

Competencies and the Recognition of Prior Learning: Bridging the Divide

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Abstract

This essay shares some information on a recognition of prior learning (RPL) project that focused on RPL for access and RPL for advanced standing processes for postgraduate-level qualifications — especially the Master of Business Administration (MBA). To design an RPL process that will ensure access for success, the team involved considered conceptualization of what *competency* means as it impacts directly on RPL processes. Taking several views on “competence” into consideration, it became clear that the debates on competencies in higher education are polarized. This essay explores these contestations associated with the first South African National Qualifications Framework (NQF) of 1995 compared to the second NQF of 2008 (NQF Act 67 of 2008, 2009), and how they impact RPL practices. The essay takes the reader through power struggles and the notion of neoliberalism; arguments related to the supremacy of cognitive skills versus the importance of vocational practice; and changes made to the second NQF as a response to academic critique on the initial NQF. This essay provides information on an RPL project in higher education whereby both cognitive knowledge and practical knowledge are incorporated into the assessment process. The third space model (Naude, 2013) was applied using the heuristic assessment process. This model yielded promising results.

Introduction

The relationship between competencies and recognition of prior learning (RPL) is an interesting one. Both concepts enter an arena with intriguing contestations and a complex interplay. When one engages in an RPL activity, one needs to be aware of these intricacies to find a way forward. When The RPL Hub, a company established to assist universities with RPL, engaged in an RPL process to provide access and advanced standing, we took these contestations into consideration.

We had to ensure that all involved, both dedicated Monash South Africa (MSA) staff and staff from The RPL Hub had the same understanding of RPL processes and the competencies that would be assessed for access to postgraduate studies, especially to the MBA. The first step was to interrogate the National Qualifications Framework within which RPL would be conducted as it determines the nature of competency and RPL processes to be followed.

The National Qualifications Framework (NQF)

The NQF is defined as the classification, registration, publication, and articulation of quality-assured qualifications. The purpose of the NQF is to create a single integrated national framework that facilitates access, mobility, and pathways for further development. The South African NQF is described as a social construct to provide education to all its citizens on an equal basis (NQF Act 67 of 2008, 2009). As such, it was also viewed as a pedagogic device to emphasize the communicative role, which informs the broader public of lifelong learning opportunities (Bolton & Kevy, 2012).

But the NQF also generated power struggles. These contestations did not focus primarily on attempts to clarify the overall purposes of the NQF. The major conflict was about the role that the

South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) played in its design and development.

The first act that gave birth to the NQF was the SAQA Act of 1995. As the NQF was nonexistent, SAQA was established to design and develop the NQF. Although this approach was necessary as a first step, the SAQA Act of 1995 evoked debates resulting in a review of the NQF by the Department of Education. The result was a second NQF based on the new legislation — the NQF Act of 2008 (NQF Act 67 of 2008, 2009).

The question is: How did these developments impact the understanding of competencies and the RPL process that could be followed?

It was important to investigate the meaning of the term *competency*. The use of the term *competency* is mostly associated with competency-based training (CBT) and NQFs. CBT could be described as an approach to vocational and occupational training that emphasizes what a person can do, which is measured against competencies such as knowledge, skills, and values required for a specific occupation. CBT promotes the idea that competencies should be expressed in the form of outcome statements of a qualification (Parker & Walters, 2008), indicating what learners should know and be able to do. Even though the outcome statements sought to integrate theory and practice, this approach was contested from an academic perspective. The perceived danger was that competencies might be understood from a training perspective only. A policy decision was made in the mid-1990s to rather use the term “outcomes-based education” to ensure a more holistic and constructivist view of learning that would not reduce the assessment of competence to only that which can be observed. Rather, it would include the consciousness and conscience of the learner. This change in terminology steered away from competency within a training environment to competency within an academic environment. This shift made RPL processes more acceptable in an education setting (Parker & Walters, 2008). However, the all-inclusive decision did not succeed in protecting the NQF of 1995 from criticism and a heavy debate on competencies.

These debates could be summarized from two points of view: One side of the debate on competencies comes from those who define competency as: “the ability to do something well or effectively, correspondence with the demands for a job: the ability to perform specific work functions” (The European Training Foundation, 1997, as cited in Makulova et al., 2015, p. 183). Another side of the debate defines competency as “a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities formed in the process of learning of a particular discipline, as well as the ability to perform any activity on the basis of the acquired knowledge, skills, abilities” (Azimov et al., 2009, as cited in Makulova et al., 2015, p. 184). Competency could refer to the job requirements, or it could refer to knowledge as associated with a particular discipline. The divide between competencies associated with the workplace and competencies associated with a particular discipline has a profound impact on RPL practices that needs to be considered carefully. A further consideration was that the sensitivity around this divide applies specifically to higher education and not to the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) college sector.

In South Africa, the TVET sector refers to *competence* as job and workplace activities following the CBT approach to competencies. Accordingly, the main purpose of the TVET colleges is to “train young school leavers, providing them with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for employment in the labor market” (DHET, 2013, p. 11). The Minister of Higher Education and Training indicated that “emphasis will be given to strengthening partnerships with employers. ... Such partnerships will assist the colleges to locate opportunities for work-integrated learning, to place students when they complete their studies, and to obtain regular workplace exposure for staff ...” (p. xii). Employers and experts in industry should be provided the opportunity to teach in TVET colleges. The transformation of the post-school sector in South Africa is primarily driven by a skills development imperative to meet the needs of a growing labor market (Maringe & Osman, 2016). The direct link between competence and the economy, workplaces,

and income-generating opportunities is not a topic of debate within the TVET college sector. It is, in fact, the intended role of TVET colleges. Within this sector, and without further debate, RPL could be implemented with a focus on workplace knowledge. This is not the case in higher education.

The Struggle for Power Around Competencies in Higher Education in South Africa

The contestations on the role that competencies play in higher education in South Africa focused mainly on the first NQF under the SAQA Act of 1995 (NQF Act 67 of 2008, 2009). We will discuss two major critiques of the first NQF, as these impact directly on RPL practices — namely the struggle for power to define knowledge, and the effects of neoliberalism on the role of higher education.

Who Defines Legitimate Knowledge?

In the critique by Allais et al. (2009) on the first NQF, the authors emphasized that the outcomes-based model approach was intended to challenge the role that established academic institutions have in creating knowledge. This view is not isolated, as it represents the perspective of some academics in higher education. As such, Allais et al.'s ideas reflect the traditional or institutional model in which the professions and education providers have considerable autonomy and control over curriculum and qualifications. In this model, qualifications are knowledge domain-based and embedded in institutions of higher learning. Trust is established between the institution and the society as a community of practice, an intrinsic condition for the existence of knowledge (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As such, a community of practice sets strong disciplinary boundaries within which competency is defined and understood. Gibbons et al. (1994) argued that, historically, knowledge is presented as fixed and, once codified, becomes the familiar and traditional disciplinary knowledge upon which most academic institutions depend.

In addition to their perception that knowledge is always generated within strong boundaries, Young and Allais (2011) clarified the position taken by those who critiqued the NQF under the SAQA Act of 1995. According to the authors, these critics argued that under this act, outcomes-based qualifications were created in an attempt to shift power from educational institutions and move it to the structure of SAQA. In effect, academic players felt ostracized from academic development; they assumed that they should have the power to determine both knowledge and competencies.

What does this mean for RPL practices? This traditional view of knowledge and who has the power over knowledge production had two beliefs: 1) that only disciplinary knowledge generated within a community of practice is acceptable as valid knowledge; and (2) that RPL-valid knowledge must be generated within the boundaries of the discipline and not by spaces and/or places of work as promoted from a lifelong learning perspective (Naudé, 2011).

This raises the question: If you assess knowledge of an RPL candidate, which knowledge counts and is viewed as valid? Knowledge generated by institutions of higher learning only, or knowledge generated outside institutions of higher learning?

The argument against competencies and knowledge-generation outside the community of practice was not the only stumbling block toward an RPL process.

Neoliberalism

A second argument against the system created by the SAQA Act of 1995 is about neoliberalism with its focus on the economy, human capital, and development of the “knowledge worker.” Cribb and Gewirtz (2012, as cited in Patrick, 2013) claimed that universities “have now become ‘hollowed out,’ lacking any ‘distinctive social role and no ethical *raison d’être*” (p. 3). Educational institutions have become part of a social reality with an economic value system that objectifies knowledge to the level of the argument: “the more credentials possessed in the shape of

certificates and degrees, the more marketable the individual” (Patrick, 2013, p. 3). According to King et al. (2002), this economic value system is determined by globalization, which is driven by neoliberalism in education. In support of this argument, Allais (2003) implied that neoliberalism in education takes away the opportunity for learners to be introduced to “powerful knowledge,” which will enable them to grow beyond their experience and be ready for further development. The intention is to argue that disciplinary knowledge has value that goes beyond the economic value of knowledge.

This raises another question: Does this critical perspective exclude the validity of knowledge gained outside the academy generated in the workplace?

Responding to These Critiques

The RPL Hub and MSA considered whether there were arguments that could counter the community of practice/disciplined-based knowledge-only perspective. We consulted researchers such as Knud Illeris, Michael Gibbons, and Basil Bernstein. Illeris (2003) suggested that the traditional view of learning cannot be upheld anymore and is insufficient. That is, learning is no longer the acquisition of knowledge contained in a curriculum or summarized in a syllabus. Competencies should include general skills and personal qualities. In his Mode 2 knowledge model, Gibbons et al. (1994) emphasized the permeability of disciplinary boundaries and accentuated the role of experiential knowledge within knowledge generation. Bernstein (1971) added an important concept, “horizontal discourse.” He argued that disciplinary knowledge is more complex; it is “integrated code curricula,” where boundaries are less insulated, and content is more dialogic with other subjects. Furthermore, Hartig et al. (2008) expressed the view that the goals of education in modern societies can no longer be described by a fixed set of specialized knowledge and skills that is transferred from one generation to the next. Knowledge must apply to different, new, and complex situations, contexts, and new real-life situations (Hartig et al., 2008). Thus, the either/or between academic and workplace learning arguments are inadequate once we acknowledge the reality of people’s lives today and the intricacies of their learning.

Given these responses and this context, new questions arise in relationship to RPL practices: Can workplace learning be viewed as valid horizontal discourse? Does this knowledge gained in a workplace setting have validity within an academic context? If the answers are “yes,” how can such competencies and knowledge be recognized?

A New NQF System

To answer these questions, the development of the NQF under the new NQF Act 67 of 2008 needs to be considered. The NQF Act shifted the initial power of SAQA to three quality councils, each responsible for its own sector: The Council on Higher Education (CHE), Umalusi (TVET), and Quality Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) (NQF Act 67 of 2008, 2009, p. 16). This change in approach means that the power of SAQA to develop qualification standards and competencies nationally now belongs to these three quality councils.

In terms of the higher education sector, the CHE implemented a qualifications framework subsystem, which prescribes types of qualifications associated with NQF levels 5-10 (higher certificate up to doctorate), each with its own purpose and characteristics. The typology of qualifications indicated a mix of vocational/industry/professional-related contents as well as disciplinary-focused qualifications. Some qualifications may include vocational/industry/professional-related contents, such as the advanced diploma and bachelor’s degree (NQF level 7); the post-graduate diploma (NQF level 8), and the master’s degrees (NQF level 9) (CHE, 2013). Apart from the CHE’s descriptors for each qualification, SAQA also developed level descriptors for each of the 10 levels of the NQF. This is an important tool to be used to determine and assess competencies associated with each NQF level.

The critique of the first NQF was mostly resolved by the CHE. The CHE allows institutions to design their own qualifications and stipulate associated outcomes and competencies. The power to decide which knowledge should be developed and disseminated is in the hands of institutions and academics within the framework the CHE has set for qualifications (CHE, 2004). This change could be described as a move away from “standardization” to “differentiation,” and away from an up-front, design-down and prescriptive approach to standards-setting to a practice-based, design-up, and descriptive approach (Parker & Walters, 2008).

But these changes did not fully address the critiques of the first NQF. The Higher Education Qualifications Sub-Framework (CHE, 2013) requires that to be academic, higher education qualifications must provide pathways and meet the needs of the labor market, vocational and professional needs, and employability. Also clearly stated in the criteria for accreditation is that learning program outcomes should meet national and/or regional labor market, knowledge, or other sociocultural needs (CHE, 2004). In this sense, the CHE criteria incorporate the neoliberal approach to education.

But what do these compromises mean for RPL practices?

In its RPL policy, the CHE (2016) described important views on knowledge gained through work experience:

- RPL is “the process through which non-formal and/or informal learning are measured, evaluated and ‘translated’ into their perceived formal equivalents for recognition across different contexts” (p. 6).
- “RPL will require close consideration of the associated epistemologies and specifically of the differentiation between experiential and academic knowledge, and hence of the areas and levels to which RPL can appropriately be applied” (p. 7).
- “Assessment criteria for RPL should not simply replicate those for mainstream study but should seek to accommodate the knowledge and skills gained in practices outside the higher education institution in terms of their value for the envisaged course of study” (p. 9).

Through its criteria for qualification design as well as its RPL policy, the CHE supports the view that both disciplinary knowledge and knowledge gained through work experiences (informal and nonformal) are valid knowledge. At this point, an important question is: How are institutions of higher learning responding to the CHE criteria?

The MBA (Master of Business Administration) Example

The RPL project with MSA focused on the MBA. A snapshot of a few MBA entry requirements was taken as a unit of analysis.

The criteria for access to an MBA reveals that:

- Institution A: The criteria for students following the academic route are less stringent than that for RPL candidates. First, academic route students only need three years of experience in management while RPL candidates require 10 years of experience with a minimum of five years in management. This discrepancy between three years for academic students and at least five years in management for RPL candidates suggests that disciplinary knowledge is favored at the cost of knowledge gained through experience. In addition, a test is required for RPL candidates that includes numeric, verbal, and inductive reasoning skills. This test will pose a challenge to most of the students. If these skills are important for MBA studies, they should apply to academic students as well.
- Institution B: To qualify as an RPL candidate, a student must be at least 40 years of age with 15 to 20 years of experience. The age requirement to be an RPL candidate is a limitation to other RPL candidates who meet all the requirements other than this age restriction.
- Institution C: The RPL process does not take into consideration knowledge gained by informal or nonformal means; only knowledge that has been assessed and credited previously at

another institution. This practice is a formal credit accumulation and transfer process, not an RPL practice as such. The emphasis is on disciplinary knowledge only.

Due to the small sample size, only a limited conclusion can be drawn. Some higher education institutions do make provision for RPL practices and recognize knowledge gained through work experiences; however, this is not true of all higher education institutions. Some still focus on disciplinary knowledge only and others create significant barriers to its recognition. Taken as a whole, these examples continue to signal a distrust in RPL practices and knowledge generated outside higher education institutions.

Polarized views on competencies still exist, which pose the question: Is there evidence that knowledge gained through experience and workplace engagement is valid and contributes to academic and disciplinary activities? Can a model be developed that bridges the divide that historically exists?

RPL Practices — Bridging the Divide

The RPL Hub implemented RPL practices in cooperation with MSA, a private higher education institution under the auspices of Monash University in Australia. From the onset of this cooperative agreement in 2016, MSA established an RPL office and accepted that RPL would be performed by a panel consisting of academics in relevant graduate-level learning programs. Although RPL practices were implemented for a range of postgraduate diplomas, this discussion focuses specifically on RPL in the MBA.

The MSA MBA is a flexible program designed to meet the needs of working adults wishing to advance their careers in business. Students can enroll at any time during a year; subjects are offered in five-week modules, completed one at a time. The program includes nine compulsory and one elective module, and a practical innovation project.

The Progress of the RPL Students

The progress made by successful RPL students was measured on February 14, 2019 (Lees, 2019). A cross-sectional approach was taken as the MBA program runs continuously module-by-module with the flexible joining of modules as it fits the student’s needs. This flexibility influences the progress made by students toward completion.

Total applicants to the MBA studies	Total number admitted into RPL process	Students who discontinued studies	Students who entered into the RPL process
69	50	1	49

Of the 69 candidates who applied for the MBA RPL process, a total of 19 candidates did not continue with the process due to financial and other academic reasons. One candidate discontinued their MBA study for unknown reasons. Six candidates were unsuccessful in the RPL process and were reverted to the postgraduate diploma.

RPL candidates for the MBA	Reverted to Postgraduate Diploma	Discontinued due to financial reasons	Discontinued for unknown reasons	Completed some modules successfully
69	6	19	1	43

The following four examples are illustrative of the types of qualifications and work experiences obtained by the RPL candidates considered for entrance into the MBA program:

Qualifications	Experience	Knowledge displayed	Advanced standing
Honors Bachelor of Accounting Science (BCompt)	A total of 19 years' experience in well-known financial institutions	Financial director and chartered accountant	Allowed into MBA
Diploma in management and professional designation	More than 10 years' experience in top management level	National manager	Allowed into MBA
Grade 12 (last year of schooling)	A total of 20+ years' experience in top management nationally and internationally	Vast knowledge of all aspects of management, but lacks academic experience	Allowed into postgraduate diploma in management
Diploma in management	Ten years' experience as guest-house manager	Limited knowledge of management and lack of reflection on management issues	Not allowed into MBA.

The range of these examples indicates how important the RPL panel considers the entrance requirements to the MBA. After all, RPL is not about setting candidates up for failure, but about access for success. For this reason, the RPL method to assess competencies becomes crucial.

RPL Method to Assess Competencies

The RPL method used by The RPL Hub at MSA was described in articles published in the *International Journal of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning* (Naudé, 2011; Naudé, 2013) and *PLAIO* (Naudé, 2016). The third space RPL model was developed based on Engeström's activity theory (Naudé, 2013). The third space is described as the middle ground where the RPL practitioner mediates the translation of workplace knowledge into academic knowledge and vice versa. The third space is needed to ensure that the candidate may be able to translate knowledge gained in the workplace in terms of academic requirements.

To complement the model, the heuristic assessment method was used (Naudé, 2016). The heuristic assessment model focuses on discovering the candidate's knowledge through questioning, listening, and helping to decode and integrate workplace and academic language. The combination of the third space model and heuristic assessment proved to be successful in alleviating the knowledge divide and recognizing both forms of knowledge: disciplinary, as well as knowledge gained in the workplace. This method may be comparable to the "Trojan horse model" of Judy Harris (Harris, 1999). Harris described the Trojan horse model as closing the gap between RPL practices and mainstream curricula. This approach seeks "to build bridges two-ways, to work towards a 'more equal and dialectical relationship between disciplinary knowledge (theory) and experiential knowledge (practice)'" (Usher & Johnston, 1996, as cited in Harris, 1999, p. 135).

The focus of the heuristic assessment was on discovering knowledge through work experience

to assess whether a candidate has gained competencies associated with NQF level 8 to enter the MBA (NQF level 9). As in the Trojan horse model, heuristic assessment assesses both ways: academic knowledge and reflection on knowledge gained in the workplace. It takes into consideration that candidates at senior management positions in organizations have completed formal training up to a certain level, and importantly, have broadened this knowledge within a context of work experience as managers — working within a learning organization environment (Senge, 1990) — an aspect of workplace knowledge that needs to be further researched.

The heuristic assessment focused primarily on the following academic skills gained:

- Disciplinary knowledge gained through previous formal studies.
- Knowledge gained through work experiences in a learning organization context.
- The ability to do research and communicate academically.
- Skills such as problem-solving, analysis, synthesis, and presentation of knowledge.
- The ability to source and manage information.
- Time management and accountability skills.

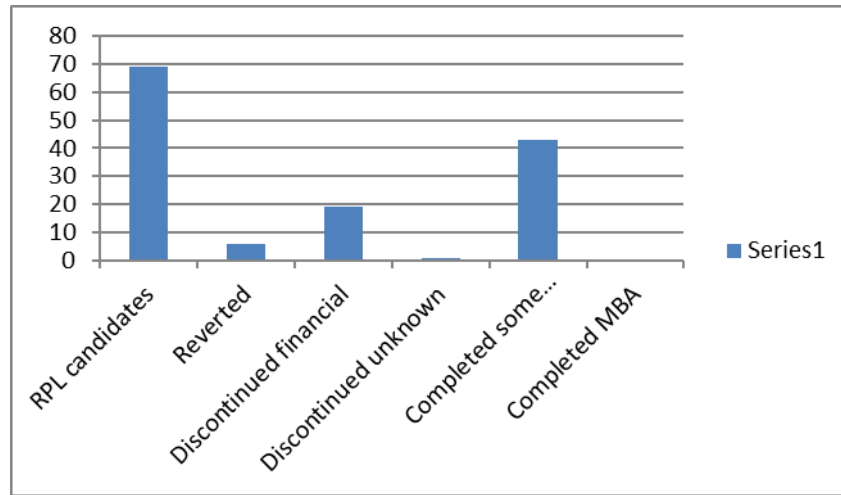
After qualifying for the RPL option, the RPL candidates went through an orientation conducted by The RPL Hub to prepare them for the RPL process in terms of the procedures to follow, evidence to submit and assessment tool that will be used, and responses to any questions candidates may have, including academic or knowledge requirements. The assessment tool consists of information from the NQF level descriptors and the entrance requirements toward the relevant qualification depending on whether the candidate is seeking access or advanced standing. RPL for access considers entrance requirements and readiness (potential) to complete a qualification successfully. RPL for advanced standing considers whether a candidate who does not hold the required qualification has already gained knowledge and skills associated with the entrance-level qualification.

To ascertain readiness for access or advanced standing toward the MBA (NQF level 9), the RPL process bridges the gap between workplace and academic knowledge. The process (third space) ensures that the discussion on competencies previously gained is reported as part of academic discourse — using academic language appropriate to NQF level 8. This is a crucial aspect of the RPL process, as the candidates have the opportunity to demonstrate their reflections on knowledge gained through research projects and other practices in the workplace where candidates engaged with management issues. The RPL process uses a process of “mediation” to help students make connections between their workplace experiences and academic and theoretical knowledge. This practice of mediation is based on the third-generation activity theory of Engeström (1999), which promotes the idea that knowledge creation is a result of networks of interactions with other activity systems (Olvitt, 2010, as cited in Bolton & Keevy, 2012) beyond any individual’s experience. In terms of RPL practices, this means that knowledge gained informally and nonformally can interact with formal knowledge when mediated. The RPL practitioner mediates bridging the divide between academic and workplace knowledge during the orientation session. An element of mediation can also be part of the panel discussion.

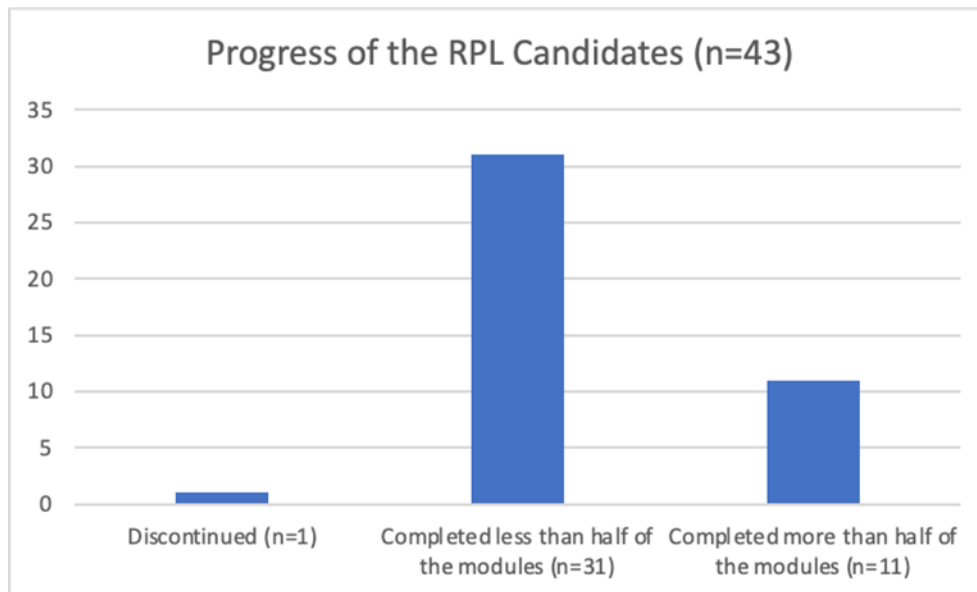
Following the orientation session, an RPL panel assessed candidates using the RPL tool developed for the MBA. This process is academic, and candidates are subjected to questions and discussions on competencies gained through formal, informal, and nonformal means. One of the surprises of this process is that the academics on the RPL panel were of the opinion that candidates with senior managerial experience could add value to the study of management, even enriching the curriculum with their insights into management practices and problem-solving. One of the important insights gained through this process is that organizations are indeed learning organizations (Senge, 1990) where not only procedural knowledge is developed but also knowledge gained through reflecting on practices and solving of problems. This is an aspect that could be investigated further to provide more detail on these contributions.

Following this procedure to mediate knowledge gained and prepare candidates for the RPL assessment, the question is: How successful is this RPL method?

Taking **all** candidates (n=69) who applied for admission to the MBA into consideration, the successful engagement of candidates (n=43) translates into a rate of 62%:



As of February 2019, the initial pull of the data, the engagement rate of RPL candidates who have completed some modules is 98% of those who continued with their studies. Only one candidate of the 43 RPL participants discontinued the study (2%), while 31 completed less than half of the modules successfully (72%) and 11 completed more than half of the modules successfully (25%). At the time of writing this article, six RPL candidates have completed the full MBA — some with distinction, within a two-year period. The other candidates continue to make progress in the program.



The success of RPL candidates in completing modules is remarkable considering their profile: working adults with vast workplace experience attending part time and studying after work hours and/or on weekends. The candidates work in the following fields: banking and finance, information technology, and engineering — employment in both the public and private sectors. Overall, the candidates displayed a solid understanding of their managerial environment, some with vast international managerial experience at top management levels. These preliminary results show that knowledge gained in the workplace can be sufficient to support learners within

an academic setting.

RPL practices as described here provide an example of an RPL model that has shown an engagement rate that looks promising, considering that, at least in 2019, candidates were still in the process of completing the MBA. To make more definitive conclusions about this process, follow-up research on outcomes since this study is required to trace the RPL candidates who have earned the MBA.

Closing Remarks

The South African NQF Act 67 of 2008 (2009) attempted to resolve the power struggle between disciplinary and workplace knowledge (vocational and professional). Still, the NQF Act 67 is not yet fully implemented by higher education institutions; that is, some institutions continue to prefer the disciplinary route at the cost of RPL practices and employability — signaling a continuation of the power struggle.

We also need to acknowledge that any attempts to hold onto power and determine which knowledge counts (either through national structures or by means of institutional autonomy) must be viewed as relative to the assumptions we make about knowledge and to the structures we design to support those assumptions. If we really examine how knowledge from different sources is interconnected, we necessarily challenge the siloed perspectives from the workplace and the academy. The inclusion of RPL into our programs provides the opportunity to examine our assumptions and bridge the divides. Indeed, we need all insights that a variety of knowledge types could provide — disciplinary as well as informal and nonformal knowledge — to enrich our lives and to assist us in making this world a better place to live in.

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