

RECOGNITION OF PRIOR EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ONLINE
POSTGRADUATE EDUCATION
The Experience of the Master in Human Resource Management at the UOC

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Abstract

The recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL) involves the assessment of skills and knowledge acquired by an individual through previous experience, which is not necessarily related to an academic context. RPEL practices are far from generalised in higher education, and there is a lack of specific guidelines on how to implement RPL programs in particular settings, such as management education or online programs. The RPEL pilot program developed in a Spanish virtual university is used throughout the article as the basis for further reflection on the design and implementation of RPEL in online postgraduate education in the business field. The role of competences as a central theoretical foundation for RPEL is explained, and the context and characteristics of the RPEL program described. Special attention is paid to the key elements of the program's design and to the practical aspects of its implementation. The results of the program are assessed and general conclusions and suggestions for further research are discussed.

1. Introduction

The development of the knowledge society and economy has generated new training and learning requirements. Particularly, there is a need for an improved technical and scientific education, in addition to a need for transversal competences and the possibility of permanent learning. This interest in permanent or lifelong learning is clearly stated by the European Commission in the Tuning Project:

The "knowledge society" is also a "learning society". This idea is intimately linked with how education is understood within a broader context: the continuum of lifelong learning, where the individual needs to be able to handle knowledge, to update it, to select what is appropriate for a particular context, to learn permanently, to understand what is learned in such a way that it can be adapted to new and rapidly changing situations.

The need to recognize and value learning could also be seen as having an impact on qualifications and on the building of educational programs leading to degree qualifications. In this context, the consideration of competences that are side by side with the consideration of knowledge offers a number of advantages which are in harmony with the demands emerging from the new paradigm.

European Commission (2002: 17).

The relevance of all personal contexts in the acquisition of knowledge and the need for its recognition culminates in diverse practices which are broadly referred to as recognition or assessment of prior learning (RPL or APL). These procedures involve the formal assessment of skills and knowledge acquired by an individual through previous experience, not necessarily related to an academic context. As a result of said assessment, the educational institution that undertakes the appraisal may grant access to a program of study, exemption or advanced standing within a course of study, or certification or partial credit towards an academic award (Day, 2002). When credit is awarded after such an assessment, RPL is also called "accreditation" of prior learning¹.

¹ Denominations for this practice vary: Recognition of Prior Learning is used in Australia, New Zealand and South Africa; Prior Learning Assessment or PLA in the USA; Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning or AP(E)L in the UK; Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) in

The central feature of RPL is, therefore, that “the [experiential] learning is credited as being of equal value to that gained in more traditional teaching and learning situations” (Field, 1993: 37).

RPL can encompass the recognition of different kinds of learning. In this sense, it is possible to distinguish two main categories within RPL (Evans, 1994; Brown et al., 1997):

- The recognition of prior certificated learning (RPCL), which refers to learning for which the corresponding certification has been awarded by an educational institution or another education/training provider.
- The recognition of prior experiential learning (RPEL), which refers to uncertified learning acquired through experience. This kind of learning is attracting attention in today’s “knowledge society”, but still lacks systematization throughout the Spanish higher education (HE) system.

RPCL has traditionally been more successful than RPEL in HE, “with universities appearing less cautious in their approach to certificated learning than experiential learning” (SQA, 1997: 28). For example, in Spanish universities there are well established programs of this kind, which recognise learning acquired in other HE institutions, while experience in RPEL is only anecdotal.

In Spain, RPEL is part of the agenda for the development of new postgraduate studies. It is suggested that universities include criteria for the recognition and accreditation of prior learning in their applications for new official postgraduate courses (Quality Assurance Agencies for the University System, 2005). This reflects the goals approved in the Bergen Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education in May 2005:

We see the development of national and European frameworks for qualifications as an opportunity to further embed lifelong learning in higher education. We will work with higher education institutions and others to improve recognition of prior learning including, where possible, non-formal and informal learning for access to, and as elements in, higher education programs.

Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education (2005)

Canada; Validation des Acquis Professionnels (VAP) in France, etc. The original term is respected in the quotations included in this article.

Originally beginning in the USA in the 1970's as a research project entitled 'The Co-operative Assessment of Experiential Learning' (Day, 2002: 2), RPEL is now being applied in a number of OECD countries (OECD, 2005). However, its implementation has followed an uneven pace at different educational levels. As Tight (2002: 107) points out, "while APL and APEL have made their way into further education, where they are seen as one more means of developing flexibility, they have yet to be so widely accepted in higher education".

This little usage of RPEL in HE institutions, contrasts with its benefits for diverse stakeholders, as claimed by universities where such programs have been implemented (see Figure 1).

Students	Universities	Employers / Managers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credit achieved through RPEL can be used to access programs leading to particular qualifications • Credit achieved can be counted as part of the total credit required for particular awards and may reduce the time it takes to obtain a qualification • Recognition of learning through experience and the process of reflection required to construct an RPEL claim often lead to an increased level of confidence • Preparing an RPEL claim helps develop independent study skills • Reflection on experiential learning enhances the theory/practice link, leading to an increased understanding of the two-way flow from academic learning to practice and vice versa 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A student's RPEL claim may suggest ideas for assessment techniques or for newly taught units • RPEL highlights the importance of issues in the work or leisure context • The RPEL process encourages study to be relevant to work, life and personal development • RPEL claims are often made on the basis of recent experience and, therefore, represent up-to-date, dynamic interaction with the world of work • RPEL can be used as a marketing tool to increase the appeal of the part-time provision of institutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RPEL candidates show a higher level of motivation and interest in aspects of practice • RPEL may lead to an accelerated path to a qualification and, thus, less time spent away from the workplace • RPEL may prove less costly than fees for taught units • The process of reflection on practice may lead to new ideas/developments within the workplace

Source: Adapted from UCAS (2003).

Figure 1: Benefits of RPEL programs

RPEL is especially useful for adult learners, who want to access or return to further or higher education and bring a wealth of knowledge that they have acquired throughout their lives (Lueddeke, 1997). These non-traditional students are often more easily

addressed through the flexibility of online learning, as it releases time for other responsibilities related to work and family (Hill & Rivera, 2001). Consequently, online universities seem to be the natural environment for the expansion of RPEL programs. However, scholarly articles about online RPEL are almost non-existent (two relevant exceptions are Blair & Hoy, 2006; and Sandberg *et al.*, 2000), and only some conference proceedings provide additional information about this subject (see Emans *et al.*, 2001; Higgins, 2005; Li & Gunn, 2006; Martin, 2006; and McLoughlin, 2003).

Furthermore, even though the Business field is an area with high potential for experiential learning, it has received little attention from the literature (see Hamill & Sutherland, 1994, and Newton, 1994, both focused on business schools) in comparison with other fields, such as nursing (e.g., Clarke and Warr, 1997; Donoghue *et al.*, 2002; Howard, 1993) or teaching (e.g., Cantwell & Scevak, 2004; Castle & Attwood, 2001; Taylor & Clemans, 2000).

This paper tries to contribute to cover the gaps identified in RPEL literature, particularly, the lack of guidelines on the implementation of RPEL programs in specific educational settings, such as management education or online programs. The RPEL program developed in a Spanish virtual university will be used throughout the article as the basis for further reflection on the design and implementation of RPEL in online postgraduate education in the business field. The first section explains the role of competences as a central theoretical foundation for RPEL. The context and characteristics of the RPEL program at the UOC are described next. Special attention is paid to the key elements of the program's design and to the practical aspects of its implementation. Finally, the results of the program are assessed and general conclusions and suggestions for further research are discussed.

2. Competences as the focus of RPEL

The recognition of prior learning is based on an approach that revolves around learning outcomes (Cretchley & Castle, 2001), as it acknowledges the learning capacity achieved by the student instead of the formal paths that have led to the outcomes in question. RPEL programs consequently acknowledge the fact that learning takes place through different kinds of experiences, such as working, training, reading, travelling,

community involvement and family responsibilities, but do not come automatically with experience and may differ from person to person (CAPLA, 2006).

Learning outcomes are commonly expressed in terms of competences or skills and competences. In the Tuning Project (EC, 2002), competences are understood as a combination of attributes (as regards knowledge and its application to attitudes, skills and responsibilities) that describe the level or degree to which a person is capable of performing a given task. In this context, a competence or a set of competences means that a person puts a certain capacity or skill into practice and performs a task in which he/she is able to demonstrate that he/she can do so in a way that allows for the level of achievement to be assessed.

Following the definitions of the Tuning Project, the RPEL program at the UOC held competences to include a number of elements that can be carried out and assessed:

- Technical competence (knowing and understanding): theoretical knowledge in an academic field.
- Methodological competence (knowing what to do): practical and operational application of knowledge to certain situations; the ability to precisely perform the tasks that are related to an academic discipline.
- Attitudes and values (knowing how to conduct oneself): values as an integral element of the way of perceiving and living with others in a social context.

A person neither possesses nor lacks a competence, but commands it to a varying degree, meaning that the three elements of competence can be placed on a continuum.

RPEL programs focus on the recognition and assessment of all three forms of competence in relation to a specific discipline or professional area. Clearly defining the competences of which prospective students should show evidence is thus a central element of RPEL. It is also necessary to define a method for assessing those competences so that credit can be awarded. Those factors were incorporated into the theoretical framework of the RPEL program at the UOC, as discussed later on.

3. Context of the RPEL program

Higher education is currently facing the challenge of adapting to new situations. One of the manifestations of such a challenge is the impact of the incorporation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into educational processes and into

teaching and learning models. In particular, the experience presented herein consists of the study of the singular nature and complexity of a specific case of the implementation of an RPEL program in a virtual learning environment, in the context of a postgraduate program of the UOC.

From its foundation, in 1994, the Open University of Catalonia has been geared to the offer of non-presence-based education. Its educational model revolves around an Internet-based methodology that provides students the resources and tools necessary for them to be able to learn, without requiring them to be physically present in a classroom or to coincide, in terms of time, with others involved in the educational process. This is achieved with the intensive use of ICTs, leading to a virtual learning process through the exchange of information in common virtual spaces. Consequently, academic objectives are accomplished in a flexible, continuous manner, which does not depend on coinciding in time or space.

The student is the centre of the pedagogic model of the UOC. The other key elements, consisting specifically of specialized consultants, tutors offering advice on academic matters, didactic materials with adapted formats and the continuous assessment system, are arranged around the student's requirements, in order to facilitate his/her learning. In addition, a number of support systems make academic activity possible, namely the digital library, the software that keeps information updated and the dynamics of interaction and participation through virtual classrooms. Social and academic relationships are established within this virtual environment in such a way as to facilitate the integration of the university community and to add value to the teaching activity.

The student-based model of the UOC blends well with RPEL philosophy. As Callis (1993: 32-33) stated: "One of the distinctive features of APEL is that it is designed around the individual learner. No two people have the same experiences, so no two people will present the same learning profile (...) An APEL service must, therefore, by definition be focused on the client: otherwise, it is not an APEL". The existence of a culture focused on the student was, then, a valuable driving agent for the implementation of RPEL at the UOC.

One of the aspects that distinguish the UOC model from presence-based higher education is that virtual education fosters the use of technology in the relevant field of

study. As technological competence is nowadays one of the critical, generic competences in all HE programs and a common requirement of the workforce, said feature of virtual education at the UOC promotes the smooth introduction of graduates into the labour market.

The RPEL program was implemented in the Master in Human Resource Management (HRM) at the UOC, a 36-credit (540-hour) program structured as a curriculum that allows students to access the courses that best suit their needs (see Figure 2). At the same time, it facilitates the attainment of progressive degrees that eventually lead to the master diploma.

Master in Human Resource Management	<i>1. Postgraduate course in Human Resource Administration</i>	1.a. Specialisation course in Techniques for the Administration of Human Resources
		1.b. Specialisation course in Labour Relations Management
	<i>2. Postgraduate course in Human Resource Planning and Management</i>	2.a. Specialisation course in Work Team Management
		2.b. Specialisation course in Instruments for Human Resource Management and Planning
	<i>3. Final project</i>	

Figure 2: Structure of the Master in Human Resource Management

One of the objectives of the Master in HRM is to improve the fit between the abilities of students and the requirements of their present or prospective jobs. Accordingly, from its creation the educational content of the Master was described in terms of professional competences, referring to the knowledge and skills which permit the effective accomplishment of certain tasks (Prieto, 2002). The relevant learning outcomes were grouped into four courses, which were related to specific professional profiles in the field of HRM. As will be explained later on, the direct link of each course with professional competences greatly facilitated the implementation of RPEL in the Master in HRM.

Moreover, each course was modularized in quasi-independent units. This also favoured the implementation of RPEL, because it made possible that students took only those modules for which they had not established evidence of prior learning.

4. Implementation of the RPEL program at the UOC

The RPEL program at the UOC is limited to postgraduate studies, as suggested by Spanish Quality Assurance Agencies for the University System, but can easily be adapted to graduate studies. The pilot program was implemented in one course of the online Master in HRM, as the first step in a project that would encompass all the postgraduate courses of the university.

The development of the experience was based on the definition and implementation of a methodology applied to virtual education, allowing for the integration of competences as a means of recognizing the knowledge, skills and abilities of students at the time of their incorporation into the educational program. The idea was to focus the project on the potential student, as the central feature and main element of the process.

In the conception of this project, recognition of prior experiential learning was defined as “the instrument that makes it possible for students to obtain academic credit based on the competences acquired during their professional activity, whilst contributing to certain projects, or through other experiences”. Therefore, experiential learning was the object of recognition, leaving certified learning aside.

The program aimed to achieve the following goals:

- To make the academic accreditation of knowledge acquired via professional experience possible.
- To foster skills and knowledge obtained in a non-academic context and to endow them with value.
- To add a distinctive feature to postgraduate education at the UOC.
- To promote a competence-based design in postgraduate degrees.
- To consolidate the applied orientation of postgraduate education in response to professional requirements, thus boosting the relationship between the university and the business environment.

4.1. Key elements of the program

For the learner, RPEL involves describing experiences, reflecting thereon, identifying the learning associated therewith and providing evidence of the learning in question (Hamill & Sutherland, 1994). The role of the education provider is to

effectively support the learner and to manage the recognition process clearly and consistently.

All RPEL programs need to design and coordinate four key elements, namely the course content to be included therein; the learning outcomes to be assessed; the evaluation method to be used and the assessment criteria to be applied. This section will examine the definition of those elements in the UOC program.

4.1.1. Selection of recognizable course content

A single course of the Master in HRM was included in the pilot RPEL program, namely the first-level specialization course called “Human Resources Administration Techniques”. Furthermore, it was not possible to “exchange” the entire content of the course in question with previous learning. The criteria established for the selection of units or modules (and corresponding credit) were as follows:

- The program did not apply to the introductory unit, which allowed for the contextualization of the specialization and for interaction with the rest of the group to begin.
- Units that made it possible to develop e-competences were not recognized, as that was regarded as being the added value provided by the institution.
- The program applied to units in which there was clear equivalence between the competences developed thereby and those acquired in a professional environment. In turn, the said relationship facilitated the provision of appropriate evidence by the participant.

4.1.2. Learning outcomes to be assessed

The units from the curriculum of the first course that were identified as being recognizable through the RPEL program were linked to professional or personal competences, for each of which specific indicators were developed.

The competences corresponding to the professional environment to which the course is geared were set out in an RPEL Table, where they were linked to specific competences in the areas of knowledge and understanding, knowing what to do and knowing how to conduct oneself, along with the relevant indicators and examples of

pieces of evidence for those indicators. Questions such as the following were considered when designing the Table:

- What sort of activities and functions does a staff administration and management specialist perform?
- Which tasks, responsibilities and functions corresponding to the professional environment are present in the content and objectives of the unit?
- What evidence proves that the student has developed certain competences?

Content specialists contributed to the production of the RPEL Table, which was structured as shown in Figure 3. Through this framework, RPEL and the competence-based curriculum foster one another. On the one hand, the prior establishment of the competences linked to each module facilitated the identification of indicators and evidence. On the other hand, when examples of indicators and evidence proved difficult to find, it was a sign that the definition of competence was unclear, thus suggesting a reconsideration of the competence profile for the course.

Content	Competences	Competence elements	Indicators	Evidence
Recognizable course content.	Competences corresponding to the professional environment to which the course is geared.	What needs to be known to fulfil objectives? Competences in the areas of knowledge types: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge and understanding • Knowing what to do • Knowing how to conduct oneself 	Tasks, in which the competence must, necessarily, be used.	Examples of pieces of evidence that can prove or demonstrate the existence of the indicator.

Figure 3: Elements of RPEL design – The RPEL Table

Therefore, the RPEL Table was the main tool for the construction of the RPEL framework. Once it was approved by the academic direction of the Master, it was offered to candidates as assistance for their portfolio development.

4.1.3. Assessment method

To earn credit for prior learning, students must prove to the faculty that they are competent in the subject under consideration. As Kramer (2002: 118) explains, credit for prior learning is usually achieved in one of four ways:

- Standardized achievement tests: such tests consist of multiple choice examinations that analyse learning equivalent to introductory college courses. To obtain credit, the student must answer a minimum number of questions correctly.
- Team-assessed training: providers of training courses contact a specialised institution with a view to the latter evaluating and recommending equivalences as regards college credit for the training developed by the former. Expert evaluators review course content in important instructional areas and make recommendations for college credit. Those recommendations may include the appropriate level of teaching and the number of hours thereof for learners per semester.
- Course challenges: such challenges are usually developed and supervised by individual institutions and may include interviews, tests or skill demonstrations. At many institutions, challenges require that students demonstrate competency by taking the final exam for a course. In other schools, students may be able to arrange an interview, during which a member of teaching staff asks them to explain concepts and issues which they would have to know to receive a pass grade.
- Experiential portfolio assessment: such assessments involve the appraisal of a notebook or portfolio of evidence of university-level learning in a particular subject area (it should be noted that this is “learning”, rather than “experience”), supported by an essay.

Prior-learning portfolios were chosen as the assessment method in the UOC program. They are the most common method of assessing learning acquired previously (Joosten-Ten Brinke *et al.*, 2007), as well as the option that offers the greatest potential for credit recognition (Dagavarian, 2003). However, the development of such portfolios is the process that is most misunderstood by those who have not participated therein (Krammer, 2002), and also the most time-intensive option where assessment is concerned.

4.1.4. Portfolios within the UOC program

Within the UOC program, portfolios included four sections that students had to prepare in detail:

- Professional objectives that the student wished to fulfil, with as much specific information as possible.

- Detailed curriculum vitae, which differed from the curriculum used for selection processes in the labour market. Emphasis had to be placed on aspects that showed that the student had certain knowledge and/or skills related to the program.
- Extended reflective writing, regarding skills and abilities acquired through prior experience. The student was asked to identify and describe the acquisition of knowledge and competences in areas determined by his/her experience, relating them to the content of the units.
- A collection of physical evidence that showed that the student actually had the aforementioned competences. The student was required to provide documentation accrediting his/her possession of the competences described in the previous section. Evidence of knowledge included in a portfolio can vary according to the subject in question. In the case of the RPEL program for the Master in HRM, evidence most frequently took the form of samples of work undertaken, certificates, licenses, reports, job descriptions, CVs, performance assessments, employment records and letters of recommendation or of verification.

4.1.5. Assessment criteria

Once the portfolio was completed, it was assessed by the appropriate faculty, which determined whether the student should receive the credit he/she had requested on the grounds of the portfolio or not, being indicative of work that would be expected to form part of the relevant course. In accordance with Nyatanga and Forman (1998), general criteria for evidence offered by applicants with a view to obtaining credit were: such evidence must be sufficient, authentic, current and valid in relation to the established learning outcomes.

Three additional criteria were used in the assessment of evidence, applying the guidelines offered by Zucker *et al.* (1999):

- Credit should only be awarded if knowledge was demonstrated. Experience, by its own, was not susceptible of recognition.
- The level of acquired knowledge had to attain the university level (higher education); however, it did not need to be excellent, but sufficient.
- The acquired knowledge had to show the appropriate equilibrium between theory and practice, according to their relative weight in the course learning outcomes.

4.2. Program administration

The structure of the RPEL process made it necessary to manage the progress of the student over different stages, which were designed to ensure his/her success and were adapted to a virtual learning environment. In this sense, the specific methodology of the UOC was applied to the administration of the RPEL program, using the various technical and methodological resources adapted to a context of non-presence-based learning.

A distinction should be made between two clearly contrasting stages in the administration of the program. Firstly, there was an initial stage during which students were given advice regarding the nature of and the procedure entailed by the program. In this stage, a self-assessment test, which served as a support tool for assessing the suitability of opting for RPEL, was distributed to the participants who wished to receive it. The second stage consisted in the development of the program: the RPEL program began in the virtual classroom; the students prepared their portfolio and compiled evidence, with the support of a tutor; and, lastly, appraisal was carried out by the Assessment Committee. Further information about each of the stages is given below.

This process was designed with the purpose of enhancing transparency in all the stages. As Joosten-Ten Brinke *et al.* (2007) highlight, when transparency is guaranteed, acceptance and fairness of the process will increase, since all members involved will understand their roles and their expectation of the procedure will be realistic.

Figure 4 shows the stages of implementation of the RPEL process designed for UOC's virtual environment, along with the figures involved and the means of communication in each stage.

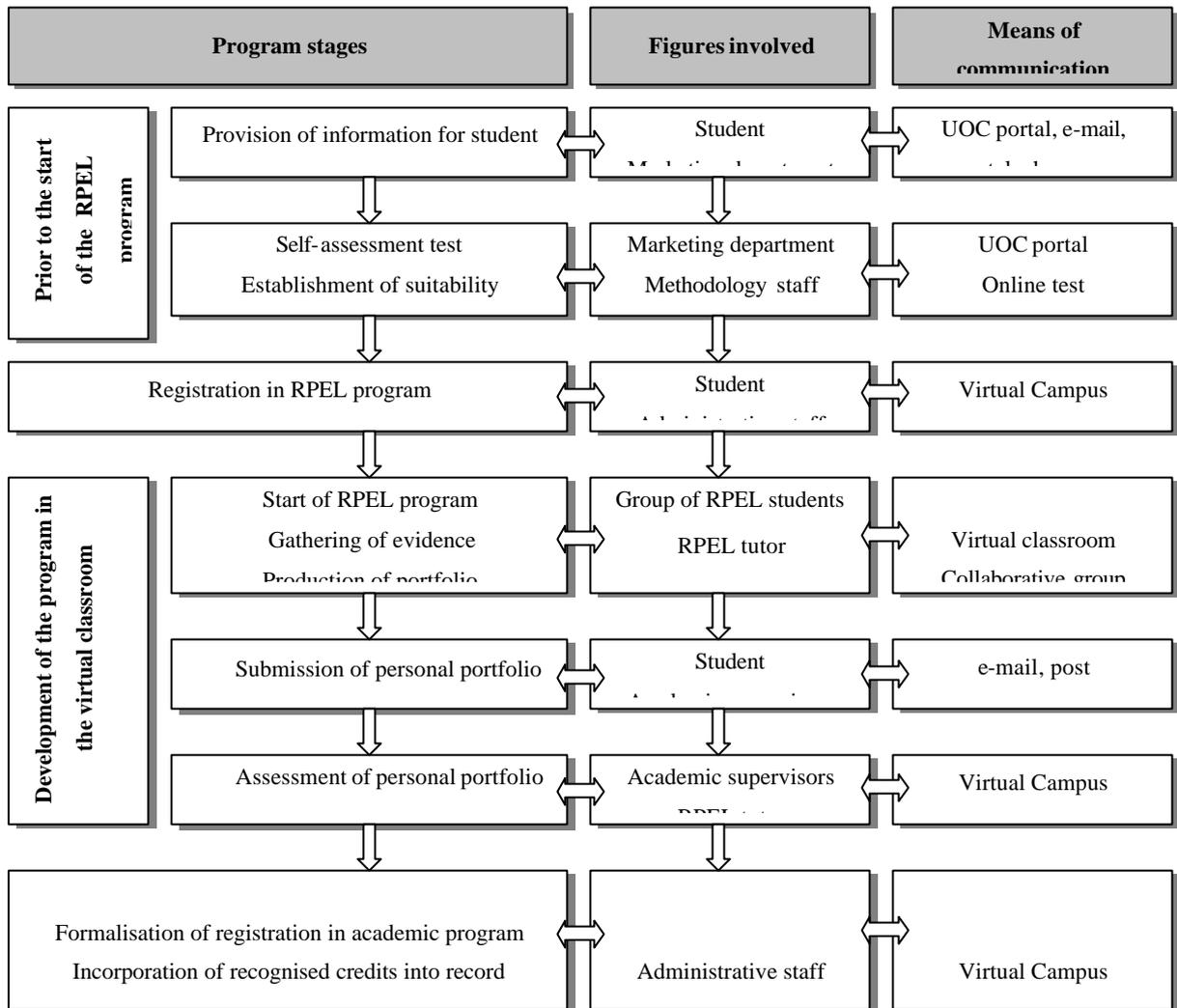


Figure 4: Implementation of the virtual RPEL program at the UOC

4.2.1. Communication with prospective students

The possibility of gaining credit through an RPEL program can serve as a useful means of increasing interest among potential students, even if they do not eventually enrol in the program. For this reason, information about the program at the UOC was prepared and passed on to the Marketing department.

The information provided explained the concept, process and benefits of RPEL for the candidate. It was published in the UOC portal and could be used by the Marketing staff in order to inform potential students.

4.2.2. Self-assessment of candidates

The self-assessment tool developed after the definition of competences for the course and the corresponding indicators enabled students to gauge the likelihood of their previous learning gaining recognition. The list of indicators for each competence was set out as a multiple choice test, so that students could choose among different levels for each indicator.

As RPEL is a time-consuming process, the self-assessment test was considered a key tool to ensure realistic expectations among candidates. Hence, it contributed to the goal of transparency, while providing a better understanding of the student's own learning and leading to increased self-knowledge and increased self-confidence (Joosten-Ten Brinke *et al.*, 2007).

4.2.3. Program development

The experiential portfolio was developed by the students with assistance from a prior-learning specialist, dubbed a "tutor" in the UOC program. In addition, the students involved in the RPEL program shared a virtual classroom, where they could discuss their doubts and progress as regards portfolio preparation. This was the lengthiest phase of the procedure, with a total duration of one month.

The goal of portfolio building, as understood at the UOC, is not only to assess the candidates' claim to have already achieved learning appropriate for advanced standing in the program of study, but also that the learners "reflect on and assess their previous experience, identifying in a coded way the learning that derived from it" (Trowler, 1996: 18). The tutor played a key role in this process and thus had an in-depth understanding of the RPEL program objectives and procedure in order to communicate those aspects to students adequately. He was also proactive in detecting any kind of obstacles that students might encounter during the rather demanding tasks they had to accomplish: firstly, systematic reflection on experience through the expression of significant learning in concise statements, to serve as a formal claim to certain skills and knowledge; and, finally, the collation and organisation of evidence to support such claims in a manner that could facilitate assessment (Hamill & Sutherland, 1994).

Interaction between the tutor and the students, and among students engaged in the program, took place in a virtual classroom and via e-mail. The virtual classroom at the

UOC provides two separate spaces for asynchronous communication. On the one hand, the board was used exclusively by the tutor in order to give general instructions and to pace the students' work, with the aim of having their portfolios completed on time. On the other hand, the forum was set up as a peer support medium, through which students could post questions, share experiences, and support each other in the process of identifying and gathering evidence for the portfolio. Additionally, e-mail was used by the tutor to send individual feedback and reply to particular inquiries by students.

4.2.4. Credit recognition

The portfolio was finally assessed by the executive and the academic directors of the Master, with the support of the tutor. The recognition process took place for each unit, meaning that between 0.5 credits (equivalent to the shortest module) and 5.5 credits (representing 15.2% of the total number of credits of the Master) could be incorporated into the record of a student. Credit recognition was always performed on the basis of the sufficiency thereof and recognized credits were designated as such in the academic record of the student.

Recognition of one or more units led to a personalised learning route, as the student only had to participate in the parts of the course for which no prior learning was demonstrated.

5. Program assessment

The pilot implementation of RPEL in the Master in HRM achieved its main goals, which were basically of academic and pedagogical nature, and offered additional insights into technology and organisation related areas. The project showed the potential of RPEL as a means for promoting a competence-based design in postgraduate degrees. The construction of the RPEL Table, together with the real-life examples provided in the students' portfolios, fostered reflection about the suitability of each unit of the course towards the goal of developing professional competences, in accordance with the requirements of the business environment.

At the same time, the project confirmed that RPEL can be successfully implemented in online postgraduate programs. Virtual media were used in each stage of the RPEL

procedure, except for some telephone communication in the initial information phase and for the submittal of the physical evidence of the portfolio. Before the learners' enrolment in the program, the online self-assessment test contributed to the creation of realistic expectations among candidates, providing them with a hint as to the type of indicators and evidence that would be relevant for recognition. During the program, the online campus made possible the dynamic, contextual adaptation among the learning activities and the learners' own background.

The tools used, along with the tutorial activity developed in the virtual classroom, permitted to secure what DeWolfe Waddill (2006) points out as necessary design elements of web-based instruction, namely perceived flexibility, community creation, learner control and facilitative approach from the instructor. A sense of perceived flexibility was created by the asynchronous and time-independent setting, as well as by the loose guidance by the tutor, who suggested goals and steps towards the completion of the portfolio instead of establishing a tight calendar and giving strict instructions. Besides, online social interaction in the virtual forum encouraged community development, reducing the possible sense of isolation among students. Before and during the process, the participants were also provided with resources on a just-in-time basis in order to yield more control to them, an aspect that is considered particularly necessary in ill structured processes (DeWolfe Waddill, 2006), such as the development of a prior learning portfolio.

However, current technology offers superior possibilities for RPEL than those used in the pilot program. For example, eportfolios could be implemented in order to simplify the process of presenting evidence and to improve feedback by the tutor and the assessment team. Additional means for collaborative virtual work could also be useful so as to improve tutor and peer support. In the same vein, synchronous communication tools could be used in the virtual classroom (see Li & Gunn, 2006), especially in the initial and last phase of portfolio elaboration, when the students need more support by their tutor and peers.

The pre-existing instructional design of the course, with a structure of quite autonomous modules, was positive for RPEL implementation. This structure allowed the recognition of specific segments of the course, and the subsequent arrangement of limited access for the student to only those modules that had not been recognized. RPEL

can thus be considered a key piece of a model focused on the student, as it results in the design of personalized learning routes that avoid unproductive relearning of existing knowledge.

Turning to organisational aspects, some values that characterise the UOC's organisational culture facilitated the implementation of RPEL. On the one hand, RPEL is only meaningful if understood as a personal process of reflection and information gathering by the student. The student-based pedagogical model at the UOC already included the figures of the tutor and the consultant professor - the first focused on guiding the student through the entire academic journey, and the second on facilitating the learning process of a particular subject. This naturally led to the creation of the new figure of the RPEL tutor, with the function of dynamizing the participant's RPEL activities and collaborating in its assessment. Online tools assist the tutors in their task, since they can efficiently combine generic communications on common interest issues with personalised attention to individual problems. On the other hand, the positive view of change in UOC's culture made the project possible, since the faculties involved were open to the different way of "thinking about learning and assessment, and about what could and should be assessed" (Joosten-Ten Brinke *et al.*, 2007) that RPEL implies.

The pilot program suggested ways of improvement for the future RPEL system. First, it proved essential to review the estimated time required for each stage of the procedure, necessarily taking into account the importance of the learners' personal development throughout the process. The portfolio elaboration phase, in particular, was completed in one month, but comments by the students and the tutor suggested that it should be extended in the future. Second, it will be necessary to develop templates for the assessment of portfolios, in order to increase its reliability. In the pilot program, the small number of students involved permitted reflective assessments by the tutor and the academic director, taking into account similarities and differences among learners. However, if the RPEL program is to be extended to many other courses, more reliable assessment tools should be developed.

The lessons learnt in the pilot program are currently being used for the subsequent design of the RPEL system at the UOC. Moreover, the positive results of the project, together with the improved view of RPEL in Spanish HE by academic and political authorities, have led the University to consider extending RPEL not only to all

postgraduate programs, but also to undergraduate degrees as soon as legal developments on this subject are approved.

6. Conclusions and future research

RPEL is a necessary feature if lifelong learning policies are to be fully accomplished. Within this framework, salient settings for RPEL development can be found in HE institutions providing online programs, where adult students with prior professional experience are increasingly present. The case study of the RPEL program in the online Master in HRM at the UOC, suggests ideas for educators interested in implementing RPEL in their institutions, as well as directions for future research.

RPEL requires a previous outcome-based or competence-based educational design, which makes possible and reciprocally benefits from the creation of an RPEL program. To this end, the RPEL Table, shown in Figure 3, can be a valuable instrument in the design stage of the program. This Table sets a clear link among course content (modules), competences, indicators and evidence, which can be useful both to the academic direction and to students. When elaborating the Table, the academic director and the faculty are compelled to check each unit in the light of professional activities related to the course. For students, the Table can be a precious tool when they have to identify relevant evidence for their portfolio.

Institutions interested in implementing RPEL will need to allocate specific resources to this system, since new human and technological resources will be devoted to its design and implementation. RPEL experts should be appointed or be formally recognised and rewarded for their participation. It seems advisable to appoint a specific tutor for RPEL, instead of embedding RPEL into a faculty's regular workload, which would put pressure on faculties that might in response become unsupportive of RPEL. The tutor works with students to help them identify learning that is relevant to their goals, drawing on a process of online peer learning as well as individual analysis. Informational resources and peer support in the virtual classroom are necessary elements in the process, but the role of the tutor is the third essential piece of the learning triangle in online education (students-resources-facilitator). Consequently, tutors should be carefully selected and trained. They have to be skilled online facilitators, as well as experts in the content and competences of the target course.

Resources also have to be devoted to information quality assurance. Prospective students need to have a precise idea of the work that they will have to undertake and the probability of their learning eventually being recognised. Thus, it is very important that information on the course be distributed and supplied to participants in a clear, detailed manner, in order for them to be aware of the benefits and the costs of the program. For example, the University web should provide easy access to RPEL information, which should be expressed in user-friendly language, be visually appealing and include a clear description of the process and the steps that must be taken by the student (McLoughlin, 2003). A self-assessment tool with automatic feedback would also facilitate realistic expectations amongst participants. Additionally, all the staff involved –including academic, marketing and administrative personnel- should receive adequate training on the recognition of prior learning principles and its procedures at the institution. By means of these practices, information provided to learners will be consistent throughout the organisation, and realistic expectations will be set, as regards the process and its potential outcomes.

Turning to technology, it must be said that, although technological considerations are important in any online setting, an RPEL system as the one described in this paper does not require sophisticated implements in order to reach its goals. However, RPEL can benefit from devices that improve the interaction between the tutor and the students, as well as among students, thus reducing the sense of isolation and enhancing perceived control by students. In any case, technological means have to serve educational considerations and not the opposite way, thus enhancing the participants' development, while boosting the tutor's task instead of substituting for this role. Total automation of the RPEL process (for example, as described by Higgins, 2005) would not take advantage of the developmental potential of RPEL, although it certainly could fulfil the needs of a pure accreditation system, where competencies that have already been achieved can be exchanged for course credit.

As regards the organisational context, there is proof that RPEL is adequate for an institution, such as the UOC, with a pedagogical model that puts the student at its centre and that views change positively. However, other institutions with different models or cultural values could face barriers in implementing an RPEL program as the one described. RPEL entails that the faculty is ready to question their assumptions about

learning and assessment, tutors are able to work with students coming from diverse backgrounds, additional resources are devoted to RPEL activities (especially the personalised counselling given by tutors), administrative systems are able to admit individualised academic routes, etc. Additional research would be valuable to understand how organisational characteristics –such as culture or values- can influence the successful implementation of RPEL.

Finally, RPEL programs face the significant challenge of acceptance in the labour market (OECD, 2005). If qualifications partly or fully gained through RPEL systems are not accepted by employers, the value of the systems to the individual and to society will be diminished. Andersson et al. (2004) stated that confidence in the instrument is based on two factors, namely the method used and regulatory criteria. In this sense, it is necessary to develop reliable methods with a view to ensuring legitimacy. The gauging of knowledge and competences requires open, flexible methods. However, said aspect could clash with the criterion of reliability of standard methods. There may thus be some conflict between the two objectives, namely fairly assessing the knowledge and competences of an individual, in the first place, and performing assessments that make it possible to draw fair comparisons between individuals, in the second place. It is therefore necessary to undertake studies that assess the balance between the two aforementioned aspects of the different RPEL methods.

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