

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING VS TRADITIONAL ENTRANCE TO A NURSING PROGRAM

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Abstract

Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is one of several methods to measure the equivalence of access entry criteria into an educational program for mature adults. This study presents the reader with the results of a comparative analysis of the performance of students who accessed a basic nursing program through the process of recognition of prior learning (RPL) and those students who accessed the same program through the traditional routes of entry.

Aim

The overall aim was to establish a RPL program that could be implemented to allow students an alternative method of access to nursing programs.

Methods

Stufflebeam's Product evaluation was used to guide this phase of the research project. Two groups of samples were drawn, one from students who accessed the nursing programme through RPL and the others through the traditional route in each of the three Nursing Education Institutions in Kwa-Zulu Natal. The mean scores of the two groups were compared for significant differences using the Mann-Whitney U test.

Results

There were no significant differences in the performances between groups of candidates. Once in the basic nursing programs, the RPL candidates performed as well as the other candidates.

Conclusion

Mature adults who access educational programs via RPL are capable to perform at an equivalent level as those candidates who access educational programs via the traditional route.

Key words

Recognition of Prior Learning, traditional route of entrance, nursing programme, comparative analysis

Introduction

In nursing, the entry requirement is matriculation or equivalent. The development of a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) model was designed as a measure to determine equivalence for matriculation. The bridging program for nurses was thought of as a solution to historical problems in the education and training of nurses. Research into the effectiveness of

the bridging program revealed several problems. Some of these were the duplication of knowledge previously gained through experience, and extension of training since enrolled nurses had to start from the beginning (Khanyile, 2001). Furthermore, these programs were centralized and not readily accessible to all. The cost of training also made the bridging program unattractive even to those who required it.

Countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand have implemented RPL policies in their education system. Problems experienced in these countries were the issue that policy makers who planned the innovation differed in perceptions from those who implemented them (Wolf, 1996:14). Another problem was the slow outrole of the program due to the lack of assessor training (Thomas, 1989; Peruniak, 1993). Thomas (1989), Butterworths and Edwards (1993), Clark, Irvanistkaya and Goodwin (2000) identified the lack of funding and capacity as reasons why RPL was not successful in these countries.

Literature on the South African context of RPL revealed that RPL was inextricably bound into prevailing social relations of power and knowledge. Different sectors (labor, business and education) held differing views and approaches to RPL practices (McMillan, 1997; Harris, 1999).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study was to develop and test a RPL model for nurses in South Africa. Phase one dealt with the development of the RPL model (Khanyile, 2005a). Phase two dealt with implementation of the RPL model guidelines (Khanyile, 2005b). Phase three dealt with testing the model by comparing RPL candidates with other candidates from traditional programs is presented. Phase three will be discussed in this paper.

Aim and objective

The overall aim was to establish a RPL program that could be implemented to allow students an alternative method of access to nursing programs. The specific objective of phase three was to evaluate whether students who completed a RPL program were able to access and succeed in a basic nursing programme.

Research question

Is the academic performance of students who accessed a basic nursing programme via RPL comparable to those who entered the normal route?

Hypothesis

A null hypothesis made was that there would be no difference between the mean scores of tests written by the two groups of students.

Research design

The study adopted a multiphase decision-oriented evaluation research design. Product evaluation was used to compare the performance of the RPL candidates with that of the candidates that accessed the programme from the traditional route of entry. Product evaluation occurs during and after implementation of an intervention. Product evaluation provides information about whether the objectives of the study were achieved or not thus providing a basis for replication or recycling of the decisions (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998:270).

Validity and reliability

Validity and reliability of the study was ensured. All the students in both groups took the same tests. Content validity was ensured by testing only the theoretical knowledge covered by the lecturers. Well established valid and reliable assessment tools were used and all the test papers were moderated.

Ethical considerations

Permissions to conduct the study were sought from the regional director of Kwa-Zulu Natal Department of Health, the Acting Registrar of the South African Nursing Council and the principals of the three participating institutions. The research proposal was presented to the Senate of each of the three institutions for their approval. For the RPL students, it

was agreed that each institution would recruit and select students, and their registration was voluntary. The other students also gave consent to participate in the study. Only codes were used during data collection. The fact that the names of the three institutions that participated were not revealed was also in line with the ethical guidelines for research as described by Polit and Hungler (1991:354).

Data collection procedures

The coordinators from the three institutions kept accurate records of the students' performance. The main source of data was the results of their monthly assessments scores over a period of six months.

Data analysis

The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to determine the relationship between the two students' groups. The mean scores of the two groups were compared. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to determine the differences between the mean scores.

Results

A total of 110 students participated in the study. Twenty-seven students (24.5%) gained entrance via RPL and 83 students (75.5%) via the routine access route. Institution C had the highest proportion of RPL students (34.4% vs 65.6%), Institution B had 24.2% vs 75.8% and Institution A had 17.7% vs 82.3% (Table 1).

Table 1 Sample sizes from the three nursing education institutions

Access route	Institution A		Institution B		Institution C	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
RPL	8	17.7	8	24.2	11	34.4
Traditional	37	82.3	25	75.8	21	65.6
Total	45		33		32	

Three tests were done at each institution. No significant differences were found between the groups for test 1 and test 2. There was a trend that the RPL group did slightly better in test one at institution C (p=0.007). A significant difference was observed

between the RPL and the traditional students at test 3 at institution A and C. The mean score was also higher for RPL group at Institution B but did not reach a significant level (Table 2).

Table 2 Results from the three institutions

Test	Institution A Test scores			Institution B Test scores			Institution C Test scores		
	RPL	Trad.	P value	RPL	Trad.	P value	RPL	Trad.	P value
1	20.38	23.57	.532	15.94	17.34	.720	22.20	13.48	.007
2	27.38	22.05	.298	15.56	17.46	.628	20.05	14.64	.101
3	38.19	19.72	.000	18.06	16.66	.721	24.31	12.36	.000

Legend: Trad = Traditional route of entry RPL = RPL route of entry

Discussion of findings

The RPL candidates continued to perform as well as the traditional entrants. In fact, the RPL candidates performed significantly better than the traditional entrants in two of the tests. The following reasons may be attributed to the higher scores for the RPL group:

- The process of RPL, which encourages self-directedness, might have benefited the RPL candidates. The reflection process could have motivated the candidates to take control of their learning process.
- The RPL candidates were selected from a pool of nurses who had waited a long time for training, and therefore may have been more enthusiastic. Once in the programs this group (RPL) seized the long awaited opportunity for continuing education.
- The traditional entrants may have been over confident of themselves because they met the entrance criteria, and they became more relaxed than the RPL candidates.

The null hypothesis that there would be no difference between the two groups was rejected in favour of the RPL group. The positive results of the RPL candidates confirmed those from other studies done by Freers (1994), Pearson (2000) and Portier & Wagemans (1995). These authors conducted studies to evaluate the effectiveness of prior learning assessment to the students' progress and persistence in advanced programs. According to them, students from RPL programs progressed at a faster rate than those from traditional routes of entry.

Where are the RPL route candidates now?

A follow up was done to establish what happened to the RPL candidates after the project. Their progress was good from all three institutions. At institution A,

two dropped out due to personal reasons. The six remaining candidates were all practicing as professional nurses after passing their final examination in 2004. At institution B, all eight candidates wrote the SANC Bridging course examination and they obtained 100% pass rate. All eight continued their education and registered for the one-year diploma in Midwifery. They all were practicing as professional nurses during the follow up period. At institution C, two out of eleven failed their first year examination, the rest progressed and wrote their SANC Bridging course examination with 100% pass rate. They also continued their education and registered for the one year diploma in Midwifery. It is worth mentioning that at this institution, 50% of the total distinctions came from the RPL group.

Conclusion

Results of this study helped in refining and reshaping the developed RPL system. The ability of the RPL candidates to compare favourably with the other candidates from the traditional routes of entry meant that the main objective of the RPL model, that of access of mature adults was achieved.

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