices for an emancipatory view of knowing.

While these debates and positions are valuable and necessary, more so because "the practice is under-researched" (Harris, 2000: 127) and under theorised, the challenge in South Africa is to move towards complementary rather than insular ways in which to theorise knowledge. While such an approach to theorising is not without its critics (Moore and Muller, 1999; Muller, 2000), the researcher would argue that this approach is crucial to the discourse community, because insularity at this early moment of implementation could compromise future RPL initiatives in higher education in South Africa. A complementary approach is useful in that it acknowledges academic knowledge as a powerful form of capital, which students need, but such an approach also acknowledges the validity of other knowledges and epistemological resources that RPL students bring to the institution. This would imply that while we engage with questions relating to giving students "epistemological access" to the discourse of the institution, as academics we may need to learn how to epistemologically access students' knowledges. This means we may need to "...refuse to take 'authorised' knowledge as a given... to acknowledge that we don't always know what is worth knowing..." (Michelson, 1999: 102).

As Zeichner comments, "there can never be a grand synthesis that washes away ideological differences" (1993: 9). But in South Africa entrenched educational

inequalities compel educators to create alternatives to the logic of academic knowledge, to engage in such a process with integrity and to work responsibly with claims and rhetoric about RPL. The experiences of the academics indicate the usefulness of an epistemological audit, mentioned earlier, and such a review becomes crucial if the practice of RPL is to remain even vaguely true to its origins in the struggle for access and equity. It is instructive that although South Africa presents a rich site for exploring other and indigenous knowledge systems, the take-up of this exploration is slow and cautious (see Higgs, Vakalisa, Mda and Assie-Lumumba, 2000).

Implications for curriculum change and student knowledge

In South Africa higher education in the main is offered in residential campuses with full-time study as the dominant mode (Castle and Attwood, 2001: 62). The curriculum in such a model is arranged with broad and foundational courses on offer in the first year of study, and applied courses with a specific focus toward the end of the qualification. At an RPL workshop at Wits (1998b) Michelson argued for a more flexible and appropriate curriculum logic for adult learners with prior learning, with learning from experience and applied knowledge to be located at the entry level of the qualification, and for the broad theoretical knowledge to be located at the end. In this way an RPL student would be able to apply for credit in courses which are at the entry level rather than the end of the qualification, facilitating student access and student mobility within a qualification.

Implicit in this approach to curriculum change is the need for courses to be structured on a modular basis, and an equal weighting system allowing for learning from different sites of practice "...to be treated comparably" (Luckett, 2001: 58). In addition this curriculum arrangement would require a wide range of options from which RPL students and staff could make informed selections.

RPL projects in this research have had mixed effects on curriculum design and organisation. Wits and JCE were piloting RPL within existing qualifications. They were cautious about RPL and not surprisingly, had not altered the range of courses offered to reflect the nature of these learners. RPL has not influenced the curriculum in these institutions, but rather an attempt has been made to absorb and assimilate RPL students into mainstream institutional offerings. The emphasis has been on access with scant attention to post-access support. At JCE the trajectories of individual students shows that a "lock step" hierarchically organised curriculum prevented the academics from recognising formal learning acquired elsewhere, because the core components of programmes could not be matched. The trajectories showed further that even though academics were comfortable with a blurring between experiential and academic learning, this did not emerge in their practice of RPL; that is, what they espoused and what occurred in practice were quite different.

The curriculum at UWC, like those at Wits and JCE, has not changed in a way that reflects the nature of adult students or their participation. The equity mission of the portfolio course and of RPL is not matched by an "adult friendly" curriculum. Like Wits and JCE it may allow for access, but is not geared to awarding credit for prior learning.

This research has shown that only one of the institutions (UFS) developed an adult focused curriculum in terms of design, delivery, structure, teaching and assessment as well as support services. The UFS offered RPL within a specific qualification designed specifically for adult learners, and this curriculum did account for adult learners and adult learning in terms of content, structure, support and delivery. Despite this adult focused context, students found it difficult to request credit in some instances, because they were not familiar with the process, or perhaps because they did not think their prior learning was valuable enough. Could it be that some academics have a way of dressing up their courses so that students cannot recognise their prior learning in such courses?

In addition to positing an alternate logic for adult learning and RPL, Michelson urges strongly that RPL requires academics and institutions to critically examine and challenge what is included in and excluded from the curriculum, and why (1999: 102). She points out that such a review will reveal that students' knowledges can become a resource for curriculum development and not just for access, and that students' knowledges can tell us about the knowledges that are excluded from the curricula in various fields. Michelson's approach firmly links RPL with curriculum change, which resonates with the principles of learner-centredness and the significance of learners' life experience that guide curriculum development in adult education (Usher et al, 1997).

In the majority of the portfolio courses in this research students' knowledge did not fare well in relation to what was in the curriculum. Their knowledges were largely invisible and were not really used to interrogate theory. Instead other texts, written by authorities in the field, were used for such interrogation. A mild exception to this was the portfolio course in adult education at Wits that drew on students' knowledge both as RPL practitioners and RPL students. Similarly, the portfolio course at UWC created a space for students' learning to become visible and for such learning to be used as a text for thinking about experience, albeit for a short while.

Arguing in a similar way, Harris (1999a: 137-138) points out that most RPL practices have the potential to be inclusive if there is an attempt by academics to allow students' knowledge to stand beside the knowledge "enshrined in curricula". Implicit in this assertion is a need for an institutional culture, which values learning derived from experience. At the time of writing in late 2002, such a culture was largely absent in the institutions examined for this research. Even in the presence of a national accreditation framework designed to facilitate learner access, mobility and course transfer between institutions and across different

sectors, little happened in this regard, hinting at the resistance of academically orientated higher education to the NQF.

Academic value of the portfolio development courses for students

How have the students experienced practices that are divided philosophically, epistemologically and even practically? And of what use are such experiences to institutions and policy makers?

In contrast to the academics, RPL students did not identify or refer to the contestable nature of knowledge. While students recognised that some institutions (like Wits and JCE) were not responsive to adult learners, they believed that they as students should be the ones to adapt rather than the institution. In addition, some of the students felt that even an academic development course, such as that developed at Wits in teacher education, was useful and valuable because the course prepared them for university life:

> *For me this RPL programme really helped me to write my assignments correctly. I was not going to make it [at university] without this RPL programme. (J)*

> *RPL assisted us to know the standards of the university. (T)*

Preece (2000: 3) points out that students and individuals rarely question or challenge a system from which they have been excluded, especially if they are attempting to access such a system which privileges the dominant class.

A consistent finding, particularly when the approaches were developmental and transformational (Wits adult education, UFS and UWC respectively) was that students experienced the portfolio development courses as opportunities to find themselves, to build their confidence and to map their learning and career paths.

The portfolio development courses provided students with intrinsic value, and this related to opportunities that the portfolio created for candidates to find out who they were.

Where portfolio courses had a leaning to more technicist approaches (particularly in Wits teacher education), students valued these for the academic skills they learnt and the confidence that these skills gave them to undertake their studies in higher education. Students at Wits valued these skills even more than their own prior learning, and an opportunity to study at Wits was especially prized. In the words of one of the students:

> *The RPL programme assisted us to know the standard of Wits university. It assisted us with academic writing, on how to approach assignments, on avoiding plagiarising and so on. It contributed to my broader understanding of what is needed at Wits. (T)*

This research has shown that RPL holds promise for the personal development of adults entering higher education institutions in South Africa. RPL was experienced as a valuable process that affirmed them as individuals, and in which they learnt about themselves and felt confident as learners and as human beings. This finding is corroborated by similar findings in RPL research conducted in England (Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997; Hull, 1992), and in Canada (Aarts et al, 1999). In South Africa, where education under apartheid was synonymous with skewing children's sense of themselves as human beings and as learners, individual development through RPL holds promise and should be one of the thrusts for equity in education. At the same time we may need to heed Fraser, who cautions that individual empowerment should not be an end in itself, otherwise we may be guilty of "... adhering to individual empowerment at the expense of social change" (1995b: 190).

Demands of the portfolio courses

A consistent finding was that RPL is not a soft option. Students across the institutions found that the demands of university, home and work called for "sacrifice" and usually it was the family that sacrificed the most. The students found the volume of work in the portfolios academically demanding, especially when the portfolios were highly textual (as at Wits and JCE). Furthermore, learning had to be reorganised and restructured to make a coherent and comprehensive portfolio. This was particularly challenging when "evidence" for learning was difficult to obtain, especially if it meant having to refer to previous employers. Accumulation of evidence was also identified as an obstacle in England in research conducted by Blackman and Brown, who are sceptical and question whether evidence of past achievement is easily collected and collated (1992).

Besides the intellectual demands of portfolio courses, students experienced reflection to be emotionally demanding, finding it difficult to identify and select which learning was valuable and which was not. It was emotionally wrenching when they had to cast aside that learning that was deemed less useful for academic learning, but which was valuable to them in everyday life. As one student said:

> *I found it traumatic to classify what was valuable experience and what was not valuable. (G)*

> *I needed to say something in my portfolio, but I needed the courage to write down some of the personal things. One has to debate with oneself whether to write it or not. After all this debating I came to the conclusion that what people have learnt in life is important even if it is not certificated. (ML)*

These experiences were similar to those of students at the University of Kent who participated in a prior learning programme aimed at facilitating access in higher education. Like the South African students, the students at Kent also experienced anxiety and were concerned "... that the academics would sit in judgment on what they, the students had only recently discovered, and valued, in themselves" (West and Fraser, 1995: 157).

These difficulties are highlighted by Stuart, who advises both RPL practitioners and student always to "...speculate about what is left out of an account. It is here that we come upon the hidden work of everyday life" (1995: 168). Similarly, the New London Group point out that pedagogy should "...develop an epistemology of pluralism that provides access without people having to erase ... different subjectivities" (1996: 72).

Academic and emotional demands were aggravated when faculty administrators were inflexible and insensitive. Students felt alienated by administrators who did not know them as students, and were not able to provide them with general information on matters relating to outstanding fees, registration dates, university calendars, publication of results and the like. The lack of availability of procedural information was frustrating for the students concerned, and is similar to the experiences of RPL students elsewhere (Butterworth and McKelvey, 1997; Merrifield et al, 2000).

Some students found it demanding to analyse their experiences in order to match them with learning outcomes of modules (as at UFS). This may have been more than a procedural problem as suggested by some writers. Like Michelson (1998a) and Usher (1986), Butterworth and McKelvey offer an alternate point and suggest that this difficulty may be "...related to the deeper issue of the extent to which experientially acquired knowledge, developed outside the confines of formal education, can be matched with ordered presentation of the same knowledge expressed as formal learning outcomes" (1997: 162).

The experimental nature of the portfolio development courses also caused anxiety among students (particularly at JCE), who encountered some confusion and even an absence of feedback in terms of the exact requirements of the portfolio and how this would be evaluated. They also experienced difficulties in accepting that a portfolio which was reflective, in which they did most of the work, could be as rigorous as an examination set by the "expert" academics. This made a few of them question the value of a portfolio over an examination. This difficulty was also experienced by students in the study of four universities in England conducted by Butterworth and McKelvey (1997: 162). With hindsight, the unsuccessful candidates at JCE may have been better off doing an examination, which might have been less invasive in their lives.

8.3 DOES RPL DELIVER ON ITS POLICY GOALS OF EQUITY?

We turn our attention now to the second research question that will be explored by examining the main characteristics of the RPL students who participated in this study. National policy (DoE, White Paper on Education and Training, 1995: 5) emphasises the social imperatives of RPL to bring about equity and access for those who were needlessly prevented from following a study or career path. Were the students in this study such students?

There is much that is sociologically interesting about the students in this study. It is in knowing these students that one may begin to grapple with the question posed above. The students in the various RPL projects came from rural and urban areas in South Africa. The majority of them were the recipients of inferior formal education opportunities available to black children under apartheid. Their school education and their educational paths tell similar stories of poverty and disadvantage, structural elements that characterised the material realities for the majority of South Africans under apartheid and which still linger today.

Born between the 1940s and the early 1970s, most of the students had to leave school early and start working in order to contribute to the family income, which was already under pressure from unemployment and job reservation. So while some dropped out and never obtained a senior certificate (matric) (particularly students at UWC and some at JCE) others completed their matric using the adult night school system. Of those that dropped out and never completed their matric, all passed their final year of study, suggesting a major loss of potentially good students from the school system. A striking aspect about all the students was the motivation, focus and the discipline that characterised their lives as adult students at university. Each of them spoke about the heavy demands of balancing their lives as workers, parents and students, but in each student's life and educational path there was a strong sense of personal agency. Hull (1992) wonders provocatively if such commitment is not in itself proof of potential for academic study.

RPL for credit and access

Higher education, as represented by the institutions in this study, has responded to RPL primarily in terms of granting access rather than credit. The analyses of the experiences of academic staff show that there is support for RPL both for access and credit. While some of the academics expressed reservations about RPL for credit because it precludes learners from participating in and contributing to new learning, others believe that credit is a viable option for students who have vast levels of learning from experience. It is instructive that none of the institutions explored in this research have implemented RPL for credit. This finding takes a particularly interesting turn when one looks to institutions like UWC and UFS. Academics at both these institutions espoused RPL for credit, yet RPL for credit did not materialise in practice. At UFS a handful of students requested credit and even fewer received it. At UWC, although RPL for credit is mentioned explicitly in its policy document, it has not been explored because of lack of experience and capacity within the institution to accredit prior learning.

Students, in turn, across the institutions were not uncritical about RPL for access and credit. They pointed out that if credit was sought, the onus was on students to provide evidence and that such evidence had to be checked by assessors for validity. A surprise finding across all the projects was that despite affirmation and support of RPL for credit, the students in this research were satisfied with RPL for access and did not request RPL for credit. What are the reasons for such a finding?

Firstly, it could be that students lacked confidence as learners in higher education. They were grateful to gain access to institutions that are seen to represent the dominant culture and which reserved places for hand-picked matriculants. On another level, but related to the question of confidence, is the timing of the portfolio courses and the timing of opportunities for requesting credit. With the exception of the portfolio course in adult education at Wits, all the other portfolio development courses presented the students with their first encounter with the institution. The portfolios were also presented within particular periods (usually before entering the qualification) and once the portfolio course was completed students proceeded to their desired programmes if access was obtained. So although through time they may have grown in confidence as learners in higher education, the opportunity to request credit was long past. As one of the students pointed out:

> *It was only once I was sitting in the lectures for the courses that I felt I know enough about this course and I could have asked for credit, but by then it was too late. (B)*

A third issue related to the question of confidence (or lack of it) is the suggestion that students did not request credit because they did not know how to go about applying for it. This process of requesting credit becomes more complex when

course outcomes are not explicitly stated and students have to guess what to include in such an application. As one student said:

> *When it [RPL] is for credit we need to know what we need to show that will allow us to get credit, what is the process and how to go about it. (E)*

Conversely, students may have felt that asking for credit might exclude them from acquiring valuable theoretical knowledge and they wanted everything the university had to offer. As one student put it:

> *When you give credit to the student for prior learning you actually disempower him because you prevent him from access to new learning. (DN)*

Or it may be that students did not feel that their prior learning was relevant to the courses they wished to access. One could speculate that students were realistic and concluded that since obtaining credit for formally acquired courses was complex and time-consuming (as at JCE), what chance would experiential knowledge have? They may have reasoned that it was best to start afresh and ignore rather than recognise their prior learning.

Finally, perhaps the central issue in RPL is really about widening access. Given that access has been denied to the majority of people in this country, RPL for access offers the space for transforming and providing redress for past educational deprivation and injustices. Students' experiences of RPL for access seem to suggest that it has the potential for being a strong version of RPL, if it is accompanied with a change in orientation and if it challenges fixed ideas about knowledge, as Hooks suggests:

To teach in varied communities not only our paradigms must shift but also the way we think, write, speak. The engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with the world beyond itself (1994: 11)

Equity and socially inclusive portfolios

As discussed in Chapter One, RPL in national policy is framed in the discourse of equity, redress and social justice on the one hand and economic development and global competitiveness on the other, leading the researcher to question its capacity to deliver on these policy goals. National policy around RPL has not distinguished between RPL and RPEL, that is between recognition of prior learning as a form of credit transfer between institutions and recognition of prior experiential learning, that is recognition of learning from non-formal and informal sites of knowledge and learning (discussed in Chapter Three).

Policy underestimates both the process of recognizing an individual's prior learning and the fact that adult learners represent a highly diverse constituency. In addition, rhetorical assertions about "opening doors of opportunity" (DoE, 1995: 15) may need to take more account of the material realities of context, as seen in this study.

The majority of the RPL portfolio courses (discussed in Chapters Four to Seven) were not explicitly designed to enable students' knowledges to be exhibited (with the exception of the portfolio course at UWC). Students' knowledges were not used as texts to be explored, or even explored for the ways in which such knowledge could enrich academic ways of knowing. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of students believed that RPL could not deliver on equity and access. Some were hopeful about access, but views on equity were coloured by pessimism. Harris (2000) cautions that promises of redress and equity are asking too much of RPL and that RPL on its own cannot deliver on these goals.

While RPL has partly "opened doors of opportunity for people whose academic or career paths have been needlessly blocked" (DoE, 1995: 15), a major challenge to the universities is to sustain this commitment to keeping the doors open once RPL for credit is implemented, because it is here that the major challenges may be experienced. As Stuart points out "tutors will have to engage with a greater variety of student experience and students themselves will be challenged to see their learning as being far more their responsibility" (1995: 169). The issue of student responsibility is crucial because it alerts us to the interplay between individual agency, institutional will and national policy imperatives in the RPL process. As one student pointed out:

> *I think a lot depends on the person, the individual rather than a policy coming in saying we have to do that and that and that [to achieve RPL]. (ML)*

Research in the workplace has shown that unless RPL processes are deliberately conceptualised, designed and supported to meet social redress and equity purposes, RPL can end up working against its own transformative aims (Lugg et al, 1998).

Equity and race profile of the students

The profiles of the majority of students who participated in the RPL pilot project suggest that RPL could contribute to equity and redress in that the majority of the students were black (See Table Three, Chapter Four). Of the 23 students who participated in this study, 21 were black and all of them were over the age of thirty. This suggests that the pilot projects largely, though not exclusively, involved students who had been disadvantaged through apartheid education. Educational and structural inequalities in apartheid South Africa shaped the lives and learning paths of students who participated in this study. The profiles of these

students attest to the discrimination and educational disadvantage suffered by the majority in South Africa. It could be argued that RPL at all the institutions examined in this research contributed to equity and redress by providing access to students whose educational paths were "needlessly blocked" (DoE, 1995: 15).

Equity and gender

The representation of women in the pilot projects is less promising in that the majority of RPL students were men. This is contrary to international trends (Clancy, 1997). The absence of women may be attributed to the fact that the RPL pilot projects with large numbers of students were in the field of management (UFS) and law and to a lesser extent arts (UWC), which continue to be male dominated. Women students were strongly represented in RPL projects that focused on education, and adult education (Wits and JCE), but these projects had small numbers of RPL students (See Table Three, Chapter Four).

Equity and success with access?

It was often pointed out to the researcher by both academics and students that real equity meant that once students had obtained access, they should and could succeed in an academic environment that was assumed to be new. One academic said:

> *It's about physical and epistemological access. (Y)*

A student said:

> *Access leads to equity when you can cope at university. (B)*

Have students enjoyed success after access?

Local literature (Breier, 1999, and Luckett, 1999) cautions about the literacy levels of RPL students, pointing out that many students who were competent in workplace discourses are unable to represent their knowledge in environments where academic discourses are dominant. Surprisingly, students in this research who were admitted under RPL at UWC have performed as well as mainstream students, with none of the RPL students failing more than one course in their first year of study (Hendrick, 2001). A similar trend is noted for the students at UFS (personal communication with course coordinator, October, 2002). The students at Wits in teacher education are in their final year of study, having met all of the course work and examination requirements for the BEd (personal communication, course coordinator, June 2002). The two students who succeeded in obtaining their qualifications at JCE met all the course and examination requirements for the Diploma in Education successfully (Osman, 2000). All the RPL students in Wits adult education were successful in obtaining a BEd in the stipulated time period (two years). As was pointed out in the institutional case studies (Chapters Four and Seven respectively), some students from Wits adult education and UFS have since entered Masters degree programmes in Adult Education and Management.

The performance of students in this study generally and at UWC in particular challenges the matriculation exemption as the key mechanism to determine readiness for university study, or the key mechanism for excluding students deemed unqualified for access to the university. As Usher points out, such formal admissions requirements "select out rather than select in" (1989: 74). At the same time it confirms findings elsewhere that adult learners have the potential to perform well academically (Flint and associates, 1999; Merrifield et al, 2000) and that they are committed and focused learners. In addition they are loyal to their institutions and bring the world of experiential learning into the world of academic learning, thereby enhancing the quality of interaction in class (Hull, 1992).

Are these students successful because of their prior learning, or does their success relate to qualities that adult students bring to the university which compensate for

the weakness or the absence of a vertical or academic discourse? Is RPL only a question of knowledge equivalence, or is it a question of "multiple intelligences"? The success of students in this study alerts us to the need to begin to grapple with and develop more sophisticated and less essentialised understandings and analyses of knowledge - especially knowledges that are not considered in the debates on knowledge equivalence (Breier, 2001; Muller, 2000; Shalem, 2001). Educators who research and write about RPL may give heed Forster who states, "the power to know one thing [academic knowledge] is never the power to know all things" (1994: 129).

8.4 PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF RPL

The experiences of participants show that RPL is indeed a new and untested policy. Both academics and students are wrestling with tensions inherent to the practice of RPL. The upshot of this is that RPL creates a space for innovative approaches to both institutional policies and practices around RPL and lifelong learning. Although the RPL models (reviewed in Chapter Three) provide insights into ways to conceptualise RPL, suggestions from academics and students who participated in contextualised and local RPL projects point to a variety of issues that need attention - issues that go beyond the conceptual and epistemological.

Create opportunities for more students to participate

A consistent suggestion, made by students, was that RPL should be made available more widely and to more students. RPL projects need to be implemented with sufficiently large numbers of students (as at UWC and UFS) to ensure that such projects are part of the institutional offerings and a visible part of daily business. Sufficiently large numbers of adult learners also serve to bring out into the open questions and issues surrounding adult teaching, adult learning and adult development. This may prevent RPL projects becoming marginal and

experimental initiatives by a few academics and may attract the attention of other academics in the institution.

Related to the issue of student numbers is the question of where RPL projects are located in the institution. This research shows that location is crucial to the viability, visibility and future sustainability of the RPL project. Location determines the kind of attention the project may or may not attract from senior management, but location also determines whether the project will be responsive to the needs of adult learners. The Wits Plus Centre for Part-Time Studies is a case in point. This centre is beginning to enjoy support from senior management, has a strong champion and seems to be moving towards adult education practices in terms of course design and delivery. This change in location may allow RPL to fare better than it did in the School of Education at Wits. However, if RPL is not a subsidy-earning activity of the institution it will be compromised, even if the location is appropriate and conducive.

Student support

Lecturers suggested that institutions needed to make a firm commitment with respect to academic development and support needs of the students in the RPL portfolio courses. This suggestion implies that the institutions in this study may need to re-examine the commitments they make in their mission and vision statements as well as their strategic plans. In the main, the strategic plans of all the institutions in this study commit themselves to improving student access, to promoting flexible curriculum design and being responsive to diverse student populations. These commitments resonate with the commitments identified by academics in this study, as necessary for the implementation of RPL. Student support and academic development are not unique to RPL provisioning, but have long been recognised as a need in higher education, though not always fulfilled adequately. A substantial body of literature and research in South Africa (Mehl, 2000) attests to the need for such provisioning, and to the problems associated

with such provisioning in higher education. Given higher education's erratic performance in the area of student support and development, what are the chances that this suggestion will be taken up?

Presently, one could point out that higher education institutions in South Africa have no enforceable obligation to the Department of Education or the Ministry of Education with respect to activities around student development, student support and responsiveness to student diversity. This is true even in 2002, in a period characterised by a deluge of educational policies, plans and proposals for "transforming" higher education. More optimistically, one could point out that structures for academic development and support already exist in higher education in South Africa, at least in part, and effective RPL would require that they be organised to include support for RPL students.

Make information about RPL widely available

A frequent suggestion made by students was that written information about RPL should be made available more widely so that more students could participate in such initiatives. In particular, students suggested that RPL processes should be made explicit so that the students can decide from the outset if they wish to participate. A practical suggestion such as this could be implemented by institutions disseminating written information to prospective RPL students via workplace organisations such as unions and professional organisations.

Students suggested further that if RPL for credit were offered, the process related to making a claim for credit should be made explicit so students know what the demands are and if this process is indeed worthwhile. International practice alerts us to the importance of such a suggestion. Hull points out that when the information relating to making claims for credit is explicit, students have an opportunity to plan their future learning in an informed way (1992). By way of contrast, in none of the five RPL projects was information about the process of

making claims for credit explicit. This, however, should not be surprising given that these were the first projects of their kind in South Africa, in embryonic stages, and lessons are still being learnt in the implementation of RPL.

RPL to be factored into the workloads of lecturers

A regular suggestion made by staff and some students (at Wits) was that the RPL activities of lecturers should be factored into their workloads. Staff experienced RPL activities as placing additional demands on them, and this was acute at Wits and JCE, where the projects were the initiatives of individuals, with little recognition from institutional management. The RPL activities of most the lecturers were added to their teaching, research and administrative loads. One of the ways for RPL to be factored into lecturers' work loads would be for the portfolio courses to be integrated into degree qualifications, as seen at UFS in the BML degree. Again, international practice makes a strong case that the workloads of academics who are involved in RPL must be considered in the overall implementation plan of the institution (Evans, 1988, in Nieman, 2001: 153), thereby making work in RPL a mainstream issue within the institution, and possibly a credible teaching and learning endeavour as well as a worthy field of research and scholarship.

Whether these suggestions are meaningful to institutions of higher education remains to be seen, but what must not be overlooked is the opportunity that RPL has created for individuals to become aware of their roles and responsibilities as educators, and of the tensions and dilemmas that such awareness generates.

8.5 CONCLUSION

This research project has offered the researcher a rare opportunity for communication and conversation across multiple arenas, between scholars, RPL practitioners and RPL students alike. It has made the researcher aware of the

diversity of students and of experience that RPL brings into the university. It has also brought a recognition that RPL is not inherently good and could be used either to maintain or challenge inequality in education and in society. Through this research she has become cognisant that there are no readymade models to guide future conversations about RPL.

Conversations about RPL cannot be driven only by questions about competing epistemologies and about the equivalence of practical and academic knowledge. In South Africa there need to be conversations and actions that deal with the inequalities that characterise our society. RPL creates the space in which educators can examine entrenched educational inequalities and develop alternatives, and for institutions to derive an understanding of themselves and their place within a transforming society.

The experiences of the various pilot projects show that RPL is dependent on institutional and individual will and capacity. McLaughlin (1987) warns us that while capacity can be harnessed, attitude, motivations and beliefs cannot be bought. As one academic in this study confirmed:

> *RPL must be reflected in this philosophy [of the institution]. Structural problems can be overcome if people share a vision. (D)*

In many ways, will is demonstrated in how an institution has assessed the policy imperatives implied by RPL and the value of these imperatives for the institution's vision and mission. Will is also demonstrated by the vision and support provided by institutional management. In the institutions examined in this research, political will was affected by competing epistemological orientations (at Wits), by restructuring and rationalisation (at Wits and JCE), by market forces (at UFS), and by a decline in student numbers (at UWC). To date the quest for social justice on its own has been an inadequate lever to influence the development of RPL.

Although equity and social justice did not provide the impetus for the RPL pilot projects, the notion of "small wins" is appropriate here. To the students in this research, RPL offered access opportunities as well as opportunities for personal development, and in this way contributed to important educational and equity goals. For some of the academics in this study, RPL provided an opportunity to re-examine and validate their epistemological and philosophical orientation as educators. Small wins enable individuals or groups of people to "identify a series of controllable opportunities of modest size that produce visible results" (Weick, 1984: 40). Small wins also contribute to individuals and groups feeling confident about their work, and this has the potential to impact on the environment in which such work takes place.

Applied to RPL, small wins in some projects could give participants confidence to continue their work in RPL and widen support for RPL in institutional environments that are still suspicious and doubtful of RPL. Small wins, such as those experienced at some of the institutions examined in this research, such as moving towards widening access and designing portfolios that created opportunities for personal development, remain vital to future RPL initiatives in higher education in South Africa. They also warrant a move in our conversations about RPL from a "language of critique" to the "language of possibility" (Giroux, 1992).

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APPENDIX ONE: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Themes	STUDENTS **Questions that explored the students' experience of RPL**	ACADEMICS **Questions that explored the academics' experience of RPL**
1	How would you describe your understanding of RPL?	Tell me about the RPL portfolio development course that you designed and implemented
	Tell me about the RPL portfolio development course that you participated in at this university.	What was the nature of this course?
	What was the nature of this course?	Some assert that portfolio courses make particular knowledge claims that favour academic knowledge.
	What kind of knowledge was your portfolio course attempting to recognise?	How would you describe the epistemological orientation of your course?
	How do you think your prior knowledge fared in this portfolio development course?	
	How would you describe the orientation of the portfolio course in relation to your prior knowledge and learning	What kind of knowledge was your portfolio course attempting to recognise?
	Literature on RPL hints at portfolio development courses being pedagogically demanding and challenging for students	Literature on RPL hints at portfolio development courses being pedagogically demanding and challenging for academics
	Tell me about the demands you encountered.	Tell me about the demands you encountered.
	How did you get around these challenges?	How did you get around these challenges?
	Were there other demands?	Were there other demands?
	Do you think the portfolio course was of value to you, professionally, personally and academically?	Some writers, in South Africa in particular, have distinguished between RPL for credit and RPL for access. What do you think of this distinction?
	Some writers, in South Africa in particular, have distinguished between RPL for credit and RPL for access. What do you think of this distinction?	In your experience should there be this distinction in the practice of RPL in higher education?
2	Does RPL deliver on equity, access and redress in education?	
3	Tell me about the ideas you have for RPL practices in higher education.	