UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN
POLICY ON RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING

Amended: August 2016

Introduction

The document comprises two sections.
- Section A contains a policy on Recognition of Prior Learning
- Section B expands upon Section A and provides additional information on critical issues relating to RPL.

SECTION A:

POLICY ON RECOGNITION OF PRIOR LEARNING (RPL)

Preamble

There is a commitment at UCT to redressing inequities and supporting lifelong learning through widening access to adult learners. This commitment is based on a belief that there are able people with valuable knowledge and experience in workplaces and communities who could benefit from university study. Historically, UCT admitted a number of students over time through making use of the discretionary power given to the Senate in terms of the Matriculation Board regulations to admit students who did not have matriculation endorsement, but were deemed to have the potential to succeed on the basis of an assessment of their prior learning and experience.

In 2004, UCT adopted a policy on Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in recognition of the fact that there were significant opportunities for expanding its use to enable access, in particular, into post-graduate programmes, articulation from other types of learning pathways, and continuing professional development programmes or short courses. This document seeks to update the 2004 policy in the context of the 2013 revised SAQA national policy on RPL, as well as the need to fine-tune procedures for RPL at UCT.

1.   Definition

In the university context, the recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the process of making visible, mediating, evaluating and acknowledging the knowledge and skills that a candidate has gained other than through formal study to enable them to gain access to higher education even though they don't meet the traditional entrance requirements. This includes knowledge gained as a result of

non-formal study, paid and unpaid work experience, community and organisational involvement, and individual inquiry. In the academic context, it is the acknowledgement that academically significant and socially useful knowledge is acquired through multiple formal, informal, and non-formal means. When evaluated through appropriate and reliable assessment practices, that knowledge can be used for purposes of academic access and accreditation. (For further information on varieties of RPL, and related epistemological issues which form part of the debate about RPL in higher education, see Section B).

2. Purposes of RPL

The SAQA 2013 revised national policy recognizes the different purposes and forms of RPL "in relation to different contexts and classifications of knowledge, skills, competencies, qualifications and part-qualifications in the national learning system" (SAQA, 2013, Clause 6d.p.3). Its defines RPL as "the principles and processes through which the prior knowledge and skills of a person are made visible, mediated and assessed for the purposes of alternative access and admission, recognition and certification, or further learning and development. (ibid. Clause 26.p.5)

In the university context, the purpose of RPL is:

- To facilitate access to higher education and provide redress for historical inequities.
- To recognise and, where appropriate, grant advanced standing for the expertise gained by skilled individuals in non-academic contexts.
- To contribute to the holistic assessment and self-assessment of people entering onto a learning path.
- To enrich the academy and the curriculum by facilitating dialogue across sites of knowledge and practice.
- To promote and facilitate lifelong learning.

3. Principles Governing RPL at UCT

- UCT is a broad institution with multiple forms and sites of academic practice. RPL practices for specific programmes must be context-sensitive and framed to suit those differing contexts where RPL is deemed appropriate
- The evaluation of prior learning is an academic task and, like other forms of assessment, is done by academic experts in a given field, drawing on other experts as needed. Academics decide on the most appropriate methods and approaches for the assessment of prior learning in their field.
- RPL is based on a developmental model, not a deficit model of adult learning; it builds on knowledge and skills that adults have already acquired.

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- RPL is part of UCT's broader commitment to be socially responsive to key social needs, and to significant constituencies in government and civil society. (See Section B: RPL and Curriculum Responsiveness).

4. Guidelines for RPL process

The assessment of RPL candidates and the decisions concerning their admission are the ultimate responsibility of the Deans in consultation with the heads of department to which they are applying, facilitated and supported by the expertise of staff within the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED).

RPL processes at UCT will typically be located in one of two sites, and will involve the following procedures:

4.1 RPL procedures where learners' choice of programme is clear :

- Each Faculty office should make provision for a staff member to take responsibility for processing RPL applications.
- Adult learners seeking alternative access to a specific programme of study will approach the Admissions office or the Faculty officer responsible for RPL who will then direct them to the appropriate programme leader.
- Programme leaders seeking guidance or assistance in developing an RPL assessment process can approach relevant staff in CHED for support.
- The outcome of the RPL process, including a written report by the assessor(s) detailing the basis on which the recommendation is made, will be forwarded to the Head of Department concerned. The Head of Department is responsible for ensuring that quality assurance requirements have been met. (See Section 8)
- The final decision regarding the admission of the RPL candidate to a particular programme of study will be made by the appropriate faculty committee or dean.
- Appeals concerning RPL results will be handled consistently with other forms of academic appeal. In cases in which RPL candidates appeal, the department or programme will provide written reasons for the decision and an explication of the inadequacies of the evidence of knowledge and skill.
- For the purposes of record-keeping and quality assurance records of applicants, decisions taken and copies of initial RPL assessment documents will be stored in the Faculty Offices. Annual reports on the number of people who applied, were assessed and admitted should be sent as part of the Faculty's Admissions Review to the Institutional Planning Department at the end of each year.

4.2   RPL procedures where learners' choices are not clear

Where potential RPL candidates are not clear as to what programme of study they wish to pursue, they should seek advice from responsible CHED staff who will advise them and refer them appropriately, either internally to a particular faculty or to another institution.

5.   RPL and Academic Support

RPL must be used in ways that allow students a reasonable chance of succeeding in their studies, sufficient academic support and appropriate and supportive pedagogical interactions. Provision of academic development opportunities should therefore be seen as a legitimate part of the RPL process. (See Section B)

Candidates who intend to register for a degree may register as an occasional student and/or for foundation courses in the formative disciplines in order to gain exposure to foundational academic literacy skills necessary for coping with the academic discipline. Ideally these students should be tutored by people with knowledge and experience of adult education and RPL.

6.   RPL and Staffing

6.1   Opportunities for Staff development and training

Programmes and departments developing RPL processes are responsible for ensuring that academic staff have access to appropriate training and professional development, where available. Departments are encouraged to make use of the CHED RPL staff development support and resources offered.

Administrative staff are often the point of first contact and the staff who help students negotiate the institution; they serve an important role in serving non-traditional students, including RPL candidates. Faculties should ensure that administrative staff involved in administering programmes with a significant number of adult learners have access to training (where available), designed to build their understanding of the needs of adult learners and RPL candidates.

6.2 Workload and Promotion Opportunities

Developing and engaging with RPL practices and processes should be recognised as an important and legitimate site of teaching practice and research. For academic staff who take the lead in such activities, RPL should be recognised as contributing towards their meeting teaching obligations and staff should be encouraged to publish research on their experiences.

7. RPL Assessment methodologies

RPL assessment methodologies include but are not limited to portfolios of evidence, interviews, demonstrations and simulations, observations, written and oral exams, letters of recommendation and other forms of expert testimony, case studies, and documentation of successful past learning experiences.

RPL assessment methodologies should be chosen based on their appropriateness to a particular context, learner, discipline, and programme. They may be chosen by the individual assessor or by those in the leadership of the programme in question. While the choice of methodologies is ultimately an academic function, UCT recognises the importance of learners' input into the decision-making process. The choice and use of a given set of RPL methodologies must be consistent with the UCT principles of assessment more generally.

RPL practices should meet key criteria for validating assessment practices, and in particular: transparency, fairness, legitimacy, attention to unintended negative consequences, and feasibility.

Faculties need to ensure that mature learners admitted through RPL are provided with the necessary support to acquire effective academic literacy in English, and to providing students with opportunities to use their home languages as a tool for learning, and to scaffold access to disciplinary discourses.

8. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in RPL is multi-levelled and multi-faceted:

- Academics who assess potential learners for RPL should design appropriate assessment methods that will allow judgements of past learning in relation to the outcomes of the particular course/programme.
- Preferably more than one academic should be involved in any one RPL process of assessment.
- Sufficient evidence should be collected to enable judgements of different kinds of skills and knowledge of the applicant in relation to the outcomes of the particular course in which the candidate is interested.
- The head of department should evaluate the recommendation of the lecturer/course coordinator by examining whether the motivation and the evidence provided justifies the evaluative judgement made by the lecturer.
- The head of department forwards the recommendation to the faculty admissions committee which then ratifies the decision.
- For the purposes of quality assurance, records of the bases of decision-making regarding RPL applicants must be kept by faculty offices.
- The faculty needs to ensure that there are mechanisms in place to provide educational counselling and advice to adult learners.

- A review of the quality management systems related to RPL needs to be incorporated into the scope of the Academic reviews where appropriate. This should include a focus on assessment methods, moderation, support for students, curriculum review, and staff development.
- An open and transparent appeals process, including the explicit detailing, when requested either by the applicant of by other structures within UCT, of reasons for any negative RPL outcome.
- Continuous review of procedures for RPL and success rates of students admitted via RPL should be conducted by faculties and annual reports submitted to the Institutional Planning Department.

9. Limitations on numbers of students admitted through RPL processes

A Council for Higher Education (CHE) guideline stipulates that the proportion of RPL students admitted to any programme should not exceed 10% of the total numbers on the programme. While respecting this guideline, UCT views it as important to take additional considerations into account:

- It is acknowledged that the presence of a sizeable number of students admitted via RPL into a programme will impact on the curriculum. However, this impact may be a positive one, particularly in the case of professionally oriented postgraduate programmes. Research at UCT shows that academic leaders of such programmes strongly value the workplace or professional experience of 'RPL' students, and regard it as enriching the curriculum.

- The presence of a sizable contingent of students admitted via RPL should not be viewed as 'lowering standards'. In fact, research on RPL (locally and internationally) shows that 'RPL' students often attain better academic results than the average. If the RPL assessment process is rigorous and appropriately done, this will ensure that the requirements for admission are met – albeit through an alternative process.

- Many 'RPL' students may need additional academic support. However it is increasingly recognized that a significant proportion of postgraduate students require writing, language and other forms of academic support, and thus the needs of 'RPL' students are no different in this regard.

RPL admissions may therefore exceed 10% of students admitted to a programme where:

- The programme has been designed for a target audience of working professionals/people, and the curriculum developed with them in mind;
- The curriculum of the programme in question will be enriched by the professional/work experiences of 'RPL' students;
- The RPL assessment follows the processes set out in 8 above and appropriate forms of academic support are in place.

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SECTION B:
CRITICAL ISSUES RELATING TO RPL

1.   Varieties of RPL

UCT recognises that different approaches to RPL are appropriate in different contexts, and that within UCT, programmatic and organisational contexts will play an important role in shaping the RPL process. The form that RPL assumes is also shaped by its purpose:

RPL for access recognises prior learning that has prepared a learner to enter an academic programme for which he or she does not have the conventional entry requirements.   In addition to the assessment of academic readiness and the identification of academic developmental needs, RPL includes recognition of the content knowledge the learner has gained in the area of study for which he or she seeks admission. In the short term, RPL will likely be used most often for access purposes.

RPL for exemption recognises that a learner has sufficiently mastered the content of sections of a course of study through prior formal, informal, or non-formal means and therefore will exempt those sections of the course of study and replace them with an equivalent number of alternatives.

RPL for advanced standing recognises that a learner has sufficiently mastered the content of sections of a course of study through prior formal, informal, or non-formal means and therefore grants formal recognition for that knowledge. In most cases, this form of RPL will be used for the purposes of admission to a post-graduate degree.

RPL for lateral movement recognises that many forms of academic knowledge and skill are portable and relevant across disciplines and that qualifications in one area may, with appropriate interventions, serve as entry into study in another.

2.   Further details on principles of RPL

- UCT is a broad institution with multiple forms and sites of academic practice. RPL practices for specific programmes must be context-sensitive and framed appropriately to those differing contexts.
- If RPL is to be a vehicle for bringing students into UCT who will be successful in their studies, this requires that appropriate academic support be available, and that pedagogical practice and curriculum must recognise diverse backgrounds and ways of knowing
- The evaluation of prior learning is an academic task and, like other forms of assessment, is done by academic experts in a given field, drawing on other experts as needed.
- The revisiting of prior learning on the part of learners is a learning experience in itself. Given appropriate academic contextualisation

and institutional structure, in the future RPL may form part of an accredited academic programme of study.

- The knowledge and skills reflected in successful applications for RPL contribute to the fund of human knowledge and thus inform and enrich the curricular, pedagogical, and critical practices of the academy.
- RPL is based on a developmental model, not a deficit model of adult learning. It aligns with existing UCT practices for opening access to tertiary study through alternative means and builds on the knowledge and skills adults have already acquired.
- In general, RPL activities will combine assessment of prior learning with the exploration of the relationship between academic and other cultures of learning and between formal and informal knowledge domains, and will typically be linked to the creation of plan for future learning.
- RPL assessment methodologies vary within academic contexts and will be chosen based on their appropriateness to a given learner, circumstance, or field of study.
- RPL is part of UCT's broader commitment to be socially responsive to key social needs, and to significant constituencies in government and civil society.

3. RPL and the Curriculum

3.1 The Epistemological Challenge of RPL

UCT recognises that knowledge is created, organised, and utilised differently across disparate sites of practice and that negotiating the relationship between them is one of the challenges of RPL. The relationship between academic curriculum and professional practice differs across programmes and disciplines, as does the mix of theoretical study, application, and interface with the broader society. RPL provides the occasion to interrogate curriculum, test epistemological and pedagogical assumptions, and recognise both the foundational principles and changing face of academic inquiry.

In the university context, RPL is premised on the expectation that adults acquire and, indeed, create knowledge through a variety of formal, informal and non-formal learning experiences. Adult learners especially need an environment in which their prior learning can be respected, a space to explore and articulate that prior learning, an opportunity to explore the relationship between their prior learning and academic ways of knowing and guidance in developing an appropriate plan for future learning.

In RPL procedures in the university context, the assessment of knowledge, including prior learning, remains the domain of academics with expertise in a given field. Admissions decisions are made by faculty managers in consultation with appropriate academic staff, but guiding learners through the exploration of their own learning and the relationship of that learning to academic knowledge and discourse is an academic function. Academics will also take the lead in

exploring the pedagogical and curricular possibilities opened by and through RPL, and in leading the epistemological debates that arise therefrom.

3.2   RPL and Curriculum Responsiveness

RPL participates in the on-going interaction between the academy and civil society. It recognises that this interaction contributes both to the university's knowledge-creation role, as well as its role of service to the broader community. RPL is an aspect of UCT's commitment to equity and redress and reflects its openness to a range of different forms of pedagogy and assessment. RPL recognises that the relationship between academic knowledge and the knowledge created in other sites of practice changes with disciplinary context or field of study, and can be the subject of healthy contestation.

3.3   RPL and Curricular Change

RPL processes that bring experienced adults into the academy provide the opportunity for mutual exchange across forms of expertise. Where appropriate, and depending on the disciplinary context or field of study, faculties and programmes may chose to create curricula tailored to such learners to accommodate and empower RPL learners whose self-worth may have been undermined in the past. Such curriculum-development provides the opportunity to revisit curricular structures and pedagogical practices created with school-leavers in mind and takes account of learning that has occurred in a variety of contexts. The academic exploration of current knowledge in the field that RPL invites contributions, in turn, to the development of interdisciplinary and innovative programmes and research.

3.4   RPL as a Learning Process

Like other forms of assessment, RPL has a diagnostic and evaluative function. However, UCT recognises that self-assessment and articulation of one's prior learning, the creation of a learning pathway, and the exploration of the relationship between experiential and academic learning is itself a learning experience. Where appropriate, faculties and programmes will develop credit- or non-credit-bearing modules in which such assessment, self-assessment, and educational planning can take place. Even when not credit-bearing, such modules are more than assessment exercises but rather provide the opportunity to interrogate past learning experiences and explore the meanings of and possibilities for new learning.

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4.   RPL and Student Support

UCT is committed to the academic, intellectual and professional development of its student body, to the support mechanisms necessary for student success, and to the defensible use of resources as reflected in rates of through-put. RPL does not, therefore, exist in a vacuum. RPL mechanisms across the university must be embedded in broader structures of student support. These include a holistic assessment of learners' current levels of academic readiness; provision of appropriate opportunities for academic development (including language development), where needed; and support for portfolio-development and educational planning/advising.

Whatever their content knowledge of the field in question, learners applying for alternative access to higher education come from a variety of educational, professional and organisational backgrounds. Their preparation for academic work may be strong, they may have professional or organisational skills that quickly adapt themselves to academic contexts, or there may be a distinct gap between their content knowledge and their ability to express and utilise that knowledge in academic terms.

Evaluation of academic readiness and a plan for the academic development of such learners is therefore a legitimate part of the process of access. Such assessments, which seek to identify gaps in learners' academic preparedness, however, are not RPL as such. Rather, RPL mechanisms to assess and recognise the achievement of knowledge and skill are used along with assessments of academic readiness to develop viable learning pathways.

5.   RPL and Academic roles

RPL affords academic staff the opportunity to develop their competence in the following roles:

➢ *Educational support/academic development:* UCT recognizes that RPL is not only an assessment exercise, but also involves – to a greater or lesser degree – educational support to enable the RPL applicant to translate his/her prior learning into a form that is recognizable in the academic context.
➢ *Assessment:* It is a fundamental principle of RPL in the university context that assessments of prior learning are done by academics with expertise in the area being assessed. Assessors are thus drawn from the university ranks and from equally qualified colleagues in the field.
➢ *Advising:* Helping learners to explore and articulate their prior learning, become oriented to academic modes of communication and inquiry, and design learning pathways is an academic function.
➢ *Programme Coordination*: RPL is recognised as a site for programme development, curricular transformation, and innovations in learning and teaching.
➢ *Research*: RPL processes of assessment, development of academic readiness and curriculum transformation and innovation provide rich

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potential sites of academic research, and contribute to intellectual enquiry in the field of Higher Education development.