An exploration of students' and academics' experiences of the Recognition of Prior Learning process for admission to postgraduate studies[1]

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ABSTRACT

In the recognition of prior learning (RPL) process that is completed for access to undergraduate studies, students and academics are the key participants. Their experience of the process appears to be under-investigated, given the limited number of these studies that have been conducted at distance learning institutions. Therefore, it is important to explore the perceptions and experiences of academics and students of the RPL process, in order to make meaningful suggestions for improving the process. This research explored the RPL experiences of students and academics in the postgraduate context, at an open distance learning (ODL) institution. Research participants who were directly involved in the RPL process, as applicants and as academic assessors, were involved. It was established that, apart from granting them admission to postgraduate studies, RPL candidates also benefited from the process on personal, as well as academic levels. The main aspect of RPL, preparation of evidence for assessment, similar to those of sustainable assessment, contributes to students becoming aware of their learning potential. Aspects of the RPL process, that both candidates and academics found beneficial, were illuminated during this research project. The academics gained insight into the candidate learner profile, while candidates experienced the process as beneficial; both for gaining admission and the postgraduate context.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), access to postgraduate studies, sustainable assessment

INTRODUCTION

The following quotations of RPL candidates and academics denote some of the perceptions of the RPL process as a means of achieving access to postgraduate studies:

> RPL unleashed my potential.

> An opportunity … acknowledgement.

> Overall, I found the RPL process rewarding and helpful.

> The preparation of the RPL assessment makes them realise the value of their work experiences in adding to readiness to study.

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RPL has been entrenched in South African education policies and legislation since 1994, addressing the purposes of access, transformation, lifelong learning, and flow among the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels. The RPL process provides RPL candidates access opportunities to postgraduate studies. The candidates do not meet the conventional admission requirements, but claim that they have obtained the relevant knowledge, research experience and coupled with an undergraduate qualification will be able to meet the demands of a postgraduate qualification. The RPL access process means that the opportunity to pursue the relevant postgraduate qualification is available to students and implies that 'advanced standing' (SAQA, 2019: 4) has been granted. Granting 'advanced standing' does not entitle the learner to claim achievement of the exempted qualification, but an opportunity to be granted admission to studies at a higher level than the prior formal studies would have allowed. As a tool for lifelong learning, RPL recognises that learning occurs in all contexts of life and includes attitudes and competencies for personal growth within the context of the National Qualifications Framework. When considering RPL as a relevant tool for access, it is necessary to highlight the benefits of RPL as a process, within the context of teaching and learning in the higher education context.

Since the implementation of RPL at the University of South Africa (Unisa), which is an Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institution, it was predominantly applied to obtain credits within undergraduate qualifications and only to a lesser extent to gain access to postgraduate studies. Considering the academic demands involved in completing a postgraduate qualification and Unisa's commitment to success after access (Unisa, 2016c), it is important to evaluate the RPL process. It is a comprehensive and demanding process. Experiences of students and academics of the RPL process need to be explored as this might provide significant information on first-hand, personal experiences and perceptions of strengths and weaknesses of the process. Furthermore, it could determine whether an RPL process contributes to the key intention of RPL in South African, namely to 'facilitate the change in the lives of RPL candidates' (SAQA, 2019: 3).

The University invests time and academic involvement in assessing students for direct access to postgraduate studies and in supervising successful RPL candidates during postgraduate studies. RPL assessors and academics draw on their evaluative expertise to participate in the process of assessing RPL applications. An assessment panel is formed, members are experienced academics in the field of the application, as well as experienced assessment specialists. These investments warrant certain requirements with academic merit for an RPL process (Singh, 2011.) It becomes particularly significant considering the institutional plan of the ODL institution (Unisa, 2016c), which advocates student centredness, the removal of access barriers and RPL, in order to facilitate access and academic success.

The South Africa Qualifications Authority (SAQA, 2019: 11) defines RPL as a 'process through which non-formal and formal learning are measured, mediated for recognition across different contexts and certified against the requirements for credit, access, inclusion or advancement in formal education'. Candidates are made aware that the main purpose of the process is to gain access or alternative admission to a qualification. This definition foregrounds mediation for making prior learning visible for assessment. Therefore, the RPL process makes provision for extended assessment preparation. Preparation for the RPL assessment facilitates mediation from one type of knowledge context to another. Assessment, which is central to all RPL processes, does not occur in isolation, but allows for different forms of learning and extended assessment preparation, which engages the intrinsic development of knowledge, skills, and competencies (SAQA, 2013). The preparation includes activities that are required as a means of producing evidence for assessment. As an integral feature of all forms of RPL, the preparation can include strategies that allow for different forms of learning to be compared and judged (SAQA, 2019: 11.) Assessment means the process used to identify, gather, and interpret information and evidence against the required competencies in a qualification (SAQA, 2019). Furthermore, one of the the important elements of the approach is, that it is a multi-dimensional process (SAQA, 2019: 11) within a specific context.

It is often highlighted in research that RPL, as a process to obtain or grant access to postgraduate studies, such as that of Cooper and Harris (2013), includes different aspects of a multi-dimensional process. The differentiation of knowledge means that RPL practitioners need to provide appropriate support for candidates to navigate their way into different academic discourses at postgraduate levels of study. Further to this, the implementation of an RPL process requires the involvement of the key stakeholders with clear roles and responsibilities. These stakeholders would include students and RPL assessors who could inform policy amendments and instruction of multi-modal pedagogy within the context of adult learning, by sharing their experiences and reflecting on their competencies. As per policy principle, Unisa's strategy allows for a developmental approach, where decisions are based on student needs and profiles (Unisa, 2016).

Students confirm that their experiences of the RPL process, for access to postgraduate studies, were positive and empowering experiences (Cooper 2011). In exploring the benefits associated with RPL, Cleary et al. (2002: 20) argue that participation in the RPL process creates an awareness within the students of their own learning potential, which contributes to greater self-confidence, as well as provides an 'important bridge' between informal and formal learning. In addition, several authors refer to RPL as a process of building bridges between different cultures and contexts of knowledge (Cameron, 2006; Gallacher & Feutrie, 2003). This includes the role of RPL in providing 'a bridge between academia and prior learning, in order to support future learning' (Pokorny & Whittaker, 2014: 270).

One of the principles of the Unisa RPL policy refers to RPL as a process supporting candidates to enable them to bridge the gap between informal or non-formal prior learning as well as formal learning (Unisa 2016a). It can be argued that the skills gained during assessment preparation assist students in their postgraduate studies; hence the need to evaluate the RPL process against this background.

RPL in a particular context involves certain requirements, such as clear admission guidelines and supportive guidance to prepare candidates (Singh 2011). This entails details on the process, the assessment tools, the evidence required and the available support. At Unisa, a comprehensive RPL application process includes advice to candidates as to the required documents and assessment evidence (Unisa 2016a). The application includes a motivation for access and an outline of a research proposal, based on work and research experience. Academics assess the evidence to determine whether direct access can be granted, and to identify learning gaps (Unisa, 2016b). The assessment panel is required to ensure that all RPL assessments are carried out as per the guidelines (Unisa, 2016b) and should furnish proof by completing an assessment report that the assessment has been properly carried out and moderated and that all assessment reports will stand up to scrutiny at an external audit. This process is coordinated by an RPL specialist as per policy requirements (Unisa, 2016a).

Within the ODL framework, the role of the RPL specialist, as RPL practitioner, includes promoting RPL within the university context, train academics as RPL assessors and evaluators, advise and support RPL candidates, facilitate the application and assessment process, as well as ensure the quality of the process. The RPL application, with supporting evidence as per guidelines explained in the application brochure, should be assessed by the Assessment Panel. This panel comprises academics who are involved as supervisors and who have expert knowledge in the academic field of a specific application. Evaluative expertise implies deep subject matter and understanding of knowledge about the outcomes being assessed at a theoretical and practical level. Implications of this is that the RPL application includes practical experience in diverse contexts of learning. To ensure the quality and standard of the process, clear guidelines are included in the Procedures Manual for academics (Unisa, 2016a).

Candidates are expected to interpret the level outcomes for the masters' or doctorate qualification they wish to be admitted into, in the articulation of the motivation — an activity that provides an opportunity

to develop a wide range of useful transferable cognitive and behavioural skills. The level descriptors hold the advantage of being used as a mediating device (Pokorny & Whittaker, 2014) between prior learning and academic requirements, where personal learning should be described within the disciplinary framework of the intended qualification. The challenge is that candidates are expected to compile this academic motivation as self-directed adult students; only with the instruction to match learning based on self-assessment and reflection. Candidates should be able to identify their skills and competence relative to the entry requirements for postgraduate study. If there is further need, they may contact the RPL specialist for individual guidance. However, the research will guide the need for more focused pedagogic support.

Within the context of higher education, the RPL process is often regarded as complex, where candidates may have negative views about it the process. On the other hand, academics often show resistance against the process due to concerns about the academic standard of the process. The reality is that the process has not been evaluated since the inception of RPL at this institution. An evaluation of the process based on academics and students' experiences of the process can provide information on the value of the process and can be used to help alter negative views. This will meet the requirements of the SAQA unit standard; Develop, Support and Promote RPL practices (SAQA, 2010), that states that RPL should be promoted in a manner to address factors that constitute barriers to effective assessment practices.

With the intention of evaluating the RPL process and determining the perceived benefits of RPL to postgraduate studies, the main research question in this study was:

> Based on their experiences, what are the perceptions of academics and students of the value of the RPL process in the postgraduate context?

To answer the research question, the following sub-questions were considered:

- What are the reflections of RPL candidates about their RPL experiences?
- What is the perceived contribution of the RPL process to postgraduate studies?
- What are the perceptions and experiences of academics of the RPL process?
- What are the experiences of academic staff of RPL candidates as postgraduate students?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The purpose of the theoretical perspective is to support the research questions and to provide a framework for the findings and discussions. Involvement in the process, as an RPL practitioner, and informal feedback from both students and academics, created an awareness of benefits associated with the process, creating the need for empirical research within a theoretical framework. With assessment as being central to the RPL process, the literature explores aspects of assessment as a learning experience. An aspect that can contribute to the lasting effect of RPL assessment as learning is the inclusion of a sustainable assessment approach (Snyman, 2013). In a personal e-mail to the author, Boud (2012) regards research on sustainable assessment as an 'unoccupied niche' because it seems as if no research has been done on this. A sustainable approach has long-term benefits for students, and may be beneficial for both the RPL process and postgraduate studies.

The process and value of RPL

The RPL process sets out to be a demanding individualised process where certain qualities are required from candidates, such as self-knowledge and ability to reflect on their own learning. This has the potential of benefiting students within a learning context.

A convincing body of research (Van Kleef, 2014a, 2014b; Pearson 2000) identified a range of benefits associated with the RPL process, such as its significant role in student success; predicting success; and in contributing to adult learners' persistence to succeed academically. The experiences of RPL students, as in the case study conducted by Aarts et al. (1999) provided sufficient evidence to support the claim that the RPL process could be beneficial to students. On a personal level, the RPL process was also found to enhance learners' self-esteem and their confidence in their ability to learn, and to increase their motivation to complete their studies. Flint (1999) observed that the value of RPL was in encouraging adult learners to bring a rich, complex history of experience to the learning situation that directly related to new learning. Valentine, Bowles and McKinnon (2016) also highlighted students benefiting from RPL, by reframing previous experience into academic contexts. Elements of personal empowerment attained though RPL included personal transformation (Armsby, 2013), which could have a positive impact on adult learners (Van Kleef, 2014a), and enhanced motivation (Donoghue et al., 2002). These findings could guide exploring students' experiences of the process, since RPL has potential implications for a candidate's learning opportunities and self-development.

Van Kleef (2014a) confirmed that a learner-centred approach, embedded in the RPL process, could strengthen adult learners' motivation by connecting their work experiences to learning expectations. This is supported by Donoghue et al. (2002), who observed that RPL motivated adults to continue learning in a formal setting. Additional benefits of RPL include an increased awareness of knowledge and skills and an improved reflective and evaluative ability (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). From a learners' perspective, Migual, Ornelas and Maroco (2016) perceived that RPL leads to a different narrative of the self and a sense of accomplishment — both key elements of learner identity.

An unquestionable benefit of RPL is that it establishes patterns of performance and success (Donoghue et al., 2002), thereby adding to students' confidence in being admitted to formal studies and confirming their academic ability. The research of Anderson and Fejes (2012) verified prior learning as a starting point for new learning and contribution to students' awareness of their own knowledge. By allowing learning during assessment, RPL often results in new insights into personal and professional goals, which, in turn, contribute to motivation Anderson and Fejes (2012: 37). Also, new learning, resulting from the recognition process, could be 'the basis of new learning'. A real concern is that experiential knowledge does not easily 'translate' into academic knowledge (Cooper, 2011: 53), which is why it is essential for the process to enable students to engage in reflection and self-assessment, in order to articulate their learning through experience (Donoghue et al., 2002).

A better understanding of both academics and students' experiences of the RPL process can inform the scope of advice and support required for preparation of the assessment process. The advice and support are provided in a way to promote the purposes of RPL and ensure student success.

Student preparation for RPL assessment

As RPL assessment preparation, students compile a comprehensive application form with evidence and supporting documents, which requires 'evaluative judgement' (Villaroel et al., 2017: 13) and the ability to draw on work and research experience, in order to transfer learning to the academic context. Writing the motivation as part of the application involves the challenge of aligning prior learning with exit level outcomes of a postgraduate qualification and to provide an appropriate description of learning claimed (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015). The exit level outcomes serve as a framework and as 'signposts' for reframing experience from one context to another (Van Kleef, 2014b: 326). The academic outcomes that are included in the exit level outcomes should be linked to authentic work and life situations, which requires informed judgements of relevant learning gained through experience. This is a demanding task of candidates who may not have contact with the academic context for some time and even more demanding within the ODL framework, where students are required to work independently.

RPL preparation requires pivotal skills, such as reflection, self-assessment, and critical evaluation of relevant evidence (Houston, Hoover and Beer 1997; Joossten-ten Brinke 2008). Reflection is a 'central skill in the RPL process' (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015: 35). By compiling their research evidence, candidates could reflect on prior learning (Stevens, Gerber & Hendra, 2010). As a key aspect of evidence preparation, reflection requires the ability to critique one's own thought (Garnett & Cavaye, 2015), to articulate learning through experience (Donoghue et al., 2002.) The application provides students with an opportunity for self-assessment within the framework of an academic discipline (Singh, 2011). Furthermore, completing the application combines the actions of making evaluative judgements and understanding benchmark standards (Adachi, Hong-Meng Tadi & Dawson, 2017).

As Marienau (2014) confirmed, there are different learning opportunities embedded in the RPL preparation and students often gain new learning from the RPL process, since they are required to identify what they have learned through a process of intense analysis, reflection and meaning making. Exploring the learning associated with RPL, Migual, Ornelas and Maroco (2016) referred to evidence of critical thinking; new interpretations of experience; and the realisation of prior knowledge. Stevens, Gerber and Hendra (2010) supported this notion by observing that RPL participation fosters a new sense of confidence in making meaning of experience.

The RPL process can be 'an important source of new learning' (Fiddler, Marienau & Whitaker, 2006: 27), since it allows candidates to identify their strengths though the reflection process and to develop a new awareness of their personal learning and identify strengths. The skills of self-assessment and reflection are required to ensure that RPL helps 'students to transform and reframe previous experience' (Valentine, Bowles & McKinnon, 2016: 495). When preparing evidence for the RPL process, it is essential that students reflect on own learning, make judgements about their own learning experiences and do self-assessment. In this regard it is worth noting that theorisations of sustainable assessment provide opportunities for an RPL process. Students, as active participants, become central to both the RPL and sustainable assessment learning processes. Through both preparation for RPL assessment as well as sustainable assessment, students are encouraged to become 'self-assessors' (Matthews & Reyes, 2019: 3). This, in turn, requires an understanding of the characteristics of sustainable assessment in the RPL assessment context.

RPL and sustainable assessment

Within the ODL context, an RPL process has the potential to broaden access, but also to ensure success of candidates after access (Letseka et al., 2014). Key elements of sustainable assessment, self-assessment and reflection could be beneficial to RPL, in that these elements prepare students for their 'future learning needs' (Bourke 2017: 8) and therefore the postgraduate context after access. Through sustainable assessment, students develop an awareness of learning and assessment skills as they actively participate in the self-evaluation of evidence. Students become 'self-assessors' (Kun Dai et al., 2019: 1), therefore, the theorisation of sustainable assessment can contribute to students 'lived experiences' of assessment within the learning context.

Boud and Soler (2016: 400) explained sustainable assessment as assessment that meets the 'need of the present', while preparing students for future learning. Sustainable assessment contributes to a changing perspective of assessment and preparation for future learning (Ngyuen & Walker, 2016).

The assessment is aligned with long-term learning to equip students for assessing their future learning, including the notion of 'assessment as double duty' (Boud 2000: 159), which may include assessment as learning; the acquisition of assessment skills; and equipping students to become reflexive learners capable of informed judgement. Boud (2000) argued that preparation for sustainable assessment built on the belief that all students had the capacity to succeed and that it aimed at forming independent, self-regulated and reflexive learners, who were able to make informed judgements.

Sustainable assessment helps to bridge the gap between assessment and learning', which relates to students' judgements about their own work (Boud & Soler 2016: 400). As Adachi, Hong-Meng Tai and Dawson (2017) observed, self-assessment could be an effective assessment approach in higher education since it involves evaluative judgements. Self-assessment contributes to developing an 'ontological awareness' (Bourke, 2017: 1) and, as a pedagogical approach, it supports students' understanding of their learning, enabling them to become familiar with their wealth of learning, personal attributes and strengths. In an RPL preparation process, this awareness of their own learning strengths may contribute to RPL candidate students to gain a sense of confidence about the learning process. Therefore, an exploration of their experiences will shed light on a better understanding of the learning process. When surveying the literature, it became evident that aspects of sustainable assessment dovetail well with RPL in that they align assessment with lifelong learning. However, as Boud and Falchinov (2007) suggested, a more focused approach requires an exploration of the conceptualisation of assessment tasks to promote a sustainable approach that equips students for future studies.

The perspectives on RPL processes and benefits can be used to guide the empirical study of participants' reflections on actual RPL experiences, in order to determine the role and value of RPL and to make recommendations for improvement of the process.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The research was designed to document the reflections on and experiences of academics and students of the RPL process at Unisa. A selection of students and academics in a specific department at the University was identified as the target population.

The students were the cohort, who had been granted admission through RPL and who, at the time, were at different stages of their postgraduate studies. The staff group comprised academic staff who had been involved in RPL assessment for admission to postgraduate studies and, at the time, were supervising RPL students. Since there were only three academics in the department who were involved in RPL assessments, three academics from other departments in the same faculty, who were also involved in RPL assessments, were purposefully selected. These were staff members who met the criteria of exposure to, participation in, and support of the RPL process.

Ethical clearance was obtained by following the guidelines of the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics (Unisa, 2016b). Only respondents who indicated their willingness to participate, were involved in the research. Data were collected by means of two open-ended questionnaires, each comprising 10 questions covering the same components of RPL. The purpose of the questionnaires was to capture participants' authentic perceptions and experiences of RPL. The open-ended questions were structured to cover reflections on their personal experiences and perceptions of the process, the support received during preparation of the process, the post-access context and general reflections on the process. To ensure credibility and exclude bias, both questionnaires were moderated and validated by an independent, external expert and by an academic in the department involved in RPL assessments.

The questionnaires were distributed electronically. Questionnaire 1 was sent to 35 students, who were older than 23 years, with at least five years relevant work experience, as required by the RPL process. Despite electronic reminders being sent out, only nine questionnaires were returned. Questionnaire 2 was sent to six academics and all six were returned.

An inductive and interpretive approach was followed in the thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the steps proposed by Tesch (1992) served as the data analysis method. This approach allowed the capture of the rich, lived experiences of research participants. As an organising system, topics

were identified and clustered into categories and sub-categories. Acronyms were allocated to categories, e.g., motivation was designated as MOT. In the actual coding process, these acronyms served as labels to analyse and categorise collected data and to identify themes that captured key aspects of the research problem (Braun & Clarke 2006).

In order to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the data analysis, intercoder reliability was employed (Peter & Lauf 2002), including criteria set by Thomas (2003). An independent co-coder analysed the raw data in the completed questionnaires; identified categories; and created themes. During a consensus meeting, the themes were discussed and required changes were made.

RESULTS

The research results were unpacked under different sub-sections. The sub-sections were guided by the research questions which included the experiences of the process of candidates and academics alike, as well as the experiences and understanding that academics had of the RPL candidates as postgraduate students.

Students' experiences
Students' reflections on their personal experiences of the RPL process were highlighted, as well as their views on the value of the process. Significant themes related to various aspects of 'acknowledgement' and 'recognition' became evident in responses such as:

> The RPL programme has given me the opportunity to fulfil a life-long dream.

The findings showed students' experience of and appreciation for RPL as a beneficial, motivational, supportive, and empowering process. For example, they expressed their experience of RPL as a 'pleasant' process that motivated them to embark on postgraduate studies:

> It was fantastic, simple process that was efficient and pleasant.

> It motivates me to do research.

> The RPL process provided me with the way forward.

The themes reflecting students' experiences were:

a. The RPL process as a beneficial process.

b. Preparation as a learning experience.

c. RPL as supportive process?

d. Sense of personal achievement and motivation.

e. Acknowledgement of prior learning.

The five main findings, supported by students' statements, included:

a. RPL was a blessing to me.

> I feel privileged to have the opportunity to have been included into a PhD with Unisa. This opens up so many doors for my academic future.

b. It prepared me emotionally, especially on stress management and the ability to multitask.

c. Overall, I found the RPL process rewarding and helpful.

I knew at every stage what was required and the status of my application.

She (the RPL advisor) was the first personal contact in the RPL programme, and she guided me though the process until I was accepted for a doctoral degree.

I learned that I have actually accomplished much over the last 14 years, and that my knowledge can make a difference in the academic world.

d. A process that allows a student to list all work experience and having them recognised as a gateway to move forward academically.

e. A process that allows a student to list all work experience and having them recognised as gateway to move forward economically

Negative feedback was acknowledged, namely:

Lengthy due to the number of supporting documents

Took some time.

Research findings indicated that students saw the preparation for RPL assessment as a learning opportunity, where they did not only become aware of their own skills, but also regarded the learning as beneficial for postgraduate studies.

Academics' perceptions

The results confirmed academics' acknowledgement of the role and value of RPL in postgraduate studies. Based on their experiences, the following categories, or sub-themes, describing the RPL process were identified:

a. RPL process as an opportunity (personal and academic)

b. The effect of students' prior learning

c. Effective process

d. Source of insight into academic and personal learner profiles

e. Process as acknowledgement and recognition.

As illustrated by the evidence, academics acknowledged the RPL process in the following terms:

a. A possibility for quality postgraduates based on acquired skills
RPL has made it possible for some quality postgraduates to pursue studies based on acquired skills.

b. Combination of academic qualifications and experience is more valuable than specialisation in one field.

Provides options of work-related research topics.

c. Great process to pioneer inclusive academic opportunities.

d. There is a fair amount of research, evidence and document correlation that goes into the preparation of an RPL application document.

The preparation of the RPL assessment makes them realise the value work experiences in adding to their readiness to study.

e. RPL as a 'great intervention' which improves quality, gives hope and pioneers inclusiveness.

The perceptions that academics had of RPL appeared to have resulted in an improved understanding of RPL candidates. They learned that the RPL process was a display of prior learning leading to maturity and creating a better understanding of the learner profile.

RPL contributing to postgraduate studies

Both academics and students' RPL experiences revealed insight into the role of assessment preparation and the contribution of RPL to postgraduate studies. In contrast to one of the students who remarked on the comprehensive nature of the RPL process and the evidence required, academics remarked more favourably on the comprehensive nature of the process. Although this seems contradictory, academics' perception was that the comprehensive nature of the RPL process could contribute to the demands of postgraduate studies.

The following themes surfaced in terms of the perceived benefits of RPL for postgraduate studies:

a. Gained insight into how prior learning contributes to further studies

b. Supports preparation for postgraduate studies

c. Provided new perspective on personal prior learning

d. Opportunity to link experience and academic background to formal studies through reflection and self-assessment

e. Preparation for assessment allows for self-assessment and reflection.

The following evidence supported the themes:

a. The RPL process also involved submitting a research outline – this prepared me well for the research proposal.

   I have learned that being organised and having all your ducks in a row ensures that the process runs smoothly.

b. There are a number of academic fields, which are very much interrelated, and there are resources in each discipline which can be used to enhance knowledge in another field.

   (It) gave me the necessary background knowledge and theoretical foundation that was so essential for my researchers.

   (It) prepare me both academically and morally for the academic task ahead.

   Through the RPL process, I became more familiar with the practical aspects of how the research will be conducted.

   (I) learned to write a scientifically standard proposal.

c. My prior knowledge gave me some of the experimental work and how to solve research problems.

d. I've come to understand that all the knowledge I obtained in the last couple of years can actually be applied in a formal structures study. (reflection)

   My prior knowledge gave me some of the experimental work and (insight into) how to solve research problems.

e. Going through the RPL process required me to review my past experiences, qualifications and achievements, which helped me assess myself in preparation for determining a path towards a doctoral degree.

The reflection of the academics on the process revealed aspects of their experiences of the candidates as both candidates and as postgraduate students. This includes aspects of their learner profile, their knowledge, and the type of learning that they gained. Although the question did not require responses on the ODL context, an academic added the following,

> I believe it helps in removing barriers to learning, thereby adding true meaning to the O in open distance learning.

Within the context of ODL academics gained a better understanding of RPL candidates as students.

Academic staff's experiences of RPL students as postgraduate students
The following themes emerged in response to the question on RPL candidates as postgraduate students:

    a. Students bring maturity and wisdom

    b. Possess a range of skills

    c. Personal attributes

    d. Prior learning gained in diverse contexts of learning

    e. Experience relevant to the study field.

The following evidence supported the findings:

    a. (They) bring wisdom derived from previous university experience and the ability, therefore, to compare the past academics with their current practical experience.

    b. Relevant hands-on experience is a definite imperative for success among postgraduate students who have been admitted through the RPL assessment process.

    c. RPL students have experienced diversity of prior research experience, and this provides insight into the advantages of postgraduate research.
        Experience gained in diverse contexts of learning

    d. (The) student had an impressive mix of soft skills and academic qualifications and certificates … and has been able to draft a formidable research proposal.
        Untapped potential

    e. RPL has made it possible for some quality postgraduates to pursue studies based on acquired skills.

These main themes were supported by categories as sub-themes. Appreciation for RPL was evident in the response of one of the participants, who stated:

> I feel privileged to have the opportunity to have been included into a PhD with Unisa. This opens up so many doors for my academic future.

Another went so far as to say,

> My RPL was a blessing to me.

These findings could enrich both practitioners and academics' knowledge and understanding of the RPL process. The students' experiences and reflections on the process could be used to benefit students in the reflection and self-assessment processes to prepare evidence to support the application.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The participants generally associated the notion of RPL with words such as 'acknowledge' and 'opportunity', which dovetailed well with what RPL sets out to be — i.e., a tool 'to enable potential candidates to attain recognition of the appropriate knowledge and skills required for personal development and the employment market' (SAQA 2013: 4). The relevance of this is that the experiences of both academics and students confirmed RPL as a value-added process within the context of teaching and learning within higher education.

The RPL process succeeds in making prior learning visible and in creating an awareness of the value of prior learning for further study. Both the academics and students' experiences confirmed RPL as a valuable and effective process. The responses confirmed the academic and personal benefits associated with the process, like Cleary et al. (2002: 20) who confirmed that the engagement in the RPL process was 'itself of value'. The findings relating to the personal benefits associated with RPL were supported by similar empirical studies by, among others, Lamoreaux (2005), Pearson (2000) and Miguel, Ornelas and Maroco (2016), who confirmed that adult learners' experienced change and increased self-knowledge related to RPL.

The findings showed RPL served as a means of equipping students for postgraduate studies and to help them navigate the path. This is supported by Cooper's (2011) finding of students' prior experiential knowledge serving as a resource for the acquisition of postgraduate literacies.

Besides offering personal benefits, RPL preparation also constitutes a learning process that helps candidates to reflect on their prior learning and personal attributes that would support them in the pursuit of academic studies. The findings showed that the RPL process helped to validate knowledge and that the self-assessment helped students to understand their own learning, as confirmed by Bourke's findings (2017). Students appreciated the outcome of these processes since they appreciated the contribution of prior learning to further studies and realised the long-term value of preparing for RPL assessment.

The learning involved in the RPL process seemed to result from the assessment preparation, which includes making judgements about suitable evidence, self-assessment, and structured reflection on prior learning. As a process acknowledging all sources of knowledge and learning, RPL acts as motivation for studies. As a means to confirm RPL as a learning process and a way of unlocking possibilities, research participants regarded the preparation process as a useful opportunity to attain the required depth of understanding for academic study; to process information; and to think differently.

This research established that academics focused on the value of RPL in postgraduate students' aspirations. They reported on a positive experience of a viable process that testified to the capabilities of self-driven students and acknowledged students' ability to progress academically. Academics demonstrated respect for RPL candidates' identity as experienced students with valuable knowledge and they valued adult experience and diverse ways of knowing (Fenwick, 2015). This is relevant for a context where academic knowledge enjoys priority.

Students' focus was on the personal benefits of and the learning gained through the RPL process, which enabled them to form realistic expectations of both RPL and postgraduate studies. The RPL experience helped to facilitate a 'new sense of confidence' (Stevens, Gerber & Hendra, 2010: 377) and fostered the ability to create new meaning of experience. The RPL process added to students' confidence in their own academic ability to succeed in postgraduate studies.

It became evident that students unintentionally had to do reflection and self-assessment in the selection of relevant information on and evidence of their prior learning. Reflection and self-assessment ensured a new

acknowledgement of skills and knowledge, which served as preparation for further study. 'Viewed through a sustainable assessment lens' (Bourke, 2017: 4), the feedback confirmed the role of self-assessment in assisting students in prioritising their focus for learning. The process allows for the development of an 'evaluative judgement' (Villarroel et al., 2016: 13), which is highly beneficial in postgraduate studies.

Participants observed that they felt empowered and motivated by being acknowledged on a personal and an academic level. Although the comprehensive aspect of the process was emphasised and there were complaints about the demanding assessment preparation, a possible benefit was that it prepared them for further stringent academic demands of postgraduate study.

The length of the process and the supporting documentation required were necessary to meet the policy requirement of a 'rigorous and transparent process to protect the integrity of academic standards' (Unisa 2016a :2). However, as a student-centred RPL process (SAQA 2013), designed to meet adult learners' needs, aspects of the process could be streamlined, based on these research findings. This should include clearly defined self-assessment criteria and guidelines for reflection. Since RPL aims at preparing students for postgraduate studies, the assessment activities should be clearly conceptualised to promote sustainable assessment. In reflection, I realised that the focus is often on the access opportunity without clear explanation of the concept 'advance standing'. The significance of the study lies in the fact that the findings illuminated the possibility of aspects of a process that benefits candidates on both a personal and an academic level. The research identified aspects of the RPL process as both a learning and empowering process and not just to gain access to postgraduate studies. In terms of RPL policy implementation in higher education, sharing the research findings will enrich the understanding of RPL practitioners and academics as RPL assessors of the candidate profile, the value of their prior learning and RPL as a learning experience. This knowledge will benefit practitioners to promote RPL and to identify and clarify 'common misconceptions', as per SAQA unit standard (Develop, support and promote RPL practices, SAQA, 2) approach contributing to the long-term benefits of the RPL process for postgraduate studies.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of the research was to explore students' and academics' experiences of the RPL process for access to postgraduate studies. Through self-assessment and reflection, students developed a deeper understanding of their knowledge, learning and their personal attributes. This awareness of students' experiences could be used to practically benefit an RPL process, e.g., including pedagogical guidelines on reflection and self-assessment to support students further in the preparation process. It is concluded that the brief explanations on the role of self-assessment, reflection and critical evaluation would enhance the RPL process as an academic process. Academics' experiences of the RPL process could be used to create an awareness amongst academia of the value of an RPL process. By exploring academics and students' perceptions and experiences of RPL, the main contribution of the study lies in clarifying the benefits associated with the RPL process in the context of postgraduate studies.

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