Recognition of Prior Learning: Exploring the 'knowledge question'

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Abstract

This article addresses the 'knowledge question' in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) in relation to postgraduate programmes. In contrast to many traditional theorisations of RPL which draw largely on adult and experiential learning theory, the article starts from a position of knowledge differentiation and explores whether the nature of the discipline or knowledge domain offers affordances or barriers to RPL.

In an interview survey, academics in a South African higher education institution were asked their views on the feasibility of RPL in relation to postgraduate study in their discipline. Data analysis draws primarily on concepts from Bernstein (2000) to identify different forms of knowledge and the ways in which that knowledge might be transformed and formulated as curricula. Findings suggest that the disciplinary context or knowledge domain into which an RPL candidate is seeking access does play a role in determining the feasibility of RPL. However, distinct organizational environments offer affordances and barriers to the implementation of RPL and there is also significant room for the exercise of pedagogic agency.

It follows that RPL cannot be reducible to 'one size fits all' but needs to assume different forms in diverse institutional and disciplinary settings. RPL for access to postgraduate study in a university will vary according to the purpose and design of the programme to which the candidate is seeking access. This supports a position that RPL should be seen as a specialised pedagogical practice that provides tools for navigating access to new learning opportunities across diverse contexts.

Introduction

This article explores the 'knowledge question' in the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). It poses the question: To what extent does the nature of the disciplinary or knowledge domain into which RPL candidates seek access determine the feasibility of RPL?[1] It starts from an assumption of the differentiation of knowledge, in other words that while knowledge gained from life and work experience may be as valuable as formal, academic knowledge; these two forms of knowledge are not the same. A corollary of this is that experiential knowledge does not necessarily or automatically provide an adequate basis for access into academic study.

The article critically explores the role of knowledge in RPL via a case study of one higher education institution in South Africa. In South Africa, RPL carries particular significance. It is regarded as not only crucial for skills development and lifelong learning in the context of the global 'knowledge economy', but is also seen as contributing to social justice through its potential to widen access to learning opportunities for those previously denied them under

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[1] It draws on a conference paper presented to the 7th International Researching Work and Learning Conference (Cooper and Harris 2011).

apartheid. The university in this case study, along with all higher education institutions in South Africa, has a policy in place which allows for RPL access into both undergraduate and postgraduate study.

Literature suggests that access via RPL into higher education has been limited[2]. This seems to be true not only of South Africa: Harris, Breier and Wihak (2011: 4) report that internationally, RPL practice lags behind policy and there is low over-all take up, despite policy commitments and funding availability. Why has RPL 'not fulfilled its promise as a fast-tracking assessment device' (Ralphs 2009)? Is there simply a lack of political will or are there deeper, epistemological constraints?

In order to address these questions, the article examines the findings of an interview survey of academics drawn from a range of disciplines across the university to gauge their views on the feasibility of access via RPL, specifically in relation to postgraduate study where programmes engage with advanced bodies of knowledge in diverse and highly specialised fields. This survey forms part of a wider research project, 'RPL as Specialised Pedagogy', which aims to explore the terms and conditions under which RPL could act as a more effective strategy for widening access and for going to scale. The research has four sites, one of which is the focus of this paper - RPL access into postgraduate programmes at a research-oriented South African university[3].

Postgraduate programmes with a professional or vocational orientation were selected as the focus for this study for a number of reasons. First, they are seen as important in the context of South Africa's skills development needs (Kraak 2004). There are also strong equity reasons for developing continuing education opportunities for those South Africans who, because of historical disadvantage, were not able to acquire a first/foundation degree, but who have significant workplace or professional experience.

In the institution under consideration, RPL has been conducted on a relatively small scale and the majority of successful applicants have been to postgraduate, professional programmes. The RPL literature (e.g. Harris 2000; Breier and Burness 2003) points to the fact that RPL is frequently more common and more successful at this level because the curricular focus is on contextualized knowledge and skills closer to the point of application than is the case in undergraduate study. Previous research at this particular university however (Peters 2000; Harris 2004; Michelson 2004) underscored academics' reluctance to engage with RPL and the barriers that exist for RPL candidates in an epistemologically conservative institution that prides itself on being a 'world-class', research-oriented university in Africa. All the above factors make this a particularly challenging site for a knowledge-oriented investigation.

Review of the literature and theoretical debates

Starting from an assumption of the differentiation of knowledge means that RPL practitioners need to provide appropriate pedagogic support for candidates to navigate their way into different

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[2] Although as Breier (2011) notes, there has been an absence of recent large-scale studies to audit the exact nature and extent of implementation.

[3] The other sites are: RPL for access to undergraduate study; a work-integrated model of RPL for employees seeking a qualification in business studies, and RPL at a trade union college linked to a university.

academic discourses. This position stands in contrast to traditional theorisations of RPL which draw largely on adult and experiential learning theory (Andersson and Harris 2006). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle is often central, where experience and reflection on experience are theorised as being the basis for new learning, thereby foregrounding the recognition and valuing of knowledge produced in non-formal and informal contexts. Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) augment Kolb's theory by paying close attention to the process of reflection in experiential learning. Neither Kolb nor theorists of experiential learning more generally explore the nature of knowledge in any depth. Where they do discuss knowledge it is largely from the perspective of social psychology rather than connecting with the rich and varied debates about the nature of knowledge within philosophy and social theory. As a result RPL is mainly seen as a device to map one body of knowledge (e.g. working knowledge) against another (e.g. academic knowledge) rather than an exploration of the relationship between the two.

In South Africa, the question of knowledge has formed the basis of broader critiques of education policies based on outcomes-based education, an approach that emphasizes 'learning by doing' and which downplays the necessity for the pedagogic transmission of formal bodies of knowledge. At the centre of critiques of outcomes-based education is the argument that experiential knowledge is not the same as codified, formal knowledge. While the former is often contextually situated, codified knowledge is more abstract and capable of generalisation across contexts. As Ralphs (2009: 7) has argued: 'Where and how knowledge is acquired or constructed really does matter and cannot be assumed as insignificant in the assessment and certification thereof'. Moving from experiential knowledge to codified knowledge does not happen automatically or through reflection alone: it is a complex process that requires deliberate pedagogy. Furthermore, experiential knowledge can sometimes act to block the acquisition of formal, codified knowledge (Breier 2003, 2006; Harris 2004, 2006; Shalem and Steinberg 2006). Such critiques go to the heart of RPL: their implications are that experiential knowledge cannot necessarily or easily be calibrated against formal knowledge, nor is it automatically a good platform for the acquisition of codified knowledge. The implications of this position are that RPL should be reconceptualised as a 'specialised pedagogy':

> RPL is seldom reducible to a technical formula for measuring equivalence and allocating common currency (credit); it is itself a distinctive pedagogic practice, an encoded practice with distinctive purposes and rules of description that provides the tools for navigating learning and assessment practices in and across the different contexts of the system. (Ralphs 2009: 13, emphasis added)

The acknowledgement that there are different forms of knowledge underpins critical perspectives on RPL. A large body of literature argues that it is unequal power relations, for example, the traditional university's monopoly of a form of knowledge production that privileges individualized and rationalist ways of knowing over collective and contextualised knowledge practices (Michelson 1996, 2006), that act to block access via RPL. In earlier issues of this journal, Armsby, Costley and Garnett (2006) argue that difficulties in implementing RPL are (in part at least) brought about by the challenge this practice brings to the university's traditional monopoly of knowledge, while Anderson and Guo (2009) show that immigrant professionals, even those with high levels of formal education, have their prior learning discounted and devalued. In earlier work, one of the authors of this article (Cooper 2006) argues that some forms of 'subjugated knowledge' (for example the knowledge of trade union activists) may be

unrecognisable to the academy because it is expressed and shared through different cultural forms.

To return to the research question underpinning this article, we were interested in whether we could find evidence that the nature of the discipline or knowledge domain offers affordances or barriers to RPL access, or whether obstacles to the implementation of RPL lie rather in a lack of political will to implement RPL or in the rejection of forms of knowledge that academics cannot immediately recognize.

Research methodology

As noted earlier, the article focuses on the findings of an interview survey carried out with academics across a South African higher education institution. This was an interpretive study aimed at 'testing' the validity of the knowledge-differentiation thesis via identifying the views of academics who are leaders in their disciplinary fields, regarding the feasibility of RPL in relation to postgraduate study in their discipline. Sixteen interviewees were selected in such a way as to maximise disciplinary and institutional diversity. These included:

- Academic leaders of postgraduate studies in five faculties (Science, Commerce, Law, Humanities and Health Sciences).
- Leaders of eight *professional* postgraduate programmes (Transport Studies, City and Regional Planning, Creative Writing, Film and Media, Health and Rehabilitation (including Nursing, and Disability Studies), Education (including Technology in Education).
- Leader of one *research*-focused programme (History).
- Two people in institutional leadership/management positions.

The university's ethical procedures were followed regarding informed consent, confidentiality[4] and respect for the integrity of knowledge. The purpose of the interviews was outlined to the participants as follows:

> The aim of these interviews is for the project to better understand the range of perspectives (positive perspectives and concerns) on access via RPL i.e. across all faculties and a spread of disciplines and types of programme. This may involve drawing on your experiences of particular models and approaches – and/or on your more general sense of the legitimacy of RPL.

The interviews were semi-structured, and probed current criteria and processes regarding access to postgraduate study; views on the feasibility (or otherwise) of RPL at postgraduate level in different disciplines, knowledge domains and programmes; perspectives on the role of experiential knowledge in higher education programmes, and the nature of faculty decision-making regarding admissions via RPL.

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[4] Anonymity is not fully achieved in this article as it was felt necessary to provide readers with an appreciation of the diversity of interviewees' disciplines.

Conceptual framework

The question at the heart of this research is closely related to broader questions around curriculum differentiation and epistemological access. Drawing from the sociology of education, we developed a conceptual framework for analysis of the interview data based largely on the work of Basil Bernstein (1996, 2000). Bernstein provides particularly useful ways of distinguishing between different forms of knowledge and for identifying the ways in which knowledge might be transformed and formulated as curricula. Key concepts drawn upon cluster around notions of 'knowledge structure'; the strength (or weakness) of boundaries between different forms of knowledge; the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge, and the idea that some degree of 'pedagogic agency' operates in the space opened up by the move between knowledge production and curriculum.

Bernstein delineates different knowledge forms. Firstly, he contrasts the context-specific 'horizontal discourse' of everyday life and work, with the codified, formal 'vertical discourse' of institutions. A distinction is made between two types of vertical discourse. The natural sciences exemplify a 'hierarchical knowledge structure' where the development and structure of knowledge is cumulative towards 'more and more general propositions which integrate knowledge at lower levels and across an expanding range of apparently different phenomena' (Bernstein 2000: 161). In contrast, the social and human sciences exemplify 'horizontal knowledge structures'. Here the development of knowledge is characterised by the addition of 'specialised languages' that offer 'the possibility of a fresh perspective, a new set of questions, a new set of theories, and an apparently new problematic' but less capacity for cumulative and vertical progression (Bernstein 2000: 162).

The concept of knowledge structure is associated with the notion of strong and weak boundaries i.e. the degree to which disciplines or curricula are insulated from, or allow for importation of, knowledge from other disciplines or knowledge domains. While the pure or hard sciences tend to be more impermeable to everyday knowledge, an example of the much weaker classification of social sciences that draw on the resources of the everyday is illustrated in the following quote from Bernstein (1996: 178):

> In History we have seen the development of oral history, in English the incorporation of popular media and narrative, in Sociology the rise of ethnography, in Feminist Studies (and to some extent in Black Studies) experiential/confessional narratives have been given the status of methodology, whilst Cultural Studies, virtually a postmodern collection code, takes as its data (but not exclusively so) the fashions, foibles and spectacles drawn from horizontal discourse.

We also sought to take into account the relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge in curriculum – or the question of proximity or distance from its point of application. In professional and vocational higher education previously separate disciplinary categories ('singulars' in Bernstein's language) are combined according to a relational principle usually drawn from the requirements of practice or the world of work. The traditional professions of medicine, architecture, accountancy and engineering are all examples of interdisciplinary knowledge 'regions' (Bernstein 2000). In contrast to these traditional professions with their strong identities and their foundations in stable, incremental bodies of knowledge are newer additions – journalism, management, business studies, communication studies, sports science and

tourism – which Muller (2008) describes as '4th generation' professions with weaker professional identities, less clear foundational disciplines and greater proximity to the point of application.

Writing on vocational pedagogy and the relation between knowledge and practice, Gamble (2009) argues that vocational or professional curricula draw on two forms of knowledge: conceptual knowledge and everyday empirical knowledge (experience or practice). Different curricula offer different combinations of the two which are in turn related to different epistemological perspectives on knowledge and practice. The relationship between knowledge and practice in curriculum can vary according a number of modalities, one being the logic determining selection of content and curriculum coherence; these can either follow a strong conceptual logic (related to hierarchy of concepts in the knowledge field) or a stronger contextual logic (according to what is relevant to the 'real world') (Gamble (2009: 11).

Muller (2008) argues that there is a distinct 'connecting logic', albeit not mechanical or direct, between knowledge structure and curriculum structure. However, curriculum is not wholly determined by knowledge structure. In our analysis, we drew on the notion that as knowledge is moved ('recontextualised' in Bernstein's terms) from its field of production (the field of research) into the field of reproduction (curriculum and pedagogy), a space – or a 'discursive gap' - opens up. Here it is possible for pedagogic agency, the curriculum developer's ideas around the purpose of education, his/her notions of an ideal learner and assumptions of how learning best takes place, to come into play.

Before analysing the interview data, we drew up a set of 'hypotheses' of how we anticipated academics might view the feasibility of RPL if arguments about the importance of the knowledge structure of their disciplines were valid. We predicted that academics in the pure sciences ('singulars'), including professional programmes drawing on those sciences would be most resistant to RPL. We assumed that the cumulative nature of their content (based on hierarchical knowledge structures) would mean that clearly specified conceptual foundations acquired usually through formal study would need to be in place for a student to engage at postgraduate level.

Conversely, we anticipated that academics involved in programmes in the arts and social sciences, in particular, the professional programmes that draw from them and which are closer to practice, would be more amenable to RPL. In these more weakly bounded (classified) disciplines, based on horizontal knowledge structures, the conceptual content in most programmes is less clearly defined. Because of this, we predicted that academics would need to rely on proxies such as general cognitive abilities, academic literacies and dispositions to gauge suitability for access via RPL.

Research findings

Findings revealed congruence with and divergences from our hypotheses. Both are interesting: convergences offer more nuanced detail about where and why RPL is easy or difficult to implement; divergences provide evidence that knowledge and knowledge structures do not impact in a deterministic way on the feasibility of RPL in relation to a particular programme. Some illustrative findings are presented drawing from the institutional, disciplinary and curricular diversity that characterised the data.

It is important to note that our findings necessarily reflect the personal, professional and intellectual views of the academics interviewed, and cannot be assumed to translate directly into established curriculum or teaching practices within programmes or departments/faculties[5].

Science postgraduate programmes – an emphasis on aptitude and disposition

Referring to postgraduate study, a leading academic in the Science Faculty was of the view that although 'foundational knowledge is important certainly up to honours - once you enter research that doesn't apply really'. What was looked for instead was the potential 'to be a good researcher'. Dispositional attributes such as 'maturity', 'motivation', 'rapport' and 'creativity' were linked to success. Although work experience was valuable prior to entry, it needed to approximate academic modes of knowledge production for example, experience of laboratory research.

> We can tell if someone has relevant work experience – if they have worked in a lab or have been doing experiments for SASOL or some chemical company – or if they have written reports to their industrial line manager or if they have written patents – and if there is evidence of that, then it's clear cut – they can write, they can think [....] that's what a [honours degree] gives you as a training or introduction to research.

This represents some degree of divergence from our hypotheses in that the interviewee chose to stress the importance of aptitude and disposition rather than (or in addition to) discipline-specific concepts.

In line with our expectations, it was acknowledged that potential for the expansion of RPL in the sciences lay in interdisciplinary and professional areas that are closer to practice, such as Oceanography, Zoology, Biological Sciences and Environmental Management. It is likely that the curricula of such programmes follow a stronger contextual logic and are closer to the point of application, making them more accessible to RPL candidates.

Engineering – reliance on proxies in interdisciplinary knowledge programmes

We anticipated that engineering, with its strong mathematics and science knowledge base, could be regarded as strongly bounded (or classified) and therefore not conducive to RPL. As expected, for most postgraduate programmes in the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment a first degree is required. However, the Faculty has drawn up a 'roadmap' which specifies exactly how science-based qualifications 'lower' than a degree might be combined with work experience to allow postgraduate entry, thus allowing for some degree of RPL access.

Departing from the roadmap however, are two interdisciplinary masters programmes. The Transport Studies programme is open to undergraduates from 'engineering, science or social science' while the City and Regional Planning programme takes people from 'music, film, chemistry, absolutely anywhere' because it draws from a range of theoretical bases, including

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[5] Our research still needs to investigate *actual* curricula through the establishment of more rigorous relationships between theoretical concepts and empirical referents.

'economic theory, social theory, and institutional theories'. We found an emphasis on general cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities, intellectual skills and academic literacies to determine suitability for access:

> I'm looking for an ability to think - to engage with policy debates at an intellectually high level - someone who, when presented with a problem, can frame that problem - evidence-based reasoning - critical reflection on accuracy of data. The prior qualification is not always a good indicator of how well a person responds. (Transport Studies)

A City and Regional Planning lecturer argued that what is most needed to be successful in that particular programme is 'spatial-conceptual' ability, 'the ability to conceptualize both processes and possibilities', to 'draw theory from different areas' and to 'do it (simultaneously) at different scales'. What this seems to highlight is the need for a high level of conceptual dexterity and interdisciplinary literacy. Thus clearly specified conceptual knowledge need not be in place for a student to engage in these postgraduate programmes, as programme leaders rely on proxies in the form of general cognitive abilities, academic literacies, and learner dispositions to gauge suitability for access.

Although experiential knowledge was seen as 'not enough in itself', it was nevertheless seen as contributing to individuals' success prior to entry providing it was relevant in terms of level and similarity to academic discourse. Inside the programme itself 'those students who come with work experience may contribute to and enrich the overall class discussions and bring valuable insights from their particular experience in industry', 'especially when discussing policy questions, we get into rich debate'.

Commerce – the difference between traditional and 4th generation professional programmes

A leading academic in the Faculty of Commerce spoke about the Masters in Accountancy, arguing that 'foundations are so critical in this field; in some disciplines the foundations are not that critical as long as you can think – if you haven't read certain literature you could read it up if you had the intellectual ability to do it – but in these disciplines it would be like putting up the roof without the foundations'. We had anticipated this, because the knowledge bases that these programmes draw on are likely to be economics and mathematics which require 'explicit, formally articulated concepts, relations and procedures' to be in place (Bernstein 1996: 174).

However, this cannot be a hard and fast rule because the interviewee also emphasised how well some students who have an undergraduate background in engineering or music do on the Postgraduate Diploma in Accountancy. Echoing interviewees from science and engineering, experiential knowledge was generally seen as valuable within programmes, enabling students 'to contextualise', but 'not sufficient on its own' to guarantee success at postgraduate level.

In contrast, and as we predicted, 4th generation professional programmes, especially those closer to practice or with a strong contextual curricular logic, such as the Postgraduate Diploma in Management Practice and the Masters in Information Systems, were seen as 'tailor-made for RPL'. In these programmes the interviewee reported that 'we take all graduates' because these

programmes are 'business rather than technical disciplines'[6]. However, taking graduates from across disciplines means that admissions processes need to rely on proxies such as general cognitive abilities and academic literacies rather than on specific content; this introduces problems of its own, for example, how to define 'graduateness':

> To me, postgraduate means you are progressing from a series of outcomes – so how do I know they have been achieved? What minimum outcomes are needed to proceed to a specific postgraduate diploma? How am I to measure them?

The Masters in Information Systems is an interesting case because the faculty representative referred to it being taught differently as a full-time and a part-time course because 'the students have different backgrounds'. This suggests the role of pedagogic agency in curricular accessibility – in other words, the educator always has a certain amount of space within which to be creative in curriculum design and delivery, and this can be used to enhance accessibility. Even though the programme is already relatively accessible to RPL because it is a 'business' rather than a 'technical' discipline, it can be made even more accessible through accommodation to students' backgrounds.

Health and Rehabilitation Sciences – role of professional bodies and contextual imperatives

There is an extremely wide variety of programmes in the Faculty of Health Sciences. We anticipated that RPL would be most feasible in programmes such as Audiology and Occupational Therapy because although they draw on hierarchical knowledge structures, they are professional programmes that are relatively close to practice, presumably easing access for those with work experience in the field. Notwithstanding this the interviewee, referring to programmes offered at undergraduate rather than postgraduate level, refuted our hypothesis by saying: 'professional programmes are more restrictive – the entry requirements will tell you straight away that if you're not a qualified this or that, you won't get in'. Here we see the regulatory role of professional bodies in the recontextualisation process. Another reason given for the low feasibility of RPL in these programmes was the high demand for places, lack of institutional capacity and scarcity of jobs: 'there is already such a big demand from people who do meet the criteria… it would be very hard to compete with [school leavers] for entry, that's part of our struggle' and 'there is a huge need out there in terms of the service but there are not enough posts, that's where the trouble is'.

This suggests that a range of social and contextual imperatives also impact on accessibility; these can enhance as well as restrict access. One example of enhancement is where the nursing professional body has increased its qualifications requirements in a field where most practitioners have historically only had an initial diploma. Because of these policy changes, the Postgraduate diploma/Masters in Nursing programme at this institution routinely accepts 'between 80% – 90%' of applicants who do not have a first degree. According to a leading

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[6] The distinction between 'business' and 'technical' is interesting, with various additional terms attached to each. 'business' was also referred to as 'adult education style', 'holistic' and as being based on 'academic abilities'. 'technical' was referred to in terms of 'technical knowledge', 'the discipline' and 'detailed content'.

academic in this programme, 'when we talk about RPL it's our standard', and 'for us, it has just been so much part of what we do that we don't really think about it as RPL.'

A further example is the Postgraduate Diploma/Masters in Disability Studies. Although housed in the Faculty of Health Sciences, the curriculum draws largely on horizontal knowledge structures in the social sciences (such as sociology, critical theory and policy studies). It is a programme designed not only to widen access but also to transform a knowledge field historically dominated by a biomedical model of disability (see Cooper 2011):

> ....not transformation in one way but in many ways – part of that was 'what do you want in the programme?' and 'who do you want in the programme?' And who we wanted was a range of people who together would make new knowledge and get to new places, especially those who had not been through the academic route.

As a result, this programme has very flexible entry criteria, accepting applicants from across Africa on the basis of their 'ideas', 'potential to develop' and 'holding high-level jobs' in the disability field. The programmes are particularly welcoming of the experiential knowledge of disability activists: 'we look for someone rich in experience, someone who is intellectual, who is able to think, talk, debate, reflect at a point that is beyond the everyday'; 'it's one of the privileges we have – of being constantly in contact with people who bring their experience to an academic environment… without that our whole programme would be bland … without reality to make it alive'.

In this programme, experiential knowledge is seen as providing a basis for the production of new knowledge in dialogue with formal, codified knowledge. As an interdisciplinary programme with no obvious disciplinary taproot, there is no clear, prerequisite conceptual or content knowledge to use for RPL purposes. There is, as we hypothesized, a concomitant reliance on proxies such as general cognitive abilities and academic literacies to gauge suitability for access via RPL. In this case, the proxies are shifted towards particular kinds of activism and intellectual abilities with the potential to 'make a difference' in the disability field.

This programme is illustrative of the degree to which pedagogic agency exercised in the process of curriculum design can act to widen accessibility.

Humanities I: Historical Studies – a traditional discipline with potential for pedagogic agency

The Faculty of Humanities is home to programmes in the arts and social sciences and houses a number of professional programmes that draw from the arts and social sciences in various combinations.

We anticipated that the postgraduate Historical Studies programme would not be very amenable to RPL because History is strongly classified by virtue of its specialised methodological practices and this particular programme is research-focused rather than professionally oriented. This was confirmed to some extent by the interviewee: 'despite the fact that there is a public perception that this [i.e. history] is something that people can do outside of the university', in practice, 'it is very difficult for people with no formal undergraduate training in History to come

onto a postgraduate course'. The 'training' he referred to involves 'an attitude of mind rather than covering content' and 'an awareness of the arguments and the approaches and theories' in the discipline. He saw History and Historical Studies as a way of thinking and as a particular mode of enquiry: 'they [postgraduate students] need to have learnt the way that one works with material and argues and presents material'. These modes of thinking and enquiring share characteristics with other social sciences, such that: 'someone with sociology is ideally suited to doing research in our department' and conversely 'a hard science background can be a barrier'.

Despite knowledge-related issues and requirements, the academic concerned was extremely well-disposed to RPL for personal, equity and institutional capacity reasons: 'it relates to the slightly anarchic tendency within me'; 'the whole process of broadening access to education is exceptionally important in the context of our country where people lacked access', and 'we are in an area where we actually want to encourage this kind of thing because we don't have floods of undergraduate students who are going on to do research'. Experiential knowledge was seen as important and valuable: 'People, especially in this context, have such rich life experience that they come in with. So, we are really cutting off our noses if we are ignoring that'. Particular reference was made to students of the 1980s[7] whose experiential knowledge was the 'fire in their bellies' situated at the nexus of politics, political theory and lived experience.

Once again, the personal disposition of the academic who is able to exercise pedagogic agency through curriculum design could potentially render this programme more open than its knowledge base suggests. However, as in other faculties, this is not enough on its own for successful postgraduate study. What is required of RPL candidates is a mix of 'training' and certain dispositions such as 'open-minded to learn', 'mission and drive'.

Humanities II: Film and Media Studies – a 4ᵗʰ generation professional programme

We anticipated that the postgraduate programme in Film and Media Studies would be open to RPL on account of its lack of any obvious disciplinary taproot. This was confirmed by the interviewee: 'people from a wide range of backgrounds can come in .... it is interdisciplinary and rich in terms of the mix of inputs it considers valuable'; 'we want bright lawyers or doctors or accountants who suddenly decide that they really want to tell a story'; I'd rather have a smart business student or a smart philosophy student, than a dull media student'. Thus, the curriculum derived from a very weakly bounded knowledge region creates the space for perspectives and concepts from a wide range of disciplines.

Given the absence of a discipline-specific conceptual load, we hypothesized that there would be a reliance on proxies to gauge suitability for access. This was the case up to a point, but the proxies were not as we expected. Although there was concern with general cognitive abilities i.e. 'strong analytical and intellectual focuses' from a range of disciplines, there was also emphasis on industry (experiential) knowledge, and dispositions such as 'passion' and 'maturity', and ideas, 'insights' and 'having something interesting to say'.

Experiential knowledge is highly valued because it is the film and media industry rather than the university that is the site of cutting-edge knowledge production. This was borne out by reference

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to the presence of students with industry experience in the class: 'when they [the students with industry experience] are in the room, I can see that other students look at them – if *they* find something interesting, the full-time [traditional] students look at them and think "OK, this is useful"'. Nevertheless, the academic interviewed emphasised that it is not a 'practical course':

> It's wrong to call ... [the programme] practical. We are not looking at camera jobs; we are looking at people who can tell a story, who can write about it, and who can do research. There's got to be a strong research element....we're not a Film School.

What we see here is a 4th generation professional programme that strengthens its academic base by utilising perspectives and concepts from other disciplines whilst also creating space for experiential knowledge, ideas and dispositions. This creates synergies:

> I think the RPL students offer a lot because they come from a different intellectual background e.g. Business with its spreadsheets and market analysis; or they come from a Fine Art background and understand graphics and so on. I think that adds to the mix – you get interchange.

There is both space to exercise agency and the will to engage with RPL in this context: 'increasingly, we are going to face the problem of students who are bright, promising, passionate, but haven't had the advantage and possibility at their [undergraduate] university. So we might have to put them through some sort of prior training e.g. run a short, intensive course in the holiday which they can do. When they graduate from that, we'll look at them again'. Despite having experienced problems regarding RPL decisions being approved at a departmental level, but rejected at a faculty level, the approach of this academic represents a pragmatic and positive strategy that acknowledges that gaps as well as affordances have to be addressed through RPL.

Tussles with faculty or departmental management have not always resulted in a positive response however, as can be seen in the following example.

Humanities III: Education Studies –influence of departmental and faculty culture

We hypothesised that the Masters in Education would be open to the idea of RPL because although it is a traditional profession, it draws on horizontal knowledge structures such as psychology and sociology and it is oriented to practice. The experiences of one of the programme 'stream leaders' of attempting to implement RPL illustrates how and why our hypotheses did not hold in this instance.

The Technology in Education stream is a recent addition to the Masters in Education. With no clear disciplinary taproot, it is actually a 4th generation professional programme with a high level of proximity to the point of application. As was the case in Film and Media, it is the ICT industry rather than the academic discipline that leads in knowledge production. Because of this, the interviewee viewed experiential knowledge as very important both prior to and within the programme: 'their experience is valuable to the class, and drawing on this increases their comfort; I welcome their comments, invite them to talk about their experience so that it becomes useful'. In the absence of specified qualification requirements or generally accepted graduate-level academic abilities, the criteria in use for access revolve around assessing potential to

succeed, plus dispositional attributes such as 'the ability to feel open to unlearning', 'capacity to change and accommodate new things', 'personal position' and 'flexibility of reflection'.

Despite evidence of success on the part of students admitted via RPL, the interviewee had concluded that, 'it's a waste of time – if I've got an option, it [i.e. RPL] is the last thing I want to do!' He related a number of bruising encounters where his RPL decisions had been seriously questioned or overturned by departmental management. How can this be explained?

The reason for this may lie in the particular history and culture of this department, and the orientation of postgraduate faculty management. Although the Masters in Education seemed to us to be highly amenable to RPL for knowledge reasons, this department has been concerned to ensure that the programme is research-focused rather than practice-oriented. RPL is viewed as weakening the discipline's already weak boundaries, as undermining academic rigour, and as increasing the vulnerability of the programme in the university context. A senior academic with responsibility for admissions to the programme disputed the validity of proxies to gauge suitability for access via RPL, and deemed it virtually impossible for RPL candidates to have acquired general cognitive abilities, intellectual skills or academic literacies outside of a prescribed university context. He claimed they have not spent enough time in academia to be able to 'judge the conflicts in the field' or entertain a range of differing perspectives; they lack the ability to analyse 'reading material or establish a position based on arguments from the [academic] field', and 'bomb out completely when it comes to research'.

What we see here is the degree to which critical attitudes towards RPL combined with a departmental culture that desires to strengthen the conceptual logic and the knowledge base of a programme can lead to stronger maintenance of boundaries and the consequent exclusion of candidates seeking access on the basis of RPL.

Summary of findings

We found as many, if not more, divergences from our original hypotheses as congruence with them. As noted earlier, both are interesting: convergences offer more nuanced detail about where and why RPL is easy or difficult to implement; divergences provide evidence that knowledge and knowledge structures do not impact in a deterministic way on the feasibility of RPL in relation to a particular programme.

In terms of congruence, our hypothesis about proximity to the point of application being an affordance for RPL held: the Faculty of Science noted the potential for expansion of RPL in interdisciplinary and professional programmes with a contextual curricular logic. In the Commerce Faculty we found that traditional professional programmes tended to rely more on discipline-specific concepts than 4th generation programmes. As a singular, Historical Studies did require a particular and discipline-specific orientation, although the exercise of pedagogic agency made RPL more possible.

In terms of divergences, the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment placed less emphasis on discipline-specific concepts than we anticipated. Our hypothesis that there would be a reliance on proxies such as general cognitive abilities, academic

literacies and learner dispositions in professional programmes drawing from horizontal knowledge structures held firm in Disability Studies and Film and Media Studies (to some extent), but not in Education Studies. Moreover, the nature of the proxies was more complex than we anticipated (for example, greater emphasis on a very wide range of dispositions).

Although professional programmes drawing from the social sciences might be more conducive to RPL on knowledge grounds, their very lack of explicit, identifiable access criteria makes it hard to determine what is actually required, including by way of proxies. In some quarters of this institution, this sets up a need for excessive vigilance. Conversely, in professional programmes drawing on the hard sciences, it is sometimes easier to make decisions about RPL because there are clearer knowledge bases that everyone accepts (often quite tacitly). Although these decisions can lead to higher levels of exclusion, this is by no means always the case; nor is it the case that conceptual foundations are always more important in these programmes than in the social sciences. Whether in the hard sciences, or in the social sciences, the interdisciplinary nature of many postgraduate programmes makes it impossible to pre-specify knowledge requirements for RPL purposes because there is no defined disciplinary taproot.

Experiential and workplace knowledge was generally valued across programmes and disciplines, and there was quite significant evidence of experiential knowledge being drawn upon as standard pedagogic practice *within* curricula: to contextualise formal knowledge; to critique formal knowledge; to enrich both formal and experiential knowledge, and to produce new knowledge.

Conclusions and implications of the study

This article has explored the 'knowledge question' in RPL through the research question: To what extent does the nature of the disciplinary or knowledge domain into which RPL candidates seek access determine the feasibility of RPL? We were concerned with why the uptake of RPL within higher education has been so restricted and were interested in whether this was for knowledge/epistemological reasons or due to other factors such as lack of political will or rejection of forms of knowledge that academics cannot immediately recognize.

Our findings confirmed arguments that knowledge structure *does* affect the feasibility of RPL, but with a number of important qualifications. Firstly, knowledge and knowledge differentiation are not as important determinants of post-graduate level RPL as we anticipated they might be. Just as important is the question of pedagogic agency. Individual academics who are committed to opening up pathways of learning for those historically excluded from higher education can play a role in designing diverse pedagogic interventions that are appropriate to purpose and innovative in form. The creative ways in which this can be done has been investigated in a further piece of research within this institution, and is elaborated on more fully in Cooper and Harris (2011). The converse is also true: academics and managers opposed to RPL on epistemological or pedagogical grounds may act as powerful gatekeepers in relation to access by those whose knowledge bases are primarily experiential and/or work-based.

Secondly, the research showed that knowledge is as much about cultural and institutional practices as it is about conceptual hierarchies. These cultural practices translate into distinct organisational environments within which RPL has to take place and which play a significant role in offering affordances or barriers to pedagogic agency and the implementation of RPL.

Knowledge is therefore one factor amongst many. It is important, but so are academics who exercise varying degrees of pedagogic agency; particular interpretations of the institutional RPL policy; artefacts such as roadmaps; faculty culture, size, space and capacity; the role of professional bodies; perceptions of whether there is (or not) a talent pool 'out there'; the constituency that was in mind when the programme was originally designed; extent of demand from traditional entrants; perceptions of the needs in society and economy (equity concerns), and the historical moment (students in the 80s with 'fire in the belly').

It follows that RPL cannot be reducible to 'one size fits all' but needs to assume different forms in different institutional and disciplinary settings. RPL for access to postgraduate study in a university will vary according to the purpose and design of the programme to which the RPL candidate is seeking access. This supports the position (see Ralphs 2009) that RPL should be seen as a specialised pedagogical practice that provides tools for navigating access to new learning opportunities across diverse learning contexts. It also suggests that in the absence of direct articulation between knowledge forms, access need not necessarily be denied as the pedagogy embedded in the process of RPL may enable the bridging of gaps.

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