THE USE OF PRINCIPLES OF GOOD ASSESSMENT IN RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING PRACTICE IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) practice offers sound benefits to library and information science (LIS) schools. Despite these envisaged benefits, very little is known about RPL practice in LIS schools in South Africa. This study sought to establish whether principles of good assessment were being followed in the LIS schools to ensure the integrity of the RPL outcomes. A combination of a questionnaire and document analysis were used to collect data from the ten LIS schools in the South African higher education and training landscape. The questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data through a survey method. In addition, the researcher employed content analysis to collect qualitative data from institutional RPL policy documents. The findings indicate that RPL assessment processes across LIS schools in South Africa were largely subjected to principles of good practice. The study found that in accordance with the SAQA RPL policy the purpose of assessment was clarified to the candidate upfront, the quality of support to be provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment was established, an appeals process was made known to the candidate, and the choice of assessment methods was fit for purpose to ensure credible assessment outcomes. It is therefore recommended that other disciplines or departments use LIS schools' experiences as a benchmark to improve their own RPL endeavours.

Keywords: Library and Information Science (LIS) schools; principles of good assessment practice; Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) policy; South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA)

INTRODUCTION

RPL has been described as a sound academic practice that could benefit library practitioners who are either under-qualified or unqualified but who have acquired a great deal of work experience and many skills over the years (Davids 2006). Structured and planned RPL offers LIS schools the best way to offer experienced but unqualified library workers opportunities for progressive professional development and career growth. However, owing to perceived lack of stricter controls to maintain rigorous and defensible standards in the implementation of RPL in higher education in South Africa, key principles of good assessment must be followed to enhance the integrity and quality of RPL assessment decisions and outcomes.

There are different conceptions of RPL by different groups and stakeholders in different countries but often with similar purposes, such as credit and access. In Australia, RPL is an assessment process that involves assessment of an individual's relevant prior learning (including formal, informal and non-formal learning) to determine the credit outcomes of an individual's application for credit (Australian Qualifications Framework Council 2012). In South Africa, RPL refers to the comparison of the previous learning and experience of a learner, however obtained, against the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification, and the acceptance for purposes of qualification of that which meets the requirements (SAQA 1995). This definition was, however, replaced by SAQA in 2013. In the new SAQA RPL policy (2013), RPL principles and processes make the prior knowledge and skills of people visible. Knowledge and skills are also mediated and rigorously assessed and moderated for the purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development. Likewise, the International Labour Organisation (ILC) 2014 report indicates that "Transitioning from the informal to the formal economy stresses the importance of skills recognition". The report states that "it is necessary to develop institutions and mechanisms that assess the skills and competencies acquired by workers so that they can be validated and recognized through certification." As a result, RPL could potentially be used as a mechanism to help such individuals obtain a formal qualification to improve their employability and redress past unfair discrimination in higher education and training. The importance of RPL in South Africa is that a large proportion of people disadvantaged by the past apartheid education system are without proper qualifications. The sad reality facing the majority of these people is the lack of proper job opportunities and access to higher education and training, even with extensive work experience.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Despite RPL being described as a sound academic practice that could benefit library practitioners who are either underqualified or unqualified, but who have acquired a great deal of work experience and many skills over the years (Davids 2006), very little is known about RPL practice in LIS schools in South Africa. This study sought to establish

whether principles of good assessment were being followed in the LIS schools to ensure the integrity of RPL outcomes. To achieve this purpose, the study sought to establish whether:

- the purpose of assessment was clarified to the candidate beforehand;
- the quality of support to be provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment was established;
- the appeals process was disclosed to the candidate during the assessment process;
- the choice of assessment methods was fit for purpose to ensure credible assessment outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Below follows the literature review conducted in the context of the objectives of the study.

RPL ASSESSMENT PROCESSES

The assessment of evidence provided by RPL candidates to demonstrate their skills or knowledge against unit standards or learning outcomes is varied and could affect the quality of RPL results. To ensure the integrity and quality of RPL assessment results, the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL 2006) provide the following ten standards for assessing learning (Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker 2006):

- Credit, or its equivalent, should be awarded only for learning and not for experience.
- Assessment should be based on standards and criteria for the level of acceptable learning that are both agreed upon and made public.
- Assessment should be treated as an integral part of learning, not separate from it, and should be based on an understanding of learning processes.
- The determination of credit awards and competency levels must be made by appropriate subject matter and academic or credentialing experts.
- Credit or other credentialing should be appropriate to the context in which it is awarded and accepted.
- If credit is awarded, transcript entries should clearly describe what learning is being recognized and should be monitored to avoid giving credit twice for the same learning.
- Policies, procedures and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process.

- Fees charged for assessment should be based on the services performed in the process and not on the amount of credit awarded.
- All personnel involved in the assessment of learning should pursue and receive adequate training and continuing professional development for the functions they perform.
- Assessment programmes should be monitored, reviewed and evaluated regularly, and revised as needed to reflect changes in the needs being served, the purposes being met and the state of the assessment arts.

To ensure the integrity of RPL outcomes, the Australian Qualifications Framework Council (AQFC 2012) recommends that, as with all assessment, RPL assessment should:

- be undertaken by academic or teaching staff with expertise in the subject, content or skills area, as well as knowledge of and expertise in RPL assessment,
- be of the same standard as other assessments for the qualification, and
- recognise learning regardless of how, when and where it was acquired, provided the learning is relevant to the learning outcomes of the qualification.

In the United Kingdom, the Association of Research Managers and Administrators' (ARMA) policy (2017) on credit transfer and RPL recommends that to ensure the integrity of RPL assessment outcomes the assessor should examine the portfolio to check that the evidence meets the following principles: the work of the candidate (authentic), recent enough to meet the requirements of the assessment criteria (current); relevant to the standards (valid); and represents sufficient breadth and quality to be appropriate to the standards to which it applies (sufficient).

Given that RPL candidates and other stakeholders depend on the integrity of RPL assessment decisions and outcome, it is essential that, in addition to being rigorous and reliable, RPL assessment processes and procedures should also be transparent, fair and accessible to individual RPL candidates and stakeholders to inspire confidence in them.

PRINCIPLES OF GOOD ASSESSMENT

According to Bloom (2015), principles that underpin good assessment practices for the RPL process include purpose of assessment, RPL support for candidates, an RPL appeals process and the choice of assessment methods as described below.

PURPOSE OF ASSESSMENT

In order to facilitate or even empower individual RPL candidates it is necessary that the purpose and expectations of the process of assessment be clearly stated upfront (SAQA 2004). This will help the learner to gain a clearer understanding of what is expected of

them and to avoid unnecessarily expectations from the RPL process. In addition, this also facilitates an efficient assessment process in that efforts are not spent in collecting evidence that is not needed to demonstrate the competence required for credit towards the qualification. Once there is clarity of purpose for the learner and assessor within a specific context, the assessment process becomes systematic, flexible and collaborative with the result that the assessment procedures are transparent, fair and equitable to deliver a credible outcome.

According to SAQA (2004), assessment is a structured process of gathering evidence and making judgements about an individual's performance in relation to registered standards and qualifications. The main purpose of assessment is, therefore, to gather evidence that demonstrate the learner's competence so that credits can be awarded towards part or full qualification. Assessment thus gives the assessor an opportunity to determine, through a systematic review of evidence, whether the candidate can demonstrate achievement of the competencies or learning outcomes for a specified qualification. Assessments are, however, often designed to ensure that they are fit for different purposes (SAQA 2004). These include:

•   Determine if learning for the achievement of the specific outcomes is taking place.
•   Report to role players and stakeholders on the level of achievement, and build a profile of learning.
•   Provide information for the evaluation and review of learning programmes.
•   Maximise the learner's access to knowledge, skills, attitudes and values defined in the national curriculum policy.

Assessment thus gives the assessor an opportunity to determine, through a systematic review of evidence, whether the candidate can demonstrate achievement of the competencies or learning outcomes.

RPL SUPPORT FOR CANDIDATES

RPL candidates are required to demonstrate how their knowledge, skills and experiences acquired outside of formal education and training match the learning outcomes required for a specified qualification in order to gain access or credit towards a qualification (Colley, Hodkinson, and Malcolm 2002).

Support for RPL candidates can be in the form of psychometric testing for lowering cross-cultural barriers; use of bilingualism; presentation of direct evidence; use of role play or simulation; use of video recording; use of a viewing and reviewing process; use of computer software and quality-assurance standards for language (Wood 1995).

According to the revised SAQA RPL policy (2013), the support services for RPL candidates should consciously address the invisible barriers to successful assessment. These include the following:

- advising services and programmes to assist learners in making effective choices;
- assistance to learners in preparing for assessment;
- removing time, place and other barriers to assessment;
- assistance by evidence facilitators to learners in preparing and presenting evidence.

However, the policy also states that the function of advising and assessing should not be performed by the same person.

It is clear from the above that without sufficient support, RPL candidates will not be in a good position to deal with anxieties, traumas and non-technical barriers that arise during the RPL assessment process (SAQA 2013). Lack of access to opportunities for support would, therefore, invariably discourage potential candidates from seeking RPL assessment in LIS schools.

RPL APPEALS PROCESS

The RPL appeals process, like all other assessment processes, uses a robust system to conduct assessments in order to maintain the integrity of the assessment process. However, policies, procedures and criteria applied to assessment, including provision for appeal, should be fully disclosed and prominently available to all parties involved in the assessment process (CAEL 2006; Fiddler, Marienau, and Whitaker 2006). This would enable candidates to challenge the RPL outcome if they believe that the assessment process was not conducted in a fair and just manner.

According to criteria and guidelines for assessment of NQF registered unit standards and qualifications (SAQA 2004), appeals can be lodged against the assessment decision under the following conditions:

- unfair assessments
- invalid assessments
- unreliable assessments
- the assessor's judgement, if considered biased
- inadequate expertise and experience of the assessor if this influenced the assessment
- unethical practices

It is therefore vital to keep accurate and up-to-date records so that it is easier to handle issues arising from the appeals process.

THE CHOICE OF ASSESSMENT METHODS

A variety of methods are used to enable RPL candidates to demonstrate that their skills or knowledge meet the required learning outcomes of the specific unit standards and can be granted credit and/or access. These methods include interviews, performance testing/demonstrations, review of contents, testimonials, examinations (oral/written) and portfolios (AQFC 2012; Van Kleef 2012). The portfolio of evidence seems to be the most predominant method of presenting RPL evidence (Pokorny 2006; Joosten-ten Brinke, Sluijsmans, and Jochems 2009). However, of critical importance is that the assessment method(s) must "be appropriate to the subject matter under evaluation" (Andersson and Fejes 2005, 3), so that the choice of the assessment method is "fit for purpose", while it depends on the scope and nature of the knowledge being claimed. Another requirement is that even though the choice of the assessment method is the responsibility of the assessor/subject matter expert/academic staff (Evans 1993), the RPL candidate must be actively involved to ensure that the assessment is fair and transparent (SAQA 2004).

METHODOLOGY

This study used a combination of a questionnaire and document analysis to data from the 10 LIS schools in the South African higher education and training sector. The study targeted the LIS schools because while there are numerous articles in the higher education literature on RPL implementation (Breier 2011), very little is known about RPL practice, especially as it relates to LIS schools.

The study triangulated the results from the survey questionnaire with document analysis results from the institutional RPL policies in order to supplement the survey results, enabling the researcher to provide greater richness and depth to the study's findings.

The respondents included the head/chair of departments/schools, senior lecturers, lecturers, junior lecturers and RPL officials, due to their knowledge and experience of RPL practice. The documents that were analysed included policy documents from the Higher Education and Training National Department as well as related institutional documents. This study was carried out in strict accordance with the Research Ethics Policy of Unisa (2007). The online survey questionnaire sent to the respondents was accompanied by an informed consent form. To ensure anonymity, no names of the LIS schools were used in the presentation of results.

A total of 76 respondents were targeted, comprising ten RPL officials and 66 academic staff members recommended by the heads/chairs of schools/departments. Five of the RPL officials did not respond, together with three academic staff members. As a result, there were 68 respondents who participated in the study comprising five professors, one associate professor, 44 senior lecturers, 13 lecturers and five RPL officials.

The Statistical Product and Service Solutions (SPSS) software was used to analyse the quantitative data collected via the questionnaire, while content analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data obtained from the document analysis which were then computed into quantitative data.

RESULTS

The table below captures the statistical data of the results of the survey questionnaire and document analysis based on the study objectives which will be discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

Table 1:   Results of survey questionnaire and document analysis

Aspect	Level of acknowledgement	
	Questionnaire	Document analysis
The purpose of assessment was clarified to the candidate upfront	77.9 %	90%
The quality of support to be provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment was established	75%	90%
An appeals process was made known to the candidate	82.3%	70%
The choice of assessment methods was fit for purpose to ensure credible assessment outcomes	86.7%	40%

THE PURPOSE OF RPL ASSESSMENT

SAQA RPL policy (2002, 25) explicitly states that "the purpose of assessment should be clarified upfront to the candidate". This is done with a view to enable the candidate to gather information needed to prepare for the assessment.

The information that the candidates collect usually takes many forms and can be gathered from a number of sources. However, for assessment purposes, the only information required is one which, when matched against the requirements of the unit of competency, provides proof of competence.

In the study, it would appear that in the majority of LIS schools, the purpose of assessment was clarified to the candidate upfront. The study's results indicated that 77.9 per cent of respondents viewed the statement positively. In contrast, the results from the institutional policy documents analysis indicated a greater compliance of approximately 90 per cent to SAQA RPL policy (2002).

To determine whether the level of extent depicted by policy was the same as depicted by the respondents, the Wilcoxon signed rank test was used. The Wilcoxon signed rank test gave a z-value = 6.856 with a p-value = 0.000, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis of median being equal to 1 (to a great extent). The test also indicated that the respondents were mainly concentrated on 2 (to a reasonable extent).

With regard to whether the purpose of assessment was clarified to the candidate upfront, the test indicated that the respondents did not think that this aspect was happening to a large extent, but rather to a reasonable extent. However, it would appear that despite the statistical discrepancy in the findings, in practice, this aspect was adequately addressed by LIS schools. This was significant because if the purpose of assessment was not clarified from the outset, candidates might feel deceived and might want to question the integrity and validity of the system.

SUPPORT FOR RPL CANDIDATES

The learner or candidate support structures were critical as a preventative measure, for example, as a measure to enhance the success rate of candidates (SAQA 2001, 7). This was not only the case for adult learners and RPL candidates, but it applied to learners involved in full-time study programmes. Hence, the quality of support to be provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment needed to be established to ensure student achievement.

In the study, the results indicated that 75 per cent of respondents viewed this aspect positively. In addition, there was 90 per cent compliance from the institutional policy analysis. In the SAQA RPL policy (2002), the services and support to RPL candidates form part of pre-assessment advice including preparation for the assessment itself, educational planning, counselling as well as post-assessment support.

With regard to the respondents, the test showed that responses were concentrated on a median of 2 (to a reasonable extent). As to whether the quality of support to be provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment was established, the respondents thought that this aspect was happening to a reasonable extent and not to a large extent.

However, the results generally showed that the majority of LIS schools made provision for quality support to the candidate in preparation for the assessment. This was significant in that unlike adults who study full-time, these adults had to face pressures of work and study.

THE APPEALS PROCESS

The study's results indicated that 82.3 per cent of respondents believed that an appeals process was in place in LIS schools and that it was also made known to the candidates. In the institutional RPL policy documents this aspect were indicated by seven (70%) of the institutions.

The Wilcoxon signed rank test indicated that there was no difference between the policy document analysis and responses. The hypothetical medians of both the institutional policy documents and survey responses was two, indicating that making an appeal process known to the candidate in LIS schools occurred to a reasonable extent. There was little discrepancy between the survey results and documentation on this aspect.

It was significant to note that the appeals process was in place in the majority of LIS schools and that it was also documented. This was because an appeals process was a critical issue supporting good assessment systems design and management. The RPL providers such as LIS schools were required to ensure that candidates have access to appeal against an assessment outcome (SAQA 2002). The candidates have the right to appeal against both the process and outcomes of RPL assessment. It is incumbent upon SA LIS schools to ensure that the appeal procedures were implemented in a fair and transparent fashion.

THE CHOICE OF RPL ASSESSMENT METHODS

SAQA RPL policy (2002, 15) makes it explicitly clear that RPL assessment plans must subscribe to principles of good assessment which actively promote the use of a variety of methods. These methods can be used to validate diverse types of learning, for example, portfolio reviews; exams developed by college department; essays; projects; oral presentations; interviews; demonstrations and performances (Cohen et al. 1994). In addition, good assessment principles also include respect for the rights of RPL candidates to participate in the selection and use of assessment methods and instruments appropriate to their situation. However, this does not mean that such alternative methodologies were in any way inferior, but they may be less threatening to the candidate.

In the study, 86.7 per cent of respondents agreed that in LIS schools, the choice of assessment methods was fit for purpose to ensure valid assessment outcomes. However, the results from the institutional policy documents analysis indicated that there was 40 per cent compliance with SAQA RPL policy (2002). To determine whether the level of extent depicted by policy was the same as depicted by the respondents, the Wilcoxon signed rank test was used. The test gave a z-value = - 6.242 with a p-value = 0.000. Since the p-value was less than 0.05, the null hypothesis of the median being equal to 3 (to some extent) was rejected. The median of the responses was concentrated on either 1 (to a great extent) or 2 (to a reasonable extent).

CONCLUSIONS

The study sought to establish and investigate the following issues: the purpose of assessment was clarified to the candidate upfront, the quality of support provided to the candidate in preparing for the assessment was established, an appeals process was

made known to the candidate, and the choice of assessment methods was fit for purpose to ensure credible assessment outcomes. The findings indicate that RPL assessment processes across LIS schools in South Africa were largely subjected to principles of good practice. The significance of this is that the quality of RPL assessment processes in LIS schools in South Africa is placed on a high premium in defence of the integrity and quality of RPL outcomes.

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