The WIO-COMPAS Program: RPL in Action

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Abstract

The Western Indian Ocean Certification of Marine Protected Area Professionals (WIO-COMPAS) program is the first of its kind internationally, for the protected areas community. It provides an example of an approach to recognition of prior learning (RPL) that works in its own context and serves its own professionals. This article explores five aspects of RPL and links these to the WIO-COMPAS approach including barriers, assessment instruments and the role of assessors. Two main lessons are that RPL models need to grow organically within specific contexts and not be imposed with a generic theoretical approach; and the recognition of the critical importance of the fundamental assessment principles as demonstrated by the rigor and the richness of this model. The WIO-COMPAS certification program has developed into a sound, rigorous and respected RPL model for protected area professionals. WIO-COMPAS can claim with considerable justification that it truly illustrates RPL that works.

Keywords: Marine Protected Areas, Certification, RPL, WIO-COMPAS, Competence-based, Professional

Introduction

Recognition of prior learning (RPL) has been accepted as one of the guiding principles behind many competency-based development programs and national qualifications frameworks (NQF), including the South African NQF (Boahin, Eggink, & Hofman, 2014). However, its implementation has been fraught with difficulties, many of which arise from the reluctance of institutions and employers to accept different forms of knowledge generated in different contexts as having equivalent value.

Heyns (2004) traced the development of different approaches to RPL and their conceptual underpinnings. The "competence-based model" for the recognition of prior learning, was described as "the ability of the individual to perform certain job tasks or roles to a pre-defined standard" (Butterworth, 1992, p. 41). This type of RPL was criticized both because of the tendency to assess fragmented narrow tasks and miss the genuine overall competence, and for not engaging with the contested nature of knowledge.

Gipps (1994) outlined some of the problems with norm- and criterion-referenced assessment, citing Shorrocks et al.: "A careful path needs to be found between the extremes of vague and nebulous criteria on the one hand, and a proliferation of detailed and trivial objectives on the other. The essence seems to lie in formulating measurable criteria which have educational aims and specifications" (p. 93). Gipps argued for carefully designed standards-referenced assessment, which, if made transparent, "can help pupils to become self-monitoring learners" (p. 94).

Heyns (2004) summarized the situation in South Africa in 1994, saying, "the two most prominent models for the assessment and recognition of prior learning seem to be most likely to empower the already empowered; i.e., those learners who have had sufficient exposure to discipline-based learning, in addition to experience, to engage with an RPL process" (p. 32).

For RPL to be useful, certificates issued as the result of RPL processes have to be acceptable to the relevant stakeholders and role-players. The Western Indian Ocean Certification of Marine Protected Area Professionals (WIO-COMPAS)[1] program provides an example of a model that works in its own context, serves its own professionals and meets its own purposes. One of the initial challenges was that there was no real precedent upon which to draw (it is the first program of its kind for protected area professionals anywhere in the world), and the development of the program was an essentially iterative and pragmatic process. Although it is not offered as a model that is generally replicable in other contexts, it is one from which a considerable amount can be learned. Perhaps the main learning is that RPL models need to grow organically within specific contexts, and not be imposed in line with a particular generic theoretical approach. Another lesson may be the recognition of the critical importance of the fundamental assessment principles as demonstrated by the rigor and the richness of this model.

Wolf (1995) pointed out that competence-based assessment is most appropriate for vocational or professional work and for assessing practical skills (p. 129). Harris (1999) proposed a more flexible model: The Trojan-horse approach calls for "an enquiry into the social construction of knowledge and curricula" in ways in which both experiential knowledge and discipline-based knowledge move closer together (and complement) each other (p. 135).

Formal education communities in South Africa and elsewhere struggle to understand and accept the value of experiential learning and knowledge generated in the workplace. It is viewed with some suspicion, the concept that the South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) referred to as RPL seeking to "recognise non-formal and experiential learning for itself rather than attempting to articulate and match such knowledge and learning with knowledge prevalent in the receiving institution"(SAIDE, 2002, p. 6).

This constantly contested terrain of knowledge production, its value and transferability is less problematic in the context of the WIO-COMPAS program, which aims primarily at the recognition of successful participants within their own community of practice. In so doing, it addresses many of the tensions evident in the discourse around RPL, simply by taking a broad, pragmatic approach to the understanding of professional and occupational competence and how to assess it, irrespective of how the competence was developed. The WIO-COMPAS qualifications need recognition from governments and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and like some other international professional qualifications, their value is derived from the graduates of the system, who demonstrate their worth so impressively that they become sought-after recruits and employees.

Background to WIO-COMPAS

The WIO-COMPAS program is a voluntary certification program for professionals working on and for marine protected areas (MPAs) in the Western Indian Ocean region, comprised of eight countries from South Africa up to Kenya and the offshore island countries. Three levels of certification are awarded based on job roles rather than titles (Level 1: Marine Field Operations, Level 2: Site Management, and Level 3: Policy and Planning). There is no sequence to these levels and one could get certified at multiple levels based on their previous work performance. The assessment process does not include a required course, though there are courses that have aligned their curriculum with the competences. Rather, the WIO-COMPAS program assesses and certifies protected area professionals based on previous work performance and knowledge. It is the first

program of its type to be applied in the field of protected area management, and includes a number of innovative features that set it apart from other professional certification programs.

WIO-COMPAS was originally conceptualized at the turn of the century by the Coastal Resources Center (CRC) of the University of Rhode Island and the Western Indian Ocean Marine Science Association (WIOMSA) in 2005 with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). This competence-based certification program provides the MPA community with clarity of core competences, a rigorous assessment system to identify those who have achieved a minimum standard of performance, professional networking, and motivation through recognition for continued excellence in a profession that often lacks incentives for good performance. After four years of development and stakeholder-building, the first certification "event" occurred in Kenya in 2008. Developed out of a strong shared understanding of what was appropriate for the field and for the professionals working with MPAs, the program has come to be recognized as meeting the essential requirements for the rigorous assessment of professional competence, in particular those associated with the idea of recognition of prior learning.

RPL was never articulated during the development and implementation phases of the program, and the connection was only made, in any formal sense, when the WIO-COMPAS assessment system was reviewed by assessment specialists. The subsequent report stated:

> The current … assessment process has been developed in a manner that reflects best practice in assessment, ensuring that candidates are only accepted once they have a good chance of success, and that each candidate is given optimum opportunities to demonstrate competence in whatever way suits his or her individual strengths. The certification process serves the needs of the sector, where it is essential to recognize professionals at all levels who can meet the prescribed minimum standards without necessarily having undergone extensive formal higher education. (King & Pahad as cited in Sisitka, Ricci, & Squillante, 2013, p. 23)

While suggesting some refinements in relation to quality assurance, the program was cited as a strong working model of RPL.

This article provides a unique focus on tailoring a certification program within the African context, while exploring five aspects of RPL and links these to the WIO-COMPAS model:
• overcoming barriers to RPL
• the main purpose of the RPL assessment in a specific context
• giving value to experiential and work-based learning
• providing opportunities to demonstrate competence in different ways
• the broader RPL process and its role in personal and professional development.

Barriers to the Implementation of RPL
While RPL in South Africa and elsewhere is enshrined in legislation and acknowledged as a valid process for ensuring that, in particular, previously marginalized and disadvantaged people can receive due recognition of their skills and understandings, there remain considerable barriers to its broad implementation. Despite the differences in contexts and practice, the barriers to recognition of nonformal and informal learning seem to be the same in many countries and systems. Some of these were identified by Werquin (2008) in a paper looking at the countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). These include: differing stakeholder perceptions; doubts about the value of assessment and qualifications based on nonformal and experiential learning; debates about appropriate assessment methodologies; concerns about standards, how these are set, by whom and how they are valued, especially in relation to formal education

standards; acceptability/take-up – because of the skepticism in some quarters outlined earlier, relatively low numbers of people being prepared to undergo such recognition processes; and cost – the need for quite individualized treatment has led to relatively high costs for each assessment.

Deller, Coetsee and Beekman (2008a) described another challenge: "The findings of the literature (theoretical) review suggested that the current theoretical frameworks used to guide RPL are biased towards RPL in the formal academic context, and that these frameworks are inadequate to inform RPL in the workplace" (p. 1). And "... one of the main reasons for this widespread rejection of RPL in favor of traditional classroom training is simply that the RPL models available do not cater for the needs of the working adult in a typical working environment" (2008b, p. 1.).

Giving credit to someone for experiential learning for part(s) or all of a formal program is practically impossible unless the program is based on the achievement of clearly defined occupational or professional competence, not on academic performance in an academic context, which is precisely what many RPL candidates lack.

The learning world outside formal institutions – work, mentoring, apprenticeship, adult education, distance education and gap-fill courses, for example – is more compatible with the implementation of RPL than the world of formal education. The WIO-COMPAS model is a good example of RPL in a context where it can achieve its purpose and serve its sector, including individual candidates, without being overwhelmed by these barriers.

The main barrier remaining for WIO-COMPAS is the cost per unit of implementation.

The WIO-COMPAS certification process is extremely intensive, requiring the input of a number of highly skilled people. Each event can only manage a maximum of 12 candidates, requiring three assessors, a moderator and a facilitator. In addition, there are usually guest speakers. Such events can be very costly, relative to the often underfunded natural resources community, and the financial cost is one of the major constraints to this model of assessment. The costs are exacerbated by the geographical spread of MPA professionals (MPA PROs) in the WIO region and the high costs of travel. However, through prudent management, the costs of the assessment events are kept very much in line with what would be expected for a professional training program of similar duration.

Although recognition of the program is gaining ground in the field (indeed, interest has been expressed by other regions in Africa and globally, as well as by the leading International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN]), there is still some resistance by conservation agencies to invest in certification as an essential part of professional development.

To date, it has proved difficult to persuade the employer organizations to meet the full costs of their employees' candidatures, and the majority of these costs have been met by "bursaries" paid out of donor funding. Employer organizations do, however, provide major contributions in kind, providing venues for certification events, often with accommodation and catering at reduced rates. This has enabled more certification events to be held.

The Main Purpose of the RPL Assessment in a Specific Context
RPL is fundamentally the recognition of the skills, knowledge and capabilities currently held by a person, regardless of how, when and where the learning occurred. The learning may have been acquired through any

combination of formal or informal training and education, work experience, community engagement or general life experience.

The South African Qualifications Authority expanded on the purposes of RPL in 2002, as follows:
- **Personal development** and/or certification of current skills without progression into a learning program, if the candidate so chooses;
- **Progression into a learning program**, using RPL to fast-track progression through the learning program;
- **Promotion**; and
- Career or **job change**. (SAQA, 2002, p. 13)

In the WIO-COMPAS context, the primary purpose of the assessment for the candidates is to achieve certification. The MPA PROs who receive the certification for the level achieved may simply want professional recognition for their own personal satisfaction, or to strengthen their position on their career path if they have previously not achieved the expected levels of qualification via the formal route. They may also hope to benefit in terms of access to further studies, or to enhance their job prospects and marketability.

In its recent RPL policy document, SAQA (2013) stressed that "credit is awarded for knowledge and skills acquired through experience and not for experience alone" (p. 6).

It could be argued that the WIO-COMPAS experience illustrates the value of the SAIDE team proposition quoted in the introduction. The purpose of RPL can be simply what it says: the recognition of prior learning which can be demonstrated through the evidence provided.

RPL: Giving Value to Experiential and Work-Based Learning

RPL applies to the recognition of all learning, whether acquired formally, nonformally or informally. The latter two learning contexts, which may include, for example, self-study as well as knowledge and skills developed through activity in the community, with family or at work, are poorly recognized by formal educational assessment processes; but these are the main ways many people develop their knowledge and abilities, especially those relating to their work (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich, & Hoffman, 2006).

Peer Ederer (2007) presented to the Qualifications Africa Conference a set of graphs illustrating the development of human capital, measuring the impact of periods in life where learning took place principally through parents, schools, tertiary education, adult education and the workplace. His research on blue collar workers versus managerial workers distinguished between black and white South Africans and those with and without university education. All results except those of blue collar workers demonstrated that the greatest impact on the acquisition of knowledge and skills, by far, was through on-the-job learning. And yet this learning is not formally recorded, recognized or certified. WIO-COMPAS is one initiative that can provide that key recognition.

Although the recognition of different forms of knowledge is contested throughout the world, the inclusive nature of RPL can have a particularly transformative impact in the context of WIO-COMPAS in post-Colonial countries. Indigenous knowledge and experience-based abilities that fall outside a typical Western curriculum have long been ignored or undervalued in formal education institutions (Morgan, 2003; Semali, 1999). Focusing on what is needed to perform effectively extracts the WIO-COMPAS program from any danger of contamination from the prevailing academic assumptions and the colonial bias that is often embedded in institutional approaches to curriculum and assessment.

Giving Value to Experiential Learning in the WIO-COMPAS Context

The WIO-COMPAS approach, perhaps because it did not start from a specific theoretical standpoint, has always been to focus on the competences. For WIO-COMPAS, the critical test is whether there is evidence to show that the required skills and understandings have been developed and are being applied. The standards are therefore based on, and indicators of, the levels of competence required; and the learning processes through which the competences have been developed are essentially immaterial to the assessment. The link to learning is re-established by the competences, which provide a clear framework and standards for the development of appropriate training and mentoring processes. **The learning is therefore informed by the competences, not the other way round.**

The WIO-COMPAS approach is also firmly workplace-focused, with the competences (see WIO-COMPAS, 2016a) being those that are required in the workplace, with much of the evidence for these competences coming out of workplace activities, being produced in the workplace. Additionally, wherever possible, the certification (assessment) events, especially for Levels 1 (Marine Field Operations) and 2 (Site Management), are conducted within the workplace context, namely at MPAs.

With this approach, the WIO-COMPAS program is accessible, especially at Level 1, to professionals with no formal training, and often little education, but all the experience necessary to develop their competence. This is one of the founding principles of RPL and has always been at the forefront of the thinking about the program. This is reinforced by the decision to offer certification at Level 1 in all local languages of the region. This strong focus on workplace competences has informed every stage of the program development, and has resulted in an RPL model that is entirely relevant to the MPA workplaces and at the higher levels of government and conservation organizations.

Identification of Competences

Identification of the required competences therefore became the most urgent and critical task in the program development. Everything else – assessment instruments, tools and processes – would all need to be appropriate for assessing these competences.

It was recognized very early on that the competences needed to be of two kinds, namely those concerned with knowledge or understanding, and those concerned with practical abilities or skills (except for the Leadership competences, which were considered important but of a different, more elusive, nature). It was also recognized that some competences could be considered more critical than others, and some form of "weighting" would be needed to differentiate between these. Furthermore, there were different levels at which these competences would be required, and again, these needed to be clearly articulated.

There was strong consensus that the initial focus should be on Level 2: Site Management, "… designed for the professional who is performing management, supervisory and administrative functions and responsibilities" (WIO-COMPAS, 2016b, Level 2 section, para. 1). In essence, this was meant for professionals with direct responsibility for managing individual MPAs, or substantial parts of MPAs, although it was agreed not to tie the levels to any specific job titles. The Level 2 competences were identified through initially creating the "competence areas," the main areas of understanding and activity that were considered essential for a Level 2 professional to perform their work effectively.

Initially, six competence areas (CAs) were identified, and while these have been subject to a few minor changes over time, they remain essentially the same. The main change was the addition of a seventh CA, relating to Leadership. Initially, it was believed that evidence of leadership could be drawn from the evidence

for other competences, but it soon became apparent that a distinct competence area was required to assess this adequately.

The current competence area (CA) titles (applied to all three levels of certification) are:
- CA1 - MPA Governance (including Policy, Strategy, Legislation and Compliance) – 8 Level 2 competences
- CA2 - Marine Conservation: MPAs and Other Approaches – 8 Level 2 competences
- CA3 - Communication and Stakeholder Engagement (including networking, liaison, advocacy, negotiation) – 10 Level 2 competences
- CA4 - Human and Financial Resources Mobilization and Management – 5 Level 2 competences
- CA5 - Management Implementation and Effectiveness – 21 Level 2 competences
- CA6 - Biophysical and Socio-Economic Context – 13 Level 2 competences
- CA7 - Leadership, Ethics and Innovation – 4 competences (all levels) (WIO-COMPAS, 2016a).

There are a total of 41 competence standards at Level 1, 69 competence standards at Level 2, and 56 competence standards at Level 3 (Policy and Planning). As an example of the breakdown of competences, for Level 2 there are 35 "understanding" competences (see Levels of Understanding section, below) and 30 "ability" competences. Both the CAs and the competences themselves were identified through a profound consultative process involving people with a range of different perspectives on MPAs, from those with direct experience of protected area and MPA management, to marine scientists and academics. One of the critical factors was the need to ensure that the number of competences was manageable in terms of their assessment, while also ensuring that they covered the requirements adequately. Each competence was further defined through "range statements" providing further guidance on the scope of understanding or ability required.

Levels of Understanding; Scoring and Weighting
With the identification of the two main types of competences came the recognition that, while the skill required to perform a task should be at a universally high level, there were differences in the levels of understanding required for different kinds of knowledge. Moreover, these would be different at each certification level. It was therefore decided that "understanding" should be defined at three different levels:
- BASIC – general recognition (able to cite examples)
- SOUND – detailed understanding and how to apply to their own place, context
- THOROUGH – comprehensive understanding and how it can be applied in diverse contexts.

Although this differentiation introduced a certain level of complexity into the assessment, it also provided a gradation of required understandings through the three certification levels.

Central to the assessment process is the notion of "scoring" the evidence for each competence. The competences therefore need to have a maximum score allocated, depending on their importance. Agreement was reached relatively early on that this weighting must not be too complex, and it was decided to have just two weightings: four (4) points for the most critical competences; and two (2) points for the less critical competences. All competences except the Leadership competences are weighted in this way, with the latter, at Level 2, being weighted eight (8), in recognition of their particular importance, and the fact that there are only four competences in this critical CA.

Providing opportunities to demonstrate competence in different ways
For an RPL assessment to be fair, reliable and valid it must be designed so that it is independent of any particular learning program or course, or indeed of any particular mode of learning, experiential or otherwise. Also it is essential to include a range of different opportunities for the demonstration of different competences.

Candidates may have achieved their competence through a variety of routes, and so reliance on only one kind of assessment instrument could result in disadvantaging certain candidates.

This is particularly the case at Level 1, where MPA staff are not required to produce sophisticated documents, and where their communication is mostly in the form of verbal exchanges, mainly in the local language. They are also observed and questioned in relation to a range of practical tasks, such as preparing a vessel for launching, and conducting patrols.

From the very outset of the WIO-COMPAS assessment development, it was recognized that the instruments used for scoring the competences must be appropriate for the field, for the nature of the competences being assessed, and for the level of assessment. There must also be a variety of instruments at each level.

Assessment Instruments
After considerable iteration, the instruments currently employed at each level are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparing Assessment Instruments across 3 Levels of Certification.

	Level 1: Marine Field Operations	Level 2: Site Management	Level 3: Strategy, Policy & Planning
APPLICATION & REVIEW PROCESS	Matching Experience to Seven Competence Areas, Entrance Requirements, Motivation Statement, CV		
PORTFOLIO	Hard Copy		Electronic Copy
CASES & PRESENTATIONS	Core Activities Document	Workplace Case Study	Key Activity Document
FEEDBACK	One Hour With Assessor		
TEST	Beach And Boat Patrol Scenario; Quiz	Written Test	None
INTERVIEW	Face-to-Face Interview With An Assessor		Panel Interview With All Assessors

The instruments employed at the different levels provide opportunities for candidates to demonstrate their competence in a variety of ways:
- through written evidence: core activities, case study and key activity documents; portfolios (all levels); quiz and written test (only Levels 1 and 2)
- through oral evidence: presentations, interviews (all levels)
- through demonstration: beach and boat patrols (only Level 1).

This variety of instruments is not only designed to provide maximum opportunity for candidates at all levels to show their competence, but is also in recognition of the different types of work activity in which candidates are engaged at the different levels.

There is a clear gradation in terms of the levels and types of documentation required at the three levels, with only fairly basic documents, such as patrol reports, simple budgets and work plans required at Level 1; management plans and media communications at Level 2; and sophisticated strategic planning and high-level conceptual documents at Level 3.

The order in which the assessment instruments are applied is quite deliberate, culminating in the interview, which is tailored to suit each candidate's needs in terms of evidence still required for certain competences.

The Assessment Process
The assessment and moderation processes have developed iteratively, responding to the needs at any particular time, and learning from experience. Each of the certification events has involved a team of assessors with a "lead assessor" who has a guidance and moderation function. At Levels 1 and 2, each assessor is assigned up to four candidates, as experience has shown that this is the maximum number any assessor can deal with at the level of intensity required by the process, the multiple instruments employed and the complexity of the scoring system. At Level 3, working with candidates at the top of their profession, it was agreed that the assessors would collaborate and work together with all candidates as a panel.

The process involves an initial technical screening by the secretariat, to see that the application forms and supporting documents have been adequately prepared. Those who pass this screening are assigned to assessors for full review. This review may involve contacting applicants for clarification in areas where the assessor is uncertain as to the applicants' strengths. Applicants not accepted as candidates are always provided with professional development advice to strengthen the areas where they appear to lack experience, and are encouraged to reapply. The door is never closed.

At Levels 1 and 2, the assessors start to develop their relationships with the candidates early in the process, often when reviewing the applications, and then supporting the selected candidates in the preparation of their case studies (or equivalent) and portfolios, prior to the assessment event. They then work with their group of candidates through the event. The assessors consult with each other regularly throughout the event, and all final recommendations for certification, pending or re-application are agreed upon collectively. The lead assessor, as moderator, ensures consistency between the assessments being conducted by each assessor. At Level 3, the panel reviews portfolios, observes the presentations of the key activity documents (having each read the written documents individually), and conducts the interviews together. The moderator is part of the panel, and ensures that the processes are correctly followed and are fair for all candidates.

It is important to note that the assessment team only makes recommendations and all decisions regarding certification are made by the Certification Board, based on these recommendations.

Language of Assessment
For assessment to be fair and equitable for all candidates, it is essential that the language of assessment is the language in which the candidates conduct the majority of their work. In recognition of this, and of the linguistic complexities in the WIO region, a language policy was established that differs according to the three levels:
•   Level 1 – English, official language of the country concerned, or relevant local language

- Level 2 – English, or official language of the country concerned
- Level 3 - English (as international language of discourse on marine conservation).

Accumulative Scoring

The basic scoring tools comprise record sheets for each of the instruments. On these, using the list of competences with the range statements and examples for guidance, the assessors score the evidence presented through each instrument against the relevant competences. They determine what contribution to the overall requirement for each competence each piece of evidence represents. The principle of the scoring system is therefore that it is accumulative, enabling candidates to provide evidence through a range of instruments, with each piece of further (new) evidence relating to any competence adding to the scoring of that competence, until the full weighted score is achieved.

Certification

Certification requires a score of 70 percent or more overall, with 60 percent or more in each competence area. When one of these requirements is not quite achieved, the candidate is informed that certification is "pending," and that additional evidence of competence in specified areas may be submitted within 12 months. Those candidates who score less than 60 percent may reapply. The door therefore remains open. Further, unsuccessful candidates are encouraged to undertake the required professional development, including seeking opportunities to gain the necessary experience, before reapplying.

The certification process itself is essentially the same for all levels. The administrative and logistical management of the program is the responsibility of the WIO-COMPAS secretariat, housed at WIOMSA. After considering the recommendations from the assessors and the moderator's report, the Certification Board, comprising WIOMSA and CRC representatives, makes its decisions and certificates are issued. An appeals process is available for candidates who feel their assessment was not conducted fairly, or who have other concerns about the process.

The broader RPL process and its role in personal and professional development

There are many ways in which professional development is fostered through the WIO-COMPAS program, but this paper focuses only on those elements which have a clear link to what is generally understood as the RPL process.

WIO-COMPAS Assessors as Facilitators of Professional Development

In the WIO-COMPAS program, it was recognized from the outset that assessors need to have a profound "tacit knowledge" of the field of MPA management, with at least one in each team having professional assessment expertise. Assessors have therefore been drawn largely from the fields of MPA management and marine science, with additional input from experts in the fields of training and assessment.

Once again, the process for identification, training and appointment of assessors has developed iteratively, with the recognition that the best assessors, particularly at Levels 1 and 2, are those MPA PROs who have themselves been certified at Levels 2 and 3. These professionals have experienced the process themselves and therefore have a very good understanding of what applicants and candidates go through and how the whole process works. Potential new assessors are identified from the ranks of these MPA PROs, and inducted into the role by experienced colleagues.

It is emphasized that the assessment process is extremely rigorous throughout, from the screening and review of the applications to the conduct of the certification events. Candidates are often surprised by the

levels of rigor with which all instruments are used, and the pressure they feel to provide evidence. In their post-assessment evaluations, the majority of candidates consider the rigor to be "just right." A few claim it is "too rigorous"' but none suggest that it is "not rigorous enough."

In some of the program's components, the assessor plays a supportive educational role, similar to an RPL advisor or a workplace mentor. For example, when the applicants are required to complete a self-assessment against the competences as part of the application form, they should be able to see where they can provide proof of competence, and where they cannot. However, few applicants are accurate in their self-assessment, so the assessor plays a guiding role in this step. Self-reflection is one of many personal development skills that is often gained gradually throughout the assessment process (Andersson, Fejes, & Sandberg, 2013).

Areas where there is insufficient evidence of competence may be identified during the WIO-COMPAS assessment process. Weaknesses may often be addressed outside formal educational institutions. RPL candidates may be advised to address gaps in their work experience, or deepen their understanding of a particular aspect of their work by self-study, or by working in a different context or under the guidance of an experienced mentor, or by seeking an exchange visit to another site. Professional development advice is provided for all candidates, not only applicants who are not selected as candidates and those whose certification is "pending," as even the strongest have areas where they could develop further. In these cases, the assessor (perhaps helped by the moderator and some of their WIO-COMPAS colleagues) acts as a kind of unofficial RPL advisor.

The Impact of the Process on the Sector as a Whole
This paper also provides a brief summary of the impact of the program on the Marine Protected Area professionals in the region, and on the management of the region's MPAs. This is critical in terms of evaluating the success of WIO-COMPAS, since these were the main reasons for developing the program in the first place.

The WIO-COMPAS competences have been used to inform professional development courses. They have been used to frame the two major MPA management training processes in the region, and the development of an in-house training program for Kenya Wildlife Service Rangers. They will continue to be used to influence other related training in the region and beyond.

The competences are also increasingly used by professionals in the field, and by their organizations, to identify professional development needs. Such a process is not yet strongly embedded in the field, but as organizations start to use the certification and the associated competences as requirements for the recruitment of MPA personnel, this will develop.

Responses of Certified MPA PROs
At present, seeking certification through WIO-COMPAS is entirely a voluntary undertaking by MPA PROs in the region, and they are invited to apply for whichever level of certification they consider appropriate for their experience. There is no obligation on the part of employers or government for professionals to achieve certification, and the standards have been set by the program itself. However, several conservation agencies in the region with responsibilities for MPA management are considering making certification a requirement for employment at certain levels. There is also growing recognition that the competences, as defined by the program, have set valuable benchmarks by which to assess potential employees, and established a framework for training and other professional development activities. The competences are therefore slowly being adopted as the standards for the profession, and there is little indication of any impulse to change either the competences or the assessment methods used, as both are recognized for their rigor and relevance by the

conservation agencies.

The people who understand the process best and who are most supportive of the certification program are the successful candidates themselves. In 2012, an impact assessment was conducted to look at how MPA PROs view the influence of the program on their own careers and on the field in general (Fielding, 2012). The main outcomes are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2. Impact of the Program on MPA PROs

Outcomes	% L1 MPA PROs			% L2 MPA PROs	
Improved success rate with job applications	5			14	
Becoming more confident in execution of duties	95			79	
Improved MPA management capabilities	89			64	
Being promoted or assigned greater responsibilities	42			29	
Improved ability to network	To some extent - 47		Greatly 53	To some extent – 57	Greatly 43
Being useful in defining career path	Quite useful 11		Very useful 89	Quite useful 7	Very useful 93
The value of setting of standards for professionals	Not at all 5	Quite useful 11	Very useful 84	Quite useful 29	Very useful 71
Establishing specific goals to achieve	To some extent - 21		Greatly 79	To some extent – 21	Greatly 79

*To the question: "Do you feel that the WIO-COMPAS certification program has impacted on the conservation of marine biodiversity and the social issues and complexities of conservation in your area of operation?" **89 percent** of Level 1 PROs and **93 percent** of Level 2 PROs claimed that it had impacted, to some extent or greatly … the indication is that the great majority of MPA PROs believe that the program has had a positive impact on marine conservation.*

Other evidence points to certification increasing levels of motivation among MPA PROs, who, in turn, encourage others to seek certification. Thus, the program has remained faithful to the original concept as envisaged by the CRC and WIOMSA, and is clearly strengthening professional capacity for the management of MPAs.

Conclusion

The WIO-COMPAS certification program, although not born out of any formal theoretical assessment framework, and not informed by any extant RPL models, has developed reflexively and iteratively into a sound, rigorous and respected RPL model for MPA PROs. It incorporates all the essential features of an RPL process, with its greatest strength being its foundation in the real competences needed for effective functioning in the workplace. A further strength lies in the tacit knowledge of the field held by all assessors, and their deep understanding of the realities of MPA management in the Western Indian Ocean region. It is an intensive process, requiring high levels of capacity to implement, and not inconsiderable financial support. However, it is clearly developing a cohort of highly motivated professionals, who in turn are motivating colleagues to

undergo certification as a powerful professional development process. At present, WIO-COMPAS can claim with considerable justification that it truly illustrates RPL that works.

Note

1   For more information about the WIO-COMPAS program, go to http://www.wio-compas.org.

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