Reliability of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Assessments for Teaching Practice Courses in Open Distance Electronic Learning (ODeL)

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ABSTRACT If students acquire experience of teaching without a teaching qualification they are usually allowed to apply for recognition of prior learning (RPL) for up to 50% of a formal teacher education qualification. Amongst others they may apply for RPL for the practical teaching aspects of such a qualification, in this study the Post-graduate Certificate in Education [PGCE] at the University of South Africa (UNISA). In the quest for quality assurance of RPL assessments, the objective of the research for this paper was to try and determine how reliable the RPL assessments are for the practical teaching courses. Documentary evidence in the form of RPL applications, mentor assessments and lecturer assessments were studied and compared to see if an accurate assessment is possible and which of these assessment methods (or a combination of these) is most reliable or accurate. Findings indicated that assessment of portfolios and lecturer assessments are well aligned while mentor assessments are quite often unrealistically high. It was further found that in ODeL, where the types of RPL assessments are often limited by cost and distance, portfolios do offer a reliable source of assessment evidence for teaching practice modules.

INTRODUCTION

RPL has a number of purposes. Against the background of research for this paper the objective is to give recognition to someone for experience gained in the workplace regarding knowledge and skills acquired informally which are aligned to aspects of education usually gained through formal qualifications. When successful in their application students may then be credited with and exempted from completing certain courses in a qualification.

RPL is evidence led, meaning that evidence must be provided by students to prove their competence regarding the aspect of teacher education they are seeking RPL for. This evidence can be in a variety of forms. RPL can therefore also be assessed in different ways such as observations in the workplace, portfolios of evidence, assessments by supervisors or managers.

RPL for practical teaching is a very high stakes assessment as the objective is to try and determine if someone is successful enough at teaching based on experience to exempt them from the practical aspects of the formal teacher education programmes through which it is usually determined if a student is ready to enter the teaching profession. For all role players it is therefore important that RPL assessment should be

of high quality and that it should be reliable and valid. In ODeL institutions, where access to students and direct contact with them is usually limited, it is even more important to make sure that RPL for teaching practice assessments should be on par with assessments of the equivalent formal courses.

The objective of the research for this paper undertaken at an ODeL institution (UNISA) where about 150 RPL for practical teaching applications per year are received and processed was to determine whether the RPL assessments are reliable and accurate.

What is RPL?

What is known as RPL in South Africa is known as Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) in the USA, Prior Learning Assessment Recognition (PLAR) in Canada, Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (AP[E]L) in the UK, Validation of Prior Learning in the Netherlands and la validation des acquis or recognition of experiential learning in France (Conrad 2013). The official definition given by the South African Quality Authority (SAQA S.a.) is as follows:

Recognition of Prior Learning is a process whereby people's prior learning can be formally recognised in terms of registered qualifications and unit standards, regardless of where

and how the learning was attained. RPL acknowledges that people never stop learning, whether it takes place formally at an educational institution, or whether it happens informally.

The Purpose of RPL

At higher education institutions the purpose of RPL is to enable assessors to form an informed opinion about:

Whether the claims of prior learning which occurred outside the classroom put forward by the candidate measure up to the requirements of the training programme/requirements of industry /requirements of the professional body (Unisa 2009)

Usually it has a two-fold purpose: to gain entry into a course or qualification or to acquire credits for a course within a qualification. This research is focused on the second purpose namely to determine if credits can be granted for courses in a qualification and how that can be done reliably.

Another RPL description of relevance to this research is that of the Brisbane North Institute of TAFE (2013) in Queensland Australia that states, "Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL is a nationally recognised process through which a specialist assessor evaluates your skills and knowledge in relation to a unit/s of competency". In this description the importance of a specialist assessor that will carry out the assessment (to ensure that it is reliable and that it will be acceptable to role players such as the academic community and employers) is emphasized.

RPL Assessments for Teaching Practice at Unisa

The College of Education at Unisa (as a dedicated ODeL institution) receives high numbers of RPL applications for Teaching Practice modules every year. There are two reasons for this. The first is that many practicing teachers in South Africa are only partly qualified - a legacy of the neglect of Black education under the apartheid government. To further their qualifications they need to study at a distance education institution as they are teaching full time.

The second reason is that many of the School Governing Bodies (SGB's) at "richer" schools

that can pay their salaries appoint additional teachers. As there is often a shortage of well qualified teachers in subjects like Mathematics, Physical Science, etc. they appoint people who are academically well qualified but with no teacher education qualification. These appointees then eventually enroll for a PGCE which they need to do at a distance education institution as they are teaching full time.

All candidates meeting the minimum requirements for RPL for Teaching Practice, namely three years of full time teaching experience in the appropriate subject and the appropriate phase, may apply through the RPL office for assessment of their experience. They are then supplied with documentation explaining the RPL process. They also receive the outcomes and assessment criteria for the specific module of Teaching Practice they are applying for and get guidelines regarding the evidence that must be submitted. Amongst these are the portfolio of evidence guidelines and an assessment grid that is used to assess the portfolio.

Students gather the needed documentation (or other forms of evidence) and then submit the portfolio of evidence according to requirements set by the Teaching Practice lecturers. The following assessments then take place:

Teaching Practice lecturers and the Teaching Practice Academic Coordinator assess the portfolio in what may be called a first assessment. This assessment is based on a broad comprehensive view of the activities and competencies of the applicant.

Part of the portfolio contains a structured assessment by the school (usually done by a mentor, chair of department or school management team member). The mentor assessment covers a range of teaching activities and competencies and also aspects like attitudes towards teaching. This is the second assessment which provides a school-based longitudinal view of the developing competencies of the applicant.

Where possible a third assessment is used in the form of an on-site visit to the student where he/she is observed teaching a lesson. This school visit assessment provides a slice in time view of the competencies of the applicant.

A final decision on the granting of RPL is made based on all available evidence and the RPL office processes the finding and informs the student after verification of the finding by the manager of the practical teaching unit. The process is as rigorous as the process for students completing the formal Teaching Practice

module and there are many similarities between the two processes. In both cases there is a requirement of experience in real classrooms, mentor assessments, assessments by visiting lecturers and assessment of a portfolio of evidence. In both cases two of the assessments are done by lecturers and one by a school-based assessor.

Theoretical Foundations

John Dewey (1938) said "... education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society must be based upon experience—which is always the actual life-experience of some individual". He was a pioneer in thought regarding experiential learning (in our case translating into practical teaching). In later years Kolb (1984) developed a model for experiential learning which served as a kind of theoretical foundation for both experiential learning and the practice of RPL (Andersson et al. 2013).

Other foundations related to RPL can be found in constructivism and progressivism because of their claims that learning takes place through direct experience and individual knowledge building (which finds expression in the portfolios of RPL applicants).

More recently voices like that of Sandberg and Kubiak (2013) are going up in preference for a new approach (or an additional approach) in the form of a Theory of Recognition as developed by Honneth (1996), although this is perhaps more suited to RPL for entrance to study (as a form of recognition of the "worth" of experiences of marginalised or disadvantaged people) than the granting of RPL credits for courses in a qualification.

One can also argue that the Theory of Situated Learning (Lave and Wenger 1990) is relevant as the experiences that students are seeking recognition for were gained in a specific authentic educational situation relevant to what is also required from formal education students.

RPL Literature Review

RPL practice emerged in the USA during the latter part of the 1960s (Trowler 2006). This paper focuses specifically on RPL assessment of experience (experiential learning) in teaching. As Fenwick (2003) states so poetically, experiential learning "recognizes and celebrates knowledge generated outside institutions". RPL is the process of assessing if these experiences are valid, current, sufficient, reliable, authentic (Kizito 2006) and worthy of official accreditation.

Assessments used in RPL are workplace observations or videos, interviews, oral presentations, portfolios and demonstrations (Clark and Lakin 2005). Whittaker et al. (2011) also found that reflective accounts, mapping of learning outcomes, project work and employer/manager assessments are being used. In OdeL RPL assessments are often limited to (e)portfolios and challenge exams (Kizito 2006) while other assessments (such as observations) are employed only where viable in terms of distance, costs, etc. The use of videos for example is only viable if such equipment is accessible by students (who are often under resourced), although modern mobile technology makes this more possible each day.

Worldwide portfolios seem to be the most common way of presenting RPL evidence (Pokorny 2006; Joosten-ten 2011). Research by Whittaker et al. (2011) which included participants from a number of countries also confirms this. Assessments used in the case of RPL for teaching practice at Unisa are portfolios and employer/mentor assessments, while workplace observations are used where viable (or where further evidence or confirmation of findings is needed).

Ultimately the assessment method chosen depends on the scope and nature of the knowledge claims and should be "fit for purpose". Whatever method used should however have the trust of the academic community (Whittaker et al. 2011).

The success of RPL is highly dependent on the quality of the processes and assessments (Kizito 2006) that take place. The importance of quality of RPL assessments in higher education is also stressed by Murphy (2011). Unfortunately research amongst RPL applicants indicates that there are inconsistencies in RPL assessment practices (Whittaker and Brown 2012).

Very few research studies regarding the assessment practices of RPL assessors have been published. Sutherland (2006) found that assessors need to be trained to "act as assessors and moderators in specialised ways". The study by Joosten-ten et al. (2009) found that there are differences in assessments between subject areas and that assessor training is required to ensure

more confident assessments. Travers et al. (2011) focused on the practice of assessors of RPL and their findings were that practice reflected the "porousness of the process" (Conrad 2011) and that RPL assessors need better guidance.

The studies in the last two paragraphs all show that RPL assessment can be improved but no study could be found that had as direct focus the reliability of different types of RPL assessments, which is what the research for this paper was about.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The qualitative research design was used for this research as document analysis (as described by De Vos et al. (2011)) was used as research method. Three sources of documents were used for document analysis. There is a comparison of the three data sets (the assessment scores) as the objective of the research was to determine the most reliable assessment method used in RPL assessments submitted for accreditation of Teaching Practice modules.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is used to amongst others deduce trends or to determine an official perspective within an organization (McMillam and Schumacher 2006). Analysis of official documents namely RPL portfolios and mentor assessments was undertaken in this study to obtain the official assessment scores of RPL candidates determined by these types of assessments, with the object of comparing them.

Purposeful sampling as described by Babbie and Mouton (2011) was used as certain inclusive criteria determined which documents had to be analysed. These criteria determined that only portfolio and mentor assessments of RPL candidates who were successful in their applications were included in the analysis. Documents of all 111 successful RPL candidates were analysed.

The third set of documents had to be generated. This was undertaken by assessment of observations of RPL applicants in action. They were observed teaching a lesson to demonstrate their teaching competencies. The observation schedule used was a teaching assessment rubric (which is also used for the assessment of formal students doing the equivalent Teaching Practice modules). The resultant completed assessment schedules were the third set of documents to be analysed. The objective was to try and confirm findings of portfolio and mentor assessments and to determine their accuracy and validity in relation to observation assessments.

To determine which student teachers were to be visited for observation, convenience sampling was used as only those students within a reasonable distance from Unisa were visited to make it cost effective and manageable. Out of the 111 successful RPL applicants whose documents were analysed in the first phase of the research, a total of 36 could be visited for observation, which provided the researcher with 36 documents to be analysed.

FINDINGS

Three sets of findings will be discussed. Firstly there will be findings on portfolio assessments. Secondly there will be a comparison between RPL and mentor assessments. Thirdly there will be a comparison between RPL, mentor and observation assessments.

Findings from Portfolio Assessments

Of 144 portfolio applications 111 were successful. Amongst successful candidates marks ranged from 50% to 84%.

The different educational institutions where RPL applicants were teaching were as follows:

Well-resourced urban schools	51 (46.0%)
Lesser resourced urban schools	15 (13.5%)
Private schools	12 (10.8%)
FET colleges	12 (10.8%)
Well-resourced rural schools	11 (9.9%)
Lesser resourced rural schools	10 (9.0%)

More portfolios were received from well-resourced institutions.

It was further found that the type of school/institution where applicants gained their experience has an influence on student achievement regarding their RPL portfolio assessments. The average mark achieved per type of school/institution was as follows:

Private schools	78.2%
Well-resourced rural schools	70%
FET colleges	68.8%
Well-resourced urban schools	62.5%
Lesser resourced rural schools	54.2%
Lesser resourced urban schools	53.8%

Results of RPL assessments indicate that females mostly fare better than males with their RPL applications. The average mark for portfolios from females was 71.5% while the average mark for portfolios from males was 54.5%, which is significantly lower.

Findings from 2 Assessments

When portfolio assessment marks are compared with mentor assessment marks it was found that mentor assessment marks are mostly higher than portfolio assessment marks. In 63 cases mentor marks were higher (sometimes substantially so), 47 were more or less similar (within a range of 5%) and in one case it was much lower (N=111).

Findings from 3 Assessments

For this analysis only the portfolio assessments and mentor assessments of RPL applicants that were also visited at their schools were considered (N=36). Comparisons between mentor assessments, portfolio assessments and school visit assessments produced the following results:

* It was found that the majority of the mentor assessment marks were higher than school visit assessment marks.
* Twenty mentor assessment marks were higher than portfolio assessment marks, 15 were similar and one was lower.
* In 42% of cases the school visit assessments, portfolio assessments and mentor assessments were aligned and could be considered similar.

Portfolio assessment marks and school visit assessment marks mostly correlated well:

* Similar = 29 of 36
* Better = 6 of 36
* Worse = 1 of 36

DISCUSSION

Ideally one would prefer experienced teachers to do better than 50% in their portfolio submissions but to be fair to RPL students one cannot expect a higher performance from them than from other students. In cases where marks are low or marginal additional assessments are of utmost importance. In Unisa RPL portfolios students must include manager reports (usually from school principals or other school manage-

ment members) that may be consulted. In all cases there are also mentor assessments that may be consulted. It is however preferred to also schedule a school visit for an additional assessment as a measure to make a better informed judgment. In ODeL distance and costs can limit this option and then a video (even one taken with a mobile device) of the RPL candidate in action, can be used.

More RPL applications were received from students at well-resourced schools. The reason for this is probably that these are the schools that have enough money to appoint additional staff members. As explained before they often appoint people with good academic qualifications but without a PGCE. These appointees then enroll for the PGCE but often only after teaching for a few years. Because of the experience they gain they are then in a position to apply for RPL of Teaching Practice modules.

Portfolios received from RPL candidates at well-resourced schools get higher marks. One assumes that RPL candidates at well-resourced schools have access to more evidence because these schools have more activities and these are usually well organized in terms of documentation that may be used as evidence. The quality of documentary evidence they can provide may have an influence on portfolio marks.

Females mostly fare better than males with their RPL assessments. This is very interesting and the researcher went back to the portfolios to see if some deduction in this regard could be made. On the whole portfolios from females were better organized and significantly more care was taken with their preparation. There were also fewer gaps and female portfolios were more comprehensive and complete.

This happened to correspond with observations at schools where some of these males and females were visited. Field notes indicate that classrooms of female candidates were on the whole more organized, neater and better decorated. This of course does not necessarily make females better teachers but lesson observation assessments mostly corresponded well with portfolio marks.

Mentor assessment marks are mostly higher than portfolio assessment marks. When the researcher became aware of this a special effort was made to talk to mentors when school visits were made to assess RPL candidates to try and find reasons for this. It was quickly discovered

why mentor marks were often much higher than portfolio marks. School SGB's that employ most of the RPL candidates pay the salaries of these teachers. The sooner the RPL candidates become fully qualified teachers the sooner they can be appointed in permanent government posts where the Education Department then pay their salaries. It is therefore in the interest of the schools to get these RPL candidates qualified and they inflate the marks to try and make sure this happens.

A second reason that emerged is in regards to the workload of RPL candidates. Because RPL candidates are studying while teaching they often have a lighter workload at school and are excused from some activities. It is therefore in the interest of the school to get them to finish their studies so that they can be allocated a full work load. There are also disruptions when these teachers have to write Unisa examinations in their other PGCE modules as someone need to take care of their classes during their absences. Once again mentor marks are inflated to try and speed this whole process up.

The high mentor marks can therefore probably be contributed to the needs of the school as school managers determine how valuable the person is to their school more so than strictly how good a teacher he/she is. They need to assist in whatever way they can to ensure that RPL candidates complete their studies (and credits for the Teaching Practice modules will of course help) and inflated mentor assessments seems to be one way of doing so.

In lesser resourced schools field notes indicate that there seems to be an empathy with partly qualified teacher who often are as good or better teachers than their colleagues and have to shoulder as high a workload as them, but who are paid less because they are not fully qualified. The studies of these teachers also create disruptions when they have to write examinations. Mentors then also inflate their assessment marks to assist them to get qualified so that they can be paid as fully qualified teachers and to lessen disruptions.

For the reasons given above it seems to be prudent not to give too much credence to mentor assessment marks when considering RPL applications. It is furthermore an external assessment by people who are not necessarily trained to assess adults or university student teachers. All external assessments should always be treated with caution if they cannot be quality assured.

Mentor assessments were higher than school visit assessments. The same reasons advanced above are relevant here.

Portfolio assessments and school visit assessments mostly correlated well. This is quite significant as a number of important things may be deduced from it. Firstly it must be stressed that portfolio assessments and school visit assessments were both carried out by the same university assessor.

The fact that the majority of the two assessments were more or less similar (within a 5% range) seems to indicate that assessments of the practice of teaching and the assessment of evidence supplied in RPL portfolios are trustworthy and accurate. In the second place it probably means that one can use either of these assessments to establish whether RPL should be granted.

CONCLUSION

In ODeL it is often not possible to visit students to assess them for RPL for Teaching Practice modules and one has to depend on assessment by school-based assessors and portfolio assessments to make assessment judgments. Obviously such assessments need to be accurate and reliable if they are to be valid, especially in high-stakes assessments like those for Teaching Practice.

This study was undertaken to determine if RPL assessments for Practical Teaching in ODeL are reliable and accurate, precisely because so much is at stake and is dependent on their validity. The results indicated that portfolios of evidence that are well-structured to ensure that the relevant evidence is provided are reliable sources of assessment evidence and that they can provide a broad overview of the competencies of applicants that seek RPL for Practical Teaching.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Portfolios give evidence based on a range of activities from the student (and the school) and shows growth/ development over time (3 + years). In light of the fact that portfolios are still the most popular assessment type for RPL (as indicated in the literature overview) and the fact that they give a broad comprehensive view of

growth of competencies over time they probably represent the most trustworthy and accurate source of evidence for RPL assessment.

Mentor assessments give an overview of the students' performance over time from in insiders' viewpoint (longitudinal view). They could be valuable as supporting evidence but should not be used in isolation.

School visit assessments represent a once off assessment from an outsider's viewpoint (a slice in time view). School visit assessments are not critical to the success of RPL applications but are trustworthy in validating portfolio assessments.

Wherever possible or where there is doubt school visits should be undertaken to gather additional assessment evidence.

It is better to have several assessments and to use a variety of assessment types and tools in RPL for Teaching Practice.

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