Towards Implementing Recognition of Prior Learning in the Free State Region[1]

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ABSTRACT

According to outcome 3 of the *National Plan for Higher Education* (2001: 28), recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an important avenue for increasing the intake of non-traditional students and adult learners. Although some institutions of higher learning have implemented RPL in isolation, the Widening Participation (Access) Project of the Free State Higher and Further Education and Training Trust (FSHFETT) is the first to regard regional collaboration as a way of implementing RPL. In this article the principles and processes of the regional RPL project are discussed and the challenges highlighted. If implemented correctly, RPL at regional level could be a powerful means for higher education institutions to meet the targets of student access more effectively, while maximising the use of scarce resources.

1. Introduction

Most of the policy and policy proposals since 1990 call for joint planning of new initiatives at regional level in order to meet national priorities (Maharasoa 2002: 38-70). According to the 2000/2002 Annual Report of the Council on Higher Education (CHE), however, limited progress has been made in the area of inter-institutional collaboration (CHE 2001: 67). This finding also applies to the implementation of RPL, which is one of the most costly and exciting challenges facing higher education (HE) institutions in South Africa.

Literature on the subject of RPL implementation is growing, with sporadic references to regional collaboration. Apart from articles, the following reports need mentioning: Griesel: "Recognition of prior learning (RPL): Issues and challenges for the HE sector "(2001); Thaver *et.al.* "A review of the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning at the University of the Western Cape " (2002); Du Pré and Pretorius: "*CTP Policy on RPL*" (2001); South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA): "The Recognition of Prior Learning in the context of the National Qualifications Framework "(2002); and especially SAQA: "Criteria and Guidelines for the implementation of Recognition of Prior Learning" (adopted on 13 August 2003). This last document concludes with a list of possible topics for further research. One of them is: "Regional collaboration models for providers offering RPL services" (2003: 73).

In this article the model developed by the FSHFETT is tabled for discussion. The FSHFETT is a regional consortium who decided to join forces to deal with issues of access across all member institutions. The model was referred to in the SAQA document (2003: 15-16), but not discussed at length. Here it will be outlined, followed by a plan to implement RPL in the region: its principles, purpose, goals, processes and challenges. Although the majority of challenges are regional, some are inherent to any RPL initiative.

The assumption is that inter-institutional collaboration on RPL could be a way of meeting the targets of student access more effectively and efficiently.

2. The Model Developed By The FSHFETT

The RPL project in the Free State is a subproject of the Widening Participation (Access) Project of the FSHFETT, the other two being entrance testing, and a bridging and foundation programme. A review of higher education policy indicates that these are the three priority areas in access (Strydom 2002: 22). The FSHFETT therefore developed a framework for and inter-institutional access programme (IIAP) to address these areas effectively and efficiently.

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[1] Although the CUT was awarded university status in 2003, the article will still reflect the name TFS

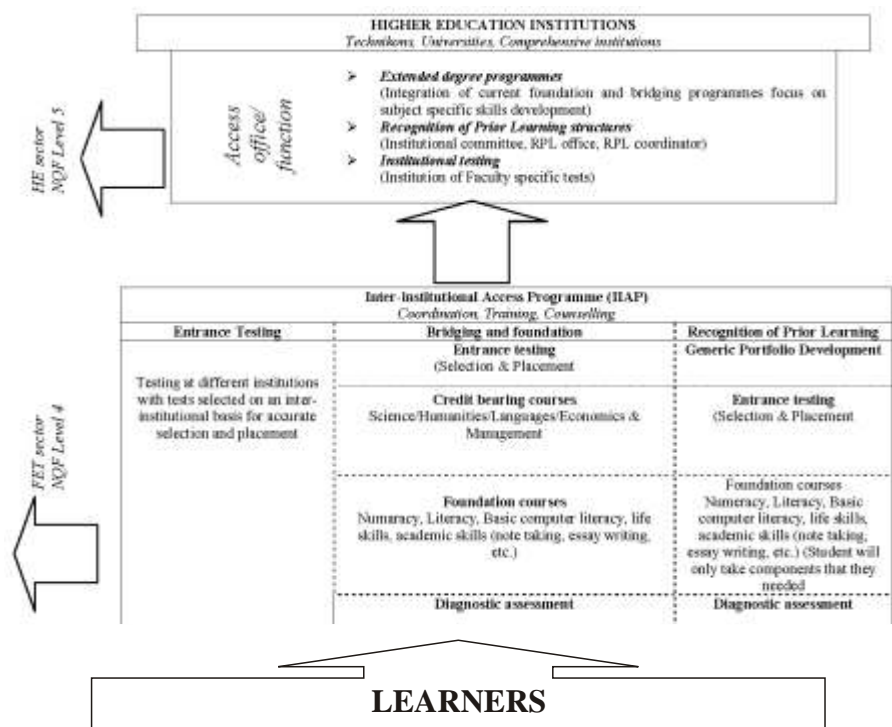The following figure provides a graphic representation of the IIAP.

Figure 1: Framework for an IIAP

The framework provides learners, who are unable to gain access to HE (due to current and future admission criteria) with three routes to do so. (Strydom 2002: 26-27). The first route is entrance testing. Students could enter HE by writing the selection and placement tests that have been agreed upon by participating institutions. If successful, the student can register at an appropriate HE institution, based on his/her needs and the professional advice of the IIAP staff. If not, he/she could articulate horizontally into the bridging and foundation programme, or the FET sector.

The second access route is a bridging and foundation programme. Diagnostic assessments help to place the learner in the bridging and foundation programme of his/her choice. If successful, learners will articulate directly into an extended degree programme at a HE

institution. They could also get another chance to write the entrance test. If unsuccessful, learners could articulate horizontally to the FET sector through professional counselling.

The third route is through an RPL process. Here learners are screened by diagnostic assessment and then put through foundation courses and entrance testing as part of a generic portfolio. A regional Centre could help with the intensive administration required by RPL. The successful candidates will be referred to an institutional committee that will help the candidate to gain the necessary recognition of his/her prior learning experience with a specific learning programme. Unsuccessful candidates could articulate horizontally either to the bridging and foundation route or into the FET sector.

The IIAP will help to facilitate vertical articulation between the FET and HE bands, as well as horizontal articulation between general and career focussed education and training, as proposed in the NAP (2001: 30).

3.   On The Implementation Plan Of The RPL Project

3.1   Mission, principles and purpose of the project.

Within the broad mission of the FSHFETT, the RPL project is a joint venture in providing an access, accreditation and redress programme for the benefit of all students from participating institutions by sharing information, expertise and resources on RPL. It is an effort to facilitate a link between education and training providers, the Department of Education and industry and commerce. This will be done by

- opening up access to lifelong learning for prospective candidates who have been denied access to higher education in the past;
- recognising prior learning for purposes of access, as well as for granting advanced placement in regional training programmes;
- establishing partnerships with education and training institutions;
- setting up structures to enhance portability of credits;
- offering training in all aspects of RPL;

- offering a variety of RPL and assessment-related services, and
- tendering for RPL and assessment-related services.

All this will be done within a paradigm of universally accredited standards. (Smith 2003: 1).

The RPL project rests on the following principles (Smith 2003: 3):

- It adheres to the basic principles of access for redress, commitment, transparency, fairness and support.
- Excellent client service will form the cornerstone of the project.
- The RPL practice followed will be internationally benchmarked (wherever possible), in order to remain globally accountable.
- The project will strive to establish a cost-effective process by sharing resources.
- In order to assure balanced perspectives regarding learning outcomes, co-operation between academics and representatives from industry is important for assessment and accreditation purposes.
- Where available, expertise from relevant SETAs and professional bodies will be sought to assess the learning outcomes required per level.

The purpose of the project is to establish a regional RPL Centre for serving individual applicants and corporate clients. The core business of the Centre will be to assess individuals' skills and competencies resulting from prior learning experiences. Individuals will be provided with certificates of assessment and accreditation. In the case of corporate clients, employers will be provided with reports on the state of their workforce, resulting from a skills audit. Finally, assessees will be correctly placed in higher education courses, with maximum financial and time benefits to all involved (Smith 2003: 2).

3.2 Goals and objectives: 2003-2005

Short term

June December 2003

- Agree on location of RPL office.
- Interview and appoint a RPL coordinator as from 1 January 2004.
- Develop database.
- Develop marketing materials.

Jan April 2004

- Start up regional office.
- Monthly visits to include stakeholder meetings.
- Identify stakeholder needs.
- Identify stakeholder assessors.
- Identify and train RPL facilitators.
- Train institutional assessors in RPL processes.
- Receive and process student applications.
- Coordinate assessment.

May June 2004

- Review progress.
- Negotiate end/continuation of supervision regarding start-up and inter-institutional teams.
- Appoint functionaries: programme director, academic RPL coordinator, etc.

Medium term

June December 2004

- Expand client base.
- Maintain levels of service.
- Maintain quality assurance functions.

Long term

Jan 2005

- Integrate RPL project with entrance testing, and bridging and foundation programmes.
- Expand client base annually and maintain excellence and

service.
- Maintain quality assurance functions.
- Achieve recognition as an expert in RPL.

3.3 Process map

In her business plan, Smith (2003: 18-20) included two flow diagrams to illustrate the path that the student should follow (screening, pre-assessment and assessment) and the assessment process as such. The diagrams are added as Appendices.

The main distinction in function between the regional RPL Centre and individual institutions is that the Centre deals with administrative issues, while institutions are responsible for academic issues. Thus the Centre will administer student applications, correspondence and payment, as well as the training and contracting of assessors. It also co-ordinates the assessment process. Individual institutions, on the other hand, are responsible for screening and assessment. In this way the duplication of administrative tasks is eliminated and the expertise available used to the maximum.

3.4 Finances and personnel

In the budget, which is intended to provide a guideline for setting up the Centre over a three-year period (2003-2005), provision is made for a programme director, an academic RPL coordinator, an administrative RPL director, facilitators and panellists to an amount of R944, 000 in 2004 and R1 039 000 in 2005. One RPL coordinator will be appointed towards the end of 2003 and the Centre will start functioning in January 2004 with the training of institutional assessors and the processing of the first student applications. The appointment of other functionaries and quality assurance will also receive attention in 2004. From 2005 onwards the RPL project will be integrated with entrance testing, and bridging and foundation strategies.

3.5 Advantages and comments

From this planning framework it is clear that the regional approach of the FSHFETT has the major advantage of sharing scarce resources and expertise in meeting the enormous challenges posed by RPL

implementation. It has the additional advantage of reducing fees for RPL candidates. Other important benefits are listed in the SAQA document (2003: 16) and include:

- The development of learning paths by means of clear articulation of programmes between bands and institutions.
- The transfer of credits is greatly facilitated.
- Agreement of the level(s) and the minimum requirements for candidates seeking credits for particular qualifications.
- Institutional autonomy remains intact as RPL services and assessment deal with generic issues.

At present and to our knowledge, no other cluster of education and training providers has initiated this type of model. It could place FSHFETT in the lead of research, procedures and processes at regional level, given that the challenges below are adequately addressed.

Only two remarks on the FSHFETT model. The first concerns the pathway that students need to follow. Some of them could be combined, for example correspondence and payment arrangements. Simplifying a process is always an advantage.

The second remark concerns the screening or pre-assessment phase, where candidates need special guidance and support in preparing for assessment. I suppose this will be part of the facilitators' job descriptions, although the function is not mentioned in any of the flow diagrams. In literature (SAQA 2003: 36-37; Thaver, Naidoo and Breyer 2002: 47, etc.) the role of a facilitator and the need for candidate support are crucial, given the academic backlog of many candidates:

> ......the danger of underestimating the levels of disempowerment .... that decades of discriminatory education and training practices had on ordinary citizens, and the unfamiliarity with formal academic study, (particularly in higher education), cannot be ignored. Therefore the support services should consciously address the invisible barriers to successful assessment. This may include a realignment

of existing academic development programmes to suit the needs of adult learners, advising programmes, assistance with identifying equivalencies and preparation for assessment (SAQA 2002: 20)

4. Progress

4.1 Current assessors at the UFS and TFS received training at a series of workshops in February and March 2003, offered by prof David Levin of De Paul University in Chicago. This was necessary for the interim implementation of RPL at the two institutions still operating in isolation.

4.2 Policies on RPL have been drafted and are in the process of being approved at the UFS and TFS. Both policies include regional collaboration.

4.3 The business plan for the RPL project is now being finalised, for submission at the next meeting of the Interim Executive Committee (IEC). Business plans for entrance testing and bridging and foundation programmes will be developed in 2004, for possible implementation in 2005.

4.4 Three partners, viz the UFS, TFS and TSA have already committed themselves in collaborating on the broadening of access in the Free State region. The Provincial Department of Education has also pledged its support to the project. Another possible partner is the FET Colleges. It is important to be pro-active in forging links with these partners if access is to be widened in a responsible way (Watt and Paterson 2000: 111)

4.5 Seed money for the project has been made available by the Ford Foundation, the UFS and the TFS. TSA could not provide seed funding at this stage, because they are still concerned with the non-participation of their merging partner (Unisa) and how they would re-budget their input of expertise and participation.

4.6 It is envisaged that the target group for 2004 would consist of 1000 learners that are currently ready for induction as part of the Provincial Department's reskilling programme for teachers. An additional 250 candidates could receive RPL in four fields of study (namely Economics and Management, Engineering, Technical Education and Nursing), bringing the total number of candidates for 2004 to 1250.

4.7 At the last meeting of the IEC (17 October 2003) it was decided to appoint four fixed term staff members to run the Centre: an academic RPL coordinator, an administrative RPL coordinator and two 5/8 administrative assistants/receptionists. The posts will be advertised internally and the secondment of existing staff to the regional project is a high priority.

4.8 It was also decided that the main RPL Centre should be at the Vista Bloemfontein campus, with information desks at the UFS, TSA and TFS. All RPL processes will be coordinated at the Vista campus in Bloemfontein.

4.9 A combined fundraising and marketing campaign for the project will be conducted by the anchor institutions towards the end of 2003 and the beginning of 2004.

4.10 The IEC (17 October 2003) unanimously decided that the project should be called the Kopano Ke Matla Project (Togetherness is Strength Project) (Mandew 2003: 1.4).

5. Challenges

The challenges evolve around different perspectives on RPL assessment and credits, the establishment of partnerships (xenophobia, decision-making processes, vested interests, economies of scale, etc.), ways of getting all stakeholders on board, the sharing of scarce financial resources and other issues related to a regional initiative. Many of these challenges have been adequately addressed; others are still retarding the implementation process.

5.1 One of the principles of the RPL project is to assure a common perspective regarding learning outcomes. This is important for assessment and accreditation purposes (see 3.1 above), as well as for inter-institutional articulation. Outcomes are broad statements regarding the requirements of qualifications and do not directly translate into subjects or modules. Subjects and modules are vehicles through which outcomes can be achieved (SAQA 2003: 10). Thus RPL candidates are to be assessed against learning outcomes, not against subject content. Up to now not all stakeholders understood the process in this way. The result was that credits and articulation were based on content (not on outcomes), thereby inhibiting assessment and the description of the results of learning.

The challenge is to assure a common perspective on learning outcomes as the sole basis for RPL assessment and articulation (Whitaker 1989:2, NAP 2001:104).

5.2 Part of the mission of the RPL project is to set up structures to enhance the portability of credits. The award of credits to outcomes poses a challenge in itself. At technikons credits are attached to subjects (content) not to outcomes (Report 151). With a view to collaboration and articulation between the university and the technikon, clarity should be reached on the administrative system to capture and transcribe such credits. A type of agreement is necessary for credits to be transferred between institutions in the region.

5.3 Negative attitudes and xenophobia were encountered in some leaders and institutions. Linked to this was a lack of vision that stood in the way of regional cooperation. For leaders who were used to doing their own thing, it was often difficult to see the implications of cooperation in terms of staffing, student numbers and finances. Leadership and commitment from the highest level are key elements for success in any regional initiative.

5.4 RPL Centre at the Vista campus, Bloemfontein.

RPL sub centres in three other sub regions (Goldfields, Qwaqwa and Kroonstad/Sasolburg) will be planned later, for possible implementation in 2005.

5.9 Implementing RPL is a cost and labour intensive exercise, particularly as RPL processes are currently not subsidised (SAQA 2003). Seed money is therefore needed to get the regional initiative going. The challenge is to develop a formula for regional funding based on the FTEs of participating institutions and the fees charged for assessing RPL candidates. All stakeholders must be satisfied with the formula and money generated by RPL implementation should be divided between the institutions and the regional Centre in such a way that the Centre becomes viable in the long term.

Another suggestion is funding through the international donor community. This option has become problematic, since donors want to see real resource commitment (seed funding) from participating institutions before considering project funding. (Strydom 2003: 2). It is a well-known fact that such funds cannot be the main source, because they dry up very quickly due to donor fatigue or for other reasons (like a change in focus areas). (Maharasoa *et.al,* 2002: 163).

5.10 A top structure delegation to Ms Nasima Badsha at the Department of Education for fundraising and political support at the highest level is critical for the success of the project. The delegation should also get more clarity on developments regarding bridging and foundation courses as discussed in the NAP 2001: 101-102; 106-107), as well on funding of these type of access initiatives.

5.11 All stakeholders have been involved in the planning of the project. However, the success of the project depends on the cooperation of academic staff, who have to face numerous other challenges in the new HE dispensation. To get on board to execute the plans is a major challenge to all decision-makers.

5.12 The restructuring of the institutional landscape (the incorporation of three branch campuses of two universities into the UFS and TFS, as well as the merging of Vista's distance education facilities, TSA and Unisa into one dedicated higher education institution) is not conducive to multi-institutional collaboration in the region, in the sense of staff feeling insecure and uncertain about their future. (Strydom 2003: 2). This has a negative effect on the commitment of staff to any new initiative, including the implementation of RPL. It will

remain so until the restructuring process has been finalised.

6.   Conclusion

In this article the FSHFETT initiative on RPL was outlined as a means to address the widening of access in the region. The progress reported covers the period 2002 to December 2003. Considerable progress has been made, but some challenges remain unresolved. These are mainly related to assessment and ways of getting all stakeholders (including academic staff) on board. The restructuring of the HE landscape is currently on top of the agenda at all institutions, making it all the more difficult to get other initiatives at regional level going.
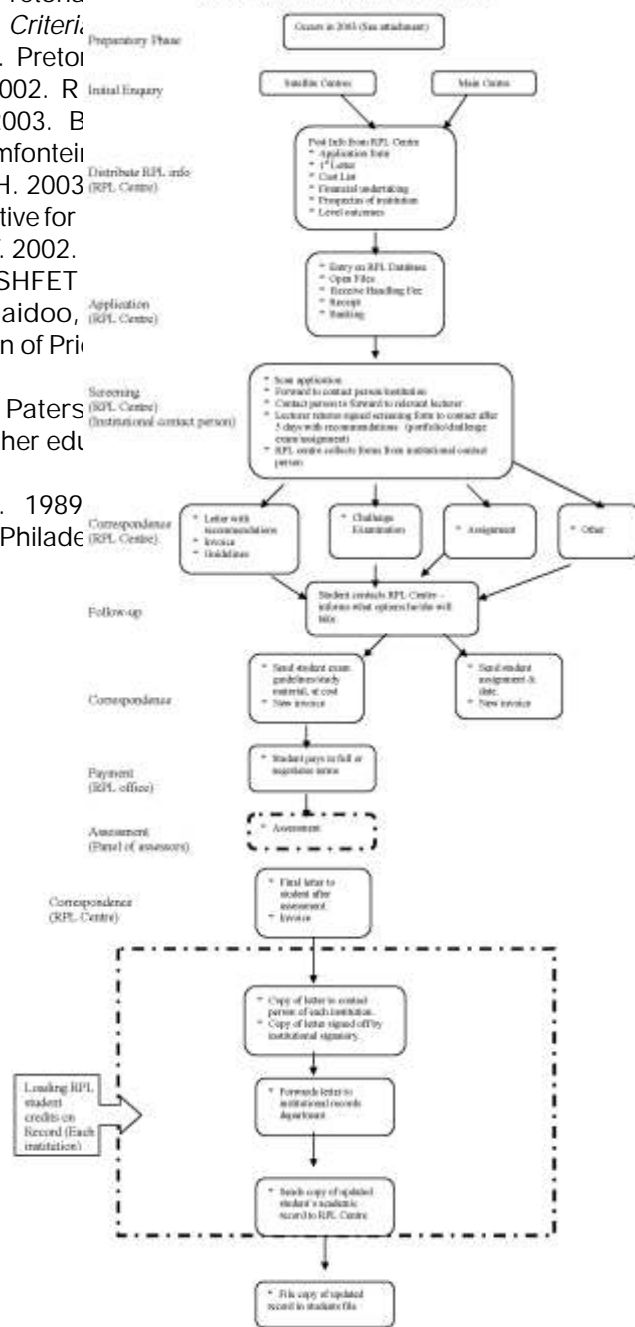
If the challenges could be met, the assumption that regional collaboration is a powerful means to implement RPL effectively and to maximise the use of scarce resources, is justified

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Free State RPL Process: STUDENT PATH

Free State RPL Process: ASSESSMENT